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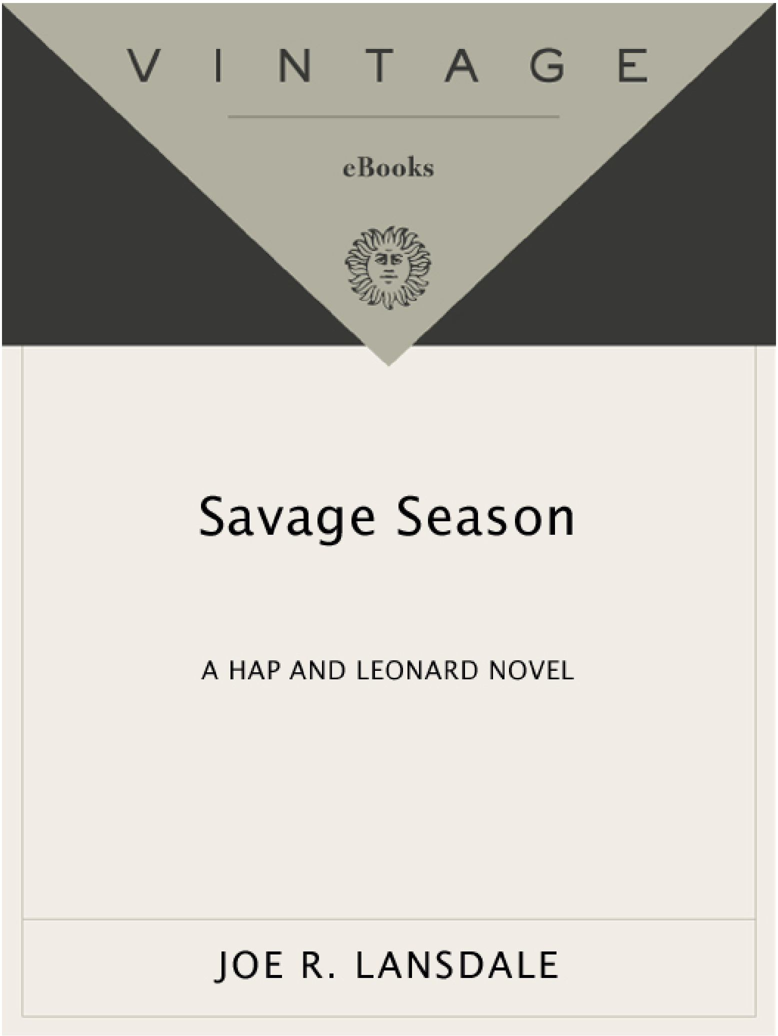

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Savage Season

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JOE R. LANSDALE

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Savage Season

Joe R. Lansdale is the author of more than a dozen novels, including *Sunset and Sawdust* and *Leather Maiden.* He has received the British Fantasy Award, the American Mystery Award, the Edgar Award, the Grinzane Cavour Prize for Literature, and seven Bram Stoker Awards. He lives with his family in Nacogdoches, Texas.

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A Hap and Leonard Novel

JOE R. LANSDALE

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This is for Jeff Banks, dedicated with friendship.

“A great deal of intelligence can be invested in ignorance when the need for illusion is deep.”

Saul Bellow

“Put all your eggs in one basket and—WATCH THAT BASKET.”

Mark Twain, *Pudd’nhead Wilson*

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1

I was out back of the house in the big field with my good friend Leonard Pine the afternoon it started. Me with the twelve gauge and him pulling the birds.

“Pull,” I said, and Leonard did, and another clay bird took to the sky and I jerked the gun up and cut it down.

“Man,” Leonard said, “don’t you ever miss?”

“Just on purpose.”

I’d switched to clay birds in favor of the real ones a long time back. I didn’t like to kill anything now, but I still enjoyed the shooting. Getting the bead on something and pulling the trigger and feeling the kick on my shoulder and watching the target blow apart had its own special satisfaction.

“Got to open another box,” Leonard said. “The pigeons are all dead.”

“I’ll load, you shoot for a while.”

“I shot twice as long as you did and I missed half those little boogers.”

“I don’t care. My eye’s getting off anyway.”

“Bullshit.”

Leonard got up, brushed his big black hands on his khaki pants, and came over and took the twelve gauge. He was about to load it and I was about to load the launcher, when Trudy came around the side of the house.

We both saw her about the same time. I turned to open another box of clay birds, and Leonard turned to pick up a box of shells, and she was swinging our way in the sunlight.

“Shit,” Leonard said. “Here comes trouble.”

Trudy was about four years younger than me, thirty-six, but she still looked twenty-six. Had that long blond hair and legs that began at the throat—good legs that were full at the thighs and dark of skin. And she knew how to use them, had that kind of walk that worked the hips and gave her breasts that nice little bounce that'll make a man run his car off the road for a look. She had on a tight beige sweater that showed she still didn't need a bra, and a short black skirt that was the current fashion, and it made me think of the late sixties and her mini-skirt days—back when I met her and she was going to be a great artist and I was going to find some way to save the world.

Far as I knew, closest she'd gotten to art was a drafting table and dressing mannequins in store windows, and the closest I'd gotten to saving the world was my name on some petitions, for everything from recycling aluminum cans to saving the whales. I put my cans in the trash now, and I didn't know how the whales were doing.

"Watch her," Leonard said, before she was in earshot.

"I'm watching."

"You know what I mean. Don't come crying over to my place if she does it to you again. Mind what I'm saying, now."

"I know what you're saying."

"Uh-huh, and a hard dick knows no conscience."

"It isn't that way and you know it."

"Well, it's some kind of way."

Now that Trudy was closer, the midday sun fell full on her face, I could see she didn't quite look twenty-six. The pores in her nose were a little larger and there were crows feet around her eyes and laugh lines at the corners of her mouth. She always had liked to laugh, and she'd laugh at anything. I remembered best how she laughed when she was happy in bed. She had a laugh then that was pretty as the song of a bird. It was the kind of thing I didn't want to remember, but the memory was there just the same, like a thorn in the back of my brain.

She smiled at us then, and I felt the January day become a little warmer. She could do that to a man, and she knew it. Liberated or not, she didn't fight that ability.

"Hello, Hap," she said.

"Hello," I said.

"Leonard," she said.

“Trudy,” Leonard said.

“What’re you boys up to?”

“Shooting some skeet,” I said. “Want to shoot some?”

“Sure.”

Leonard handed me the shotgun. “I got to go, Hap. I’ll check you later. Remember what I told you, huh?”

I looked at that hard face of his, black as a prune, said, “Sure, I’ll remember.”

“Un-huh. See you, Trudy,” and he went away then, making deep strides across the pasture toward the house where his car was parked.

“What was that all about?” Trudy said. “He seemed kind of mad.”

“He doesn’t like you.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot.”

“No you didn’t.”

“Okay, I didn’t.”

“You want to shoot first?”

“I think I’d really rather go in the house and have a cup of coffee. It’s kind of chilly out here.”

“You’re not dressed like it’s chilly.”

“I’ve got hose on. They’re warmer than you think. Just not warm enough. Besides, I haven’t seen you in a while—”

“Almost two years.”

“—and I wanted to look good.”

“You do.”

“So do you. You could gain a few pounds, but you look good.”

“Well, you don’t need to gain or lose an ounce. You look great.”

“Jazzercise. I’ve got a record and I do what it says. Us older ladies have to work at it.”

I smiled. “Okay, older lady. Why don’t you help me gather this stuff, and we’ll go on up to the house.”

■ ■ ■ ■

She sat at the kitchen table and smiled at me and made small talk. I got down the coffee and tried to keep my mind off how it used to be between us, but I wasn't any good at it.

When I had the coffee maker going, I sat at the table across from her. It was slightly warm in the kitchen from the gas heaters, and close enough I could smell the scent of her minty soap and the hint of some perfume, probably dabbed behind the ears and knees and below her belly button. That's the way she used to do it, and the thought of it made me weak.

"Still working in the rose fields?" she asked.

"We've been digging them, but not for the last few days. The man me and Leonard work for is through with that part. It'll be a few days before he'll need us for anything else."

She nodded, ran one long-nailed hand through her hair, and I saw the glint of a small, gold loop in her earlobe. I don't know what it was about that gesture, about the wink of gold, but it made me want to take her in my arms, pull her on the table and make the two-year absence of her blow away.

Instead I contented myself with a memory, one of my favorites. It was about the time we went to this dance and she had worn this zebra-stripped blouse and mini-skirt. I was twenty-three and she was nineteen. The way she danced, the way she moved when she wasn't dancing, the smell of her, had made me manic with lust.

I had whispered something to her and she had laughed and we had gone out to my Chevy and driven to our favorite parking place on a pine-covered hill. I stripped her and she stripped me, and we made slow, sweet love on the motor-warm hood of my car, the moon shining down on us like a personal love-light, the cool summer breeze blowing across us like a feathered fan.

And the thing I remember best about that time, other than the act of copulation, was I had felt so goddamn strong and immortal. Old age and death were as wild and improbable as some drunken story about walking across the face of a star.

"How's … what is it? Howard?" It wasn't a thing I really wanted to ask, but it came out anyway.

"Okay. We're divorced. Have been for a year now. I don't think I'm cut out for marriage. I had you and I screwed that up, didn't

I?”

“No great loss.”

“I left you for Pete and Pete for Bill and Bill for Howard. None of them worked out, and neither did the ones I didn’t marry along the way. None of them came close to what we had. And the kind of men that are anything like you are harder and harder to find.”

The flattery was a little thick, so I didn’t have anything to say to it. I checked the coffee, poured a couple of cups. When I sat hers on the table, she looked at me, and I started to say something brotherly, but it wouldn’t come out.

“I’ve missed you, Hap,” she said. “I really have.”

I put my coffee cup on the table next to hers and she stood and I held her and we kissed. The earth didn’t move and my heart didn’t stop, but it was quite all right just the same.

Then we had our hands all over each other, and we started moving toward the bedroom, molting clothes along the way. Under the covers we danced the good, slow dance, and she let loose with that laugh I loved so much, the one as sweet and happy as the song of a bird.

And I did not care to remember then that even the most predatory of birds, the shrike, can sing.

2

About two in the morning the phone rang. I got up, and went to the kitchen to answer it. I don't think Trudy even heard it.

It was Leonard.

"That bitch there?"

"Yeah."

"Shit. You're fucked again."

"It's different this time. I'm only getting laid. Remember what you said about a hard dick not knowing a conscience? You were right."

"Bullshit, don't give me that macho crap. I was just talking that way. You don't think like that and you know it. It's always got to be something to you. This is Leonard you're talking to here, Mr. Hap Collins, not some rose field nigger."

"Leonard, you *are* a rose field nigger, and so am I. I'm a white version."

"You know what I mean."

"What are you doing up at two in the morning minding my business?"

"Drinking, goddammit. Trying to get drunk."

"How are you doing?"

"I'd rate it about a five on a one-to-ten scale."

"Is that Hank Williams I hear in the background?"

"Not his ownself, but yes. *'Setting the Woods On Fire.'* "

"What key's he singing in?"

"You're not as funny as you think, Hap. Shit, I wish that whore wouldn't come around."

"Don't call her that."

"That's what she is. She comes around and you start to act funny."

"How funny do I get?"

"All moon-eyed and puppylike, talking about the good old days, giving me that self-righteous sixties stuff. I was there, buddy, and it was just the eighties with tie-dyed Tee-shirts."

"You numb nuts, you talk about the sixties just as much as I do."

"But I hated them. Shit, man, Trudy gets you all out of perspective. She gets to telling you how it was and how it ought to be now, and you get to believing her. I like you cynical. It's closer to the ground. I tell you, that bitch will say anything to get her way. She's fake as pro-wrestling. She's out there on a limb, brother, and she's inviting you out there with her. When the limb cracks, you're both gonna bust your ass. Get down from the tree, Hap."

"She's all right, Leonard."

"In the sack, maybe. In the head, uh-uh."

"No, she's all right."

"Sure, and wow, the sixties, man, like neat."

"This time is different."

"And next time I shit it'll come out in sweet-smelling little squares. Goodnight, you dumb sonofabitch."

He hung up, and I went over and got a glass out of the cabinet, filled it with water, drank it, leaned my naked rear into the counter and thought about things. What I thought about mostly was how cold it was.

I went back to the bedroom to get my robe, and looked down at Trudy. There was enough moonlight that I could see her face. The blanket had fallen off of her and she was lying on her side with her arms cuddling her pillow. I could see a smooth shoulder, the shape of one fine breast and the curve of her hip. Looked too innocent to have been the one in my bed a short time ago, screaming and groaning, and finally singing like a bird.

But she didn't look so innocent I wasn't stirred. I thought about waking her, but didn't. I covered her gently, got my robe off the bedpost, went back into the kitchen and filled my glass with water again, took a chair at the table across from the window and looked out. With the curtains pulled back like they were, I could see the moonlit field where Leonard and I had shot skeet, could see the line of pines behind it, looking oddly enough like the outline of a distant mountain range.

I sat there and drank my water and thought about things, thought about Trudy and the sixties and what Leonard had said, and knew he was right. Last time she had come around and gone away, I had started on a monumental drunk that embarrassed the winos down at the highway mission, which was where Leonard found me—three months later. I had no idea where I had gotten the money for liquor, and I didn't know how much I'd drunk, couldn't even remember having started.

Since that time I had sworn off. Trudy, not the liquor. But now she was in my house again, in my bed, and I was thinking about her, considering all the wrong things, knowing full well I had fallen off the wagon again.

Until it had gone wrong between us (and it was a mystery to me as to when and how), our relationship had been as beautiful as a dream. And there were times when I felt it might have been just that.

We met at LaBorde University. I had made a late start due to no money and lots of hard work at the iron foundry trying to get me some. The foundry was a hot, horrible job where you wore a hard hat, watched sparks jump and heard the clang of steel pipe all day.

But it was money, and I thought it would allow me to go to college, get some kind of degree and find a way to make an easier living than my old man had; a way for me to get my slice of the American Dream.

Pretty soon I was wrapped up in the learning, though, and not for what it could get me financially. There was something in the books and lectures that went beyond the sports page and the martial arts I practiced, the color article section of the *TV Guide.* There was more to life than a beer with the buddies, a gold watch and a pension. It was the sixties, a time of love and peace and social upheaval—contradictions that walked side by side. Women's rights.Civil rights. The Vietnam War. I got it in my head I could do some good out there, make things better for the underprivileged. I changed my major from business to sociology and went to anti-war rallies and sang some folk songs, collected Beatles albums, and let my hair grow long.

At one rally held at a Unitarian church, I met Trudy. I looked across the heads of long, straight hair and Afros and saw her on the other side of the room talking to a pear shaped girl in a flowered dress that belled and dragged the floor.

God, but Trudy was beautiful. Painfully young, a prototype for Eve. Long gold hair rippled to her waist and her eyes were so bright green they looked supernatural. Spangles of silver hung from her ears. She was wearing a white midi-blouse, a blue jean mini-skirt and wooden clog shoes. Beneath the midi was flat brown stomach and a marvelous belly button, and beneath the mini were legs like God would have given his very own woman.

I got over there without running and introduced myself. We made shameless small talk, mostly stupid mumblings, some of it about the war.

Pretty soon we had our arms around each other and we were out of there. We both lived in dorms then, and as the dorm mothers were furiously against fucking, I took her to a parking place that was to become our haven, and we did what we had wanted to do since the first moment we laid eyes on one another. We generated so much electricity upon that pine-covered hill, I'm surprised we didn't cause a forest fire. I feel certain we didn't do the shocks in my old Chevy much good.

This went on for a time, and things got better and hotter. And on the night of my fondest memory, when she wore the zebra-striped outfit, we decided to rent an apartment and move in together.

We pooled our money and found a little room on the grubby side of town and lived there for two months. It got better yet, and we decided to get married. It was a simple wedding with lots of flowers and barefoot guests and a female minister younger than Trudy.

God, those were odd times. If you missed them, and you know someone who went through them, soaked it all in, and you catch them late at night, after maybe a beer or two, or the kids are all in bed and the TV's dead, and you say, "Hey, what were the sixties really like?” There’s a good chance they’ll say “It was magical,” or “It was special.”

For a time it sure seemed that way. Peace and love seemed like more than words. We thought everyone could live in a world full of mutual respect, long hair, and cooperation. It was as if the sky had split open and God had given us a ray of light, and in its glow, wonderful things happened.

An example being the sparrow incident the night after our wedding.

We dropped the apartment and rented a small house on the edge of town. It wasn’t much of a house. The ceiling in the living room was too low and the plumbing squeaked like giant mice.

Trudy turned on the back porch light and went out there to toss some potato peels, and found a sparrow sitting on the porch. It was weak and nodding and couldn’t fly. She called me and I looked at it. It was a baby, and as far as I could determine, there were no wounds on it. It seemed sick.

I picked up the bird with some reluctance, because I had once been told if birds smelled the human scent on another bird they would peck it to death, and carried it into the house. I got an old shoebox and tore some newspaper up and put it in the bottom of the box and the bird on that. I got an eyedropper and used it to give the bird some cold beef bouillon.

That was the procedure from then on. First thing in the morning, and between classes, we would give the bird bouillon and clean its box and put fresh paper in the bottom. At night we stood over it and looked at it and clucked our tongues like parents worried about a sick child.

About this same time, I went to work part time in a restaurant in LaBorde, and brought home scraps I thought the bird might eat. At first he wouldn’t touch them, but after a while he ate them out of my hand. Noodles were his favorite. I suppose they were as close as he ever got to worms.

The bird got stronger. He started flying around the house. You could open doors and windows and he wouldn’t fly out. He liked it in there. He liked us. He’d light on our shoulders and our outstretched palms. He cheeped a lot, and because of that, we named him Cheep. The only time he showed distress was when we weren't wearing black. Guess because I had on a black Tee-shirt and Trudy a black peasant dress the night we found him, and he bonded to black.

We were so excited about our bird, we dyed everything we owned black. On those occasions when we did buy new clothes, they were always black. That way Cheep stayed happy.

Sweet alchemy was thicker in the air than radio waves then, and it seemed especially thick around Trudy and me. We thought it would last forever.

But even the best looking apple can contain a worm.

When 1970 rolled in just a few weeks after we were married, the Vietnam War still raged on. The relatively innocent smoking of grass had been exchanged by many for pills and shit-filled needles. The wonderful, if admittedly hokey, beauty of Woodstock had to stand shoulder to shoulder with the senseless tragedy at Kent State.

Our bird continued to fly about the house, but the magic of the era was gone. A deep, dark awareness that perhaps it had never actually existed settled in; we had glimpsed some shopworn cards up the magician's sleeve, and with each passing moment, the glow of the act was dimming.

The sixties were dead. They may never have lived.

I began to feel guilty about hiding out in college with my deferment when so many were dying in Vietnam. Asking that everyone be peaceful and love one another wasn't enough. I wanted to make some statement against the war, and I didn't want to hide behind a deferment to do it. I was one of those who felt our original cause in Vietnam was just, but that it had become a political nightmare. The government we were defending, in spite of cries of "We are a democracy," showed little evidence of being different from the one we were fighting. Our role there was as aimless as the flying Dutchman. We took a hill, we gave it back. The American dead stacked up. Seemed to me, we ought to have known when to cut our losses.

I talked to Trudy long and hard, and it was the sort of thing she loved. Noble involvement. It lit her like a torch.

With her blessing, I decided to quit college and allow myself to be drafted. When it came time to step forward and take the induction, I would refuse. I'd go the prison route instead. That would be my statement.

This was the time of the lottery, and I was drafted almost immediately. I was disappointed my draft notice didn't say *Greetings.* I had always heard that it did.

I went to Dallas, took my physical, passed, and refused to go.

The army tried to give me outs. I give them that. One officer even suggested I make a break for Canada. The war had soured even his way of thinking, and he was a lifer.

But I refused to run.

It was suggested I sign as a conscientious objector, but again I refused. C.O. status meant you thought fighting for anything, even your life, was wrong. I didn't believe that. Had I been around during the fighting of World War I or II, I would have gone and done my bit. The causes were just and the wars were fought with a conclusion in mind. I was an idealist, not a coward.

So I went to Leavenworth. Trudy and some of her friends came to see me from time to time and told me "right on" and how brave I was, and it felt good to hear it. They wrote me nice letters.

But that good feeling didn't last. It didn't relax me at night when I could hear the cons snorting and coughing and crying and farting and sodomizing each other. And there were guys in there who had bludgeoned their grandmothers to death who thought it their patriotic duty to kill me for not signing up to shoot gooks. If I hadn't been a pretty tough country boy with iron foundry muscles, I might not have made it.

Trudy kept coming to see me, but her friends dropped off. She kept writing, but the friends quit. She sent me clippings in her letters that told me what was going on outside, about the causes being fought for, the ground gained, the ground lost.

Then her visits thinned, and finally stopped. Next to last letter I got from her went on about how brave I was again and compared me to a number of counterculture heroes. It said Cheep had died and had been buried in a cream corn can out back of the house, and that she had met a man named Pete who was big in the ecology movement and they had this thing going. The last letter told me that the thing she and Pete had going was now really going, and she was filing for divorce. Nothing personal. She thought I was the bravest man she knew. It was signed like all the others: *Love Trudy.*

I did my time. Eighteen months altogether. I had planned the day they let me out for a long time. I thought I would come out on a bright warm day with my fist held high, and Trudy would be there looking sexy and soft in a short wind-blown dress that would give me a good view of her long brown legs, and as the music came up, sweet but triumphant, she would run to me with those legs flashing and give me a kiss that would knock me silly from head to toes. Then she would load me in a car and drive us away.

But when I came out it WAS cold and drizzling. I had to talk a guard into calling someone to drive me to the bus station. Between paying for the car and the bus, the money I had when I went in and the money the government gave me for the nonstimulating manual labor I did inside was almost gone. Needless to say, I didn't feel like raising my fist.

I went back to East Texas and found out I didn't want to help the underprivileged anymore. I realized I was one of them. I got a job in the rose fields outside of LaBorde, and that's where I met Leonard. He was a Vietnam vet and a certified hardhead. He didn't like my views on a lot of things, but he didn't hold them against me either; I gave him someone to argue with. He was a martial artist, boxing, kenpo, hapkido, and he revived my interest. When I was in high school, until the time I met Trudy, I had been heavily involved in that sort of thing. Guess I dropped it later because I didn't feel it fit my new peace and love image or something. Anyway, I had been away for a time. I was glad to get at it again. I got better than ever before. It helped me work out some frustrations.

After a while, Trudy started coming around, and each time she went away she left me a bigger wreck than before. Built me up with promises, then left me sudden and flat. She always found a new man who was big in some movement or another. Supporting lettuce workers or saving seals from the business end of a Louisville Slugger.

Each time she left, I told Leonard I was through with her. And each time it was a lie. But the last time, after the Great Drunk, even I believed it.

And now she was back.

All this was going around and around in my head when she came in buck naked and put her arms around my neck and bent and kissed me on the ear. The minty clean soap smell and the aroma of sex came off her in waves. I reached up and touched her hand where it rested on my chest.

“I woke up and you were gone,” she said.

“I got thirsty.”

“I got horny. Come back to bed.”

I stood and took her in my arms and kissed her. She was shaking from the cold. I opened my robe and stretched it around her as far as it would go and held her to me. Her hands played at my sides and rump, and finally around front where she took hold of me.

“You’re pretty ruthless,” I said, “treating an old man this way.”

“You don’t feel old, sugar.”

We went back to bed, but this time she didn’t let loose with the laugh I liked. She lay there when we were finished and finally eased out of bed and picked up her panties and pulled them on. I hated that. I liked the view. Covering up that downy crotch of hers with panties was as vile an act as tossing a wet bath towel over the face of the Mona Lisa.

“It’s cold,” I said. “Come back to bed.”

“Hap, I haven’t been entirely truthful with you.”

“Not that you ever are. But this time, don’t feel so bad. You haven’t had a lot of time to lie.”

She walked to the window and stood with her back to me, looking out, hugging herself. She turned slowly, her arms crossed over her breasts. “You sound pretty vindictive.”

“Guess I was starting to pretend again. But you’ve put me back on track.”

“It was always good for us, wasn’t it Hap? The sex, I mean.”

“For a little while, more than the sex.”

She picked up my robe from where I had dropped it on the floor and put it on. She climbed into bed, crossed her legs, and sat looking at me.

“Hap, I need your help.”

“I’m tapped out for money. I got maybe fifty dollars, that’s it. Fifty cents in change.”

“I didn’t come for money.”

“But you always come for something, don’t you? Long as it doesn’t have anything permanent to do with me.”

“I don’t want to argue. It’s just that I need your help. I couldn’t think of anyone else to ask.”

“Maybe I can.”

“I want you to do it, because this time you’ll profit. This time will make up for all the other times.”

“Nothing can make up for those times.”

“This might go a long way toward it.” She put her hand on my shoulder. “Hap, my love, how would you like to make an easy two hundred thousand dollars? Tax free.”

3

Early next morning I left Trudy asleep and rattled my old green Dodge pickup over to Leonard's place. He had a little house off the same dirt road I lived off of, and he was only about five miles away.

I parked up close to the house, got out into the cold morning air, and tried the front door. It was locked. I got the key from its hiding place beneath the porch and let myself in.

There was a fire in the fireplace, though it had dwindled considerably, and the house smelled like coffee. I followed my nose to the kitchen and found the pot and poured a cup. I called Leonard's name, but he didn't answer.

I checked to see how his handiwork was coming. He was rebuilding his sink cabinet due to termite damage. Had precut boards stacked by the sink, a hammer and a bag of little facing nails and a bag of long nails for the wall boards. He'd been doing the work a bit at a time, and as usual with that kind of thing, his craftsmanship was excellent. Me, I couldn't put on a rubber without directions, then I might get it inside out.

I took the cup with me out the back way and walked down to the dog pens and the barn. The barn was an old-fashioned affair, once bright red and now rust-colored with big double doors and a hayloft. The pens were six long steel wire runs, and each held a spotted bird dog, and at the end of each run was a large dog house, built against heat or cold or terrific winds, and they had flap doors that closed off when the dogs went in or out. The dog in the pen closest to the barn was called Switch for some reason, and he's Leonard's favorite. Which is not to say Leonard wasn't crazy about all those big dumb bastards. He went hunting with them as often as he could, not so much to hunt, but to see those spotted beauties run.

I went by the pens, and the dogs barked and leapt. I put my fingers through the wire as I came to each run, and the dogs licked them in turn, wagged their tails and yipped.

When I got to Switch's run, I knelt down and spent more time with him. I hated to play favorites, but hell, there was something special about Switch. There was a kind of sad nobility in his eyes, like maybe he had seen some things he'd rather not have, but was the wiser for it. Which was damn silly, of course. Even a smart bird dog is a pretty dumb variety of dog. But he did have some class. He was protective of Leonard, too, and if he didn't know you and he was loose and you were standing too close to Leonard, you had to watch yourself. He'd leap at you and try to tear your face off, without so much as a bark or warning growl.

From the barn I could hear a steady thumping and knew Leonard was making that sound. He was regular about that sort of thing, even if the night before he had been up until two A. M. drinking.

I downed the rest of my coffee, finished petting Switch, stood up and leaned forward on the pen and looked out at the thick dark woods back there; they seemed to be expanding as the sunlight widened and redefined them. Leonard had a beautiful place here. The creek was maybe a little too close to the house and he'd steadily been losing his land to erosion, something his having trenches of gravel put in alongside the creek hadn't helped. For a while it was okay, but soon it broke down and the gravel started to wash away, and now sometimes in the summer we'd go stand out there on the bank and throw gravel at the water and later sit on his porch scraping it and the clay out of the treads of our shoes.

When we were really in a Huck Finn mood, we'd go down to the Robin Hood Tree, a big oak in a clearing in the woods behind Leonard's house. I don't know who all that woods belonged to, but in our minds that tree belonged to us. We'd named it that a few years back, after the big tree Robin Hood held his conferences under in Sherwood Forest. We sometimes went there to talk and enjoy the woods. Occasionally Leonard brought his rifle so he could pretend to be scouting for squirrels. But we always ended up at the Robin Hood tree, sitting with our backs against it, talking until nightfall.

My place was nice but I had to admit, I prefered Leonard's to mine. I let the look of the place soothe me while I thought about what Trudy had told me last night, and tried to figure out some way to convince Leonard to go in with me. Leonard hadn't been part of Trudy's thinking, but he was damn sure part of mine. I tried to tell myself it was because I liked Leonard and wanted to see him make some money, and though this was true, I knew too it was because I had come to depend on him so much. He had bailed me out of hell so many times, he had become my spirit guide through life.

Inside the barn the light was weak, but I could see Leonard working over the heavy bag he kept hanging from a rafter beneath the hayloft. He was stripped to the waist, wearing a pair of gray sweatpants, low-cut tennis shoes with white socks and a pair of worn bag gloves. His face and hard upper torso looked like wet chocolate, and when the light caught him right, the thick beads of sweat gave the impression of greasy boils covering his skin. He was snorting plumes of cold exhaust.

I put the coffee cup on one of the two-by-fours that helped support the unadorned wall, leaned back and watched. I guess I stood there a full five minutes before he noticed me.

"Well," he said, "you look like a man who's had sex."

"And you act like a man who hasn't. That's why you got to pound a bag, to work off frustrations."

"Tell me about it. No, don't. Just makes me feel bad." He did a combination on the bag, then smiled at me. "Unlike you, I could have all the women I want."

"Go on, talk some shit."

"Could … lots of them, anyway. Ain't that the shits? They want me and I don't want them. They're lined up for me, and me the way I am."

"Maybe you should try to be another way. It's bound to beat jacking off."

"Don't think it wouldn't be easier, but it's like taking up knitting or backgammon. Doesn't work for me."

"Just saying how things could be easier."

He gave the bag a flurry, then winked at me. "You could always help me out, you know. A little relief for a friend."

"I'm not that friendly."

He flurried the bag again, caught it with his forearms and smiled at me. “Got you nervous, didn’t I? Tell you a truth, ole buddy. I like you, but you’re not my type.”

“That shatters me. I want to go right on out of here crying.”

He hit the bag with two hard lefts, one high, one low. “Work the bag with me. I like to see a peckerwood sweat.”

I slipped off my jacket and shirt, got the spare bag gloves off a nail, put them on, and went over to the bag. I made some slow, soft moves on it to get the muscles loose. It felt awkward at first, way it always does when you start. Then my muscles began to warm and loosen and I got my rhythm and I was circling and exploding into the bag whenever the mood struck me. Leonard was circling too, staying directly across from me, the bag between us, and no sooner would my flurry end than he would hit with a series from his side, and pretty soon we were making conga music with that old canvas bag.

When we stopped my hands ached slightly from clenching my fists, and I was beginning to breathe heavily. I took off the bag gloves, hung them up, flexed the tension out of my hands.

“You’re getting soft,” Leonard said, taking off his gloves. “Haven’t been working out enough.”

“I’m preferring my rest in my dotage.”

“Want to spar some?”

“Sure.”

He went over to a shelf, got down the boxing gloves and kick guards and tossed a pair of each to me. I fastened the kick guards over my tennis shoes, then pulled on the gloves. They were the kind without laces; they slid on over your hands and tightened at the wrists with elastic, so you didn’t need help to get them on.

We had been using the light from the open side door, but now Leonard went over and opened the big double doors and the sun flooded in and I could see dust motes rising from the barn’s dirt floor like little slow tornadoes.

Leonard put on his equipment, shuffled his feet, put up his hands and made his way toward me.

“Gonna suffer, honkie.”

“Hope you know a home for invalid niggers, ’cause you’re gonna need it."

"Name-calling, huh? Racial slurs."

"Call 'em like I see 'em."

"Minute from now you aren't gonna see anything."

Then we were at it.

It was like Leonard turned into oil and flowed over me. I covered up, but the oil turned hard and the hardness hit my forearms and made them weak, hit the side of my head and ribs and made sounds on my hide like the sounds Leonard and I had made on the bag.

When I got him away from me, I said, "Won't lie to you, that was nice."

"I know," he said, and came again.

I let him think he had me. I jabbed out with a weak left and when he slipped it, I kicked with my forward foot in a roundhouse motion and caught him hard enough in the breadbasket to force his breath out. I swarmed him then, hit him with a right cross above the left eye and tried to hook him with my left, but all I got was one of his forearms. He flurried me, and he was fast, but I had his timing off now, and his blows skimmed across my face and slid on my sweaty chest and didn't really hurt me. I kicked off my back leg this time and my kick caught him in the solar plexus again and drove him back and I came off the other leg and tried the same thing and glanced his side with the ball of my foot. He backed up fast, and I went after him. He turned his back on me as if to run. Instinctively I rushed in for the kill. He swiveled on his left foot and brought himself completely around to face me and his right leg arched into an outside crescent kick and the ridge of his foot caught me on the side of the head and I went down and dirt filled my nostrils.

Suckered.

Leonard bent down. "How are you, peckerwood?"

"I been worse.... Barn's moving, though."

"You're always impatient. I set you up." He patted me on the back. "Lay there a moment."

"No other plans."

A few minutes passed and Leonard helped me up. The barn was still a little wobbly, but starting to shape up. He helped me get the gloves and kick guards off. I weaved over and put on my shirt and coat while Leonard did the same, then I got the coffee cup off the two-by-four and Leonard put his arm around me and walked me to the house.

Leonard put on a Patsy Cline album, turned it down low and started fixing breakfast. I took a seat at the kitchen table and dipped my head between my knees.

“You eaten?” he asked.

“No.”

“Able to?”

“Yeah.”

“Eggs and toast sound okay?”

“Fine.”

He chuckled.

“White boys in distress,” I said. “You love it.”

He cracked an egg in the skillet. “You’re over here for a reason, Hap. You don’t get up this early on Sundays. What happened, that woman leave already?”

“Nope. But I am here for a reason. An important reason.” I lifted my head. Nothing was spinning.

“How important?”

“You wouldn’t have to go back to the rose fields. Least not for a long time.”

He stopped unwrapping the bread and looked at me. “How long a time?”

“Quite a few years. You might start your own business. Understand you people do well with barbecue stands, stuff like that. Whatever you want.”

“Barbecue sounds like work. You know us, loose shoes, tight pussy and a warm place to shit.”

“Way I heard it.”

“Come on Hap, quit dicking with me. What’s the deal?”

“One hundred thousand dollars for each of us.”

“Shit. What we got to do, shoot someone?”

“Nope. We have to swim for it.”

4

I drove Leonard to my house and parked next to Trudy's faded green Volkswagen with the Greenpeace sticker on the bumper. We went inside and found Trudy at the kitchen table drinking coffee. She was wearing one of my shirts, and it was much too large for her. That and her tousled hair made her look girlish. Less so when she crossed her legs and looked at me. "I was worried about you. I couldn't find a note."

"Didn't leave one. Thought I'd be back sooner."

She decided to notice Leonard. "Hi, Leonard."

Leonard nodded.

"What you told me last night," I said. "I want you to tell Leonard."

Her face showed me she didn't like that. "No offense, Leonard. But that was between me and Hap. He shouldn't have said anything."

"I'm dealing him in for half my share."

"There may not be a share if you keep this up, Hap."

"That's okay, too. Find some other sucker."

"You're awfully tough in the morning."

"Controls his glands better in the daytime," Leonard said. "They tend to get overactive at night."

"I don't care for the sound of your talk, Leonard," Trudy said.

"Wasn't supposed to be music," Leonard said. "Maybe you prefer a classical Negro dialect? A little foot-shuffling?"

"Can it, both of you," I said. "This is coming off worse than I thought. I want to deal Leonard in. What's it matter? It's not costing you any more, and you'll have an extra hand. Way you talk, we could use him. He's had some diving experience, for one thing. We need that. I been in the water a few times with a suit on, but that's about it."

She turned to stare out the window at the field. My mother did that when she was exasperated with me. I almost expected Trudy to threaten me with a paddling.

She turned her coffee cup around on her saucer. The light from the window was on her face and showed some of her age.

"Sometime today," Leonard said. "After a couple minutes, pouting bores me."

She looked at us. "All right, but I don't like being railroaded this way, Hap. You should have discussed it with me first. There's enough between us you could have done that."

"I didn't ask because I knew you'd say no, and I want Leonard in. It's not anything I'm trying to put over on you. He stood by me through some tough times, some of them your fault. I want to see him profit the way you say you want to see me profit. You don't want us both, no problem. Deal us out."

"It's something else to explain to Howard. He wasn't keen on me asking you in, Hap."

"I've got faith you can wrap this Howard around your big toe," Leonard said, "and I don't even know the poor sap."

"You know what's wrong with you, Leonard?" Trudy said. "You're jealous. You're in love with Hap here and you're jealous of me."

"Hap's all right," Leonard said. "He's got a nice, perky ass, but he's not my type."

"You two be friends," I said. "It's easier that way."

"I'll put a lid on it," Leonard said, "but with me and her it's business associates, not friends."

"It couldn't be any other way," Trudy said.

Leonard and I sat at the table, Leonard by the wall and me across from Trudy. She glared at Leonard, then me. "One hundred thousand is a lot less than two hundred thousand, Hap. Sure you want to do this?"

"Yep, and I want him to hear the story from you. I haven't told him anything except there's some money to be made. He hears what you got to say, he may not want in."

Trudy got up, poured another cup of coffee and came back to the table. She sipped it and started her story.

"My last husband, Howard, was involved in nuclear protests. Traveled across the country speaking against nuclear reactors, leading marches against their sites. During a protest in Utah, he was responsible for cutting a fence and getting inside a compound and damaging government property. He felt it was his responsibility as a human being—"

"No politics," Leonard said. "It affects my heart. Just the straight goods."

"All right," she said, and told it.

It was a pretty simple story. The judge made an example out of Howard. Gave him two years at my alma mater, Leavenworth, later cut it to eighteen months for good behavior. I wondered if she left Howard while he was in prison, and if he got more letters and visits than I had.

While Howard was in prison he met a man called Softboy McCall, who fancied himself a gangster. He had been in the can a while and wasn't getting out soon.

When he found out Howard was from Texas he took immediate interest in him. He was a Texan too. Waco, Texas, to be exact.

Softboy and Howard got close. Softboy told Howard what he was in for—this time anyway. He had robbed a small East Texas bank (are there any other kind?), and the day they robbed it, it was chockful of money. More money than a bank that size ought to have, even if it was a weekend and the payrolls were in.

Softboy thought it was laundered money, loot being processed through the bank by big shots. He was more certain of that later when a lesser amount than he stole was reported. Softboy claimed to have made a take just over a million.

During the robbery, there was a shootout with a guard at the bank. The police were somehow alerted, and they got there before Softboy and his two accomplices could escape, and there was more shooting. The guard and a policeman were wounded, and all three of the robbers were injured.

Still, they got in their getaway car and drove away.

Day before, the driver of the car had gone to the bottoms and found a place to hide the motorboat, and they had made for that.

Before they got to it, one of the robbers died, and when they got there, the driver went toes up. All that was left was Softboy and the money.

Softboy managed to push the car off into the water to hide it and he managed to load the money in the boat and get it going. But he didn't get far. He hit a stump or something and was thrown out.

He made it to shore, into the woods, and crawled around through the underbrush for the next three days, feverish and hallucinating. Didn't know if he was going in circles or what.

Eventually he came across a trail and followed that. Next thing he knew, he was on the highway leading to Marvel Creek. He passed out, and when he awoke he was in the Marvel Creek hospital with a policeman sitting in a chair beside his bed. Seemed some motorist had discovered him and pulled him out of the highway and called the law.

When he got better, the police tried to get him to show them where the boat had wrecked, but he couldn't.

He didn't know. He didn't even know how he and his partners had gotten the boat in the first place. He hadn't been the one who stashed it, and hadn't been along when it was stashed. After the robbery, he'd been too out of his mind with pain to notice.

The police searched the river for days, but didn't find evidence of the boat, the car, or the bodies.

Never did.

Softboy told Howard he had bad dreams about all that money underwater and the fish eating it. Said he wanted it spent, and that if Howard found it, he'd split it with him.

At this point in the story, Trudy paused and Leonard said, “Trusting sort of guy, wasn't he?”

“Suppose he thought Howard was honest enough,” Trudy said. “Assumed Howard felt about him the way he felt about Howard.”

“Or wanted Howard to think he felt that way.” I said. “Make a guy feel wanted, he'll do things for you. Get Howard to find and coordinate the dough, and old Softboy could use it to bribe guards and prison officials. Make life a little easier in the joint. Considering his situation, it'd be a worthwhile gamble.”

"Three days before they let Howard out," Trudy said, "Softboy was killed by an inmate with a knife made out of a spoon. The fight was over something silly. A dessert, I think."

"So there goes Howard's obligation to Softboy," Leonard said. "He decided to get the money, and he dealt you in, and Hap dealt me in. Well, this is all good and everything, but I see some problems here. First of all, I take it Howard's already tried to find the money. Am I right?"

Trudy nodded.

"The police have looked and Howard's looked and they've come up with nothing, so what makes anyone think we can do better?" Leonard said.

"That's where I come in," I said. "I grew up in Marvel Creek, and I know those bottoms."

"Bet a lot of folks who knew the bottoms helped the police search, and they still didn't find it," Leonard said.

"There's something else," Trudy said. "Softboy didn't tell the police about the Iron Bridge, but he told Howard."

"The Iron Bridge?" Leonard said.

"When Hap and I were married he used to talk about it some, that it was this place in the bottoms … How does it go, Hap?"

"It was an uncompleted bridge. Stuck out over a wide place in the water. Oil companies had started it back in the fifties before the oil ran out. All sorts of stories about that place. Lovers parked by it. There was a story about this guy went down there and hung himself off the bridge because of some girl, or some such thing. Said his ghost was still down there. That when the moon was right, you could see him hanging from the bridge. Also there's a story about this couple went down there to park, and some men came up on them, raped the girl and tied the spare tire to the guy and threw him off in the water. Lots of stories."

Trudy said, "Softboy told Howard, last thing he remembered after the wreck was lying on the bank, looking downriver and seeing the Iron Bridge."

"Thing is," I said, "the bridge isn't on the river. It's down a narrow creek that comes off of it. Don't even know if the creek's got a name. Pretty junglelike down there. Softboy could have been wounded so bad he got off the river without realizing it, but I figure they were never on it, just thought they were. They were on this creek all the time, and the only place that creek could have been wide enough and deep enough for a boat is a stretch near the Iron Bridge.”

“That dough would have long dissolved and washed away by now,” Leonard said. “You might find some coins, but that’s about it.”

“Softboy and his partners were going to carry the money downriver a ways and bury it,” Trudy said. “They had another car stashed a little further on, and they thought they could get away, go back when things cooled off and recover the money. Softboy told Howard they had the money in waterproof cylinders and those were in a big aluminum cooler fastened down in the front of the boat. Chances are, the waterproof containers are still there, and so is the money.”

“When was the last time you saw this bridge?” Leonard asked me.

“Eighteen, nineteen … maybe twenty years ago.”

Leonard shook his head. “Hell, man, I’ve come to pick you up for work and you couldn’t even find the shoes you took off the night before, let alone find something you haven’t seen in twenty years.”

“True … but my shoes didn’t have a million dollars in them.”

5

When we finished talking, Trudy said she was going to take a shower and lie down for a while. After being up most of the night thinking, talking, and screwing, I needed a nap too, but I refrained. I like to think it was because I had strong character. It was, of course, because I didn't want to be anywhere alone with Trudy right then. I had a hunch she would have harsh words to say about me and Leonard, and I wasn't up to it. I didn't want her to get me near a bed, either. She could really talk in bed, and if she talked long enough and moved certain parts of her body just right, I might agree to have Leonard shot at sunset.

When I heard the shower running, I got a pen and a paper and wrote Trudy a note. *Gone to Leonard's to make arrangements for leaving. Back by lunch. In case you want to come over…*

And I drew her a map to Leonard's house.

Me and Leonard went over to his place and he put some clothes and a paperback of *Walden* in a suitcase. He got out a thin foam rubber mattress and some blankets and rolled them up in a bundle, then got his Remington .30/06 and a box of shells out of the closet. He put the suitcase, the bedroll, the rifle, and the ammunition on the couch.

"Where's your twenty-two target pistol, Leonard?"

"Put up."

"Don't you think we might need it? Maybe you know a place that's got some bazookas and hand grenades we could buy, maybe a couple of land mines. Shit, what is all this? We're going to swim down and get some money, not shoot it."

"Comes to your ex-wife, I get paranoid."

"She's a pain in the ass, overly idealistic, but she isn't going to ambush us."

"I don't know what she might get us into. I think she leaps before she looks. And I don't know this Howard guy from nothing. He got pals, or are we the only fools in on this?"

"She said there were two others—idealists all. They're going to take their shares of the capitalist banker's money and give it to a good cause."

"No shit? What cause?"

"Save the seals, I guess. Maybe the whales. Hell, I don't know. She didn't say."

"I get any money out of this, I'm going to put it to a good cause too. Me. The seals got to fend for themselves. They don't have bills to pay."

"I hear that."

Leonard went over to the scarred fireplace mantle, got his pipe and tobacco down, and sat in the rocking chair by the fireplace. He pulled a long fireplace match out of a metal cuspidor by the hearth and put it in his lap. He packed his pipe quickly and expertly, pulled the match over the fireplace and lit it. He puffed and considered me.

"How did I let you talk me into this?"

"My perky ass had something to do with it. Christ, Leonard, perky ass?"

"I came up with that because I though tit would annoy Trudy."

"You being alive annoys her."

"Old man Lacy is gonna be needing field hands in a few days, and he'll call, and I won't be here. I'll be wasting my savings trying to find a dream in the Sabine river. Get back from this with no money and my tail between my legs, I might be out of a job permanently."

"There's always room for field hands. Look, we're out of that crap. I think we should go out and do something, even if it's wrong."

"And it is. That's stolen money."

"All this time has gone by, the insurance company is bound to have paid off, and if it's laundered, no sweat."

"How are we to know one way or the other? It might all be marked stuff, or whatever it is they do to trace money."

"We'll take our share to Mexico. We can make some deals down there. We’ll have to lose a few thousand to get it changed to pesos, no questions asked, but we can do it. We can stay there awhile. The money will be worth ten times what it is here. We can buy senors for you and senoritas for me. We can get drunk on Mexican beer.”

“I can’t go off and leave my dogs.”

“Fuck it, I’ll go down there, get the money changed and mail you your half in pesos, and you can get it changed to dollars. Bring you and your goddamn dogs down there for a vacation. I’ll get them some of those little Mexican dogs to date. There’s some way to do business. Bank robbers do it all the time.”

“You been giving this some thought. Usually Trudy comes around and you’re ready to join the Peace Corps, tie yourself to a pine and save it from a chainsaw.”

“Bottom’s fallen out of my convictions. Trudy’s got me thinking again, all right, and maybe last night she had me thinking the way she wanted, but not today.”

“Like I said, Hap, it’s your glands. You got more control over them in the daylight. But come sundown and you’re home in bed between her legs, you might sing some different notes.”

“No, she’s got Howard on a string too. I can stand her coming back to me if I can fool myself for a while, but I won’t sit around and let her swing from one end of the string to another.”

“I didn’t think it was a string she was swinging on.”

“I’m going to make some jack out of this, then slide on out.”

“Won’t be easy. You been a bleeding heart a long time.”

“This heart’s bled out. Gone dry as toast. You don’t think so, hide in the bushes and watch me head for Mexico.”

Leonard grinned at me. “After all I’ve said about you being such a sap, don’t know if you suit me much this way. You make me a little nervous. You being Trudy’s patsy is what made you adorable. There’s a kind of ignorant charm about it. Like having a big dumb pup around that hasn’t quite learned to quit shitting off its papers.”

“That’s sweet, Leonard. I’ll try to remember that.”

■ ■ ■ ■

We decided to take Leonard’s old blue Buick instead of my pickup. Trudy could go with us if she wanted, or go ahead in her Volkswagen. Whatever suited her. We loaded Leonard’s suitcase, rifle, ammo, and bedding into the Buick’s trunk, then tossed in some rope and camping supplies, just in case.

“We’ll need some diving equipment,” Leonard said. “Dry suits, I figure. Wet suits are probably too cold in this weather, not that a dry suit is much better. They hold pockets of air and pinch you.”

“You know more about this stuff than I thought.”

“Just enough to get us drowned. But I do know this. Cold as the water is right now, it’ll deaden your brain. Though in your case, that may not be a new experience. I know this too: it’s my goddamn savings we’re using to rent this stuff.”

“But you have my goodwill, Leonard.”

“I been wanting that something furious.”

“You rent this stuff, won’t it blow our cover?”

“Hap, my good but dumb man. We aren’t going to tell what we want it for. Just say we want the experience of a cold-water dive. They don’t give a damn if we drown or turn to ice cubes, long as we pay down good, give them enough to buy new equipment if we lose it.”

“Leonard, you’re my hero. When I grow up I want to be just like you. Can I, huh, can I?”

“Need some black paint first, but that isn’t gonna make you as pretty. And it would be nice if you were a lot less stupid. Come on, I need to call Calvin and see if he’ll feed my dogs while I’m gone. Then I’ve got to cry over using all my money to finance this dumb idea. Stick close, now. Never know when I might say something wise.”

6

When I awoke the next morning, I could hear the wind wolf-howling through the eaves of the house and the pines out beyond the field. At night I seldom kept the heat going, due to the price of butane, and the room was cold enough to make an Eskimo shiver.

I got up and put on my robe and padded through the morning air, blowing out puffs of whiteness as I went.

I looked out the window. The trees and the ground were iced over and there were flakes of snow mixed with sleet. Quite a rarity for East Texas. Most of the time you didn't even know it was winter; generally the winters were exaggerated falls. But this year was different. The cold had blown in hard and vicious on the very day I was supposed to start toward making some money. A wiser man would have considered it an omen.

I wanted to go back to bed, but instead I struggled to the kitchen, got matches and lit all the heaters, the one in the bedroom last. Even then, with my butt backed up to the heat, I was tempted to climb under the blankets again and snuggle close to Trudy. But it might not have been any warmer under there. She certainly hadn't been warm last night. She made love like I was paying for it and she had more customers in line, some of them important. I attempted to bring her to orgasm, but it was like trying to conquer Everest in Bermuda shorts. She wasn't having any. She wanted me to rut and feel cheap and miserable, and I did. But I have no pride and came anyway. When I finished, she rolled from beneath and turned with her back to me. I put my hand on her hip, but she didn't move or say anything. I might as well have been stroking a marble tombstone.

Suddenly I felt sorry for Howard. Like me, he didn't have a chance with a gal like Trudy. Not really. She ruled us with brains and passion and her downy triangle. It was damn demeaning is what it was.

I dressed and put on my coat and went outside and looked to see if the water in my truck's radiator was frozen. It wasn't. There had been enough antifreeze in there, and I parked it on the south side with the bumper pressed against the house and had put an old horse blanket over the hood.

I got pliers out from behind the truck seat, put the blanket under the truck from the side, crawled on top of it and worked the radiator screw loose so it would drain. This way, if I was gone for some time, I wouldn't have to worry about the cold defeating the antifreeze and blowing my ancient radiator to pieces.

I returned the blanket to the hood and found a couple rocks to put on top of it in case of high winds, then went out to the edge of my property and pried up the water cover and turned off the water valve with the pliers. I put the pliers back, went in the house and locked the windows and back door, drained the water out of the faucets, cut down the water heater, and when I heard Leonard coming, cut off the butane heaters. The air chilled immediately.

I got my gear I had packed last night and brought it into the living room and placed it by the door.

Trudy had got up and dressed during the time I was outside, and all the while I made my inside preparations, she sat on my ratty couch and looked at the wall. Didn't say a word. Didn't look to be breathing.

Leonard stepped inside, looked at Trudy, then me. "I can tell now this is gonna be fun."

"Trudy, you taking your car?" I asked.

"I'll come for it later. I'm no good driving on ice."

"Your VW hasn't got a radiator to bust," Leonard said, "but you might want to put it in my barn just the same. There's some folks in these parts might not mind stealing a car they don't know."

"What about the diving equipment?" I asked.

"In the trunk. Went in and got it yesterday, and they weren't even open. Had to talk a blue streak and wave some extra money around to get the owner out of his house and down to the shop. You owe me a hundred bucks, Hap."

"Put it on my bill."

“Man, your credit level is way topped out … Look, we wait a few days on this, things will be better. Ice will have blown out.”

“Howard is expecting me,” Trudy said. “And I have work tomorrow.”

“Work?” I said.

“You know. You go to a job you hate, and they pay you money for it. You think I’m kept, Hap? Contrary to what Leonard here wants you to think, I’m not a concubine.”

Over at Leonard’s place, Trudy parked the Volkswagen in the barn and Leonard made up his special dog food from three different brands, poured the contents of the feed sacks in a plastic garbage can, a little bit of each, a smidgen at a time, mixing it evenly.

While he did that, Trudy walked out to the dog pens and I followed. I felt like I ought to say something, but didn’t know what. She had a way of making me feel like a jerk when I hadn’t done anything. We both stood by the dog pens and waited on Leonard. We were at the end opposite Switch’s run, and Trudy had her fingers poked through the wire and was scratching the nose of a dog named Cal, cooing sweet things to him. The dog was eating it up. I was eating it up secondhand. She sounded very sexy making those tender little sounds, and bless my little heart, I wanted to make love to her so bad right then I thought I’d cry.

Leonard came out of the barn and started in our direction. On his way over, he stopped, knelt down to reach his fingers through the wire of Switch’s run so the dog could lick his fingers. “Get in your doghouse, boy. You gonna freeze your nuts off.”

Switch was acting like a pup, wagging his tail so hard his entire body shook. I walked down to them, and forgot Trudy. She came after me and suddenly knelt between me and Leonard and put her hand to pet Switch the way she had Cal.

Switch, quick and silent as an arrow, leapt for her extended fingers. Leonard snatched her hand back and Switch’s muzzle went against the wire. He grabbed it with his teeth, pulled, let go with a snap. Foam flecked out of his mouth and splashed on the knee of my jeans. Trudy hadn’t even had time to flinch.

Leonard let go of her hand, and Trudy stepped back. “Jesus!

What's in him?"

"Protective," Leonard said. "He doesn't like anyone near me he doesn't know. That dog and men like me, probably the only males you can't twist the way you want."

"You think it's funny, don't you, Leonard?" Trudy said.

"He got your fingers, I wouldn't. Since he didn't, yeah, I think it's funny."

"You can have your old dog. I hope he freezes to death."

"Good thing I don't think you mean that, lady."

Trudy walked away quickly.

"Glad you don't like women," I said, "because you don't exactly have a way with them."

"I like women fine, just not to fuck. And I don't like that woman to do anything with. You think the dogs are gonna be cold?"

"Hell yeah. But the way you've got their houses fixed up, they'll be all right. Warmer than we're going to be. Calvin comes to feed them, sees they're uncomfortable, he'll do something about it."

"Yeah … guess so."

Then we were all in the Buick, easing along with Leonard at the wheel, me in the front, leaning on the door as if contemplating a leap, and Trudy dead center of the backseat with arms and legs crossed tight as the coils of the Gordian knot.

The car leaked carbon monoxide through a hole in the floorboard and we were all a little dizzy from it. The wipers beat at the snow and ice and the near-bald tires whistled a tentative funeral march. We made it slow and easy, without much talk, into Marvel Creek about half-past noon.

7

The town really started before the city limits. There was a line of beer joints on either side of the highway, ramshackle fire hazards with neon pretzels on their roofs and above their doorways.

Among them were two places I well remembered: The Roundup Club and The Sweet White Lilly.

Next came the long, wide river bridge and the city limits sign that read POP. 5606. Then we were on Main Street, coasting past closed businesses with boarded windows and bolted doors, service stations with oil spotted drives and greasy-capped men with their hands on gas nozzles or leaky tires.

As we went deeper into town, it got better. Open stores and more people. But the place still looked sad. Not that it had been any budding metropolis when I lived there.

Trudy had us turn on a brick street slick as vaseline, and we went past the bank, around a curve and past what had been a Piggly Wiggly but was now called Food Mart. I used to buy Cokes and peanut patties there, hang out with the boys and lie about all the fights I'd been in and all the tail I'd banged.

We glided past car lots and the empty spot where the Dairy Queen had stood and old Bob used to make us chocolate shakes with more water than milk in them. On down the highway we went, onto a blacktop and back into the pines, and finally down a soggy clay road that ended at a small house that was mostly weathered gray with strips of paint peeling down its sides like melted candle wax. The front porch leaned starboard and the smoking, crumbling chimney was held upright by the slanting support of ten feet of warped six-by-six. Pine sap corrosion had turned the mouth of the chimney dark as the devil's shadow.

Parked off to the right on the dead grass were a red, dented Dodge mini-van and a jaundice-yellow Volvo with a sheet of cardboard in place of the left front window. Two more letters on the end and the writing on the cardboard would have read MONTGOMERY WARD.

Leonard killed the engine, looked at me, and said, “And I thought *we* lived like trash.”

Trudy got out of the car without saying anything and we stayed where we were. Before she was all the way up the porch steps, the door opened and a big, handsome blond guy with a slight gut, wearing jeans, a gray sweat suit, and old hightop white tennis shoes came out. He took Trudy in his arms and kissed her in a more than cordial fashion.

“Flexible, ain’t she.” Leonard said. “And you know, bubba, he’s prettier than you are.”

The guy who had to be Howard looked at us. He said something to Trudy and then came out to the car. We got out before they could get there and leaned on the hood and tried to look thuggy.

“This is Howard,” Trudy said.

“You must be Hap,” Howard said. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

We shook hands.

“This is Leonard,” Trudy said.

It was obvious from the expression on Howard’s face he was trying to picture Leonard’s role in all this. “So, you gave Trudy and Hap a ride up. You ought to stay for dinner before you go back. I’m going to fix my famous spaghetti dinner.”

“He’s in on it,” I said.

“Ah,” said Howard, and looked at Trudy.

She wouldn’t let him catch her eye. “He’s a good swimmer,” she said. “Hap wouldn’t come without him. It’s like they’re married or something.”

“Just engaged, “Leonard said. “We’re still picking china.”

Howard had gone mildly red-faced with irritation. “So, you swim, huh?”

“Like a goddamn eel,” Leonard said.

Howard nodded, tried to keep it pleasant. “Where’s your car, Trudy?”

"Leonard's. I didn't want to drive on ice."

"I see," Howard said. "What say we go in? I'm freezing."

"Go ahead," Leonard said. "I'm gonna smoke a pipeful first. Hap's gonna keep me company."

"All right," Howard said, and put his arm around Trudy as they started for the house. Howard seemed to be holding her shoulders rather tight.

They went inside and Leonard got his pipe and fixings out of his coat pocket, packed the pipe, and lit it.

"I don't know about you, Hap, but I liked him. He's sweet. Warmed to me right off, don't you think?"

"I think you talk too much."

"And I could see he warmed to you too, and you to him. You both got, I don't know, a kind of glow on your faces when you first saw one another. Guess spreading the same gal does that to you."

We leaned on the hood for about five more minutes, then Leonard tapped out his tobacco and put his foot on it. "Well," he said, "what say we go on up to the house and meet the rest of the gang? Got a feeling we're gonna love them as much as we do Howard."

8

The house was sticky-warm and the air wore the smell of incense like a coat, and beneath the coat was some kind of stink.

The incense came from the upraised trunk of a small brown ceramic elephant sitting in the middle of a water-ringed coffee table. My delicate nose determined that the underlying stink most likely came from the kitchen garbage. The heat came from a big butane heater with busted grates, and from a small fireplace that needed shoveling out.

The walls were covered with faded newspaper, and the paper was ripped and peeling, and where it was completely gone you could see pocks in the wood and occasional holes stuffed with thick wads of toilet tissue.

There was a couch covered in what was left of a flowered pattern, and a big green armchair with the cloth on its arms worn down to the wood and cotton dangling out of the cushions like some strange animal that had got its guts knocked out by a speeding car.

There were also a couple of folding metal chairs with their seats polished silver by hordes of shifting asses.

“All right,” Leonard said. “Where’s everybody?”

As if in answer, Howard came through a door. Before he closed it, I saw behind him a kitchen with a greasy cookstove, a bullet shaped refrigerator and smoky-yellow walls that were once white.

I was right about the garbage too. With the kitchen door open the smell came into the room like a bully and started pushing the incense around. Howard closed the door, stopped in the center of the living-room and stood there looking nervous and angry, though he was trying not to let it show, and thought he was good at it. He was all dry smiles and no hand gestures—he had his hands pushed down in his pockets to keep from it, but there was tension in them and they fluttered in his pants like frightened animals trapped in sacks.

“Trudy went to tell the others,” he said. “They’ll want to meet you.”

“Bet they aren’t as excited about it as we are,” Leonard said.

The door to the hallway opened and saved Howard from having to respond to that. Trudy came into the room, along with some cooler air and a fat, doughy man with a shaggy haircut that didn’t go with his receding hairline. He wore a tie-dyed T-shirt, faded jeans with ripped-out knees, and low-cut work shoes with thick white socks. Except for the haircut and clothes, he was a pretty nondescript guy. He had colorless eyes, shit-brown hair and smooth features.

But the only thing regular about the man who followed him were the clothes he wore: a black T-shirt with pocket, blue jeans and running shoes.

The right side of his face was red and angry, obviously burn-scarred. He had a lump like a melted candle for a nose. His lips were two thin lines of purple leather. His left ear was missing and there was a knob of wart-like flesh where it had been. He was bald except for a tuft of hair over his right ear, and that ear seemed big enough and flared enough to pick up Radio Free Europe. At some point his scalp had been torn off and resewn, and a poor job had been done of it. The skin on the back of his head pouched up like a wrinkled pup tent.

Trudy said to me, “I’ve explained to them that you and Leonard are with us.”

“Except I’m not giving my share to any whales or such,” Leonard said.

Trudy didn’t bite. She was learning to ignore Leonard. Things went better that way. She gestured to the doughy man, said, “This is Chub.”

Chub came forward, put his hand out and I took it and we shook. “Real name is Charles,” he said, “Everyone calls me Chub because I’m a little pudgy.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I smiled like a jackass and Chub went to Leonard and shook his hand, said, “Trudy just told us about her hesitation in letting you in on our plans here, and I want to assure you it had nothing to do with you being black. That isn't our way. We make our decisions on a one-to-one basis."

Leonard said, "You keep your dialogue on a three-by-five card?"

Chub grinned. "I accept that. I learned years ago, if you express what you think and feel, you're better off than if you don't."

"Chub's had analysis," the burned man said, "and he never lets us forget it."

"It's done me a world of good," Chub said. "There was a time when being the fat kid, the one who got chosen last in football, the one who didn't get the pretty girls or get asked to go riding around with the popular boys, was painful and important. It carried over into being an adult. But analysis has allowed me to move beyond that and I can accept who I am."

"Yeah, but I don't think I can," Leonard said.

"That's right," Chub said. "Express yourself. I'm not offended."

"Before he expresses himself in a way you don't want, Chub," the burned man said, "let me introduce myself. I'm Paco."

"Paco what?" Leonard said.

"Just Paco."

Paco didn't come forward to shake hands, and we didn't go to him. I stood there feeling foolish. Leonard probably felt disgusted, and with good reason. What had seemed like a good idea yesterday now seemed childish and pathetic. Reality had taken hold and I felt like a little boy who had been playing at adventurer but had just been told by mother to put my toys away and come in to supper.

We stood that way a long time. Leonard said, "Isn't anyone going to ask me my sign?"

Chub said, "I sense a lot of hostility in you, Leonard. I'd like to know you better, have you think of me as a friend, someone you can talk to. Being able to talk things out can really let off pressure."

"Chub," Leonard said, "that analysis shit might be all right for an airhead like you, but you come at me again with that, I'm gonna let off that pressure you're worried about."

Chub started to open his mouth, then mulled it over. His lips twitched, like the words were living things trying to push out. But he held them. Leonard looked like a man who just might let off pressure.

I felt sorry for poor Chub on one hand, but on the other he sort of asked for what he got. Kind of wore a perpetual KICK ME sign around his neck and on his ass.

“We’re not getting off to the best start,” Howard said. “There’s no need for threats.”

“He wants to talk like people talk, okay,” Leonard said, “but he wants to play analyst, he can talk that trash to himself.”

“We’re going to work together,” Howard said, “we got to coexist.”

“True,” Paco said, “but could be a solid punch in the teeth would do Chub some good. I’m tired of him myself.” He looked over at Chub. “One word about my physical scars being a manifestation of my internal condition, or some dumb thing like that, and I’m going to promise you something similar to what Leonard promised.”

Chub put his hands in his pockets and smiled to let us know he could take whatever was dished out. He was okay, you were okay.

“Violence isn’t the way here,” Howard said. “Let’s sit down and get something to drink or smoke and talk business. We’ll eat in awhile.”

“That sounds right enough,” Leonard said.

“Trudy,” Howard said, “will you help me bring in some drinks?” Then to us, “Selection’s limited. Coke, beer, some Dickie whisky. We got a little grass, anyone wants it.”

Chub didn’t want anything. I went for beer. Paco and Leonard took the Dickle.

Trudy caught my eye and gave me a look that pinned my skull to the wall. Gee, what did I do? Leonard was the bigmouth. I thought I’d been pretty sweet, all things considered.

I tried smiling at her, but she wasn’t going for that. She turned her back, and she and Howard went into the kitchen and closed the door.

Paco went over to Leonard, grinned and said, “By the way, big fella, what *is* your sign?”

“The Asshole,” Leonard said.

“I’ll buy that,” Paco said.

Chub smiled. He smiled big. He liked himself. He and the world were one with one another. Except he was smiling so tight the muscles in his cheeks were quivering.

In the kitchen I could hear Howard murmuring, and though I couldn’t understand what he was saying, I could tell from the tone of his voice that Leonard and I had already worn out our welcome, or Leonard had worn it out for both of us. Not that it mattered. Now that we were dealt in, they had to let us stay. Thing was, I wasn’t sure there was anything to stay for.

That feeling of foolishness washed over me again, big time.

9

After a bit, Trudy and Howard came back with our drinks, and I sat on the couch with them. Leonard got the gutted chair, and Paco and Chub pulled the folding chairs up close. Howard sipped a beer and went through the stuff Trudy had told us about the money most likely being laundered. Then he started waving his hands around and working his best facial expressions; threw in a few cents about how the spirit of the sixties need not die; how the money we were going to get could be used to push the ideals of that time forward; said the survivors of that noble era need not fall by the wayside; that unlike the dinosaur our generation had been compared to, we were not in fact extinct or even on the endangered species list, we were merely hibernating like a bear, and now was the time to awake to a new and productive spring.

Although Howard pretended to be talking to both me and Leonard, it was pretty clear it was me he was trying to interest. Trudy had told him about my past, about my involvement in "the movement," and he thought he might jump start my old battery if he could find the right words.

He couldn't.

I was curious about what they had in mind, but felt it would be a mistake to go the next step and ask. I'd open a whole new can of germs that way. Once they knew I was interested they'd try to work their virus into my bloodstream and take over, and I couldn't see any reason to go through the process.

From the way Trudy looked at me, I think she was both surprised at me and disgusted with me. I don't know if it was my lack of interest in their cause, whatever it was, or the realization she was losing control over me.

During Howard's dissertation on the sixties and what it meant to him and should mean to all of us, Chub threw in a few "right ons," but for the most part was mercifully silent. Paco yawned a lot, and Trudy tried to stare me into submission. I attempted to look pleasant but a little dense, like a dog listening to a talk on nuclear physics.

When Howard was on his third run of rephrasing what he'd already said, hoping to sneak up on my blind side, Leonard said, "Since I don't see we're talking much business, pardon me, will you? Because like the bear coming out of hibernation and feeling the first intestinal stirrings of spring, I've got to take me a big, greasy shit. When y'all get to the folk songs part, maybe I'll come back. I'm good on 'I Got A Hammer.' "

"Wrong era," I said. "We're talking Beatles and Doors here."

"I never can fit in," Leonard said, "and I try so goddamn hard."

He went in search of the bathroom.

"Your friend doesn't seem to like us much," Howard said.

"No, he doesn't," I said. "He wasn't involved in any movement during the sixties except moving out of the way of bullets, trying not to get his ass shot off in Vietnam."

Howard nodded like that explained some things. "He knows about guns, I presume?"

"Yeah, got a medal or two in Vietnam. But on the negative side he's a little weak on the social graces and Bob Dylan lyrics, and I've caught him in a few mistakes when we're discussing the ballet and the history of Marxism."

"I don't get the impression you're all that interested in reviving the spirit of the sixties, either," Howard said.

"Can't imagine why you thought I might be. Well, I can imagine, but whatever Trudy's told you about me, that's in the past. This sixties talk is embarrassing. You sound like a first-year college guy who's just gotten away from mom and dad and discovered weed and liberal politics."

"The sixties were a positive time, a good time," Howard said.

"Some of it was. Some of it wasn't. But that was the sixties. I'm happily selfish now. I'm in this for the money alone. Besides, sounds to me like you're trying to justify theft with sixties rhetoric, and you're too goddamn secretive for my taste. You sound like more illegal stuff than I've agreed to, and I don't want to hear about it. I'm not going to prison for some idealistic rush. This idealism crap has got me nowhere but tired and broke and cut to the bone. Money I can spend, and might get away with it.

"I can take it and go someplace warm with cheap whisky and loose women." I looked at Trudy. "Women that want nothing more than hot, sticky sex down Mexico way or on some tropical island where you can run around with your ass hanging out and your dick slapping your thigh, and nobody asks you anything but mind your own business. You people fight the good fight, whatever it is, because you're going to have to do it without us."

Paco grinned, got out a cigarette pack, lipped a smoke and lit it with a cheap lighter.

"Don't make us breathe your bad air," Howard said.

"Screw you," Paco said. He blew smoke across the room.

Normally I'd be on Howard's side, but I enjoyed seeing him irritated. I almost asked Paco for a cigarette.

Howard sighed, looked at Trudy sadly; he was a smart, hip guy dealing with a bunch of nincompoops. What could he do?

"Anytime change is encouraged," Chub said, "there's always someone who argues for the status quo, or decides to run off and take it easy, concludes that the best and simplest way—"

Paco reached over and slapped Chub on top of the head with his fingers.

"Damn you," Chub said. "That was childish, Paco. You're frustrated about something, you should discuss it, not resort to—"

Paco slapped Chub again, this time with the palm of his hand, said, "Shut up, will you, Chub?"

"Who's side you on, Paco?" Howard asked.

"Yeah," Chub said, rubbing his head.

"I'm not choosing up," Paco said. "I'm tired of Chub's bullshit is all. He keeps talking like he's done some things. Hell, leave Hap alone. He isn't interested. Let him and Leonard do their job, then let's do what we're gonna do. They couldn't care less. If they want it that way, lets leave it that way. You guys are starting to sound like evangelists, and I hate those fuckers."

"Amen." It was Leonard back from the bathroom.

"You look refreshed," I said. "Hope you struck some matches."

"About four. It was a championship shit."

“I can see this isn’t going anywhere,” Chub said. “So I think I’ll withdraw until we’re willing to converse sensibly.”

“Telling it like we see it,” Leonard said. “Isn’t that what you like, Chubby?”

“I don’t need this,” Chub said. He got up and went through the hallway door.

“I hate it when he leaves the room,” Leonard said. “He makes things so damn bright when he’s around. But since he’s gone, I’m going outside to smoke.”

“Thanks for not cluttering up the air,” Howard said, and he looked at Paco.

Paco put a smile on his ugly face and kept smoking.

Leonard said, “It’s not your air I’m worried about. It’s mine. This place has a rot smell under all that fucking incense. Smelled enough of that in Vietnam. The rot and the incense.”

Leonard went outside.

“Think I’ll join him,” Paco said, and he got up and went out and closed the door.

“Me too,” I said, and got up and started after Paco.

“Hap,” Trudy said. “We got to talk.”

God had spoken. “Do we?” I said.

“I told you you shouldn’t have done this,” Howard said to Trudy.

“You don’t know everything,” Trudy said and stood up.

“I know this,” Howard said. “I know this isn’t a good idea at all. You’re thinking maybe with some other part of your body.”

“That’s rich, coming from you,” Trudy said. “I’ve seen how you think.”

“How you make me think.”

“Children,” I said. “Let’s not fight.”

Howard stood up, held his beer in my direction. “I got something to say to you, big shot.”

“Say it, then,” I said, “while I’m used to the drone of your voice. I’d rather not get acclimated again.”

“You think you can come in here and run things,” he said, “be a goddamn comedian. But you're wrong."

"I'm not trying to run anything. I just don't want to be ran."

"We got some scruples here. Idealism may strike you as dumb, or sissy, or childish, or nostalgic, but there's more to it than that. There's more to us than that."

"I'm sure history will be kind to you," I said. "Howard gave his stolen money to the whales. He was a good guy. Hap gave his to wine and heat and women. He was a bad guy. Leonard bought all the Hank Williams originals he could find. He was a bad guy."

"What's with the whales?" Howard said. "No one's said a thing about the whales."

"Shut up," Trudy said. "You're drunk."

"Only had a beer," he said.

"The smell of rubbing alcohol makes you silly," she said.

"Look, Howard," I said, "I'm not trying to cause any trouble here. You think maybe I'm trying to take Trudy—"

"She's her own person," Howard said.

"Yeah, but you don't like the fact that I've been fucking her again, do you?"

"Hap," Trudy said. "Don't."

"You know I have," I said. "You think she came over to my place and merely talked some business? We banged each other till our eyes bugged out."

"Like Howard said, Hap, he doesn't own me. And neither do you."

"And I'm damn proud of it," I said.

What Howard thought he knew, he was now certain he knew. In theory it was okay, but in actuality it got under his skin like a chigger.

"It doesn't matter," Howard said, but his voice lacked conviction. "She's a grown woman. I've got no strings on her."

"But she's got them on you," I said. "And I should know. They used to go all the way through me and fasten to the bones. I got maybe a few still tied in me. Enough that I'm acting horsey here when I shouldn't, and it's making you do the same."

"I'm saying you're not coming in here and changing what we believe, what we're going to do. That's all. I'm not saying anything about me and Trudy or you and Trudy."

"I think you're saying plenty about just that. You open your mouth and your heart and dick talk over you. Like I said, I'm one to know."

"You don't know anything," Howard said. "You and that other guy, you think you know all there is to know, but you don't know a thing."

"Let's leave it," I said. "I don't want to hear any more. So it isn't the whales. Do what you got to do for people and animals and nuclear disarmament, and give my regards to the boys in Leavenworth."

"To hell with you, pilgrim," Howard said. He moved around the coffee table, staggered slightly. That bit of alcohol really had got to him. Or maybe it was the capper to some he drank earlier. Had I been in his place, knowing Trudy was supposed to be with me but was off with one of her ex-husbands for a few days, I'd have been drinking too. At one point I had.

He came around the coffee table and put his hand out and pushed me hard in the chest, but made the mistake of not pulling back fast enough, and I put my hand over the back of his, trapped it to my chest and bent forward. It sent Howard to his knees. It was a playground trick, but heck, he started it.

"Stop it, Hap," Trudy said. "Let him go."

I let him go. Trudy bent down and put an arm around him and tried to hoist him up. He shrugged her off, got up on his own.

He pointed a finger at me, but he wasn't standing as close as before. "Try that when I haven't been drinking."

"Okay," I said.

"Hell, listen to me," he said. "I'm playing your macho game now. I'm not getting pulled into this. I'm gonna lie down. I've had all this foolishness I want."

Without wobbling too much, he went through the hallway door and out of sight. Maybe he and Chub had their own special place to sulk back there. Some old sixties records to play.

"Happy?" Trudy said.

“Semi.”

10

I awoke to the sound of a bird and the embrace of the cold. The voice of the bird was pathetic, and the cold was criminal.

I was on the back porch of the little house, and it had once been screened in, and in a sense still was, but to make it a kind of room, cardboard had been tacked all around on the screen in a couple of layers. It might have worked okay summers, but winters, especially this winter, it wasn’t much.

I wondered whose idea it was to fix the porch this way. The landlord or the renters? I voted on the renters. A landlord who’d let people live in this shit box didn’t strike me as the type to bother with even cardboard siding.

Originally Leonard and I had been in the kitchen, sleeping on the floor. The cookstove, with the oven door open, heated up the small room perfectly. But I awoke in the middle of the night bathed in sweat, finding it hard to breathe. I opened the door that lead out to the back porch, and that helped some, but the air in the kitchen was still poisonous with butane. I toed Leonard awake and told him I was going out on the porch, and if he didn’t want to spend tomorrow in Marvel Creek Funeral Home, he might want to do the same.

Now I was lying under some ice-crusted blankets, inside an old sleeping bag. The bag was on top of some broken down cardboard boxes (probably the remains of the interior decorating scheme) and the seams on the cardboard had worked through the bag and into my back. I was still in my clothes. My socks felt damp from yesterday’s sweat. My body felt stiff as wire.

I rolled over, and sitting in the kitchen doorway with a blanket over his shoulders, shivering, looking at me in what can only be called an unpleasant manner, was Leonard. His breath was snorting out of his mouth and nostrils in white puffs and his eyes were narrow.

He said, “I’ve let you talk me into some shit before, Hap, but this one is the king of all the dumb things. These fuckers are seriously balled up. Ought to have my ass kicked, and be proud of it.”

“Good morning.”

“Chub is really in orbit, and Howard is so full of what Trudy’s filled him with, he doesn’t know if he needs to shit or throw up.”

“Don’t you have something unpleasant to say about Paco? You wouldn’t want to leave anybody out.”

“He confuses me. He doesn’t seem like part of this. He’s got his feet on the ground.”

“You’re just sweet on him because he went out on the porch and had a smoke with you.”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“They’re kind of silly, Leonard, but they’ve got good intentions. Without people like these sillies, blacks would still be drinking at water fountains that said colored and they’d be going around back of a restaurant to get their food through a little slot.”

“Now you’re talking like the fat guy.”

“He’s a clown, but his heart’s in the right place.”

“Tell me about women’s rights now. Toss in something about how the gays used to be more oppressed before people like these, people like you, came along. Tell me how you people ended the war.”

“All true.”

“Then why the hell didn’t you go for what they wanted you to go for yesterday? They were fishing with every kind of bait they had.”

“I guess it’s their posture. That holier than thou attitude that smacks more of a performance than anything else.”

“I thought you said it was heartfelt.”

I hate being caught in a contradiction. “Have you ever thought about fucking yourself, Leonard?”

“Constantly. Want to have a relationship with a good man, figure I’d be prime pick. But my dick’s about a half-inch too short to get the job done. I like to feel it all the way up in my liver.”

"You through jacking with me now?"

"Almost. All I got to say is you can't be a professional bleeding heart. Yeah, things are better for blacks and women and gays, but it was the blacks and women and gays that did it, not fuck-ups like this bunch. Whites and straights came along to give help, all right, after the blacks said 'enough' and got their heads busted, and it's the same for the gays and the women. The whites and straights, they control things, and they could have changed it anytime."

"Not all us whites and straights are in a position of power, or haven't you noticed?"

"Let's save this for next time we're on *Meet The Nation* or something."

"Gladly. I'm too cold to argue, and if I got up from here to kick your ass my foot would break off."

"Or I'd break it off for you. Now that's settled, let's get out of here before the World Savers get up."

Leonard looked at his watch. "It's six o'clock and I'm hungry. Paco said there's a pretty good place for breakfast in town."

"Maybe they got something here we could fix."

"Nothing in the fridge but a bag of uncooked spaghetti and three beers. Cabinets are mostly empty, except for some roaches."

We left without disturbing anyone, went out to Leonard's car, and it cranked after a scary moment of the starter Bendix clicking. As we drove away, I thought of Trudy and Howard in bed together and felt like Howard must have felt when she was with me.

Depressed.

I thought of them lying there, her waking up, giving herself to him before she got cleaned up and went off to work (wherever she worked) and he went to his job (if he had one). Then I imagined them coming home from a hard day, planning to steal money that was already stolen to use for some noble cause. Ozzie and Harriet of the sixties set.

I liked it. It was sweet. They were a great couple with high ideals.

I hoped it was so cold back there her vagina was frozen shut.

Sue me. I’ve got a juvenile streak.

11

We drove in and found a little café called Bill's Kettle, the place Paco recommended. It hadn't been there when I was growing up. Back then that spot had been a magazine and cigar store. The lady who ran it used to let me read comics off the rack and not buy them. I was the only one she let do that.

The building the café was in, though it had to be considerably younger than the one the magazine store had occupied, looked much older. It appeared to be held up with nothing more than the smoke and grease from the kitchen. The huge plate glass was so grimy you could hardly see movement behind it. Someone had made an attempt to wipe it clean on the outside but hadn't bothered rinsing the soap; it looked like the end result of a Halloween prank.

The inside looked no better. The floors were scuffed and dirty and tables had been poorly wiped. There were two men at one table eating. They eyed us and nodded as we came in. In the back a young man sat staring into space, sipping coffee. There was a fat blond woman in thinning green stretch pants at the counter. She gave us a quick glance and went back to her coffee and cigarette, said something to the thin, oily-headed man behind the counter. He managed a laugh, like a leukemia patient trying to be cheery.

We sat and kept our arms off the table. The fat blond woman got down off the stool and came over with menus. Pretty sneaky, the help blending in with the clientele that way.

We ordered, and about the time our meal arrived, Paco came in. He had on faded khakis and a blue baseball cap today. The cap hid some of the ugliness of his head. No one stared; they all worked at not doing that, and you could tell.

He saw us, smiled, and the smile was nice; the only part of him that wasn't ruined.

He came over and Leonard made room and Paco sat down beside him. We went through the casual greeting bullshit you go through, and the waitress shrugged off the stool and came over with her cigarette in her mouth and asked around it for Paco's order, then went away.

"She didn't even bother with a menu," Leonard said.

"I always get the same thing," Paco said. "Pancakes. Her asking me is simply a ritual."

Surprise. The food was great. I was wiping up the last of my eggs with a piece of toast when Paco smiled at me and said, "Place looks like a toilet, but what comes out of the kitchen could pass for ambrosia. They got someone back there knows what cooking is all about."

When Paco's order came and he finished eating, I said, "How do you live, you and the guys? Trudy the only one working?"

"I don't get too many indoor jobs with this face," Paco said. "Nobody in a store wants to look at me all day. I do some jobs here and there. Move across country doing different things, farm and yard work mostly. Sometimes things that aren't legal or aren't quite legal. Right now, you could say I'm between jobs.

"Trudy works at the Dairy Palace east of town. She doles out hamburgers. I'll tell you now. Don't eat there. The food's for shit.

"Howard's got a job at a gas station. Pumps gas, changes tires, fixes flats, runs the wrecker service. He's getting in good with the owner so he can get use of the wrecker. Told the guy that way his wife—Trudy's going as his wife—won't have to pick him up. He thinks they're gonna let him have the wrecker soon and we can use it to pull the boat out some afternoon."

"If there is a boat," Leonard said.

"I don't let myself think any other way," Paco said. "There's a boat."

"You got Trudy's kind of dedication," I said.

"I don't know she's so dedicated," Paco said. "She wants to be, but I don't know she is. I don't know her like Howard knows her, or maybe you know her, but I know her type. I've heard her talk about you two, and I've heard Howard talk, and I see how burned out you are, Hap, and I got to draw some conclusions. I think she's a quitter. She likes to get all the sticks and tinder for the fire, likes to light it, but doesn't want to be there when it starts to smoke too much and get too hot. By then, she's out of there, gathering new sticks, starting new fires, then she's away from that one before it gets going good. Leaves someone else to mind the blaze, lets them take the heat and smoke and get all burned up. She's got a knack for picking guys who'll martyr for her, ones who think she's gonna come back and burn up with them."

"I been trying to tell this clown that for years," Leonard said. "I know a goddamn succubus when I see one."

"What about you, Paco?" I asked. "What's your story? You just dedicated to their cause, or what?"

"Me, I'm not dedicated at all. Except to myself. I'm just looking to score as big as I can."

"I hear that," Leonard said. "But what are you doing with these bozos?"

"I'm a bozo too. Or have been. I'm just not dedicated anymore. I'm like a big truck with momentum and no brakes, the gearshift knob off in my hand, going downhill on a narrow grade. I want to stop but can't. I got to ride things out. Either I go over the side or make it to the bottom of the grade and coast out smooth and easy, hope I don't wreck."

"Chub?" I asked.

"He was born with money. He hung around with ill-contents. It gave him a club. He's still eighteen or twenty in his head. Never really gets up against the hub, just likes to think he does. Always been a weekend rebel, but he's gone and got married to getting this money. He wants to use it to fight some injustice. Anyway, folks back home in Houston disowned him, but not before they gave him a bundle they thought he'd use on becoming a doctor. Over the years, he's spent most of it on good causes, got some in the bank here to live on. He's got degrees aplenty. Knows medicine, even though he never became a doctor. Wouldn't go the final business because he thought that was becoming part of the establishment. He's got idealism like nerds got religion or *Star Trek."*

"I still don't have you figured in all this," I said.

"Maybe when I see that money I won't do what they think. But

I don't see any cause to rock the boat until we got the boat. We work together, we might can bring that money up. They think I got other plans, they might fade on me. It's not like I can go to the police and complain I been welched on. Besides, if I could, I wouldn't. I got some problems there already."

"Suppose you're going to tell us about it?" Leonard said.

"We're gonna break the law together, so why not?" Paco got out a cigarette and lighter and lit up. He looked around. The fat blond waitress was gone from the counter—somewhere in the back, most likely. The fella behind the cash register was leaning on it, looking out that grimy glass. We were the only customers left in the place.

Paco said, "I got a record. It's the sixties' fault. Well, my fault and the sixties with it, but it's no fun blaming yourself even if you think you're guilty. So I'm gonna say it's the sixties fault and you can know better if you want.

"But when it was '68 I graduated and went off to the University of Texas, and things were heated up good, what with the war and all. Back then I had a face. I wasn't a Greek god or nothing, but I wasn't so bad. Now I scare crows at a hundred yards. But the face was all right, and I guess I was all right too. Full of lies about life and all, like we all are then. But I started figuring out some things. Come to the conclusion what we been told about things, about life, is just talk. You act a certain way to gain a certain thing, and that's all there is to it. I know that now, but then, I was full of love and peace and end the war, civil rights and women's rights. Thought I could make everyone look at these things and see that's the way it ought to be, that it would hit them like a thunderbolt from Zeus.

"I got a feeling you know what I'm saying, Hap, I know a disfranchised sixties guy when I see one."

"You pegged him right," Leonard said.

"Silence in the gallery," I said.

"So, anyway, I'm off to college, and I'm Mr. Big Shot. I'm gonna do some things. I know how the world works and I'm gonna rip off the lid and let everyone look inside and see the gears, and once they do, it's all gonna go smooth. We'll put a little oil in there, but once the machinery of a thing is understood, there goes the mystery. Everyone can live together and love one another, no sweat.

"But when I finally got the lid off, looked down there, I saw the machinery was a lot more complex than I originally thought. You couldn't glance at it and see how it worked. I had to go down in the machine and study it, become a mechanic. Change some things around so it was simple. I figured I could do that. Figured when I came up out of the machine, it would be smooth and well oiled and would run the way it was supposed to. Without prejudice and wars and sexism. People would be kind to animals, loan their tools, and locks would come off doors."

I nodded. "Peace, brother."

"You got it. So I decided to team up with these other mechanics. People who had the right ideas, you know, wanted to get down in that machinery with me, do some work. This machinery analogy was theirs, and they started calling themselves the Mechanics. You don't hear much about them some reason or another, but they were active as ants."

"I heard of them," I said. "Started out getting people to register to vote. Pushing the ideas of a democracy, then they splintered. The ones that continued to call themselves the Mechanics were kind of like the radical branch that split off from the Students for a Democratic Society and called themselves the Weathermen."

"You got it. The splinters all died out pretty quick without their original leader. He was a charismic kind of guy. Had come into the group as one of the Indians, but in no time was chief. A few of the Indians split, tried to form their own tribes, but the diehards stayed with him. And it took him to hold things together, keep the Mechanics on track.

"So the Mechanics got their monkey wrenches and went to work. Said to hell with this democratic society shit, the answers are in the street. You got to wreck some things to get them built up new and different. We went underground. Got guns, started hitting anyplace we thought didn't jive with human rights or supported the war in Vietnam. There were lots of targets. We bombed a few ROTC buildings throughout the state. Moved on to other states. Traveled all over and didn't get caught. We were a different kind of criminal than the FBI had dealt with before.

Smart people with a smart leader. We had a cause, and there's no one more dangerous than the zealot, and we were that in spades."

"How many of you were there?" Leonard asked.

"Twelve at first. Took in a few more here and there off college campuses. Did some sneaky recruiting. We had been students, so we knew where to go to talk to the right people—people with a similar political mind. We hooked them in, fed them radicalism like pudding. The leader of the Mechanics was especially good at talking that shit. Thought he was one of life's poets, one enlightened sonofabitch. Didn't hurt either that back then every college kid wanted to be Che Guevara.

"We were good at what we did. Knew how to forge documents, make new identities. Worked what jobs we could get, spent very little, moved often. Stayed near college campuses mostly; all kinds of free stuff you can get at the bigger ones. Play it right and live simple, you can do well mostly on the labors of others. And that struck us as right. We saw ourselves as ripping off a capitalistic society."

I had been sitting there trying to remember a name, and suddenly it came to me. "Gabriel Lane," I said. "That's who the leader of the Mechanics was. Goddamn! That's you, isn't it, Paco?"

"Long ago. I'm Paco now, and Paco I'll be till they find me somewhere dead in a cheap motel and cart me off to a pauper's grave."

"I think you guys were fucked up," Leonard said. "Doing what you did."

"Our hearts were in the right place, but we got caught up, and pretty soon our hearts shifted. An innocent bystander dies when we bomb some capitalistic bank, some ROTC building, boy that's tough, we hated it, but hey, it happens. The end justifies the means. We'd blow you up for peace and love."

"General consensus is you're dead," I said. "You were supposed to have gotten killed in an explosion, if I remember right."

"I may look blown up," Paco said, "but here I am. Talking and smoking and making your morning bright and gay."

"I'm gay," Leonard said, "but I don't know about the day and what you're doing for it."

"Gay?" Paco said. "You saying what I think you're saying?"

"I fuck men," Leonard said. "Does that clear it up for you?"

"I believe it does."

"You say people died because of what you were doing?" I said.

"That's right," Paco said. "Toward the end we lost some of our own. Cops—or the pigs, as they were popularly referred to then—cornered four of the Mechanics in a house in Chicago. I was out at the time. Making a gun trade. Had two of the group with me. I forget what the rest were doing. But the bottom line is the cops got wind of where we were, hit the house, and killed four of us. Bobbie Remart among them. She was a top radical at that time. On the FBI list right under me. She was kind of my lieutenant. My lover too. After that, things went from being political to being personal."

"You got to feel bad about that shit," Leonard said. "I mean, I killed gooks in Nam, and I was supposed to kill them. Thought I was fighting for my country, doing what was necessary. Still feel that way. But I hate I had to do it. But you guys … I don't know."

"You don't look to me like somebody who could do that kind of thing," I said.

"You kidding," Paco said. "I look like death warmed over … but I know what you mean. Listen here. You been around, you should know better. Can't judge things by what you see. Look at something long enough, and it'll start to look like something else. Watch me long enough, you might see something you don't see now. Whatever, there won't be any of the old me to look at. That's a guarantee.

"Back then, I thought what we were doing was right. Like you thought what you were doing was right in Nam, Leonard. Felt we were patriots. Least until what happened to Bobbie. After that, I was like something taxidermied that moved. Right and wrong were words. I couldn't see the line of difference anymore, couldn't tell if I was crossing it or not. For me, that line has long been gone and nothing's going to bring it back.

"Anyway, what happened was we were hiding out in this house in Chicago, and I had the Mechanics building a bomb to blow something or another to hell, and I was supervising. I was the one taught them how to build bombs, see, and I wanted to be sure they knew I was still the big daddy. Sasha was the one actually working on it, and the rest of the group were gofering for her. Way they were treating her was making me a little jealous. Sasha was strong-willed and kind of new to us, and the Mechanics weren't turning to me quite as often as before. She was starting to get some of my thunder. I wanted her to make sure she knew her place, you know. I looked over her shoulder, and she was doing all right, working safe, but like I said, I had to be big daddy, and I said something to her about how she needed to work smoother, and she didn't take to it. She was the only one had my number. Knew my ego. Knew how fucked up I was over Bobbie's death. She planned to take things over. I could tell that. She could have done it too. Still had the cause in her. She knew my days as leader were numbered, that I was burned out, just doing by rote. She wouldn't take shit from me. She turned around and started telling me what I could do with my advice, got her mind off what it ought to have been on. Must have let the wrong wires touch. Next thing I knew, the world was bright and hot, full of stone and glass, and I was rolling around in rubble. Ego and explosion had kicked my ass.

"I awoke outside, down in a pit, the house all around me, ears ringing, cold air cooling me down. Somehow the blast had brought the whole place down, and by a goddamn miracle, maybe because Sasha was in front of me, the explosion had thrown me away, caught me on fire, but not burned me up or blown me up.

"I found I could walk. I wandered off, lived under a porch for three or four days, and the people owned the house never knew I was there. When my ears quit ringing, I could hear them come and go and I could hear their TV playing. A dog came under there and slept with me. That's what I did most of the time. Slept. And hurt. Hurt something awful. It was cold then, right at winter, nothing like the way it is here today, but cold. That blast had burned me so bad the weather felt good at the same time it made me shiver and feel sick. It being cold might have been what saved me, I don't know.

"When I got strong enough, I got out of there at night, staggered to a phone booth, busted the phone box open, made it work without any money. Give me a bobby pin, and I can hotwire a jet. I called a man sympathetic to our cause, and he came to get me. When he saw me he gagged and threw up.

"I must have been a sight, all right. Skin burned off, top of my head open. Dirt embedded in my face. An ear gone. Looked like walking, breathing hamburger meat. Way this guy acted when he saw me, I wished the bomb had done me in. Wish that now.

"To shorten it up, he got me out of there and took me to Chub. Chub didn't have what he needed to take care of a case like me. He'd mostly handled gunshots for us before, and those only minor, but here I was with my head wide open, burned over most of my body, and him with just the basic stuff. He did the best he could, I give him that. He kept me there till I was better. Guess I ought to figure I owe him. But I don't. I don't even like the fat fuck. He fixed me up, and I gave him a cause. I consider us even. In fact, from that day on, it didn't take much for me to consider myself even with just about everybody and everything.

"Chub made arrangements for me to stay with some other Movement people. One of them was Howard. He was living in Austin at the time, and I wanted to go back to Texas and rest, get involved again when I felt better. Or so I said, but I knew it was over. The whole dumb dream was through.

"For the next year or so, I went from one sympathizer to the next, being taken care of, passed around like some kind of exotic pet, one of the last of a dying species. The noble, wounded hero who gave his face for the cause.

"Then one by one there wasn't anyplace for me to stay. Harboring a fugitive from the old days was no longer romantic; flirting with the law and danger was no longer fun. People had to take their kids to soccer games and work in the PTA. The really radical people were getting caught. The Weathermen were out of it by then. And that explosion had killed all the Mechanics but me.

"Oh, there were a few die-hards throughout the country that would put me up, but they liked to talk the talk and not walk the walk. On the whole, I was old, bad news. The bullshit times were over. That was it for Gabriel Lane."

"So you're hiding from the law?" Leonard said.

"Not exactly, but I don't want any truck with them. I figure if the FBI thinks I'm alive they're not saying. There was such a mess and mixture of bodies there, they had to have decided it got us all. But I'm not one to take chances."

Paco reached into his mouth, took out his top teeth and put them on the table. So much for his fine smile; it was a fake. The gap where the teeth had been made him look truly horrible.

"Explosion got the real ones. Chub made these for me," Paco said. "Fat bastard knows about medicine, both human and animal, and he knows dentistry. You got to give him that. I've had these teeth, what, twenty years maybe."

He put the teeth back, fastened them to the back molars. "I bummed some, read about me in a few books and magazines, about my death and all, found that what we had done really hadn't amounted to a hill of beans. We blew up some places, killed a few folks, and I've got no face."

"How come you're in with Howard and Chub?" I asked.

"The money. Howard got in touch with me. Thinks now that he's been in prison he's learned some things, that he's an intellectual tough guy out to do some good. Ready to revive the sixties. Power to the people and all that shit. Thinks he's gonna get this money and make some changes.

"But he decides he needs help to do it, and he calls around to some people he knows that know me, and they catch me next time I pass through. And that's no easy feat, cause I go my own schedule. Work till a job plays out or I play out. Anyway, I got the word Howard has something I might want to get in on, something that would do some good. Like the old days. Money was mentioned and I got interested.

"Course, it's really Trudy behind all this. I can see that. I know her type. She hears about this money from Howard, maybe one night after he's put the pork to her, and they're lying there thinking sweet thoughts, reliving the sixties like they do, and she gets an idea about it. Next thing you know, Howard's looking me up, believing it's all his idea. He gets in touch with Chub because he knows him too. We may not be much, but we're all he's got left from the sixties.

"I listen and figure a way to score. Can't do this town-to-town shit labor rest of my life, so I'm in. But not for any goddamn cause."

"And now," Leonard said, "here we all are."

"All right, goddammit," I said. "I bite. What's their plan for the money?"

Paco grinned his false teeth at me. "Trust me. Stay out of it. Take the money, like I'm going to take the money, and go on. I promise you, you'll be a hell of a lot happier."

12

Next day the weather cleared up some. It didn't go warm, but part of the meanness went out of it. It was cold with no new ice and no high winds. The sky was flat as slate and the color of chipped flint. Leonard and I took his car down to the bottoms to see what we could see. I wanted to locate the Iron Bridge, find that money, get on with things; go away from this weird winter and Trudy, talk of the sixties and Paco's failed revolution.

Although the house where we were staying was at the edge of the woods, it wasn't the part of Marvel Creek legitimately called the bottoms. The bottoms are lowland with lots of trees, water, and wildlife, and it doesn't start where it used to. Civilization had smashed the edges of it flat, rolled blacktop and concrete over it, sprouted little white wood houses and a few made of two-story brick and solar glass. Barbecue cookers sat in yards like Martians, waiting till the chill thawed out and summer came on and they could have fires in their guts again. Satellite dishes pulled in movies and bad talk shows from among the stars, and dogs, too cold to bark, too cold to chase cars, looked out from beneath porches and out the doors of doghouses and watched us drive past.

Beyond all that, the bottoms were still there. They started farther out from town now but they still existed. They were nothing like the Everglades of Florida or the greater swamps of Louisiana.Not nearly as many miles as either of those, but they were made up of plenty of great forest and deep water, and they were beautiful, dark and mysterious—a wonder in one eye, a terror in the other.

So we drove on down until the blacktop played out and the houses became sparse and more shacklike and looked to have been set down in their spots by Dorothy's tornado. The roads went to red clay and the odor of the bottoms came into the car even with the windows rolled up: wet dirt, rotting vegetation, a whiff of fish from the dirty Sabine, the stench of something dead on its way to the soil.

Winter was not the prettiest time for the bottoms. Compared to spring it was denuded. The evergreens stayed dressed up, but a lot of the other trees, oaks for instance, went in shirtsleeves. Spring was when the bottoms put on its coat and decorated itself with berries and bright birds that flitted from tree to tree like out of season, renegade Christmas ornaments. Leaves would be thick and green then, vines would coil like miles of thin anacondas up every tree in sight, foam over the ground, and hide the snakes. Considering how thick the vegetation would be in the spring, how many snakes there would be, this bad old winter might come to some good after all. Like making Leonard and me some money.

Still, winter or not, the place was formidable. When I was growing up in Marvel Creek, folks used to say, you hang out down there long enough something bad will happen.

Perhaps. But some good things happened too. I caught fish out of the Sabine and swam naked with Rosa Mae Flood. When I was sixteen, seventeen and eighteen, I parked my car down there and made a motel of my backseat. Made love not only to Rosa Mae, but to other fine girls I remember fondly. Girls who made me feel like a man, and I hope I made feel, at least temporarily, like women.

The clay roads turned to shit as we went, and we had to go slow and easy, and finally Leonard said, “We oughta have something better for down here. Four-wheel drive maybe. We’re gonna get stuck.”

“Well, we can always go back to town and buy a couple. One for me and one for you. Could get them in matching colors even.”

“Just saying we could use it is all.”

“We won’t get stuck, Leonard. We’re the kings of the world. We do what we want, when we want.”

“Right.”

We eased on and I tried to make out landmarks, but there weren’t any. Everything had changed. I had the sudden sick feeling that I had no more idea where the Iron Bridge was than Trudy and the gang. I wondered if anyone knew where it was anymore. All I remembered was that it was not on the river proper, but off of it, and deep down in the bottoms at a place that looked like something out of a Tarzan movie.

“You got some idea where you’re going?” Leonard said.

“Of course,” I said. “You know me. I never been lost, just—”

“A little bewildered. Save it, okay? I can tell. You got no idea where we are.”

“It’ll come back to me.”

We went on down that main clay road and turned off on a few smaller ones that dead-ended against trees or the edge of the river. Some of the roads were so narrow we had to back our way out. Sometimes we had to back a long ways. Leonard loved that. He knew more foul words than I thought he knew, and I thought he knew plenty.

About high noon we were dipping down over a hill on the main road and there was a sudden sound like strained bowels letting loose, and the car started to slide right.

A blowout.

Leonard tried to turn in the direction of the skid, but the skid didn’t care. The ice on those clay roads would not be denied. The right rear fender struck a sweetgum with a solid whack and my seat belt harness snatched at me and pulled me snug.

We got out.

The car wasn’t banged too badly. I said, “I think it’s an improvement.”

“Remind me to knock a dent in your old truck when we get back, you like it so much.”

“While you’re changing the tire, I’m gonna look around. Looks kind of familiar around here.”

“Now the place looks familiar. Got a tire to change, and you know the place like the back of your hand.”

“I merely said it looks familiar. I’ll be back.”

“When?”

“About the time I figure you’ve got the tire changed.”

It didn’t look familiar to me at all, but hey, I hate changing tires and tires hate me. I know from all the bruised knuckles I’ve gotten over the years, all the quick moves I’ve acquired from avoiding slipping jacks.

My mechanical abilities are simple. I can air up a tire, put water in the radiator, check water in the battery, let water out of the radiator, check the oil and put it in, fill the tank with gas.

Beyond that, I'm an automotive moron.

I walked around a bit, hoping I'd stumble onto something familiar, but nope. I went back to the car and Leonard had the spare on, was jacking the car down.

"Been going well?" I said.

"Now I know why you hang around with a black guy. So in case you have a flat, you got someone can change the tire."

"It's your car."

"Your fault I'm down here."

"All right, you found me out. I like me a black fella to change tires."

"And chauffeur."

"That's right, and chauffeur. I think the ethnics should know their place."

"You so right, boss, and I is proud to serve you."

"Actually, I don't know how to break this to you, Leonard, but I only hang out with black guys when I can't find a Filipino."

"You tighten the bolts. You're not getting out of this scot-free."

He put the jack in the trunk and gave me the tire iron. While I was tightening the bolts, he said, "We could go home. Not even pick up our gear. Just drive out of here and forget all this business."

"We could," I said. I didn't want to admit it, since I was the one who got us into this, but I had been thinking pretty much the same.

"We could go to jail that money doesn't turn out to be the kind of money Howard says it is."

"If there is any money."

"Yeah, if there is any money."

"But there isn't a thing happening at the rose fields now, and I can't think of another line of work we could go into."

“There’s always shit work,” Leonard said. “It isn’t like we’re some kind of professionals.”

I finished the bolts and put the tool in the trunk, positioned the ruined tire between the oxygen tanks and the diving suits, and closed up. “I leave it to you, Leonard. Whatever you want, that’s fine by me.”

He thought that over. “Really, any of this familiar to you?”

“I remember part of the road we came in on,” I said. “Outside of that, I could be on Venus.”

“That’s not encouraging.”

“No, it isn’t.”

He thought some more, said, “Tell you what. We’ll give it, say, three days for you to start seeing if something’s familiar. You see something you recognize, we’ll go longer. We find the bridge, maybe we’ll look a few days, we still feel like it. Don’t come across the boat or signs of it pretty quick, we’ll go home.”

“Deal,” I said.

13

Just before dark we drove back to Marvel Creek, stopped at Bill’s Kettle, had a hamburger, bought a six-pack of Lone Star at a cut-rate store, and started back to the Sixties Nest, as Leonard called it.

We found ourselves following the jaundice-yellow Volvo that lived in the yard of the Sixties Nest, and we pursued it to the house and parked behind it.

Howard got out of the car. We kept our seats and drank our beer, observed him like aliens examining an inferior species through the portal of a flying saucer.

He was wearing slightly greasy blue work clothes with a patch over the left shirt pocket. I couldn’t tell from where I sat, but my bet was his name was stitched into the patch.

He looked at us a moment and went into the house.

“Looks to have been a tough day at the old job site,” I said.

“I know it’s got to be the same with you,” Leonard said. “I can’t make up my mind. Is it him or Chub I like best?”

“They both have a lot of charisma,” I said.

We went inside. Paco was sitting on one of the fold-out chairs grinning his false teeth. Trudy was sitting on the couch. She had her legs and arms crossed. She looked as if she could crack walnuts with her asshole.

An unjustified strain of guilt went through me. I felt like a husband whose wife had just found rubbers in his wallet.

The guilt went away when Howard and Chub came into the room. Chub didn’t bother me, really. He couldn’t help being a jerk. But Howard was a self-made man in that department.

Chub went over to the couch and sat down. Howard crossed his arms and held his ground in the middle of the room and glared at us. His eyes roved a little to his right to check out his audience;

the teacher was about to make an example of us.

I wanted desperately to knee him in the nuts.

“I thought there was an understanding that you were working with us,” Howard said.

“We forget to punch the clock or something?” Leonard said.

“You don’t want any part of what we are, but you said you wanted to do a job. There were things we had to do today, like go to straight jobs.”

Leonard looked at me. “Straight jobs, Hap?”

“That’s what they used to call square jobs, back in the beatnik days,” I said.

“Ah,” Leonard said.

“Straight is, relatively speaking, a sixties term, still popular today.”

“Ah.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t heard it.”

“I’ve been kind of outta step.”

“It’s not funny,” Howard said. “Chub ran some errands for us. But you two, we had no idea where you were. There were things we needed to talk about this morning. Plans needed to be made. We were all about our business but you two.”

“You didn’t say what Paco was doing,” I said.

Paco grinned even wider. Poor guy. In that face, the fine white teeth made him look a little bit like a sun-dried barracuda.

“I think he’s playing favorites,” Leonard said. “I hate that kind of thing.”

“Paco has earned his keep in the past,” Howard said. “I haven’t seen what you two can do. But it smells like what you can do is drink beer.”

“But can you tell how many we’ve had?” I said. “Smelling it from over there is good, but I want you to say how many we drank.”

“And what brand,” Leonard said.

“No use trying to talk to them when they’re like this,” Trudy said. “They’ll go on until you get tired or mad. You can’t reason with the fools.”

“Fools?” Leonard said. “Now that’s rude.”

“I’d as soon the two of you pack up and get out,” Howard said.

“We’ll decide when we get out,” I said.

“And if we stay,” Leonard said, “we still won’t report to you. You’re just some guy we don’t know, that’s all.”

“Besides,” I said, “while you been fretting about what we been doing, we’ve been down in the bottoms looking for the Iron Bridge.”

“And?” Chub said.

“We didn’t find it,” I said. “We’re going to give it three days. I don’t come up with it, maybe we will get out. You can go your own way then. We won’t tell on you or anything. You’ll have our blessing.”

“Anything look familiar?” Trudy said.

“No,” I said, “but it’s been a long time since I been there. But I can solve all this easy. I can just ask someone. A classmate, an old-timer. It might be thought odd if one of you asked, not being from here. I can claim nostalgia, wanting to look around at the old growing-up place.”

“I’d rather you not,” Howard said. “It’d probably work out all right, but I think if we can get through this without it being mentioned anywhere, better off we are.”

“I agree with that,” I said. “I’m just saying what we can do if things get too difficult. I leave, and you’ll have to ask. And even if you’re told, you’ll never find anything down there. You’d need a guide. Then you’ll be tying one more person into it you don’t know.”

“As Leonard pointed out,” Howard said, “we don’t know each other.”

“True,” I said, “but I sense something special about you and me and Trudy. We could be one big happy family.”

Howard uncrossed his arms. I could see the patch on his shirt pocket. It said FLOYD.

“You guys are pushing your luck,” Howard said.

“Please don’t start that again,” Trudy said. “I don’t want to see

Hap or Leonard hurt you, Howard.”

Howard looked at her as if she had just sliced his nuts with a knife. “He might not be so lucky this time,” he said.

“Luck hasn’t got a thing to do with it,” Leonard said.

“Why don’t you guys arm wrestle?” Paco said.

“Don’t you start in too, Paco,” Howard said. “You’re starting to sound like them. What you’ve done doesn’t hold you forever.”

“Well,” Paco said, shaking out a cigarette, “I hate that.”

“Floyd?” I said.

“What?” Howard said, then it dawned on him. “It’s just a shirt.”

“Man with no pride in his name or shirt, it’s hard to know what to think of him,” Leonard said. “He could be anybody and not even care. I’d want my own name on my shirt.”

“Me too,” I said.

14

I stood on the front porch and looked out at the night.

Everyone was in bed but me. I had turned in but the cold and my thoughts wouldn't let me drift. I had the uncomfortable feeling that Trudy and the gang were planning something stupid. I had no idea what, and had decided to follow Paco's advice about not knowing, but I couldn't help but think about it. Because of that, I had got up, pulled on my shoes and coat, and gone outside to think.

It was cold and clear and the moon and stars were bright, and their lights rested in the yard like puddles of gold and silver paint and wound through the trees like gold and silver ribbon.

I tried to find Venus. There was a time when I knew where to look. I couldn't remember if it was visible this time of year or not. Once things like that were important to me, and I knew some answers.

I read in a book that primitive men could see Venus in the daytime at high noon with the naked eye. In fact, sailors as late as the 1600s could do the same, and they guided their ships by it. Now the ability was no longer needed, or desired, and modern man could not see Venus in the daytime.

I was somehow distressed by that. Hell, I couldn't even see the bastard at night.

I gave up on Venus and let my mind smooth out. I absorbed the night and the moonlight and watched my breath turn white against the dark. That was about all the thinking I was willing to handle.

I took a deep breath of chill air and went inside, tossed my coat on the gutted armchair, sat on the couch, and picked up a book Chub had left on the coffee table. It was one of those books that explained how everyone could profit from analysis. It was written by an analyst.

Marking his place was a faded black and white snapshot. It was of a big black-haired guy, somewhere between thirty-five and forty-five, kind of handsome, with wide shoulders and a smile full of big white teeth. There was something about him that made me think of someone who had ran a few pigskins between the goalposts, and now ran a few deals past his competitors. On his right was an attractive, well-dressed blond woman who looked like she had trained to be the Queen of England, and might have been, had the job not been taken.

Pushing his way between them, as if not really invited, was a blond kid of eleven or twelve with enough meat on him to loan to two others. He was smiling, but the smile wasn't much. His was the face of a kid picked last for football games and told to go long, the face of a guy not really asking for a lot, and getting less.

The kid was Chub, of course, and I felt sad looking at him. I turned the photograph over. Written on the back in a young hand was *Mom and Dad and me.*

Maybe the picture meant something to him—a slice of a good moment, when he thought he'd grow up to please his parents and be something other than a fat kid. And maybe I was full of shit, and it was just a marker.

I had just started reading the book because I was bored enough to jack off with a fistful of barbed wire and roses when the hall door opened gently and Trudy came into the room.

She was wearing a red tee shirt and nothing else. It fit tight. Her nipples poked at the fabric like the tips of .45 casings, and it stopped high on her thighs and made her seem all legs. Her hair was tousled and she looked tired and somewhat older without her makeup. She looked good though. She smiled at me, closed the door softly, leaned against it, said, "You, too?"

"My mind's racing," I said.

She nodded at the book. "Learning anything?"

"It's all anal and sexual. Talk about shitting or fucking and you reveal yourself immediately."

"Do you, now? I was going to slip into the kitchen for some milk. Think I'll wake Leonard up?"

"If he were straight, you just walking by would wake him up.

I'm surprised the whole house isn't awake. Dressed like that, you ought to ring like a bell."

"Want some milk?"

She always did take compliments well.

"I'll take some milk."

She brought back two small fruit jars filled with milk, handed me mine and sat down beside me. I couldn't help but put my arm around her.

"You really do pick at Howard," she said.

"I don't like Howard. He's a prick."

"He isn't so bad."

"Guess not, you're sleeping with him."

"I like him. I used to love him. Not like you, but I loved him."

"Uh-oh, here we go." I took my arm from around her.

"Put your arm back, silly."

She crossed her legs high and the tee-shirt went way up. She wasn't wearing underwear. I put my arm around her again.

I said, "Didn't you forget something?"

"Howard tossed them somewhere."

"That's not what I wanted to hear."

"Truth."

"Sometimes a little white lie is better."

She set her glass on the coffee table and kissed me on the neck.

"You going to go through all the men in the house tonight?" I said.

"Is that supposed to make me mad?"

"Yep."

She kissed me on the neck again. "You're the only man in the house."

"Shit, Trudy."

"You like me saying that, don't you?"

"If I believed it, I'd like it more."

"Like you said, sometimes a little white lie is better."

I smiled.

“Let’s go for a ride, Hap.”

“Now?”

“Uh-huh.”

“You might get a little chilly, lady.”

“Just a minute.”

She got up and eased the door open and smiled back at me before she went into the hall. After she closed the door I thought about her going to the room she and Howard shared, tip-toeing about, looking for her panties and her clothes. I had looked through the house earlier, just to look, and their room was a small thing with a mattress on the floor and a messy pile of blankets and some Coke cans tossed about.

At the other end of the hall Paco and Chub shared a slightly larger room. Chub slept on a saggy box frame bed in the middle of the room and Paco had a cot in a corner. The room had very little in it. A chair with clothes tossed over it and a small box of Chub’s books, all of them on subjects designed to be read at gunpoint.

Less than five minutes later she was back. She was dressed in a blue denim work shirt, jeans, scuffed black work shoes, and a thick red and blue jacket. She looked like the best-looking lumberjill alive.

She held up a set of keys.

“The Volvo,” she said.

“Will Howard mind?”

“Of course.”

I pulled on my coat and we went outside and got in the Volvo, Trudy behind the wheel. We backed out and the ice in the drive crackled under the tires. We drove to the highway and started toward Tyler, which was about twelve miles away. The car heater worked slowly, and the car was as cold as a meat locker. The highway was smooth with hardly any ice. I guess road crews had been at work salting it. There were splashes of gravel for the really bad spots.

Trudy reached for me and I slid over and leaned my head against her shoulder and she kissed my cheek. She held one arm around me as she drove and I smelled her perfume and the slightly stale wool of her coat.

I felt good and a little foolish. There was enough of the old male culture about me that I felt positions should have been reversed. I hoped no one saw us.

We drove like that for a long time. Finally Trudy said, “I wanted to go for this drive because I wanted to talk.”

“About what you people have planned?”

“You people?”

“You know, power to the people and all that.”

“Really have become a cynic, haven’t you? God, but I miss the old Hap Collins.”

“Did you miss me the most while I was finishing up my prison term?”

“You never have got past that, have you?”

“Let’s say it’s the sort of thing that weighs on a fella’s mind.”

“I did miss you, okay?”

“I like the way you showed it.”

“I never claimed to be perfect. I’m sorry it happened like that, but it did, and that’s that. I can’t undo it, so let’s leave it. And the plans we have isn’t what I wanted to talk about. I thought I might work up the courage to tell you something about myself you don’t know. Something you ought to know. For old time’s sake.”

“What kind of something?”

“Something pretty awful.”

15

"I killed Cheep," she said.

"Our bird?"

"Yeah. Could you move on your side of the car while I talk about this?"

I moved to my side of the car.

"It's complicated, Hap. Cheep was not only our bird, he was a symbol of our relationship."

"Sounds to me like you been reading Chub's books."

"I been thinking is what I been doing; thinking for years. Trying to figure why I'm no good at relationships. I go into them full tilt, mean for them to work, but I can't maintain. You were the best. I had a shot there. But I messed it up. I mess them all up. You see, I got to have my white knight. I know better. Be your own person, and a woman is a person too, and all that shit, but I got to have my white knight. And if the man I'm interested in isn't a knight, I try to make him one. I send him on a quest, and soon as he's no longer on the quest, I lose interest in him, and the cause I've sent him on. I may get interested in the cause again, but I got to have my white knight with me if I'm going to do anything. I see my knight as going out there and doing what he's doing not only for the cause, but for me. I suppose it makes me feel loved. Important. Understand?"

"What's this got to do with Cheep?"

"I'm coming to that. But when the cause really takes the knight —in your case prison—I feel cheated. Like it's not for me anymore. Things come apart. I want to start over, get a new knight. But I couldn't do that with you because of Cheep. Just a bird, I know, but he made me feel tied to you. Other things wouldn't do it, the cause, the love we shared, but the bird was a living reminder. He wouldn't fly away. Depended on me completely. And I couldn't just leave him. He wouldn't have lasted any time in the wild, and in fact would have suffered. But I didn't want to start life anew with him. He reminded me I was a failure at things. Relationships, what have you.

"So I filled the bathtub with water and took Cheep and held him under till he drowned. It didn't take long. He didn't suffer. But I still think about it. I carry that goddamn bird's ghost on my soul like a weight.

"But when I did it I felt good. Not that Cheep was dead, but that I had made a strong decision without anyone's help, or without me leading someone else into doing what I wanted. It should have been a turning point. But I didn't really understand why I did what I did at the time. I knew I wanted to be free of something, but I wasn't sure what. You were my first major love, but on a smaller scale, with boys in high school, couple in college, I had already established a kind of pattern. Building someone up so they could be special, and since they were special, and they loved me, it made me special. Against all odds, we two … that sort of thing. You see, killing Cheep was killing a symbol."

"Cheep might disagree."

"But the sense of freedom didn't last. I fell back into my old ways. I found a new knight and let him lead, and when he led away from me, I went knight hunting again, and again. I understand all that now. What I'm saying, Hap, is that I'm ready to kill a bird again. This time, the bird is the old me. I'm going to drown that bird and be a new person. Someone who believes in herself. In idealism for its sake. Not as a symbol of worth, or love. I want to be a woman who doesn't need a man to put out front and pretend he's leading and suffering for me, his fair-haired damsel. Don't have to say, 'Look at my man go.' *I* can go. Come hook or crook, I can see things through."

"Jesus Christ, Trudy. You been doing some major rationalizing here is what you been doing. You're not learning to be independent. You're realizing how selfish you've always been is all, and you're justifying it with some bullshit self-analysis, like Chub would do."

"Think what you want."

We were silent for a time.

"This thing you're going to see through," I said. "It sounds serious."

"Let's say I'm serious. I'd like to have you with us, but I don't need you the way I used to need you. I don't need Howard either."

"Don't need us, how come you got us?"

"I want your help. But I don't have to have it. Not the old way, as my knight. All I want is to believe in something so strong, that belief and my own inner conviction carry me. Like those monks who set fire to themselves to protest the Vietnam War. I want to have that kind of dedication."

"They had dedication, all right. But they also got burned up."

"It's all gone bad out there, Hap. Worse than the sixties, because now no one cares. Someone's got to do something, even if what they do is nothing more than stirring the soup. We could start people thinking. They're all so apathetic. So what if the ozone layer is being eaten away by pollutants in aerosol cans? So what if people are starving on our city streets? Why have government funding for AIDS? It's a disease for queers, right? People don't even vote anymore, because they know it's all a lie, Hap."

"Don't forget the destruction of the seals." I said. "The whales? The sparrows like Cheep?"

"I did what I had to do, Hap. It was a terrible thing, but sometimes you have to do terrible things so you can make progress. Sometimes you do something terrible so some good will come of it."

"Trudy, you got to grow up sometime. You can't take the world in to raise. No one can."

"I feel sorry for you, Hap. You got nothing left inside to hold the dark away."

When we got to Tyler, Trudy turned around and we started back.

I said, "You seem to be avoiding telling me exactly what it is you have planned."

"I thought I'd tell you tonight, Hap. But I've decided not to. You might try and mess it up out of spite."

"I may disagree with you, but I'm not spiteful."

"You might be. You've changed. Could be I don't know you good as I thought. I wanted you with us, but I think now you should do your job and take things as they come to you."

We didn't cuddle and kiss anymore. We didn't even talk. Trudy turned on the radio. It was an all-sixties station. Percy Sledge sang "When A Man Loves A Woman," followed by the Turtles singing "She Only Wants To Be With Me." Good stuff, wrong moment. It was depressing.

We got back to the Sixties Nest, and I was about to get out when she reached across and put her hand on my thigh.

"You couldn't have changed that much, Hap. You were so … noble."

I put my hand on hers, suddenly wondered if this hand was the one that had held Cheep under. I wondered what else this hand was capable of. I took hold of it and put it on the seat between us.

"Watch it, that's knight talk.… You've changed too, Trudy. You may have the willpower and dedication you always wanted, but I think maybe you lost something in the process."

"I see it as a gain."

"Whatever. I think for you and me, there's been too much blood under the bridge."

I got out of the Volvo and went in ahead of her, went to the back porch and took off my coat, socks and shoes, rolled up in my bedding.

I heard Trudy come in and go through the hall door, then I didn't hear her anymore.

I lay there listening to Leonard snore and tried to force myself to sleep for a few hours, but I'd go in and out, and when I came out I would remember bad dreams.

Dreams that ought to have been funny, but weren't. Like this soft, feminine hand holding me by the throat, pushing me down into a tub of water. My mouth was open and I had a beak instead of lips and I was blowing bubbles.

Then I was floating face down in the water, my back covered with feathers, the water in the tub red as blood.

16

Next morning I waited in my sleeping bag until Trudy and Howard were off to work. I didn't want to look either of them in the eye. Didn't want to see the look of disappointment she would give me, the look of pain Howard would have. He probably woke up in the middle of the night, found her gone, and thought we were out banging one another silly until the wee hours of the morning.

I think Trudy would have wanted him to think that. I wish that was what had happened. I wish I had never learned the truth about Cheep.

Someone had bought a few groceries the day before, so Leonard pan-toasted a couple slices of bread and we spread them with butter and had some bad leftover coffee the texture of syrup.

Outside the day was cold, but still clear. We drove to the bottoms and began our game plan.

What we did was simple. We drove down the main bottom road until we saw a cutoff we thought the car could handle, and we took it.

Sometimes the cutoffs circled back to the main road, or met up with another little road.

When a road dead-ended at the woods or river, or was just too muddy to drive, we got out of the car and walked awhile, hoping I'd see something familiar that would lead to a tributary or creek or some little outflow of water that might be the home of the Iron Bridge.

Mostly we walked and Leonard cussed the brush and rotten logs we stepped over. I think he did it to irritate me. I'd never known the woods to bother him before. I think he wanted to remind me he thought this whole thing was stupid and he was humoring me.

I tried to ignore him and listen to the cries of the birds and the splashing sounds coming from the river. Those sounds made me think of great fishing days and channel cats, the catfish they called the trout of the Sabine. Gunmetal grey, lean and graceful with pointed heads and wide, forked tails. And there were the bigger cats that swam along the bottom of the river or laid up between the huge roots of water-based trees. Some called them bottom cats and others called them flatheads. They were big, brownish rascals, sometimes fifteen feet long, weighing up to a hundred pounds, narrow-tailed, with a wide head and a mouth big enough to suck up a child. And there were stories that they had.

Certainly there were gars in there that had bitten children and pulled swimming dogs under for their afternoon meals. They didn't call the big ones alligator gar for nothing. Six feet long, lean and vicious, they were the barracudas of fresh water, beasts with angry racial memories of lost prehistoric seas.

And now and then, there was the real McCoy, the alligator. I had never known them to be plentiful along this stretch of the Sabine, and growing up I had seen only one in the river, and that one from a distance. Another I had seen big and complete, lying dead in the back of a fisherman's pickup out front of Coogen's Feed Store.

To the best of my knowledge, they were hibernating. Hoped so. Rare or not, it only took one to punch your ticket. They weren't the sort of critters minded eating a man in a dry suit, oxygen tanks and all.

Definitely the cottonmouth water moccasins, the meanest snakes in the United States, were hibernating, and that was a relief. Winter, even one bad as this one, was not without its charms.

We scouted around like this until noon, then drove into town, bought some bread, sandwich meat and beers, drove back and found a little road that terminated at the river bank, sat on the hood of the car and had lunch.

We didn't talk much. We watched the brown water roll by and spread out in a dirty foam where the river widened down to our left. "In the spring it would be great to come here and fish," I said.

"Yeah," Leonard said.

Another half hour went by.

"Guess we ought to get back at it," I said, totaling a beer. "Yeah."

We walked along the edge of the bank and the wind picked up and brought a damp chill off the water; the sky had gone grey as a cinder block.

We went until the bank became nothing more than mud and gravel and was hard to keep our footing on. We were about to turn back when I saw a great tree split wide from lightning, its blackened halves lying one on the bank, the other partially in the water.

I studied it.

"That used to be a big tree," I said.

"Good, Kemosabe. Pale Face no miss fucking thing. Him know big trees from small trees. Pale Face one smart sumbitch."

"It used to have an old tire swing hung from a chain. The swing was over the river."

"You're saying you remember something?"

"We'd bail out of it into the water, then climb up and do it again."

"We're near the Iron Bridge?"

"No, I just remember the tree and the swing."

"But it's a landmark to help you find the bridge?"

"Probably not. I remember the tree, but can't put it into relationship with the Iron Bridge. I know we used to come here is all. The Iron Bridge is on the side of the river we're on, though. Bridge goes partway over a creek that shoots off the river on this side. The tree helped me remember that."

"That's something," Leonard said. "You remember that much, means we can spend all our time looking on this bank."

"It's not real close to the river, as I recall. It's down this creek I'm thinking about, and quite a ways."

"Meaning the creek you can't find?"

"That's the one."

“So, Dan’l, what do we do now?”

“Any more beers?”

“Nope.”

“Guess we keep looking.”

17

Back to work we went, driving those back roads and excuses for roads, and it was late afternoon, maybe two hours before dark, when we drove around this curve and I happened to look out and see this rusty metal pole, and, bam, there was an explosion in my memory centers. At first I couldn't place what had exploded, but around the curve we went, and the debris from the explosion rose to the top of my memory and began to tumble into something identifiable and I said more calmly than I felt, "Stop the car."

"You're smiling," Leonard said. "You got something, right?"

"Turn around."

He had to drive a ways before we could find a wide enough place to get the car turned, and when we got back to the curve and the pole, I had him pull over. We got out, and I took a look. My smile got bigger.

"When we used to come down here this pole had a metal sign on it," I said. "Probably rusted off the bolts and's under all these leaves and pine needles, a few years of dirt. Sign said something about this piece of land belonging to some oil company or another. I don't remember exactly. But by the time we started going here, there were bullet holes in the sign and it was no longer valid. The oil company had long since lost its lease on the place, and it had reverted back to the county, or the State of Texas, or whoever owns it. But the little road for trucks and equipment was still here, worn down and grown up some, but still usable."

"It's not here now," Leonard said.

I looked where I remembered the little road being. The trees were scanty there, relatively young. In spots there were patches of dirt mixed with old hauled-in gravel, and neither trees nor weeds had found support there. If you studied hard enough, you could see where the little narrow road had wound itself down into the woods toward the water.

“I think this was the road Softboy and his boys took after robbing the bank,” I said. “They made all these pretty good plans, but the dumb suckers saw water and assumed they put their boat next to the Sabine.”

“But it was the broad part of the creek that flows under the Iron Bridge?”

“Yep.”

We pushed limbs aside, stepped through the browning winter grass, and then followed the faint curves of the old road. When we came to water, we were at a spot as wide and deep as the Sabine at its best. It was easy to see how someone who didn’t know the river could mistake this for it.

“If they had a car down here and ran it off in the water,” Leonard said, “reckon Softboy would have done it right here, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, but it might not be there now. Over the years, the floods and swellings, even something the size and weight of a car could move, if only an inch or a foot at a time.”

“Thank you, Mr. Wizard.”

We went walking along the bank. The undergrowth turned thick and grew out to the water. There was little room for footing. Sometimes we hung on to limbs and roots and dangled out over the creek, pulled ourselves along the steep bank like that until we found ground again. It was tough work, and even cold as it was, we worked up a lather.

The creek eventually turned narrow, just wide enough and deep enough for a boat to go on. I recalled it widened again at the bridge, then, not far beyond that, narrowed enough to jump across, and went like that a long ways.

We got past all the undergrowth and came to the second widening of the creek. There was plenty of bank to stand on now. The water was dark and spotted with stumps and lily pads. Great trees leaned out from the shoreline and spread branches over the water thick as macramé, dripped vines and moss. Past all that, where the water was less dark and less riddled with stumps, was the Iron Bridge.

Half a bridge, really—what was built before the money played out. It sagged, and was covered with vines and moss. The metal, where it was visible, had gone red-brown with rust.

"Why would they build here?" Leonard said. "Back a ways they could have thrown a bridge across in an afternoon."

"They were going to widen all this, entire Sabine and its tributaries, I think. Make one gigantic river out of it. They had, as the Baptist preachers say, grandiose plans. Thought they'd be getting so much oil they'd be using river barges. Tools and machinery coming from the northern end of the river, oil in barrels heading South. But it played out before they got started good. There're abandoned wells all through these woods."

"You know," Leonard said, "I'm a wee bit excited. If there's a car down there, just might be a boat with money in it. Finding the car would be a way of checking. We got an hour before dark. What do you think?"

"Now's as good a time as any," I said.

We went back to the car and opened the trunk. The tanks were well packed in foam rubber so they wouldn't bang together and blow us to hell. And they could. They were highly explosive.

Leonard got in the backseat first and took off his clothes. He had this tube of grease for bonding the dry suit to the flesh, and he rubbed the grease all over his body and pulled on the suit. He got out of the car and put on the tanks and mask.

Then it was my turn.

I hated the grease part.

We put our clothes in the trunk, got a fifty foot coil of thin rope out of there, and went down to the water carrying our flippers.

Leonard fastened the rope to his belt and went in first, and I fed the rope out to him, keeping just enough slack in it.

After a few minutes, he came out of the water and shook. He took the regulator out of his mouth and pulled his mask up. His face looked gray.

"No car?" I asked.

“Fuck the car,” he said. “Goddamn.” He sat down on the shore and took in some deep breaths and shook. His teeth chattered.

“Chilly, huh?”

“Whoever called these bastards dry suits had to be kidding. I got water all inside, and it’s cold, buddy boy, I will assure you. My balls are the size of grapes.”

“Before you went in, or after?”

“Funny. Look, it’s deeper there than you think.”

“I remember it as deep,” I said. “Used to fish and swim here.”

“There’s a mild suck hole too.”

“That I don’t remember.”

“It isn’t bad, but it could trick you. It’s about where I came up. Damn, I’m freezing.”

“I won’t be down long.”

“Not telling me nothing I don’t know. You think it’s cold up here, this is the tropics compared to that water. And it’s dark. So dark, you’ll come up and it’ll seem like the goddamn world’s bright enough to be on fire.”

“If you had listened in your science classes, Leonard, instead of beating your meat under your desk, you would know that it takes more energy to warm a square inch of cold water than it does a square inch of cold air. And absence of light makes it dark.”

“Just listen, smartass. You’re gonna feel numb at first, little confused. Think you’re getting too disoriented, don’t wait till you’re so messed up you don’t know what you’re doing, come up, or yank on the rope and I’ll help you up. I’m not jacking with you, Hap. Water like that will screw you around. Play some serious tricks on you.”

“Gotcha.”

I put the rope through my belt and tied it loosely in case it got tangled. Leonard took hold of the other end but kept his seat.

I pulled the mask down, put the regulator in my mouth, pulled on my flippers, and eased under the water.

It didn’t hit me for a second, but when it did I felt a wave of blackness and paralysis all over. The cold went right through the suit like some kind of freeze ray. It was a feeling like you have when you get something cold on the wrong tooth, only it was my entire body.

It was all I could do to make myself breathe the Nitrox in my tank.

The wave of blackness passed, though, and I could feel something like cold bug feet creeping through my dry suit; it was water seeping in, of course.

I got organized best I could and swam down deeper. I could feel Leonard letting out the rope.

I couldn't have gone far before I touched bottom, but it seemed to take forever. My head, heart, and lungs felt pregnant with ice. I couldn't see anything. It was muddy from all the rain and overflow from melting ice. I crawled along the bottom like a crab.

I wanted to swim to the surface, but somehow couldn't make myself do it. It took all my concentration to breathe from the respirator, keep in mind where I was, what I was doing, and that air and daylight were not too far above my head.

It came to me eventually that I was looking for a car. That struck me as funny. A car in the river. Cars belonged on the highway. I had a car once. I had a truck now, but I had a car once. Leonard had a car. Lots of people had cars. Or did cars have people? It was an interesting thing to think about. If I'd had a pad and pencil, maybe I'd have taken a note to consider that later. No, I couldn't see well enough to take a note, and paper wouldn't do so good down here. I'd have to remember about the cars and sort it out later.

I felt a tug, as if wires were attached to me. I couldn't figure it.

Leonard pulling the rope?

No. That was the other direction.

Did I have another rope on me?

No, I didn't think so.

The suck hole. I was near that and it was pulling at me.

Had to think. Okay. Underwater. Got air. Cold as the tip of a penguin's dick. Looking for a car. Honk, honk.

The suck hole was pulling me. My arms were weak, and I didn't feel as if I could swim. I went with the suction. It wasn't bad, but it was enough to pull me. It seemed important that I do something, but I couldn't think what it was.

Then the river bottom went away and there was water and tugging. I was over the suck hole. I had swam over and into suck holes and out again in my time, but I wasn't this cold then. Beer would keep good in this water, but you'd want to drink it in a warm place. In front of a big fireplace would be nice. Maybe something to eat with it. I really preferred my beer with food.

Something was keeping me from going down.

The rope. It had gone taut. Leonard had me. Seemed to me that was supposed to be good, but I couldn't be sure.

But wait a minute. I was in the suck hole and my feet were touching something.

This wasn't a very deep suck hole. I wondered how wide it was. Maybe I could put a picnic table down here and have that beer and a sandwich on it. But I'd have to wait until summer. Wait a second. You can't drink beer underwater. Sure can't eat a sandwich. It would get flimsy. And taste like the water. The water was dirty, too.

It was so goddamn dark. Had I been down here so long it was night?

What were my feet touching?

The rope was tugging at me. Leonard was pulling me up.

Hold on here. I didn't ask to be pulled up. I'm thinking down here, goddammit.

I got hold of the belt and unfastened it and let it go. The rope wasn't pulling me anymore.

I bent forward and touched with my hands what my feet had been standing on. It was something flexible. I got hold of it with both hands and held on to it and my feet floated straight up. What I was holding came loose and I began to float up.

Let's see, did I want to float up?

Now something had me, had me hard. I wanted to fight against it, but I was holding this thing in my hands and I didn't want to lose it.

Why didn't I want to lose it? I could let it go and fight back.

I thought about that, but by the time I decided to let go I was on the surface and Leonard had his arm under my chin and was pulling me toward shore. The sun was very bright. It wasn't so cold. I could see trees and sky between their limbs. My hands felt numb. I was still holding my prize. I thought I should let it go. All I had to do was have my brain tell my fingers, "Let go, you sumbitches."

I let go. I was lying on my back. What I let go of was on my chest. A monster bent over me. No, Leonard. He pulled back his mask. He took the respirator out of his mouth. He was calling my name, but it sounded as if it were coming from far away. He was calling someone else too. A person named Shadhad. No, wait a moment. That was shithead. Could he mean me?

"Answer me, shithead. Are you all right?"

"I think so," I said.

"You took off the belt and the rope."

"Did I?"

"You did."

"Couldn't think clear."

"The water, smartass. I told you. Too cold. We haven't got top equipment here and we don't really know what we're doing. … You're okay?"

"Uh-huh. But you can forget finding any car down there."

"That right?" He picked something off my chest, wiped it with his hand a couple of times and held it in front of my eyes. It was a rusty license plate.

We took off the swim gear and used some Kleenex from the glove box to get the grease off of us, then we dressed and drove into scenic downtown Marvel Creek. We had a couple of Lone Stars and a hamburger at Bill's Kettle. Afterwards, we splurged and had chocolate pie and coffee.

When we finished, Leonard said, "Course, it could be some other car."

"How many cars are gonna end up in the middle of a creek like that? And that suck hole is wide enough and deep enough to hold a car during floods and water risings over the years, and when the river gets low, bet that spot's covered with enough water to keep the car out of sight."

"What we got is a license plate, though, not a car."

"It was hooked to a car. It came off because it was rusted."

"You know, the boat could really be out there. And with a little luck, the money."

"Lot of luck. By the way, did I thank you for saving me?"

"Not nearly enough. More humility on your part would be good. I went down there without a rope and pulled you up at great risk to my own life."

"How great a risk do you think?"

"Real great. I fought the suck hole and the cold and you. I can't think of anyone braver."

"Or more modest."

We went on like that until we were tired, then we found we didn't want to drive back to the Sixties Nest. Didn't want to sleep on a cold back porch with butane in our snouts. We got some beer and some cheap wine and rented a room at a rundown motel and stayed up most of the night telling lies and a few sad truths that we hoped the other would think were lies.

Leonard talked about his grandmother, and how fine she was, how he loved her, then talked about his dad, who beat him until he was fourteen and he turned on the old man and kicked his ass, and the old man went away and never came back and his mother died of diabetes and shattered dreams. A stint in the army seemed all right to him. He didn't talk about Vietnam. He skipped that part, and of course I'd heard it all before and he knew it, but a drunk doesn't care about what's been said before, he cares about now and about how he feels, dragging that stuff up is like putting on a good old blues song you've heard a hundred times. You know the words, but it still does you good.

He moved on to other things. Sad history became glad lies. He talked about his dogs, about this one—long gone to her reward, of course—that was smart as Lassie. Could jump through hoops and run for help. Another glass of wine and he might have told me how she could drive a car and smoke a cigar, maybe work a couple calculus problems.

But it didn't get that far. He got limp and paused too long and I told him how I'd lost some plans. About how the future that was not the future I'd wanted. He listened good, like he always did, and what I said was all right. He was with me, knew this line of patter, nodded knowingly in all the right places, way I had with his much-heard story about his good grandmother and his runaway father and his dead mother. Then I told him about Trudy and Cheep, sneaked it in like an inside curve ball. I was looking for a little sympathy there. Figured I deserved it.

"You dick," Leonard said. "I told you that bitch was poison. Paco told you. Everyone knows what she is but the guys in love with her. Maybe I wasn't queer I'd love her too. But from my perspective, she's just a bitch with some patter, and you're an A-one jackass that can't tell a hard-on from true, sweet love. Goodnight."

The thing I like best about Leonard is his sensitivity. Tell you one thing, though, I'd listened to his last goddamn dog story cum lie. He could tell it to the bushes.

Next morning, dull-eyed and slick-tailed, we drove out to the Sixties Nest, ready to deliver our news.

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After we told them what we found, it took two days to get everything together, make a few plans. They gathered up chainsaws and axes and brush knives and an aluminum boat, and somehow Howard talked his boss into letting him borrow the wrecker for a Sunday afternoon.

His boss must have found him considerably more charming than Leonard and I did. At my worst, I wouldn't have pissed on him had he been on fire, and at my best, I would have stomped the flames out.

So we went down there on a cold-as-hell Sunday, the sky all funny-looking and threatening rain, and we took the tools and cut a path for the wrecker to get down to the creekbank. It wasn't much of a path, but by cutting a tree now and then and chopping out some undergrowth, the wrecker, one of those big things with monster tires, was able to get through. We put out a few fishing poles here and there as a disguise, but I thought that was damn silly. Anyone came along and saw all the work we'd done to get that wrecker in, saw our wet suits, and believed we were just dropping a few lines off cane poles was going to have to be a lot dumber than a stone.

Still, that's what we did. All of us but Paco. He was gone as he often was, and nobody offered an explanation, and I couldn't have cared less.

I girded my loins and prepared to put on the dry suit. I didn't want to go back down there, but I knew if I didn't, Leonard would, and I couldn't let him do it just because I was a chickenshit. Not that I hadn't considered it. He offered, and it was tempting, but I made it clear the first round was my baby. My dad always said that if something scared you, thing to do was to face it head-on. Saved yourself a lot of sleepless nights that way. Course, it was an attitude that might get you killed. I wondered if dear old Dad had considered that possibility.

I rubbed myself down with the grease and pulled on the suit and took hold of the wrecker's hook and cable and went down to the edge of the water.

Leonard came over, said, "Sure you want to do this?"

"Course not."

"But you're gonna?"

"Yep."

"Get in any kind of trouble, I'll come get you."

"How you going to know if I'm in trouble?"

"I won't let you stay down long, oxygen tanks or not. You don't come up pretty quick, I'll go down there and get your ass."

"I know that's your favorite part, Leonard, but bring the rest of me up with it."

"Deal."

I pulled the mask down and Howard let out some slack on the cable. I went into the water, swam directly toward the suck hole. It obliged by dragging at me, and I went with it. It was as dark as before down there, and just as cold, and I had to work not to get tangled in the cable. A mild feeling of panic moved over me, but I put my mind on my business and swam with the current. It wasn't as bad this time. I could feel the pressure of the cold against me, but I must have gotten myself greased better this time or my suit put on tighter, because no water was seeping in.

When I was in the suck hole, I turned with my feet up and felt to see what had given up the license plate. It sure felt like a car bumper. I ran my gloved hands over it some more. Yes sir, what we had here was a genuine automobile. I got the hook attached by feel, hoped it was secure, grabbed the cable, and followed it up rapidly. It took only a few seconds, but when I broke the surface, I felt as if I had been down forever.

Howard got the winch going. It whined and pulled taut, paused, started whining again. Before long our catch broke the surface. I couldn't tell what color it had once been, because it had long since adopted the gray and green of the creek bottom's mud and mold. The rear window was mostly busted out, and what glass was there was flimsy-looking, as if it were not glass at all, but crinkled plastic. The tires looked like black chamois rags wrapped around the wheels. The windows were down, to help it sink no doubt, and water and mud the texture of a sick man’s shit rushed out of them.

When it was on the bank, we gathered around it.

“It’s a car,” Howard said, “but is it the right car?”

“Softboy said he had some partners,” I said. “Check for bones.”

Time and fish would have long since taken care of any bodies in the car. Bones might have washed off or been carried away by larger fish, but if the car had gone into that suck hole and lodged there early on, just maybe they had been preserved. And if not, there might be some other evidence there that would tie the car to Softboy.

The doors wouldn’t open, so Howard got a bar and went to work. When he popped them, mud oozed out. Trudy and Howard got shovels and started scraping. It wasn’t too long before Howard found a skull. He wiped it on his sleeve until we could see that it had a large hole in the left side and a smaller one in the right.

Trudy dug around in the backseat until she came up with another mud-covered skull. She brought it out on her shovel and Howard took hold of it and scrubbed it with his sleeve. This one had a small hole in the forehead, and at the back, one the size of a fist.

“I got a feeling Softboy lied about his partners,” Leonard said. “Those are close-up shots. Small one’s the entry wound, big one’s the exit. I think he finished them himself. Money’ll make you do things.”

“He didn’t seem that way,” Howard said.

“Well, things aren’t always what they seem,” Leonard said.

“One thing, though,” Howard said. “He told the truth about the car. And you know what that could mean.”

We had the fever then. I tried to figure where Softboy might have wrecked the boat, and decided the best thing to do was to check both sides of the bridge in the deeper water, see what we could come up with. Leonard and I took turns going in. It was surprisingly deep on either side of the bridge and I thought maybe they had dredged there, preparing to dig the great waterway that never happened.

We swam along the bottom, and at first we panicked at everything we touched. Some of it was the usual garbage: cans and bottles and plastic containers that had once housed soaps or colas, all manner of crap that belonged at the dump and not in the water. Sometimes there were big things and we hooked the winch cable to them and Howard hauled them out. There were a number of fifty-five-gallon drums full of who knows what, and tires and wheels, the occasional transmission or lawn mower, and of course the ever popular irregular shaped rock.

No boats. No pieces of boat.

I was less fearful of the water now, and I tried to keep that in mind. Over-confidence is the way to give your soul to the devil an inch at a time. The dry suit was pinching me some. Water was starting to seep in, and I could really feel the cold. We dove and we dove, and by late afternoon I was exhausted.

We had found neither money nor boat nor boat pieces, and Leonard and I came out of the water and out of our drippy suits and dressed in our clothes for a little warmth and a break. Paco showed up with sandwiches and coffee, and he and Howard went off down the bank to talk about something or another.

The money fever was fading. I thought about how long ago the boat had gone down, and all that could have happened to it over the years, and a mild depression moved in. If it had broken up when it wrecked, it might have gradually been carried away, and the money with it. It could have long since made the sea.

Trudy had been ignoring me. She was about her business of sorting through the junk we'd pulled up, hoping to find some overlooked fragment that might resemble a boat. I couldn't help but watch her, the way she moved was tantalizing.

There was this mound of dirt and vines and scraggly growth not far from the water's edge, and she took a break and went to lean on it, and the way she leaned, with her pelvis thrust forward, put a pain in both my heart and my groin. And I think she damn well knew it.

She shifted her hips without looking at me, making it seem pretty natural, but not quite, and suddenly she moved away from the mound and put her hand to the small of her back and rubbed, then reached out and rubbed at what had poked her. “This looks like a bone,” she said to no one in particular.

I went over and could see the edge of something poking through the mound of dirt. It looked more like a rock to me, but even if it was a woolly mammoth bone, I wasn’t greatly in the mood for paleontology. I felt she had used it as an excuse to get me over there so she could persecute me with her presence.

She ignored me and began to dig around the edges of the thing and pretty soon it was clear what it was, and it was considerably more exciting than a rock or bone.

It was the blade to a boat propeller.

She looked toward the bank where Howard and Paco were standing, staring out at the water.

She said, “There’s something here.”

Howard and Paco came over. Leonard and Chub showed up.

Howard looked at what was there, said, “Oh man, that means —”

“Means it’s a boat propeller,” Leonard said. “But not necessarily the boat propeller.”

“How would a boat get up here?” Chub said.

“Water might have put it here and receded,” I said. “Since no one would have looked for the boat down here, it might have been sitting here, slowly gathering dirt over it.”

“Or,” Paco said, “what we may have here is a propeller blade and a mound of dirt. But one thing’s certain. There’s a boat in there, we’re not going to talk it out.”

Shovels came out then, and we were on that mound of dirt like worms on a corpse. Howard and Paco and Leonard on one side, me and Chub on the other, Trudy with a trowel working at the propeller. Chub was so frenzied he nearly whacked me twice with his shovel handle, and he nipped my ankle with the shovel blade once. I had to threaten to do him damage to make him watch what he was doing. But we were all a little frenzied, and when Trudy uncovered a large hunk of outboard motor, even more so. We dug and we dug and the sun went down and the cold became colder, but I wasn’t aware of it until I paused to relax and felt the sweat cooling on my face. The cold air cut at the rims and insides of my nostrils and sliced down my throat and hissed in my lungs and made them throb like a wound.

But I kept digging.

At some point Howard turned the wrecker toward us and pulled on the highbeams so we could see. We started digging even faster. We came to some thick twists of roots and we got the axe and Leonard elected himself Paul Bunyan. He cut at them with hard, precise strokes and the roots flew up and out, and we went back to digging. Finally Howard's shovel hit something that sounded unlike root or rock. He dropped his shovel and dipped his hands into the dirt and came out with the crumpled top of an aluminum cooler.

We all paused and looked at it. There in the cold highbeams and the splotchy moonlight, it had as much majesty as a silver shield. "Could be, could be," Howard said, and then we were digging again, really digging. The mole population of the world couldn't have been any busier. Wooden fragments that might have been boat pieces were found next. They were as crumbly as artificial fireplace logs.

Then Howard's shovel hit something else. He lifted out a long aluminum canister cracked in the middle. We all looked at it. I felt as if I had suddenly been filled with molten lava, that a little ice had gone out of my soul. Lost years were on the verge of being regained. Possibilities went through me, grew heads like a Hydra. The fact that this money might be partially mine for the taking, that it was stolen and illegal, filled me simultaneously with ecstasy and guilt, like I'd have felt if my mother had ever caught me jacking off to a girlfriend's picture.

Howard tried to loosen the lid, but couldn't. He finally resorted to bending it at the break to work it apart. He managed that and wads of something dark fell out of it. Trudy was suddenly there with a flashlight and Howard grabbed what had come out of the canister and squeezed it between his fingers and cussed.

I took hold of it too. It was paper, probably the money; it was black and the texture of wet tissue. Another year or so, it might make good garden mulch.

"There's supposed to be several containers," Trudy said. "They can't all be broken."

“Yes they can,” Leonard said.

His words were anvils dropping on our heads. I felt a little dizzy and empty, as if hungry, but there wasn’t any food that was going to fill this gap. The boat and the canister had given us a moment full of dreams, and now those dreams threatened to grow wings and fly south and die among the bones of all our dreams.

Yeah, that money could make up for a lot of missed ambitions, but without it we were nothing more than a batch of losers, standing cold and silly, empty-handed on the muddy bank of an unnamed creek.

We went back to digging and sifted through some more wood and some metal and plastic and some chunks of glass. Eventually we came up with another canister. This one wasn’t broken open. Howard got a screwdriver and a wrench and with shaking hands went to work on the lid, popped it off.

Inside was some money. It was in a plastic bag, in bundles, and looked in good shape. Howard tore open the bag and the money fell out. Trudy grabbed it, unfolded it, dropped to her knees, starting counting.

I could hear her breathing, all of us breathing. We were puffing out white, cold smoke, chugging like little trains trying to make a last bad hill.

It took a long time to count that money, longer than I would have imagined, and we all stood there watching those bills go off that wad and out of her hands and onto the ground, and after what seemed enough time for continents to sink beneath the waves and new ones to rise up out of the sea on the shoulders of volcanic eruption and for new life-forms to come into existence, she said, “A hundred thousand.”

With the sharp voice of greed, Howard said, “There’s got to be more than that.”

We went at it again, and before long uncovered another canister. Again the money was counted—this time we all took some of it and made little piles—and what we had in this one was just short of two hundred thousand. All of it was in good shape. We dug till we found two more canisters. Both held money. One had a few damaged bills on top, but the bulk of it was okay. We leveled the mound. No more money.

We counted what was there, added it together. We had just over four hundred thousand. Trudy took the money and rolled it into tight little rolls and put it back in the bags and wrapped the bags firmly with some tape she had and put the spoils in the two best canisters.

“That’s a lot less than a million,” Howard said.

Though it looked as if my dream was going to be a smaller one than I had hoped for, I was glad to have anything. In fact, I felt a little giddy. I looked at Howard. He nodded. I said, “Seems to me this is a good tax-free haul. Might be another canister or two in the water, but personally I’ve had it. This could be all there ever was. Talk about money is like talk about fish. Both grow in the telling.”

“Me and Hap,” Leonard said, “we’ll take our share now. I want to get back to my dogs and Hap wants to get on down to Mexico.”

Howard looked at Paco, then Chub and Trudy. “Now, huh?”

“That’s right,” I said.

“Well,” Howard said, “just a minute.” He stepped back and opened his coat and reached inside and pulled out something and pointed it at us. Even with his back to the headlights and there being only an occasional snatch of moonlight through the trees, I could see well enough to make a fairly accurate guess at what he was holding.

A flat little automatic.

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Turned out they all had guns. When Howard pulled his, they produced theirs. It was pretty disconcerting, all those people standing there holding cheap automatics.

Howard drove the wrecker. Trudy drove the mini-van. Chub drove Leonard's car and Paco hung over the front seat and pointed a .32 automatic at us. The bottoms raced by us in black bands and twists of oak fingers and pines shaped like dunce hats. The moon crept through it all and faded in and out with the rolling of the clouds.

I didn't look at Leonard. I could sense he wanted me to, but I didn't want to see that well-deserved I-told-you-so look.

"You guys are some kidders," I said to Paco. "I thought they wanted the money for a cause and you just wanted the money. Turns out you're really in this together, and you all just want the money."

"No," Chub said. "Not true. We have a purpose. Thing is, we require it all. We thought there would be more and we could give you some. But little as there is, we can't afford it. We made a pact that if there wasn't enough for our needs, we'd have to appropriate your share."

"It's needed for a buy," Paco said.

"Drugs?" I said.

"Guns," Chub said.

"Guess you're going to give them to some South American revolutionaries to fight their capitalistic oppressors," I said. "Something like that."

"Something like that," Chub said. "Only we're not giving them to anyone. We're the revolutionaries."

"Oh shit," I said.

"Great," Leonard said. "Bozo the clown and his clown buddies with guns. Probably gonna have live ammunition too."

"We need all the money," Chub said, "because the weapons we're buying are state of the art. Right Paco?"

"Sure," Paco said.

"Paco said if we found this money, he had connections and he could get to them right away. People he's worked with before. Right, Paco?"

"Right."

"He's been checking with them all along, in case we got the money. He's got them to quote us some prices. We theorized that we'd need quite a lot of them and plenty of ammunition, and we'd need money for when we went underground, so we could make payoffs, buy food, supplies, that sort of thing. Enough for us to get established before we started robbing banks."

"Banks?" Leonard said. "You're going to rob banks?"

"Not for the money. Of course, we'd have to have some of it to finance things. But we'll give a lot of it to supporters of politically correct causes."

"Politically correct," Leonard said. "I love that."

"We didn't really intend to cheat you, but with so little money there, and our plans being as ambitious as they are, we had to. It's nothing malicious or personal, it's a matter of priorities."

"Ah," Leonard said. "I see. For a moment there, I just thought we were getting fucked."

"We're going to have to keep you awhile," Chub said. "Until we make the buy and go underground. Let you loose now, you might spill the beans. We don't want anyone knowing about us just yet. Soon everyone will be aware of us, and we'll be glad for it."

"I wouldn't tell a soul," Leonard said. "Think I want the world to know I got snookered by you goofs? Some revolutionaries you're gonna make. You couldn't find your shitters with both hands."

"Paco's done this sort of thing before," Chub said.

"Yeah," Leonard said, "and all he got out of it was a burned-up head."

"Fooled *you*, didn't we?" Paco said.

“I’m afraid you did,” I said.

“We have to do something,” Chub said. “This country is rapidly going the way of fascism. The spirit of the sixties can’t be lost—”

“Christ,” Paco said. “I’m going to join the fucking capitalists you don’t shut up.”

20

Another cold night, but not as cold as it had been at the Sixties Nest. The heat worked well here and there was some of it in every room, and the rooms were slightly larger and better-looking, much less depressing. Logs crackled pleasantly in the living room fireplace. Still, it wasn't comfortable. We'd slept sitting in armchairs, and to add insult to injury we were in Leonard's house, Howard and Trudy having spent the night in Leonard's bed, except when they took their turn sitting on the couch with their guns, watching us, looking as if at any moment a great shootout was inevitable.

They had taken their watch together about midnight. I could see the clock on the fireplace mantel, could hear the bastard tick the minutes away as if dropping water on my head. Paco was sleeping somewhere in the kitchen and Chub was wrapped in blankets on the floor near the fireplace.

For lovers, Trudy and Howard didn't look at each other much. They sat on the couch at opposite ends. There didn't seem to be any electricity between them. They had become, at least in their minds, hard-nosed professionals in the last twenty-four hours.

They had all changed. With us prisoners, our captors had taken on an unconscious swagger. Maybe they hadn't wanted this to happen, us being out of step with their plans, but since it had, they were eating it up. It gave them reason to tote their guns. They were having a taste of revolutionary foreplay. Orgasm was anticipated.

I nodded in and out, watching Trudy and Howard watching me and Leonard, and came completely awake and reasonably rested to the sound of Chub groaning. Trudy was toeing him awake. "Your turn," she said. "There's coffee. Don't go back to sleep."

"Don't talk to me like a kid," Chub said. Coming awake like that, he'd momentarily forgotten the lessons of analysis. How he wasn't bothered by anything.

“They got no respect for you because you’re fat,” Leonard said.

I looked at Leonard. I hadn’t noticed him coming awake, and he had awakened as grumpy and sarcastic as ever. No wonder he didn’t have any lovers. Who’d want to wake up to Groucho Marx every morning?

“You get thick,” Leonard continued, “everyone treats you like you’re a talking pork chop.”

“You don’t bother me,” Chub said. I doubted that. Earlier, before he bedded down, during one of my awake moments, I had seen him standing near the living room window, examining his reflection in the dark glass, and I could tell from the way his shoulders slumped that what he saw was not what he wanted to see. He got up, washed his face at the kitchen sink, drank a cup of coffee, got his gun from under his pillow, and took to the couch.

“We’re going for a walk,” Trudy told him.

“Outside?” Chub said.

“No,” Howard said. “We thought we’d circle the fucking couch.”

“Just asking. It’s cold out there.”

“Say it is?” Howard said.

“You’re all jumpy,” Chub said. “Come on, we’re in this together.” Chub’s face wore the same sad look it had in that photo of him as a kid. He so desperately wanted to be treated like an equal, he couldn’t help but act inferior.

Howard took a deep breath. “Yeah, well listen, we get back, we’ll help you take them for a bathroom break.”

“I got a big dick,” Leonard said, “but it don’t take but me to hold it while I piss.”

“We wouldn’t want you to be lonely,” Howard said.

“What if we got to pee now?” Leonard said.

“Hold it,” Howard said.

“Is a number two, a doodie, any different?” Leonard asked.

“Hold that too,” Howard said.

Leonard looked at me. “He’s just too tough. When he talks I get this little rush in my loins, don’t you?”

During this exchange Trudy had disappeared into the bedroom. She came out now wearing a bundle of clothes, her big lumberjill coat topping it off. “Put something warm on,” she said to Howard.

He went into the bedroom and came out a few minutes later bundled as heavily as she was. They went out the front door. I closed my eyes and dozed.

Next time I came awake, it was to the sound of the back door opening and closing.

Trudy and Howard came in through the kitchen, red-faced from the cold. The bottoms of Howard’s pants were spotted with wet dirt and the toes of his shoes were tipped with it. Trudy looked as clean and desirable as ever, even decked out like a little she bear in her winter coat.

I looked at the clock in spite of myself. Two-forty-eight. Time flies when you’re having a good time.

Howard got his pretty little automatic out and pointed Leonard to the bathroom. When Leonard finished, I took my turn and went back to my chair.

It was three A.M.

Moving right along.

Leonard went right back to sleep. He even snored. For me it was more nodding in and out. Once I awoke and Chub had gone back to his place on the floor and Paco was on the couch, gun in his lap. There was a saucer on the arm of the couch and it was full of cigarette butts and there was a cigarette in his mouth and a cloud of smoke hung over his head. He looked a little twitchy. It was the first time I’d seen him that way. There were beads of sweat on his wrecked face and that studied cool he’d had was on vacation. When he saw I was awake he called some of the cool home, smiled, gave a slice-hand wave and picked up his gun with the other hand.

I thought about jumping him, but I also thought about getting shot. If Leonard were awake, I might signal to him, and we could jump him at the same time. The bastard couldn’t get both of us.

Or maybe he could. And if he only got one of us, I didn’t want it to be me, and I assumed Leonard felt the same way about himself. And if we did take him, it probably wouldn't be without a noisy struggle, and that would bring the rest of them awake, and they all had guns.

I gave Paco the foulest look I could muster, twisted in my chair, and was about to close my eyes when Trudy came out of the bedroom. She was carrying a flashlight, wearing her lumberjill outfit again, only this time with less bundling under the coat.

Paco looked a question at her.

"Can't sleep. Going to take a walk."

Paco nodded.

She went out through the kitchen. She was a walking kind of gal this night. I closed my eyes and slept. It was Trudy coming back that woke me. She wasn't all that loud, but I wasn't that deep in sleep either. She came in red-faced from the cold again, pulling off her brown cotton gloves. She came over to the edge of the couch, looked at Paco, then stared at me for a long, hard time. I studied her in return. The bottoms of her pants and the toes of her boots were crusted with clay and there were a few pieces of gravel stuck in the clay at the front ridge of her boot like ugly gems on hard red velvet. The great Hap Holmes deduced she had been out walking along the edge of the creek, where Leonard had tried to build up his land to keep it from washing away.

She tired of trying to stare me down—which was good, I was about to look away—and walked behind the couch and into the bedroom and closed the door.

"She's still got the hots for you bad," Paco said.

"Save it," I said.

The clock showed a little after five.

I didn't go back to sleep again. By six, Howard and Trudy were both up. Trudy had already showered and was wearing one of my shirts with a clean pair of jeans. Everyone else had on what they had worn the night before. Howard got guard duty. The rest went into the kitchen and scrounged through Leonard's stuff for breakfast. Leonard awoke in time to see them using up his coffee, his bread and butter, and most importantly, his vanilla cookies. Losing the cookies really bugged him. He had a passion for them, kept them hidden even from me. Paco found them by accident and put them on the table so they could be had with coffee, and though we were offered some, I could tell it was no fun for Leonard to get his own cookies from assholes.

I had picked up tidbits of information here and there, listening to them talk when we were at the Sixties Nest, and now here at Leonard's, and I had a good idea of their general, if not specific, plans. With the exception of Paco, who was tight-lipped and unreadable, they weren't secretive about the general stuff. They had brought us here because the guns they intended to buy were to be bought someplace outside of LaBorde, and neither LaBorde or that place were excessively far from Leonard's house. Last, but not least, Trudy said Paco had contacts in LaBorde that would help them go underground. They weren't ex-movement people, they were drug runners. But the method for getting lost from the mainstream was the same no matter what your purpose. After all, Paco had done it for years. They only had to follow his lead.

I hoped they would do what they were going to do and get it over with, then let us go. I didn't want to spend another night sleeping in a chair. The rose fields seemed like a better career today than yesterday. I wanted out of the picture. I wanted to toss away its frame and knock down the wall it hung on.

But when we were out of this mess, I was uncertain what I'd do. If I went to the police, I had to tell them about the money I'd helped find. I could lie my way around it for a while, but if they caught one of the others, the truth would come out, and I might end up viewing the world from behind bars again. Maybe Huntsville prison this time, but a prison just the same. The difference in their exercise yards would not be of enough interest to make the time appealing. And even if I didn't mention Leonard, one of the foiled revolutionaries might. Leonard wouldn't like prison any better than I had or would again. Yet, if I said nothing, innocent people might die during one of the group's holdups, and no matter how I might rationalize it, that would be on my head.

It was not an exciting morning. Paco used Leonard's phone a couple of times to mutter a conversation at someone, and with the exception of Howard, who was sitting on the couch with his gun, guarding us, we were essentially ignored.

Finally Trudy came over and sat on the couch, reached under her (my) shirt and took the gun out of the waistband of her pants and said to Howard, "I'll watch awhile."

Howard got up and went to the table, laid his gun beside the bag of cookies, opened the bag and went to work. I could almost feel Leonard flinch while Howard ate. Leonard sure loved his cookies.

I smiled at Trudy. It was not a nice smile. "You're all jackasses," I said.

She smiled at me. It was not a nice smile. "Whatever you think, Hap. You and I aren't connected in any way anymore. It's just not there. What you say doesn't matter to me. You don't do what we say, try to get away before we're ready to let you go, try to screw things up, we'll shoot you. Wound you if we can. Kill you if we have to. Don't think our past will keep me from pulling the trigger myself. Understand?"

"All too well."

"What are you going to do with us, and when?" Leonard said.

"Paco's got to make another call, then we'll know when and where to meet our contacts, know better what we're going to do."

"Why not have them come out here and we can have a party?" Leonard said. "They can finish off my cookies."

"Better yet," I said, "leave us here. Cut the phone lines or something, let the air out of Leonard's tires. Go your way and leave us be."

"If I knew everything would go smooth, I would. But I want you two with us until the moment we've got the guns and we're ready to go underground. We have some kind of delay and you two are free, you warn someone, then we could get caught before we're ready to make things work. And if our game plan doesn't go right, something about this buy sours, we can have here for a home base for a few days till we put something else together. I want us prepared for any emergency. When it all works out you'll be with us, and if it doesn't happen here, we'll let you out some place where you won't be able to get to a phone too quickly. Not someplace so isolated you'll freeze to death or be too miserable."

"We sure wouldn't want to inconvenience you none," Leonard

said.

“Then Paco’s going to take us to meet our underground connections. New transportation has been arranged. We’ll ditch the van, and—”

“And the rest is history,” I said.

“We’ll try to make a difference,” Trudy said.

“Take the money and give it to the goddamn whales,” I said. “This is stupid. You with a gun? Think about it.”

“I have. I’ve been for gun control all my life, and now here I am with one. Soon to have more. But I’ve given to the whales and I’ve given time and what money I could get to most everything. This time I’m giving myself, and I’ll make a difference.”

“Hap told me about the bird you drowned,” Leonard said. “I think that makes you ready for anything, a stone killer.”

“Oh, shut up, Leonard,” Trudy said.

“Serious now,” Leonard said. “You could call yourself the Ice Birds. You know, like the Weathermen or the Mechanics, only you can be the Ice Birds on account of you’re bad enough and mean enough to drown a sparrow. Shit, I want in. I’ll drive and you shoot.”

“It’s all comedy to you two,” she said. “Exist from day to day, watch out for yourself and each other, and that’s it. You’re not contributing to anything beyond your moment. If it doesn’t affect you immediately, then it’s of no consequence.”

“Sounds right,” Leonard said.

Trudy leaned back into the couch and held the gun in her lap. She said, “You’re hopeless.”

“That may be,” Leonard said. “But what I’d like to do is call a friend who’s been feeding my dogs, tell him I’m home and not to come over. I don’t want you Ice Birds—”

“Don’t call us that.”

“—getting touchy and shooting an old man for one of the bureaucratic, capitalistic pigs that run our society. And I’d like to go out and feed them. Anyone else tries, Switch will take their face off. You can bring your arsenal along so I don’t run off.”

“Call him,” Howard said. He had been listening on the sidelines, and now he was waving Leonard out of his chair with his automatic. “Any tricks, though, and you could get yourself or Hap hurt.”

Leonard made the call. It was quick and simple and friendly. No codes were passed. He went out and fed the dogs and Paco and his gun went with him. The morning crawled by like a gutted turtle. About noon Paco made a call. When he quit mumbling into the phone he said to the others, “They got a place and a time for us to meet. Sounds okay. Think we can get this over with pretty quick. Get the money, and let’s do it.”

21

We went in the mini-van. Chub drove. Paco sat in the front seat beside him. Trudy and Howard sat in the middle seat and turned around and pointed towel-covered guns at me and Leonard in the backseat. Outside the weather had turned wet with icy rain and the wipers whipped at it like a madman trying to tread water.

“Can we stop for burgers on the way?” Leonard said.

No answer.

We caught the loop and took it around LaBorde, out past the city limits to a stretch made up of long metal storage buildings, and finally the old Apache Drive-In Theater.

It was no longer in operation and would possibly someday become the site of a number of rectangular aluminum buildings the size of aircraft hangers. Before TV hit it a left, and some years later video cassettes finished it with a hard right cross, it was the place to go, but now it was condemned junk.

The great old Apache Indian head figure that had stood atop the marquee was gone, probably stolen, but the marquee itself was there, high up on its metal poles. There were breaks in it and the red letters mounted there were few and left a cryptic message: ED N HE ST.

We drove past the marquee, past the pay booth, to what used to be the entrance. There was a plywood barrier now. Kids had spray-painted pictures and graffiti on it. The pictures were the usual hairy vagina and dick and balls and most of the sexual suggestions were misspelled. At least when we were kids and did that sort of thing we spelled *Fuck* with a *c* in it.

“Honk the horn,” Paco said.

“What?” Chub said.

“They said honk the fucking horn.”

Chub hit down on it and held it.

“Just once, dammit,” Paco said.

The plywood wall shook and slid back. When it was halfway across a woman appeared from behind, got at the other end and shoved it some more.

As we drove past her, I saw that she was in her late twenties, tall—over six feet—and dark-haired. Attractive. Wearing a jogging suit with a blue jean coat over it. The coat couldn’t keep you from noticing she was a bodybuilder. She looked a trim one seventy and her muscles hopped like rabbits when she moved.

I looked back and saw that she had hold of the plywood and was backing up, pulling it into place.

I glanced at Leonard, and he raised his eyebrows.

I took a deep breath. I could feel my hands fluttering on my knees. Howard’s Adam’s apple was working slightly and Trudy was watching me intently, her breath audible.

“Park here,” Paco said, and pointed at the concession stand. We parked and got out. Howard and Trudy took the towels off their guns. More professional that way. The cold rain beat on our heads and drenched us to the bone. I found myself looking at where the old drive-in screen had been. I wished it were ten years ago, and I was here for a movie.

Paco went into the concession by himself, came out a moment later. “Come on.”

We went in. It was dry inside but very cold. There was all manner of rubbish on the floor: beer cans, condoms, old popcorn bags, candy wrappers and a pile of turds that might have been human or animal.

We went past what had been the concession counter and into a room that had a faded sign above it that read OFFICE. Inside there was an old cheap desk made out of what they called pressed wood, but was little more than hardened cardboard. On the desk was a battered black porkpie hat and a frayed black umbrella. Behind the desk was a man sitting on an upright soda drink crate, his feet and legs were visible through the opening beneath the desk. He was long and lean, dressed in black slacks with hightop black tennis shoes. His red and black plaid shirt poked out over a vanilla windbreaker. In spite of this light attire, he didn’t look cold. Quite the contrary. He had black hair cut short and greased and combed back. He wore a pair of thick-lensed glasses with square black frames. The nose bar and the left wing of the glasses were wrapped with thick white tape. The eyes behind the glasses seemed huge. They were black as his hair and only slightly less oily-looking. He smile and showed us he was missing some teeth in the right side of his mouth. His face was slightly flushed and pimpled with sweat. He looked as if he were running a fever that was trying to break.

We were all stuffed in the little room and now the muscular woman came in, shook her wet hair like a dog. She had one hand in the pocket of her coat. She leaned in the corner, pulled a leg up and bent it so that the sole of her foot was pushed against the wall. Her face held no more expression than a wax dummy.

"Hey, the revolutionaries," said the man behind the desk. "Qué pasa. How the fuck are you?"

"We're all right," Howard said.

"Glad to hear it," the man said.

"We'd like to deal quickly," Howard said.

"Sure," the man said. "But let me introduce myself.... Ah, fucked up. Ladies first." He nodded at the Amazon. "That shapely piece of meat is Angel. Me, I'm Soldier. I want you to remember that, know who you're dealing with. Case things don't go down the way you like, you can come to me and say, 'Soldier, things aren't to my satisfaction.' And I can say, 'Fuck you.' "

I glanced at Leonard. He looked as uncomfortable as I felt. Howard and Trudy still had their guns but they weren't pointing them at us anymore; they held them against their legs.

"Do you know what I'm saying here?" Soldier said.

Howard looked at Trudy, and I saw his left cheek jump. Trudy's lips made a thin white line. Chub moved over near the wall Angel was occupying. He was between her and the desk. Paco moved to the right of Soldier. He had his hands in his coat pockets and was looking at the dirty, paper-littered floor.

"Nobody knows what I'm saying?" Soldier said.

"No," Trudy said. "We want to deal for the guns. That's all we want. You give us the guns, and we give you the money. We got to see the guns first."

“You do.” Soldier looked at Paco. “Hear that, they got to see the guns first?”

“I hear,” Paco said.

“You got guns,” Soldier said. “All you got guns, ’cept for this one,”—he pointed a finger at me—“and the nigger. Right?” He looked at Paco. “They’re the dumb assholes helped find the money, aren’t they? That right? I got ’em picked? I know I got the nigger picked. He’s the only nigger in the bunch. Black man, you called him. Black my ass. I know a nigger when I see one.”

“Yeah,” Paco said. “That’s them.”

“My folks brought me here when I was fifteen. Moved down from Jersey to get here where you spear-chuckers know your place. And you’re worse here. Everything’s gotten so goddamn … What’s the word, Angel?”

“Homogeneous,” Angel said.

“That’s it, goddamned homogeneous. You got your best Ku Kluxers up North now. Southerners, they’ve come to think a nigger’s all right. Turns my stomach.”

“Hating a person because of their skin won’t solve anything,” Chub said.

“Shut up, Chub,” Paco said.

Soldier looked at Chub in surprise. It was as if he had just seen a miracle. “Who the fuck asked you to talk?”

“Not everyone feels like you do,” Chub said.

“Not now, Chub,” Paco said.

“You shut up too,” Soldier said, pointing a finger at Paco. He shifted it to Chub, said, “Angel, move.”

Angel stepped toward me. I saw a snubnose .38 come out of her coat pocket. I glanced back at Soldier. He stood, picked his hat up, took hold of the .45 automatic under it, pointed it at Chub and fired. The back of Chub’s head went by me in a gray and red flash, hit the wall where Angel had stood. Chub bent his knees slowly, went down until he was supported on them, fell back with his face to the ceiling. The rest of what was in his head ran out like sewage.

The sound of the gunshot throbbed against the room, and

Soldier, the .45 still pointed where Chub had stood, said, “Anyone makes to use their gun, I’ll kill ’em. If not me, Angel. Not Angel, Paco.”

We looked at Paco.

“That’s the way it is,” Paco said.

22

“Yeah,” Soldier said. “That’s the way it is. Now play real smart, don’t give me any nigger lectures, and let Angel collect your guns. Pretty please?”

Angel merely took hold of the barrels of the guns, one at a time, tugged gently. Trudy and Howard were so stunned they let go without realizing it. Angel tossed the guns on the desk, went over and opened Chub’s coat and pulled his out of his waistband. I couldn’t help but look at those open, bugged eyes of his, that small hole in his forehead, the puddle on the floor where the back of his head touched. No more analysis for him. No more worries about being the inadequate fat boy. I hoped at some point I had said something nice to him, more for my sake than his.

Angel tossed Chub’s gun on the table with the others.

Soldier nodded at the guns. “These are for shit. You dips wouldn’t have known guns had I had them. I leave here, I leave that shit right here on the desk.… You see, there never were any guns, or any goddamn underground. There was just Paco and he’s been talking to me, and he knows me and knows I got a line on some deals, and he wants to make big bucks. Get out of the chickenfeed, you know. The big score, and all that shit. Besides, who but me is going to hire the ugly sonofabitch for something big, huh? No offense, Paco. Fire’ll do that to you. Make you like scrunched …

What’s that wrapper paper, Angel? They put it around Twinkies, that kind of thing.”

“Cellophane,” Angel said.

“That’s it, that’s the stuff your face looks like, Paco.”

Soldier turned back to us and moved the sight of the .45 along the side of his jaw. Our eyes went to him and his gun and back to poor Chub. A gun and a dead body will hypnotize you, especially with the echo of the shot still ringing in your ears, the coppery smell of blood and shit stuffed full in your nostrils.

“Those are special expressions you’re wearing,” Soldier said, and he smiled at Trudy and Howard. “Got your goats, didn’t I? Came in here all ready to deal, dragging prisoners along like you’re somebody tough, and now you’re all my prisoners. And I ain’t got gun one. Don’t think I can’t get ’em, now. I can. Could. But I don’t deal them much anymore. They’re a hassle. Easy to get caught. Dope’s easier. But Paco, he comes to me, says he’s got something easier than that, got some real dumbasses on the hook that I don’t got to do business with you. Just got to be here to take your money. And you know what’s best for you, we’ll get on with that part right now, because I don’t take shit. I’m like my old man. He didn’t take none of it neither. Old lady mouthed off at him, whamo.” He made backhand motion. “We kids didn’t mind, whamo. Hey, see this ear.” He turned his left ear to us. “See how it’s kind of cauliflowered. Nothing creepy, now. Not like old Paco there, but a little fucked, you know. Old man did that. Beat me within an inch of my life. Deserved it. I was disrespectful.… Look here, I’m going to take that money now. Which one of you’s carrying?”

I looked at Trudy. She was staring without seeing. Howard looked at her, then back to Soldier. No one said anything.

“Nobody’s talking to me here,” Soldier said. “Someone better talk to me real soon, or I’m going to have to get someone’s attention. I’ll start with the nigger, then the nigger’s pal. Paco, what’s his name?”

“Hap,” Paco said.

“Hap. Old Happy Kind of Guy … Listen, talk to me. I’m going to get the money anyway. I can shoot you and search you. But hey, I’m easy. I’d prefer you show a little respect here and give it over. I’m big on respect. Know what I’m saying?”

“We want the guns,” Trudy said, and her voice was surprisingly firm.

Soldier smiled. “What’s that? The guns? You want the guns?” He looked at Paco. “She wants the guns.” He turned back to Trudy. “Bitch, I told you, there aren’t any guns. No bang-bangs. Not even any bullets for you to throw. You see, it’s like this. You give me the money, and I don’t blow your brains out. That’s the deal, see, and that's all the deal there is." Soldier lifted the automatic and pointed it at Leonard. "We'll start with the coon, he'll be missed the least. We work up from there and end it with the woman."

Howard said, "We didn't bring it with us."

"Say what?" Soldier said. "What're you talking here? Got in a hurry going out the door and forgot the money? Huh? That the story? Hey, you better talk to me, asshole."

Howard's Adam's apple seemed to be plugging his vocal cords. "We don't have the money with us."

Soldier put the automatic on the desk and looked at Paco. "What's this? There some money or not?"

"There's money," Paco said. "I saw it."

"You wouldn't fuck with Soldier, would you?"

"I saw the money. I told them to bring it."

"You told them. You didn't see them bring it, though, right?"

"No, but there's money. Ballpark of four hundred thousand."

"All right, you … What's your name?"

"Howard."

"Right. Howard. About this money you didn't bring with you."

"We … me and Trudy thought we ought not to bring it. We thought things might not work out … that we'd have to bargain. The guns might not be right, and if we didn't have the money with us, we … well, we …"

Soldier pointed a finger at Howard. "You'd have a lever. Am I right on that? Talk to me."

"That's right," Howard said.

"Then," Soldier said, picking up the automatic, "You could jack with old Soldier, and he'd say, oh gee, you don't like this deal. Well, we'll set it up again. Fix it to your satisfaction. Man, you must have fallen off the … What kind of hay truck am I going for here, Angel?"

"The proverbial," Angel said.

"There you are. You must have fallen off the proverbial hay truck, Howard, my friend. You see, I don't have to deal."

"I brought five thousand of it," Howard said. "We thought that could be a down payment if things weren't just right. We were trying to be cautious. We thought of it last night."

Soldier turned to Paco. "They thought of this last night. They didn't tell you? I mean, you're supposed to be one of them and they didn't tell you?"

Paco shook his head.

"It was a precaution is all," Howard said. "In case of … in case of a double cross."

"A double cross. Hey, I don't like not being trusted, see. It's disrespectful."

"We thought there'd be guns," Howard said. "Just thought that we might get skimped on the number and the quality. We'd read about that kind of thing."

Soldier nodded his head. "Read about it, uh-huh. Well, how much you say you brought?"

"Five thousand."

"That's not piss in a bucket, Howard. Tell him, Angel."

"That's not piss in a bucket," Angel said.

"You'd have to pay me more than that to fuck your sister if she had six feet of legs and a pussy like a velvet clam. That's nothing. I make that in a day, Mr. Howard. You're wasting my time. Give me the five thousand."

Howard dug in his jacket, came forward and gave Soldier the five thousand, went back to stand by Trudy. Soldier put the automatic on the table and thumbed through the money. "Five thousand, all right. This'll be part of my share. That okay with you, Paco? Angel?"

Neither answered. It wasn't meant as a real question.

"Now, here's what we're going to do," Soldier said. "You're going to tell me where the money is, Mr. Howard."

"Leonard's place," Howard said. "We buried it."

"I see, buried it," Soldier said. "What I ought to do here is shoot the lot of you, 'cept Howard. Then you and me, Howard, we can go dig up this money."

"Be less messy to take everyone and go get it," Paco said.

"You say something, man?"

"I don't want to kill anybody 'less I have to," Paco said. "I've done it, but just when I have to."

"I say you have to, Paco, you have to. You think I didn't have to kill that asshole a while ago? That what you're thinking? A little bloodshed could have been avoided here? I'll tell you, that asshole had no respect. That's the difference between you and me, Paco. I demand respect."

Soldier sat down on the soft drink crate and looked at us. "What about you, girlie?" he said to Trudy. "What you think about all this?"

"I'm not giving you the money," Trudy said.

"I see," Soldier said. "Spunk. Not much respect, but spunk. Just the same, I'm feeling generous as Jesus, so we'll do this Paco's way. We'll go to Leonard's … Leonard, that's the nigger, right?"

"Right," Paco said.

"We'll go to the nigger's place, dig up the money, take it and go our merry way, leave you holding your asses. How's that sound? You up for that, Howard? A little digging?"

There were tears on Howard's cheeks. "Yes," he said.

"Good," Soldier said. "Knowing you're happy makes me happy."

23

Soldier went through Chub’s pockets, took his money and the mini-van keys. He put on the porkpie and got his umbrella. We left Chub where he lay and went out into the rain.

Soldier and Angel had a worn white Lincoln parked on the other side of the concession, and we went there first, stood in the cold rain while Soldier told us a little about respect. Paco got behind the wheel of the Lincoln. Angel sat up front, twisted in her seat to watch Howard and Trudy in the back.

They left ahead of us.

Soldier made me drive the mini-van. He put Leonard beside me, and he took the backseat. “Don’t drive fast and don’t think about any stupid shit like wrecking. I can put a bullet in both of you before we wrap around a telephone pole.”

I didn’t know which was preferable, a telephone pole or a bullet. I didn’t want either.

I put the van in gear and started driving. When we were on the highway, Soldier tapped me on the shoulder with the automatic. “Angel. Whatda ya think of her? How she looks, I mean.”

“She’s all right,” I said. “The gun takes away some.”

“Those muscles bother you?”

“No.”

“Yeah. Well, I tell you. Climb on top of her, it’s like climbing on boulders. You can get a bruise. Stick your dick in her, you don’t know you’re getting it back. Got a bear trap for a pussy. We’re talking about getting married. Whatda ya think?”

“You’re a match made in heaven,” I said.

“Yeah, maybe,” he said. “But I don’t know a man ought to marry some woman can bench press more than him, know what I’m saying? It far to the nigger’s place?”

“Reasonably far,” I said.

“Yeah, well, drive careful. I’ve seen some bad wrecks, weather like this.”

By the time we got there the weather had really gotten bad. There were flakes of snow mixed in with the blowing rain and ice and the sky was dark as near sunset. Last time I had eaten was early that morning, and I was famished and felt a little lightheaded.

We went into the house, which had been left unlocked, and Angel was standing by the couch holding her gun. Paco had his automatic in his waistband and he was stacking kindling in the fireplace. Trudy and Howard sat on the couch side by side with their hands on their knees. They glanced up when we came in, then glanced away.

Soldier shook out his umbrella on the living room floor and snapped it shut so briskly we all jumped. He smiled and propped the umbrella against the door frame.

Angel waved me and Leonard over to the couch, made us sit with Trudy and Howard. It was a tight fit. Me, Leonard, Trudy and Howard, the four dumb assholes.

Angel leaned on the wall next to the fireplace, held her gun against her thigh and watched us. Her eyes were dark and clueless.

“Look around,” Soldier told Angel. “Paco, you watch things. I’m going to find the head.” He went in search of the bathroom and Angel went out the back way.

Paco pulled the automatic out of his pants as if the act were tiring, stood by the couch and hardly looked at us at all.

I said softly to Paco, “Guess this is what you meant by a truck going downhill.”

“Guess so,” he said.

“You should have robbed the World Savers,” Leonard said. “Fat boy would still be with us if you’d done that.”

“I didn’t want that to happen,” Paco said. “But what happens happens. Soldier’s got some possibilities for me. I’m willing to gamble for the bigger score. I robbed these fools I’d have that money and that’s it.”

“You could have set your own deals,” I said.

“Soldier, he’s got better connections. He’s done some big deals.”

“Drugs?” Leonard said.

“Drugs,” Paco said.

“But the guy’s crazy,” I said. “He may have some connections, but he’s not firing on all cylinders. He thinks he’s some kind of gangster.”

“He is … and he’s fucked in the head. I don’t like him any, but I’ve seen the kind of dough he gets. I invest my part here, I could make millions, then I’m out of the shit for good. I’ll buy me a face and a life.”

“You don’t have to do this,” I said.

“Think I don’t know that?” Paco said. “I throw in with you, what do I get? Your gratitude? I can’t buy a thing with that. Guy like me, record I got, way I look. This is the end of the line, and I’m going to throw the dice for the big one this one last time.”

Soldier came back.

“Got a slow flush in there, nigger. Water pressure’s down.”

Angel came in the front door.

“How’s things?” Soldier asked her.

She nodded.

Paco returned the automatic to the front of his pants and placed a couple of logs on the kindling and lit the pile with one of the big matches. It smoked a little, began to catch. “I’m going to light the heaters,” he said, and he went about the house doing just that. When he came back into the room he returned to the fireplace and poked another log into the flames.

Soldier watched him, pushed his hat back on his head and let his right hand rest on the hilt of the automatic jammed into the front of his pants. His face still had that unhealthy sheen of sweat. He worked his tongue around inside his bottom lip and said, “You going to make some sandwiches next, Paco? Get cozy, maybe have a little picnic?”

Paco turned and said, “Look here, Soldier, don’t give me a hard time. I’m sick to death of being cold. And I ought to make a sandwich. We could all use a sandwich. None of us have eaten.”

"You got to think about this kind of shit ahead of time. Me and Angel we ate, didn't we, Angel?"

Angel nodded.

"When was it, right at noon, when you're supposed to eat? Had some sandwiches. What was it we had, Angel?"

"Bologna."

"Yeah, bologna. Listen here, now, we get through with this little deal, I'll buy you a steak. Hey, I'll even buy these shits a steak. Okay? Hey, you, the dick, what is it? Harry?"

"Howard," Angel said.

"Come on, let's go do some digging," Soldier said. "Hell, all of you come. I'm going out in the shit, you're all going. We need a shovel for this?"

"Yes," Howard said. "It's in the barn."

"Maybe you and the girlie drew a little treasure map. Something with an *X* on it, you know. Says Dig Here. You do that, Howard, draw a little treasure map?"

"We dig up the money, you'll let us go?" Howard said.

Soldier spread his hands. "Hey, you don't show me the money, you got no luck. I see some money, I can get happy. Nice things might happen. Let's go."

We went out to the barn. The dogs barked at us as we went by their pens. "Tell 'em to shut up," Soldier said, "or I'll blow their fucking heads off. I hate dogs."

"Quiet," Leonard said. "Hush down."

The dogs softened their barks, and we went inside the barn through the side door. It was only slightly warmer inside than out. Soldier leaned on Trudy's Volkswagen and breathed out a cloud of vapor. "Up north they heat barns. Okay, whatcher name, what's the scoop on the money?"

"We buried it here in the barn," Howard said.

Soldier folded up his umbrella neatly and put it on top of Trudy's car. He said, "Didn't want to be cold while you were digging, that it? Get the shovel."

"It won't do any good," Trudy said.

"Yeah," Soldier said. "Tell you what, cunt. Shut up! Angel, she says another word, you fix her nose a little.”

Angel nodded.

Howard got the shovel. He went around front of the Volkswagen and began to dig.

“Barns in the north,” Soldier said, “they got floors. Maybe you niggers and white trash should go on and do it right. Forget the fucking walls too.”

Howard stopped digging, got down on his hands and knees, moved his fingers in the dirt. He looked up at Soldier. “It’s … not here.”

I thought immediately of last night and Trudy’s second walk, the clay and gravel on her pants and boots. She had moved the money somewhere near the creek. She may have hardened in her dedication, but her final trust of men hadn’t changed. She was for damn sure the one on the steed now.

I looked at Trudy. She was staring straight ahead. Howard was looking up at her with eyes like a kicked puppy. She’d done it to him again.

“I see,” Soldier said. He said to Angel, “It’s gone, honey, whatda you think?”

Angel shrugged.

Soldier pulled his automatic out of his waistband, then put it back. He took off his hat and ran his hand through his hair. He put the hat back on and took a small packet of Kleenex out of his windbreaker pocket, carefully peeled it open, and pulled one out. He returned the packet to his pocket and used the Kleenex to clean his glasses. He put his glasses on again and dabbed his face with the Kleenex.

“Okay,” he said. “The money isn’t there.” He tossed the used Kleenex on the ground. “Howard, give me the shovel.”

Howard was still squatting by the hole, trying to sort things out. He used the shovel to help himself up, gave it to Soldier.

Soldier said, “Thanks, Howard. Stand over there, will you? About there.” He looked at the hole, looked at Howard. “You’re sure you dug deep enough?”

Howard nodded.

Soldier got a good grip on the shovel near the top of the handle and swung it around smoothly and caught Howard above the ear with the back of the shovel blade. Howard's head rang as if it were hollow. He fell out on his back and didn't move. Soldier put the blade of the shovel against Howard's neck, raised his foot to stomp it into him.

Trudy yelled, “Leave him alone! I took the money and hid it, you cretin! You rotten sonofabitch! Leave him alone!”

24

Soldier took the shovel from Howard's throat and flung it aside. It went by me, missing my head by about a foot.

"Goddammit, Paco," Soldier said. "You said this would be an easy score. Just wear our leotards, dance in and take the money. This hasn't been easy. This is boring. This is bullshit!"

"Trudy," Paco said. "Give us the money. We'll let you go if you do. There's no other way."

"You lying double-crossing shit," Trudy said.

"That's me," Paco said. "Now give us the money. It'll only be hard for you if you don't."

"It damn sure will," Soldier said.

"I'm talking here," Paco said. "You're not the only one's killed somebody, you know."

"Oh," Soldier said, "listen to you. The goddamn creature from hell, and now you're talking some orders. Don't you forget, freak. I'm the one gives the orders."

They stared at one another for a hard moment. Paco had his automatic in his fist and Soldier's was still in his pants. He had his hand resting on it.

"This is some shit, Paco," Soldier said. "You and me trying to showdown on one another. We're partners. Right, huh? Right?"

"Close enough," Paco said. His voice was firm but I could see his legs were vibrating slightly.

"Let's don't say some things we'll regret," Soldier said. "Let's go on to the house, talk a little. Trudy here, she'll see to reason. Won't you, Trudy?"

"I'm not telling you where the money is," Trudy said.

"All right," Soldier said. "You're not telling. Not now. Things can change, though. You, Happy Man. You and the nigger. Get what's his name, Howie, Howard, whatever the fuck. Carry him to the house.”

We put Howard on the couch and Trudy and Paco took chairs and me and Leonard sat on the brick hearth before the fire. Angel stood in front of us with her gun. She seemed as natural as part of the furniture.

Soldier sat at the kitchen table and called out to us. “Maybe Paco’s right. We all get a little something to eat, we’ll feel better. More cooperative, you know. He awake?”

Angel went over to the couch and turned Howard’s head with her hand. I could see a knot the size of an orange at the front of his ear and the middle of the knot was cut and oozing blood.

“No?” Soldier said. “Well, we can save him a little something for later. Paco, what say you make the sandwiches? Am I bossing again, huh?”

“I’ll do it,” Paco said.

He did. We had sandwiches made of leftover meatloaf. I don’t really remember eating it, which, considering Leonard’s meatloaf, is no loss, but I certainly needed it. I felt a small measure of strength return.

“Everybody eaten now?” Soldier said. “All right. We got that out of the way. We’re all feeling less grumpy, am I right? Doody, come over here and see me.”

“Trudy,” Angel said.

“Trudy, then, whatever. Just get over here.”

“I’m not telling you where the money is.”

“Come here anyway. Angel, give her some help.”

Angel pulled Trudy to her feet, pushed her toward the kitchen table. Trudy went over and sat in the chair across from Soldier.

Soldier smiled at her. “Not still hungry, are you? Need a glass of water? No. Good. Now listen here. What we got is a simple problem, but you’re making it into one of those whatya call its … Angel, help me out here.”

“Dilemmas.”

“Yeah. One of them. It’s really a lot more simple than that. You give me the money, and we go away. You don’t give me the money, I shoot you. And all your friends too. The nigger and Happy. All of you end up like the fat boy back at the Apache. Brains on the wall. It's not a good way, Trudy."

"You're going to kill us anyway," Trudy said.

"No. No. I'm going to let you go. I'll take the money, get long gone, and hey, next day you're back to whatever you were doing before we came together here."

"I tell you where the money is, you'll kill us," Trudy said. "And if you're going to kill us anyway, I'm not going to tell you where it is. If I'm going to die, it's knowing you haven't got the money."

"That's tough, Trudy. You're a hard little cunt, I give you that. You seen a man's brains blown out and one get it with a shovel, and you're still talking to me like we got some negotiations here. Last time you and, what's his name, Howie, Henry …"

"Howard," Angel said.

"Yeah, him. Two of you didn't do so good, you know? I mean, you got no guns. You got nothing."

"And you don't have the money," Trudy said. "That money was for an idea, an important one—"

Soldier made a fiddling motion with his left arm and right hand. His lips drooped at the corners and pursed.

"—and you just want it to spend."

"You think all I want is to spend this money? Any fool can spend money. Buy a gallon of milk, a pound of butter, new economy car. Trip to Tahoe. Bullshit. There's spending, then there's spending. I'm a regular goddamned cona … What am I saying here, Angel?"

"Connoisseur."

"That. You see, baby, I've made more money in a day than you got hid out there. This bit of shit, four hundred thousand or so, that's nothing. But this is supposed to be an easy score, see, and you're making it not so easy, and I'm getting hardheaded about it.

It's the principle of the thing now. How do you think I'm going to feel about myself I let this go? I said I was going to get the money, and I'm going to get the money. Takes a little time, it takes a little time. But if it takes time, it's going to seem a hell of a lot longer to you, Doody. Hear me? And in the end, no matter what, I'm going to get the money."

"Not if I don't tell you," Trudy said.

"You'll tell me. Look, here's what I'll do. To show I'm no hard guy." He pulled out the five thousand Howard had given him and put it on the table. "I give this back. Yours. Not to split with anyone else. All yours. Buy you a little something nice, new dress. Get your hair done. Whatever. Your money. All you got to do is tell me where the main pile is. You give me the big wad, I let you and everyone else go. The nigger too. And you make a little change. And I tell you, I'm in a good mood when I get the money, I might toss in a little bonus for everybody. Whatda you say? We got a deal?"

"Go fuck yourself."

Soldier's sweaty face went red. "Have it your way."

He got up and walked around the table. Put his hands on the back of Trudy's chair, bent so that his chin touched the top of her head. My muscles bunched in the center of my back like a knot being tied.

"You're sure?" he said.

"I'm as sure as I've ever been," Trudy said.

Soldier straightened up, looked around the kitchen. He went over to the cabinet Leonard was building and got the hammer, took one of the long nails from the paper bag. He went back to his chair at the table, said, "Angel. Can you come over here a moment? I'm going to need your help."

"Soldier," Paco said. "Don't."

"Paco," Soldier said, "I've let you fuck with me a lot. Don't think my good humor's going to hold out forever. There's money and I want it. You want it, don't you? Want what I can do for you?"

Paco paused.

"Well?" Soldier said.

"Yeah," Paco said, and he was barely audible.

"Then," Soldier said, "we've got to get this show on the road." He took off his hat and tossed it in the corner. "Angel, take hold of her left hand."

25

I had only thought I had been helpless before. I could see what was coming and I wanted to stop it, wanted to do something heroic like leap over the couch and go for Soldier and break his neck. I had the ability to break his neck, but I had no reason to believe I could reach him. Paco might not want things to be like they were, but he had cast his lot, and would shoot me before I had gone six feet. And if he didn't, there was Angel. She had her gun in the waist of her jogging pants, but she was far enough away she could draw and fire. And then there was Soldier.

If I died, that left Leonard and Howard and Trudy against this bunch, and Trudy wasn't going to be worth much in a moment. Howard was out of it. I had to bide my time.

I could tell them I knew the money was along the creek, but even so, I didn't know where. Bottom line was I couldn't lead them straight to it, and I couldn't depend on luck. And even if they got the money, Trudy was right. Soldier was going to kill us.

"Open your hand and put it on the table," Soldier told Trudy.

Trudy didn't move. She sat with her hands in her lap staring straight ahead.

Angel took hold of Trudy's hand. Trudy made a fist. Angel slapped her. Trudy let out a cry. Angel opened Trudy's hand with both of hers and pushed it flat against the table, palm down, and held her by the wrist.

"Do it, you pig," Trudy said. "Do it!"

Soldier put the nail against the back of Trudy's hand and the hammer came down quick and the nail went through and Trudy screamed and the table rocked. Her fingers thrashed like heated caterpillars.

Angel let go of Trudy's hand and stepped back from the table. She turned to look out the kitchen window, as if distracted by a bird.

“Now,” Soldier said. “The money. Or the other hand.”

Trudy opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

“That’s all right,” Soldier said. “Rest a little. You’ll get your voice back. But you don’t tell me about that money, it’s the other hand. That don’t work, we got to do a tit.”

I had stood up when the hammer came down, but there was nowhere to go and nothing to do that wouldn’t get me killed.

“Sit down,” Paco said.

I sat down. I felt small in my clothes. I could see the side of Trudy’s face. Her eyelid was fluttering rapidly. Soldier said, “That had been me, I think I’d have passed out. You got balls on you, sister. I give you that. But hey, this has got to hurt. Am I right? Let’s stop this unpleasantness. I want you to stop being obstrap, ob … What am I going for here, Angel?”

“Obstreperous.”

“There you go. Obstreperous. Where’s the money?”

Trudy’s voice was a rasp, but the words were clear. “Eat shit.”

Soldier leaned over the table and slapped her. She fell back out of the chair and the table turned over and the edge of it hit her in the neck. The fall stretched her hand to the limit the nail would allow. She lay there and made little sobbing noises while the five thousand dollars fluttered all over like a shattered head of lettuce.

In that instant I wanted her to tell what she knew. Let them have the money and shoot us, get it over with, and in that same instant my survival instincts rose up in me and I knew I had maybe one card to play, and I had to play it now or fold and count the lot of us out.

“I know where the money is,” I said.

“What?” Soldier said. “You, Happy Guy. What’s that?”

“I know where the money is.”

“He’s lying,” Paco said. “He never left this house. He wouldn’t know where she buried it. If he did, he wouldn’t have let her go through with this. He’s stalling.”

Leonard was watching Paco like a dog watched a favorite bone. All right, Paco was Leonard’s. I’d count on that.

That left Angel and Soldier.

"It just came to me where it is," I said. "I remember when she came in, what she had on her shoes."

"Shoes?" Soldier said. "We're talking shoes? I'm talking money, I don't know from shoes, Mr. Happy. Money, the moola, the green."

"I know where the money is because of her shoes."

"I see," Soldier said. "One of those clue things, huh?"

"Something like that," I said. "Give me a shovel, and I'll give you the money."

"Hey, there we are," Soldier said. "Angel. He's going to give us the money. Hear that?"

Angel nodded.

"You're all right, Happy. I could get to like you."

"I don't want to like you," I said. "I want to get this over with. I give you the money, and you let us go."

"Have I ever said different?" Soldier said. "This's the deal I been trying to shake all day. Give me the money, I let you go. That's what I been saying, right? That's right, isn't it Angel?"

"That's right," Angel said.

"Let's go, Happy," Soldier said, "you and me."

"All of us," I said.

"All of us?" Soldier said. "You're telling me, all of us? Everybody's a boss here. I mean, I'm supposed to be the boss, and I got no say."

"I want Trudy doctored," I said. "I want her with us. I don't want to leave her with Angel. Angel likes what she does too much."

"We'll leave her with Paco."

"No."

"Now you're trying to negotiate. You see where this gets you. A nail in the hand. Lying on the floor."

"My way, in twenty, thirty minutes, you'll have the money," I said. "Your way could go on all day."

"If you're tough as she is," Soldier said.

"I don't think I am," I said. "But I might be tough enough to last for a while. Longer than twenty or thirty minutes."

The sweat on Soldier's face looked like a thick coating of Vaseline. He wrinkled his brows and nodded.

"You got a point on the time thing, Happy Man. Not a good one, but a point. But hey, I'm sick of dicking around. I want to … What is it when you want to speed things up, Angel?"

"Expedite."

"Expedite. That'll do. So, deal."

Soldier squatted behind the over-turned table, took the hammer, and hit the point of the nail hard. Trudy let out a yelp and bent at the waist and almost sat up before falling back down. The head of the big nail poked out of the back of her hand, but it was still partially in the table.

Angel got hold of Trudy's wrist, jerked hard and the nail came out of the table and the head of it caught on the back of Trudy's hand. Angel grabbed the nail from the bottom and shoved it through most of the way, then caught the head of it between two fingers, yanked it free and tossed it on the floor. She let go of Trudy's wrist and put the overturned chair upright and sat Trudy in it. Trudy was as white as plaster.

"Get the monkey blood, tie a rag around her hand, whatever you want," Soldier said. "Let's get this over with."

26

Angel brought some alcohol from Leonard’s medicine cabinet, tore up a pillowcase, and let me dress Trudy’s hand at the kitchen sink. Trudy was still white and a little wobbly and she flinched when I poured the alcohol on her hand, but not much. After being nailed to a table, alcohol was a treat.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“I made my own choices,” she said. “You don’t know where the money is, do you, Hap?”

I didn’t answer.

“If you do, don’t tell them. They’re going to kill us anyway. Let’s don’t give them the satisfaction of the money. Scum like this, they’ll buy drugs, sell them to kids if they can make a dime.”

“Hey,” Soldier said. “Quit the debate. Happy Man’s giving me the money. And I tell you, it’s not so bad a kid or two’s got some dope, way things are. Little dope’s better than some things. Let’s roll.”

I wrapped the strips of pillowcase tight around her hand. Blood spotted through it in a matter of seconds, but it was the best I could do.

“Everybody out into the great outdoors,” Soldier said. He went over to the couch to prod Howard with the barrel of his automatic, but Howard didn’t move. Soldier bent and put his head to Howard’s chest. “This one’s checked out. Shit, I hit guys harder than that before and they didn’t die.”

“You sonofabitch,” Trudy said. “You sorry sonofabitch.”

“You hadn’t dug up the money and moved it on old Howard, he’d be with us today,” Soldier said. “But no, you got to be the smart bitch. Then you got to get a nail through your hand for nothing, ’cause old Happy Man here is going to lead me to the dough anyway.”

"He doesn't know where it is," Trudy said.

"Yes, I do," I said. "I figured it out."

"You better have," Soldier said, "or it's going to sound like the Fourth of July around here for about a minute. Let's go."

Soldier got his umbrella and put his hat on. I put an arm around Trudy, and Soldier waved Leonard in close to us and the three of us led out, Paco, Angel, and Soldier close behind.

Outside, the blowing rain and sleet had stopped, but it was cold and wet and there was the sound of thunder. I bent over and kissed Trudy next to her ear, whispered, "Just follow my lead."

"No talking," Soldier said. "You get to talking, I get nervous. I like to do the talking."

I walked straight to the barn. When we were inside, I let go of Trudy and she wobbled, but Leonard stepped in and held her up. I went over and got the shovel where Soldier had tossed it.

I started outside again.

"It's not in here?" Soldier said. "We got to go back out in that shit?"

I didn't say anything. I went out and Leonard followed, helping Trudy. The armed trio followed us.

I went straight to Switch's pen, and when Leonard saw where I was going, he picked up his speed slightly. I stopped in front of the pen, and Switch came out of his house and walked cautiously toward me.

"You all right now?" Leonard said to Trudy.

"I'm all right," she said. "I can stand just fine."

Leonard let go of her and came over to the dog pen and said, "Switch, ol' buddy."

Switch came over and Leonard looked at me out of the corner of his eye. I knew then he understood what I was up to.

"What's with stopping to pet the mutt?" Soldier said. "You on vacation here?"

"The money's here," I said. "One of these pens. I don't know which one, but one. When she came back that night, the second time, she had dog shit on her shoes. This is the most likely place for her to get it. I think she buried it in one of these pens."

“Think?” Soldier said.

“You can just about count on it,” I said.

“You got to count on it,” Soldier said. “Paco, what you think?”

“Could be,” Paco said. “Probably is.”

“Angel?” Soldier said.

Angel shrugged.

“What am I asking you for?” Soldier said. “You got your three squares, one of those protein milkshakes, some barbells, you’re happy, aren’t you?”

Angel’s expression didn’t change.

“You could be one of those things,” Soldier said. “What is it I’m trying to say here, Angel? Like a robot kind of.”

“Android,” she said.

“Yeah, one of them. You know, sometimes you give me the willies.”

I opened the dog pen and reached in and got hold of Switch’s collar and said, “Good dog.” I pulled him out. I could feel his muscles bunching at the smell of all these strangers.

“Whatda you doing?” Soldier said.

“Getting him out of the way so I can dig,” I said. “Leonard, hold him.”

Leonard reached over and held him and took a step backwards and pulled the dog after him, stuck out his free hand and touched Soldier’s shoulder and said, “Ow!”

It was all Switch needed, thinking Leonard was hurt. He twisted in Leonard’s grip and Leonard let go and Switch leapt straight into Soldier and Soldier dropped his umbrella and threw up his arm. The dog had him hard as a mallet, teeth flashing.

I had already started toward the group with the shovel cocked, and when Switch hit Soldier and Soldier yelled, Angel and Paco turned their heads, and I brought the shovel around with all my might and caught Angel on the side of the neck with the edge of it and it was like hitting a concrete piling. She went down on one knee and her gun arm dropped to her side and her neck split open and lashed a band of blood into the cold air and rain.

Leonard stepped behind Soldier and the dog, pivoted on his left foot and spun around, fast, and his right leg went up, and at the same instant Paco raised his gun and leveled it, Leonard's foot caught him in the back of the head, low, and Paco snapped forward and the gun went off but didn't hit anyone. Next instant Paco was face down on the ground with his butt humping like a worm trying to crawl.

Leonard's heel kick had broken Paco's neck.

Switch had Soldier down and his teeth buried in Soldier's arm. He was dragging him backwards on the muddy ground, gnawing as he went, tearing jacket and shirt and meat beneath.

I brought the shovel around again and hit Angel solidly on top of her head and she dropped her gun and went down on her hands as if to do a push-up. I started to go for her gun but Soldier managed to put his automatic to Switch's head and pull the trigger. Switch jerked, then was on the ground thrashing. Soldier was getting up on one knee now, his hat was gone and his glasses dangled from one ear.

He gritted his teeth, lifted the .45, and pointed it at Trudy.

Trudy hadn't moved through all of this, but I was moving. I grabbed her around the waist, jerked her to the side and the bullet went by us. As I turned, I saw Leonard sprint behind the dog pens toward the creek and saw Angel scramble for her gun. I got hold of Trudy like she was a sack of potatoes and ran zigzag toward the creek.

Trudy was too much for me and I dropped her. There was a sudden sensation as if someone punched me in the right side with the end of a fence post. I went down on one knee and yelled, "Run!" Then I was up again, and Trudy was already moving, long legs flying. She went over the creekbank and into the water just ahead of me. There was another snap of gunfire, then I was in the creek right behind Trudy, splashing water, running for all I was worth. The brush on the sides of the bank grew thicker as we headed into the greater woods.

Back toward the house I heard several shots and a dog yelp and Soldier yelling. I was surprised they weren't on us right away, and wondered if they had gone after Leonard.

As I ran, pain crawled inside me looking for a place to live.I felt as if my very soul were easing out of me, falling into the water, washing away.

But when I looked down, I saw what was oozing out of me into the water was not my soul.

It was blood.

27

I wasn't exactly making the best time in the world, and Trudy wasn't much of a runner to begin with. I could hear Angel and Soldier thrashing through the water behind us. They sounded some distance back, but they were gaining rapidly. Angel had the constitution of a horse and a head like an iron skillet. Soldier had popped poor old Howard half as hard and only once, and he hadn't survived.

I caught up with Trudy and grabbed her by the elbow and pointed to the bank. We climbed out of the water and crawled into a mess of leafless brambles and through that and into a grove of pines and sweetgums.

We hadn't gone far, when I had to sit down. I found a sweetgum and put my back against that and eased myself to my ass. Trudy, breathing heavily, squatted beside me and looked at my side. My coat was bloody and I could feel the blood cooling and sticking my shirt to my skin.

"Oh, Hap," Trudy said.

I put a finger to my lips. I could hear Soldier and Angel splashing water in the creek. They went past us and kept splashing.

When I thought they were reasonable out of the way, I spoke softly. "Your hand. How is it?"

"Numb," she said. "Mostly it's shock. But that's passing some.All things considered, I'm all right."

"Well, I'm not. Help me up."

She got her good hand under my arm and I pushed up and leaned on her a minute. "We got to make the Robin Hood Tree."

"What?"

"Trust me."

It wasn't far from where we were, but it felt like a mile. My side had little feeling in it at first, but now it was as if someone had heated up a jack handle and was sticking it into me, stirring it around.

We went through deeper woods and promptly broke into a clearing, and there in its center was the massive oak that Leonard and I called the Robin Hood Tree. Sitting down, his back against it, was Leonard.

We walked up to him and he opened his eyes and looked at us. "If you'd been Angel or that other geek, I'd be dead."

"You're hit?"

"Caught me in the back, low, to the right. Came out the side of my leg here." He touched his right thigh gently. "Bone turned the slug, I guess. It was Angel shot me. Bitch is good. I was well on the run, ahead of you two, going into the woods along the creek. Thought I had it made."

I squatted down beside him, wiped cold sweat off his forehead with my fingers, rubbed it on my pants. "It'll be all right, Leonard."

"Damn right it will," he said. "I been worse … Shit, man, you're hit too."

"High in the side, came out the front here," I said. "I'm scared to look, but—"

"You been worse," Leonard said.

"Right."

"Trudy," Leonard said, "you've had yourself quite a time playing revolutionary, haven't you?"

"I believe what I believe," she said. "None of this changes anything."

"This," Leonard said, "isn't over. But I got to hand it to you, had it been me and Soldier had brought out that hammer, I'd have sang like a parakeet."

A freezing rain came slanting through the trees from the north and hit the clearing, then the oak and us.

"We stay here, we'll freeze," I said.

"Can't we go through the woods?" Trudy said. "It's got to stop somewhere."

"It stops, all right," I said. "Several miles later. As cold and close to dark as it is, I don't think me and Leonard could make it with these wounds."

"Trudy maybe could make it," Leonard said. "Get some help."

"I don't know the woods," Trudy said. "I'd be going in circles before I was out of sight of this tree."

"Doubt we'd survive till you got back anyway," I said. "If Soldier and Angel didn't find us, we'd most likely freeze or bleed to death. We can go wide to the main road, or back to the house. Chance Soldier and Angel being gone right now. Get Leonard's car and haul out."

"It's got to be that for me," Leonard said. "I go too far in any direction, maybe even back to the house, and I'll be growing grass over me come spring."

"We might wait them out," Trudy said.

"We'd be icicles first," Leonard said. "And besides, I got a rifle in the trunk of the car, a target pistol in the house. They could be some insurance."

"Then it's settled," I said.

"Hap, break me off a limb," Leonard said. "Got to have a crutch."

I had to go easy, but I walked until I came to a sweetgum at the edge of the clearing, got hold of a two-inch limb and pulled on it. I felt as if my guts were being wrenched out, but I kept at it until I heard it crack, then I swung on it until I got it so I could twist it off. It had a couple of whispy limbs on it, and I managed to break those off underfoot. It wasn't going to make a comfortable crutch, but by hooking it in the crook of his arm, it might do. It had a kind of point on the end too, where I had twisted it off, and I thought that would be good, something he could push into the ground.

Trudy helped me get Leonard up. He got the stick positioned and tried it and it worked well enough.

"Don't wait on me," he said. "One of us has got to get back to the house and the car, get some help."

"It's all or nothing," Trudy said.

28

We eased forward, wide of the creek, broke through the woods and out into the clearing where the house was visible through the ever-thickening slants of icy rain. To make matters worse, the wind had picked up and was driving the rain against us as if it were frozen needles. I felt feverish, and as if something important had broken inside me. Everything was a little surreal. I was still losing blood.

We huddled together, me and Trudy on either side of Leonard, helping him along. He looked like something for a pine box and six feet of dirt.

I thought about Soldier and Angel, realized that if they had come back by the creek, they could already be at the house, waiting. But if we could get to the car and get it started … That was thinking too far ahead.

Keep walking. One foot in front of the other and this fever is the heat of the sun and it's mid-July and the fish are biting and the grass is going brown and the trees are wilting like overworked washerwomen. Yes sir, it's not cold, it's hot, it's hot, gimmea left. Left. Adaleft, left, left, adaleft, left, had a good home but I left, left. Hell, maybe I shouldn't have fought the draft. I had the march down. Then I realized I was talking out loud, and I shut up and zeroed in on the dog pens and made for them, tried not to think about Soldier and Angel or that they might be waiting for us to come into range so they could spray the place with our brains. It would be quicker and better than dying slowly in the woods from the wet cold.

Next thing I knew we were at the dog pens, and I understood why we had gotten as much of a head start on them as we had, saw what all that shooting we heard was about. Leonard's dogs. In his fury, Soldier had killed them all.

"That motherfucker," Leonard said. "I ever get the chance, half the chance, he's a dead cocksucker. Dead."

Paco lay where we had left him. He was face down, on his knees, his head bent under him, as if folded. That had been some kick. His false teeth lay over in the mud near Soldier's open umbrella, mashed porkpie and the shovel. Trudy turned Paco over to see if his gun was still under him, but Soldier, though stupid, wasn't that stupid.

"I wasn't on this stick," Leonard said, "I'd go over and kick that fucker till he came back to life."

"Go straight for your car," I said.

We did. The car was parked at the side of the house, near the front porch, where it had been left when brought out by the Ice Birds, as Leonard called them.

Leonard worked the keys out of his pants pocket and Trudy opened the car door and Leonard slid in and tried to start it. Nothing. It didn't even click.

I went around and opened the hood. Doing it made me feel as if my intestines were falling out of me, but when I looked inside, I knew our problem wasn't the weather, and I understood Soldier's and Angel's delay in pursuing us even better. They had taken the distributor cap. I limped over to the mini-van and looked under its hood. Same thing. And the Lincoln. And the Volvo. I thought about checking the Volkswagen in the barn, but I couldn't believe they'd leave it undone, not after taking time for the others. Besides, I didn't feel as if I could make it to the barn.

"The rifle," Leonard said.

I got his keys and limped around there with Trudy, and was about to unlock the trunk, when there was a crack and the back glass of Leonard's car exploded in to jagged stars. I saw Soldier and Angel coming up over the bank. They were covered in mud from the feet to the knees. Their faces were red and limb-whipped. Not happy campers. They were still a good distance away and not moving at top speed due to the cold blasting rain, but those guns gave them a lot of reach.

I whirled to run and there was another shot, and Trudy, who was slightly in front of me, threw out her hands and went face down. I grabbed her by the coat collar and started yelling for Leonard and there was another shot, small caliber, the .38. Then I was dragging Trudy toward the front porch of the house, my wound making my insides jump hard against my bones, and Leonard was limping behind. I heard him let out a grunt and I glanced back and saw him go down on one knee and saw blood flowing out of him to be washed across the cold ground in a dark wave; saw too that Soldier and Angel were coming on hard and fast.

Leonard scrambled for his stick and screamed himself up and yelled something at me that the pounding rain took away, and then I had Trudy pulled up on the porch and my shoulder took a bullet and I grunted and opened the door and hauled her halfway inside and staggered back for Leonard.

He almost ran over me before I could get off the porch. He let out a yell and I felt a punch in my chest and I grabbed him and swung him through the door and he and his stick went sliding across the floor. I fast-limped in, got hold of Trudy and pulled her all the way inside and slammed the door and locked it and Soldier hit it with his body and yelled. I thought Angel would hit it next, take it off its hinges, but that didn't happen. There was silence. And that was more frightening than the noise. I made my way across the room and into the kitchen, to the back door. I locked it just before the knob began to rattle and Soldier began to cuss. He fired two shots, quick succession, through the door about head high. I was just enough out of the way and the slugs slammed into the wall and picked a crock pot off a shelf and sent pieces of it all over.

I stumbled toward the living room, and as I passed the kitchen window, two more shots punched at the glass and threw up the curtains and slammed into the wall, but I was out of there and into the living room.

I avoided the window in the living room by getting low. I went over to Leonard. He was on the floor. Blood was running out of his leg and just below his ribs. That would be the shot that hit him on the porch and went through and got me too, but not bad. Leonard had taken most of that one. The ones in my right side and shoulder, those were the sonofabitches. The one in my lower right chest was just picking at me.

Leonard had taken off his jacket and pulled off his shirt and was tying it around his leg, trying to stop the blood from pumping out. He had never lost his stick, and took hold of it again, tight.

Soldier was at the side of the house yelling. “Come on out, it’s all over. Bam. A bullet in the head. You don’t come out, I’m going to take some time with you.”

I crawled around in front of the couch where poor dead Howard lay, and got a look at Trudy. The front of her jacket was a dark wet explosion where the bullet had come out. Viscera poked through the hole in the jacket. My face explained things to Leonard.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Not a thing you can do.”

I tried using my hand to close her eyes but I couldn’t get her lids to go down. It seemed very important that her eyes close so I wouldn’t have to look at them, but the lids just wouldn’t do it.

Two shots whizzed through the living room window and struck the fireplace mantel and ricocheted into something I couldn’t identify. Arctic rain came through and hit my face and mixed with the tears on my cheeks. I found it almost pleasant.

“You with me, Hap?” Leonard said.

“Yeah,” I said, but I wasn’t so sure. It was as if my center of gravity had shifted.

“One time,” Soldier yelled, “I caught me this nigger trying to do me on a drug deal. I took him out and nailed his balls to a stump and left him there. With a sharp knife. Hear me in there, nigger?”

“Just a couple of licks on him with this,” Leonard said, shaking the stick. “That’s all I ask.”

“The target pistol?” I said.

“In the nightstand by the bed. Not loaded. Shells are there in a box … Hell, Hap. I got it bad.”

“Hang on, buddy.”

Soldier was quiet out there. Not a good sign.

“Look here, now,” I said. “I’m going to get the pistol. You been worse, right?”

“Oh yeah.”

To keep away from stray bullets, I crawled behind the couch and through the open door to the bedroom. I went like that until

I was almost to the nightstand, but I never made it. I stopped crawling when I reached a pair of jogging shoes. With Angel's feet in them.

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I looked up and there was her snubnose .38 and above it her impassive face with the right side and top of her forehead swollen all out of proportion from my shovel blows. One eye was almost closed. She looked like a Neanderthal. Behind her the bedroom window was up and the curtains flapped in the freezing wind above the bed and there were muddy footprints on the sheets.

She pulled the trigger on the .38.

It was empty.

She knew that.

Bitch.

She whipped her hand around and struck me on the side of the head with the gun, tossed it away, grabbed me by the coat and pulled me up. A network of pain went through my wounds and some new connection were found.

She kneed me in the nuts, tossed me backwards with a yell.

I hurtled through the open door and fell on my side in the living room behind the couch. Outside, I heard Soldier yell. “Angel? Angel?”

I rolled and tried to get up, but she got me by the collar and picked me up and tossed me over the couch. I rolled on my back and she leaned over the couch and grabbed Howard by his coat and crotch, and more shoved than threw him at me. He landed on his stomach across my legs.

She started around the couch making deep strides and I kicked out from under Howard and got unsteadily to my feet.

“Watch her, watch her,” Leonard yelled, as if I might decide to go take in a little TV. When she came around the couch, she kicked at Leonard, who was doing his damnedest to get up, caught him a glancing blow on the head. But he wasn’t her main target. He seemed for the most part incapacitated. And she hadn’t forgotten me and that shovel.

She reached for me and I shot out a left jab and her head went back and her nose broke open and spouted blood. I hit her again, and again. Good jabs.

She stepped in and grabbed me and whipped me up and around and I fell back on the couch. She came down on top of me and I squirmed out from under her, caught her under the arm and twisted her on her back, straddled her and hit her with a hard left-right combination. Her face was nothing but blood now.

She slammed her forearms into my sides, sending tentacles of pain into my side wound. I fell back on the floor, trying but unable to scream. Next thing I knew she was on top of me, slamming me in the face with her fists. I couldn't think, couldn't get oriented, couldn't fight back.

Then something long and dark and sharp came into view and it pushed back Angel's head and blood ran onto my face.

Leonard had rolled across the floor and shoved the broken end of his stick into her right eye.

She stood up stiffly. The stick stuck out of her face a full four feet, but it was firm in her head. She didn't take hold of it. She managed to step over me and start toward the fireplace, but got her feet tangled in Howard's legs and went face down. Most of her body landed on the couch, but her head missed and the stick in her eye hit the floor and the back of her head cocked up slightly but sharply, stayed that way.

Then there was a thrashing at the living room window. Soldier had the shovel and was using it to knock out what was left of the glass. Before I could get up, the shovel pulled out, and he kicked out the frame, stooped, and stepped inside, the .45 in front of him. Leonard, still lying on the floor, reached out and caught Soldier's ankle before his foot was firmly planted, sent him stumbling forward, but he got his feet under him again and went past Leonard and caught his foot on Trudy's outstretched arm and fell all the way this time, and when he hit I rolled and fought the explosions in my body and chopped down on his wrist with the edge of my hand. His fingers popped wide like a startled starfish, and the gun went sliding, and he crawled for it, but I got him around the neck and tried to choke him. He made it up to his knees and I went up on my knees too, and I tightened my forearm around his throat and tried to squeeze the life out of him. He pulled a knife from his pocket and flicked it open one-handed and brought it up and slashed me at the crook of my elbow, but I didn't let go, so he did it again, and this time I did.

I scuttled toward the living room window on my hands and knees, saw Leonard lying there, finally too much out of blood to move, and then I twisted and got up on one knee and Soldier was there, slashing at my face. I caught the blade in my hand and the slash went deep in my thumb and scraped on bone. I tried to get my legs under me and get up, but something had finally gone really bad inside me, and I couldn't.

Soldier jerked the blade back and cut me again that way, but I didn't feel it right then, and I dove forward and put my head between his legs and grabbed him behind the knees and popped my head up and caught him in the balls with the back of it and snatched his legs out from under him. His head hit the floor hard. Real hard. I crawled on top of him and got hold of his knife hand with my good left hand, twisted his thumb back and made him let go.

I picked up the knife and put it to his throat. All I had to do was thrust and rip. Hadn't this goddamned out-of-state racist asshole tried to kill me?

He looked at me through those pathetic glasses and I thought of this gawky, sweaty-faced bastard as a kid with a father who slapped his ear into a cauliflower and had convinced him it was for his own good and that dear old kid-beating, wife-beating dad was a good man that demanded respect. And in that same fleeting instant I remembered that I had not gone to war because I didn't want to kill needlessly for a cause I didn't believe in. And here we didn't even have a cause. Just a sad fuck-up without any hope.

I got off of him and held the knife close and said, "Roll on your stomach, Soldier, or I'll kill you."

"Easy," he said. "I got a bad dog bite here."

He rolled on his stomach. I cut his coat from the collar to the center of his back, then pulled the sleeves down so they caught at his elbows. I cut strips from his pants legs and tied his wrists. I cut the back of his pants open so I could pull them down around his knees. I took off his tennis shoes and used his shoestrings to tie his ankles. I rolled his socks up tight, lifted his head, and forced them in his mouth, just in case he might want to talk. I'd heard all of him I ever wanted to hear.

Leonard was trying to sit up. I closed the knife and put it in my pocket and helped him to a sitting position so he could lean against the front door.

"You should have killed him," Leonard said.

"I know."

"It's going to complicate things."

"I know."

"Same ole Hap."

I made a concentrated effort to rise, and had to use the edge of the couch for support, but I made it. Falling down only twice, I got to the place where the phone ought to have been, saw that it had been pulled out of the wall and tossed on the floor near the kitchen table. Soldier or Angel in their haste had made an effort to disable it, way they had the cars. I grunted and cussed on over there, took hold of it, held my heart in my mouth while I examined it. The little connection at the end of the wire was cracked from being ripped out of the wall and the phone had been thrown down hard enough to knock the back off and let the guts out, but the guts themselves appeared to be intact. Looked to me they had been in too big a hurry to do the job right. I hoped.

I shoved the phone's insides back into place and crawled over to the wall connection and snapped the clip into place and tried to hold my mouth just right while I punched 0. The operator came on the line after three rings and I had her connect me to the sheriff's office. I told them what I thought they ought to know and hung up. The phone was slick with the blood from my cut hand.

I crawled back to the door and sat up next to Leonard.

"We better come up with some story," Leonard said.

I thought awhile. I put my mouth to his ear so Soldier couldn't hear.

"That's for shit," he said.

"Got one better?"

He shook his head. “Hap, you know I told you I been worse?”

“Yeah.”

“I lied.”

“Me too,” I said.

“We gonna make it?”

“I am,” I said.

Leonard tried to laugh, but it hurt too much. He opened his hand. I took it and held it.

30

I remember coming awake on the way to the hospital in the ambulance, and there being a man from the sheriff’s office there. He was determined to have some kind of statement. I think I gave him one. After that, things got hazy, then things got white and there was this light and people bending over me, then I was out again. When I awoke it was to sunlight shining through a hospital window.

A nurse came in and spoke to me and gave me some water and sat me up in bed so I could see out the window better, and later on she came back with an orderly and a wheelchair and they got me in that and pushed me over by the window for an even better look.

I sat and looked out on the hospital lawn. The bad, wet weather was gone and the sun was out and the trees on the big lawn were moving gently in the wind. It was probably a cold wind, but certainly nothing like the way things had been. I wanted to take that as some sort of sign of good things to come, but it wasn’t long after that the doctor came in and he had a big man with him in a long black coat and another big man dressed up in hat and boots and the standard issue that the sheriffs office gives out.

The doctor was a little man with a bland face and thinning blond hair. He stood with his hands in front of him, left palm over right. He made me think of a preacher, way he stood there. He was very polite. He said, “Mr. Collins, I’m Dr. Dumas. You know, you been out three days.”

“Three days?”

“That’s right. And I got to tell you, you’re a lucky man.”

“I don’t feel so lucky,” I said.

The man from the sheriffs office took off his cowboy hat and showed me a vein-riddled bald head. He went over to the corner and leaned there. The big man in the long coat took the single chair and pulled it around so that he was straddling it. Both he and the sheriff's man had their eyes on me.

"You're lucky nonetheless. Fraction of an inch here, a fraction there, it could have made quite a difference. One bullet went in your back, just above your buttocks, about here, but it caught the fatty part and turned and came out on the right side in front of your hipbone. One in your shoulder tore some muscles, but punched on through. There was a slug lodged just under your skin, right below your sternum, slightly to the right. You weren't too bad to patch up."

"What about Leonard?" I said.

"Medical science has something to do with Mr. Pine's survival, but his constitution may be more amazing than even yours. But he won't be up and around as soon as you are. He's got some nasty internal injuries, and his leg, well, I don't know. He'll keep it, but he may not walk well on it."

"My compliments to you, Dr. Dumas."

"That's my job. These men are here to ask you a few questions," Dr. Dumas said. "I'll let them introduce themselves."

Dr. Dumas went out.

The man in the long coat said, "I'm Jack Divit." The man from the sheriffs office didn't introduce himself. He looked around the room like he was bored.

Divit said, "I'm with the FBI. Sheriff's office has a statement from you, and now that you're feeling better, we'd like one too. You don't mind going through it again, do you?"

I took a shallow breath and started telling it the way Leonard and I agreed to tell it.

"My ex-wife. Trudy Fawst. She came around and said she had a job for me and Leonard. She wanted us to recover a boat for her and some other people and if we did they'd pay us some money."

"They tell you why they wanted to recover the boat?"

"No. It didn't matter. It was a job. We recovered the boat and it had lots of money in it in watertight cannisters. They didn't want to pay us then and they took, us with them, said they'd let us go later. Turned out they were going to use the money to buy guns so they could be revolutionaries, you know. Silly idea. One of their bunch, guy named Paco, was out to make his own score and he hooked them up with a guy named Soldier, woman named Angel. There weren't any guns and Trudy didn't bring the money along, except for five thousand dollars. She said the rest was at Leonard's and we ended up going back there, only there wasn't any money and things got out of hand."

"What about this money?" the man from the sheriffs department said. "You say you saw some money, then there wasn't but the five thousand."

"I don't know. There looked to be more than five thousand. I wasn't counting. If there was more, I don't know what happened to it."

"This guy, Soldier," Divit said. "He tells a different story."

"Does he? How is old Soldier?"

"Physically, pretty good," Divit said. "But you see, he's a boy we been wanting to see for a long time. He's got a record."

"Imagine that."

"He's got some bad things to his credit. Drugs. Arms. Murder. Rape. Been busy. This Angel that was with him, she wasn't exactly for the church choir either. But still, Soldier tells it different. He says there's some money. Says it was some kind of holdup money this Howard fella knew about. Says you were all trying to score."

"I told you what I know," I said. "I don't know where the money came from originally or what they did with it. Howard claimed it was buried on Leonard's place, but Trudy, before she died, told me different."

"She told you where it was?" Divit said.

"Nope. She said it wasn't on Leonard's place. That was just a lie she told Soldier to stall. You'd seen this guy in action, you'd have lied to him too if you thought it would save you. He's a real animal. But the bottom line is she told me it was gone forever."

"What do you think she meant by that, Mr. Collins?"

"I got the impression she was trying to tell me it was destroyed. She might have been out of her head then. She'd had a nail driven through her hand, lots of shock, you know."

"Yeah," Divit said. "That shock's bad stuff. But what Soldier says, it matches some facts. And this Paco guy, he turns out to be a big-time revolutionary, head of the Mechanics. We thought he was dead since way back."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. And Soldier says this Paco told him this money was from a bank robbery some years back. Guy named McCall headlined it. Howard, he was in prison with this McCall. Lot of ties, huh? This money, the five thousand we recovered at your friend's house, it's clean money. Means it might not be stolen. Means too it might have been laundered and can't be traced. And Soldier, amount he's claiming Paco said there was, is a lot more than was robbed from that bank. Dirty business all the way around."

"I got this feeling," I said. "Soldier might tell a story."

"That occurred to me," Divit said. "Also occurred to me those bank officials might story some."

"A banker lie?"

"Yeah, who'd believe that?" Divit said. "Then you're saying you don't think we got cause to believe Soldier's story?"

"Not all of it. Sounds to me he's trying to work me and Leonard into this for vengeful purposes. You wouldn't want to take the word of a scum like Soldier over my word, would you?"

"You got a little record yourself," the man from the Sheriff's office said.

"Forget that," Divit said. "That's no kind of record."

The man from the sheriffs office didn't look offended. He got out his pocket knife and went to cleaning his nails.

Divit paused and looked me over. "Listen, Collins. Your friend, the war hero, Pine, he tells it like you tell it. I guess that's a better story than the one Soldier's telling. But if that money turns up, you'd let me know, wouldn't you?"

"You'd be the first," I said. "We going to trial for anything?"

"You don't end up in the middle of a slaughterhouse like that and not have to do a lot of talking. But you got a good case for self-defense. You'll be loose in a few days. Get you a pretty good ambulance chaser, and you'll do all right."

"Thanks."

"Don't thank me," Divit said. "Don't thank me for nothing."

Couple days later they let me limp down to Leonard's room. He was full of tubes and wires. Those bags they hang on those bars were all over the place, thick as fruit on trees. I hadn't expected him to look as bad as he did.

He had his head turned to me. "Hi," he said.

"Hi."

"You all right?"

"Good enough. I'm going home pretty quick. I don't know I've got enough insurance for all this."

"Man, I lay here and think about my dogs. About old Chub too. Got to considering, he bought the big one standing up for me. Well, maybe not me, but for an idea. I guess if he'd known Soldier was that nuts he'd shut up, but, you know, he maybe wasn't such a bad guy.... Hap, what I said about you not really being my type? Remember?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I just wanted you to know, I meant it."

I laughed.

Three days later they let me go home. I talked to Divit again, but it was a conversation not too unlike the other. He said he felt certain Soldier would get some years for a lot of things. Quite a few years. Like maybe three lifetimes. He mentioned the money again, about how if it showed up I'd keep my promise about letting him know.

I lied to him again.

I went home for a couple of days and rested, then I drove over to Leonard's. Calvin had left his spare key in the hiding spot, and I took it and went inside. All the crime scene stuff was gone and it had been cleaned up some.

Calvin had buried the dogs and nailed plywood over the busted windows. I went out to the barn and looked around. The shovel that had killed Howard and that I had used to zing Angel wasn't around. Maybe the cops called it a clue. I found a hoe, took that and limped out to the creekbank. On the way over there I noted where a lot of digging had been going on. The holes had been filled carefully and leveled off, but it didn't fool me. A country boy knows about digging and dirt, and those holes were fresh. I wondered if Divit had been here to supervise. I wondered if they had found the money. If so, I might be talking to them again and have to lie some more.

But it wasn't likely. I had an edge they didn't have. I had some idea of where it was supposed to be.

I went along the bank and found the part where the gravel had been put down. I looked around there but didn't see anyplace where she might have dug.

I guess I stayed at that for a couple of hours, looking around like that, digging a spot or two at whim, but I didn't come up with anything. I got down on the very edge of the creek and tried to think like Trudy might have thought, out here in the freezing weather with a flashlight and a shovel, trying to be quick and smart about it. I went back to the barn and took a straight path from the back door to the creekbank, walked down it to where the gravel was, then went over the edge and right up against where the water ran.

All right. Don't think about the gravel and clay except as a guide. She came here and started shining her light around. Maybe she shined it across to the other side. I looked and didn't see any dig spots, but I saw an armadillo hole in the side of the opposite bank. Roots from trees partially exposed by erosion draped over it.

I jumped the little creek and went over and looked in the hole. There was dirt not far down in the hole, so that proved the armadillo didn't live there anymore. Nothing lived there anymore. I raked back the dirt and looked inside. There were several plastic bags.

I reached in and took them out. They were those sealable bags. I stuffed my coat pockets with them, took the hoe to the barn, and went back to the house. I felt surprisingly casual. Neither the FBI nor the sheriffs department were waiting in the kitchen.

I sat down at the table and put the money on it. When I reached for one of the packets to open it, I saw the nail hole where Trudy's hand had been. I put my hand over it and centered it about where I thought the hole was.

Poor Trudy.

I opened the bags and poured out the money and counted it.There was a little over three hundred and fifty thousand. Subtract the five thousand the authorities had, and you were still short, but not much. Trudy may have rough-counted that night, or maybe Paco palmed a little. It didn't matter.

I put a hundred thousand in one bag. It was a tight fit. I got up and got a big black trash bag out from under Leonard's sink looked through the drawers till I found a big grocery bag and some package tape and scissors. I went back to the table and sat down. I put the rest of the money in the plastic bags and put all of it, excluding that one hundred thousand, into the trash bag. I folded the bag down and around the money and made a nice compact bundle. I opened the paper bag, put the trash bag in it and folded the paper bag around it, used some package tape and the scissors to make a nice parcel.

I got up and looked around until I found a black marker. I went over and wrote in big bold letters on the package, GREENPEACE. I'd have to look up the rest of the address later, but seeing it written made me feel pretty good. It wasn't what Trudy had planned to do with it, but what she had planned had ultimately been in the support of things like that. I like to think she would be proud of me. After all that talk Leonard and I had given about not giving to the seals or whales, I thought there was a certain pleasant irony in it all.

The hundred thousand was for Leonard. He'd need it when he came home. If the insurance didn't pay his hospital bills, it wouldn't do him much good, high as they are, but it could give him eating money until he could go back to work.

I put the hundred thousand in my coat pocket and stuffed the package under the couch. Not exactly ace hiding places, but I figured they'd do until I got home and could do better. And besides, it had all been laundered. Who was to say it was stolen money? How was it to be proved? Greenpeace could spend that dough good as they could anyone's.

I put on Leonard's Hank Williams album, *Greatest Hits, Volume 2*, turned it up. I got one of Leonard's 40 pipes and some spare tobacco off the fireplace mantel, packed the pipe and lit it. I dragged his rocking chair out to the front porch and sat there and puffed the pipe until I remembered why I didn't smoke. I thumped out the tobacco and continued to sit there in the cold afternoon, listening to Hank Williams, occasionally flipping the record, and feeling the cold get colder.

It came to me as I sat there that Trudy, for all her blind idealism, had at least been on the right track, heading for the right station, but she got derailed.

Me, I didn't even have a station in life anymore. It was like she said, I lived from day to day and thought it was good. But she had shown me something about heart and soul again, and I knew why it was I always went with her. At the bottom of it all, she believed that things could be better than they are. That life wasn't just a game to get through. I had believed that way once, and lost it, and that's why, in spite of myself, I had always liked her coming around, no matter what it did to me. She made me believe that human beings could really make a difference. In the end, her way of doing it was as bad or worse than those she was against, but the idealism was there.

Knowing what I knew now, I could never feel exactly the way I had. I was too experienced and too practical to go back to seeing life through rose-colored glasses, or think you could figure out life's solutions with paper and a slide rule.

But to lose my idealism, to quit believing in the ability of human beings to rise above their baser instincts, was to become old and bitter and of no service to anyone, not even myself.

Idealism was a little like Venus in the daytime. There'd been a time when I could see it. But as time went on and I needed it less and wanted to pass on the responsibility, I had lost my ability to see it, to believe it. But now I thought I might see it again if I made an effort and looked hard enough.

I went inside and flipped the record for the umpteenth time, turned it all the way up, and went back and moved the rocking chair to the yard, pulled my coat around me and looked up at the sky, tried to pick out Venus before the day gave out and it got dark.

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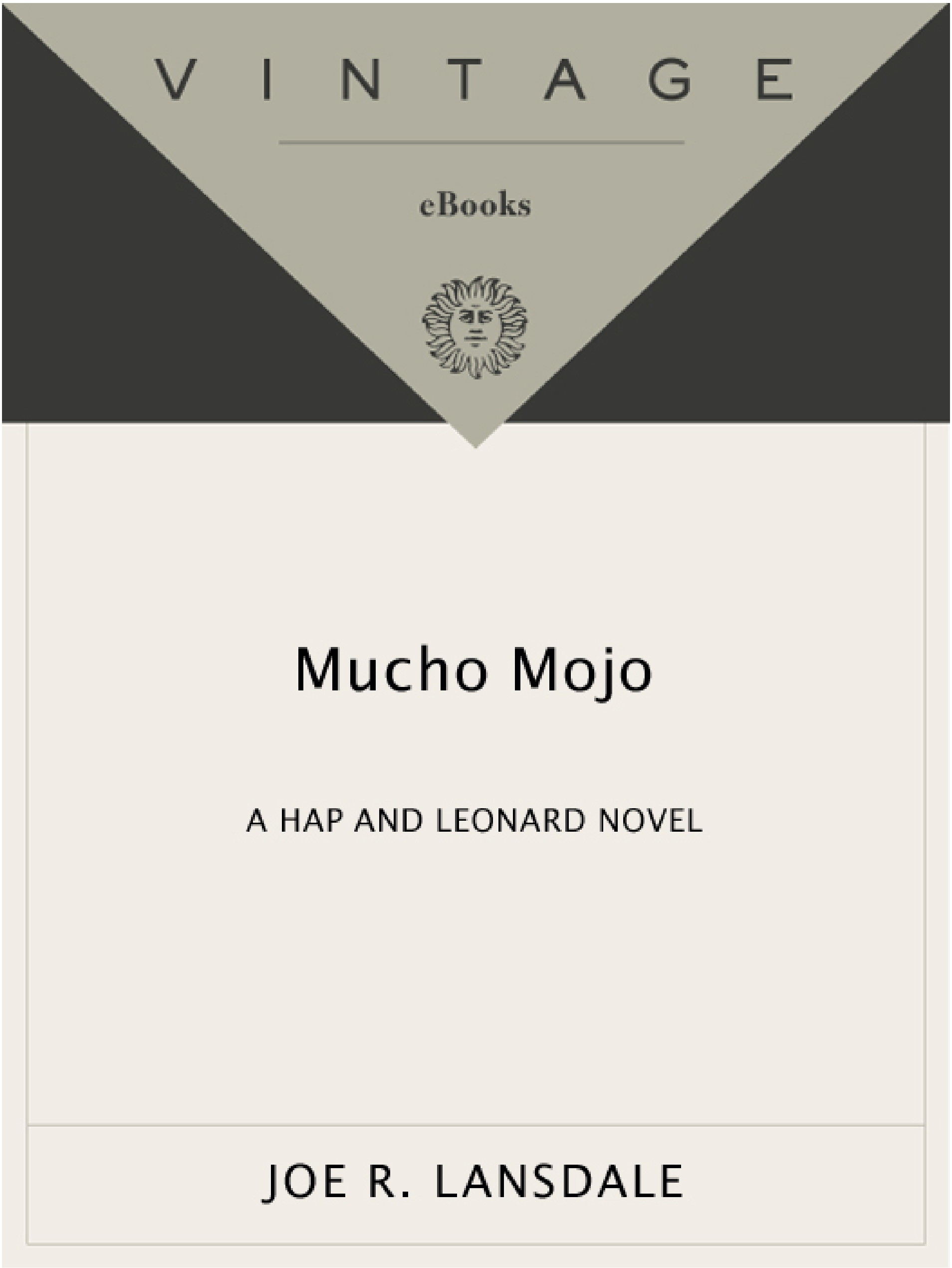
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www.joerlansdale.com

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Joe R. Lansdale

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This book is dedicated with love and
respect and the deepest devotion to
the most important person in my life.
My wife, Karen.

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It doesn’t matter whom you are paired against; your opponent is always yourself.

—*Nakamura*

1.

It was July and hot and I was putting out sticks and not thinking one whit about murder.

All the other rose-field jobs are bad, the budding, the digging, but putting out sticks, that's the job they give sinners in Hell.

You do sticks come dead of summer. Way it works is they give you this fistful of bud wood, and you take that and sigh and turn and look down the length of the field, which goes on from where you are to some place east of China, and you gird your loins, bend over, and poke those sticks in the rows a bit apart. You don't lift up if you don't have to, 'cause otherwise you'll never finish. You keep your back bent and you keep on poking, right on down that dusty row, hoping eventually it'll play out, though it never seems to, and of course that East Texas sun, which by 10:30 A.M. is like an infected blister leaking molten pus, doesn't help matters.

So I was out there playing with my sticks, thinking the usual thoughts about ice tea and sweet, willing women, when the Walking Boss came up and tapped me on the shoulder.

I thought maybe it was water break, but when I looked up he jerked a thumb toward the end of the field, said, "Hap, Leonard's here."

"He can't come to work," I said. "Not unless he can put out sticks with his cane."

"Just wants to see you," the Walking Boss said, and moved away.

I poked in the last stick from my bundle, eased my back straight, and started down the center of the long dusty row, passing the bent, sweaty backs of the others as I went.

I could see Leonard at the far end of the field, leaning on his cane. From that distance, he looked as if he were made of pipe cleaners and doll clothes. His raisin-black face was turned in my direction and a heat wave jumped off of it and vibrated in the bright light and dust from the field swirled momentarily in the wave and settled slowly.

When Leonard saw I was looking in his direction, his hand flew up like a grackle taking flight.

Vernon Lacy, my field boss, known affectionately to me as the Old Bastard though he was my age, decked out in starched white shirt, white pants, and tan pith helmet, saw me coming too. He came alongside Leonard and looked at me and made a slow and deliberate mark in his little composition book. Docking my time, of course.

When I got to the end of the row, which only took a little less time than a trek across Egypt on a dead camel, I was dust covered and tired from trudging in the soft dirt. Leonard grinned, said, "Just wanted to know if you could loan me fifty cents."

"You made me walk all the way here for fifty cents, I'm gonna see I can fit that cane up your ass."

"Let me grease up first, will you?"

Lacy looked over and said, "You're docked, Collins."

"Go to hell," I said.

Lacy swallowed and walked away and didn't look back.

"Smooth," Leonard said.

"I pride myself on diplomacy. Now tell me it isn't fifty cents you want."

"It isn't fifty cents I want."

Leonard was still grinning, but the grin shifted slightly to one side, like a boat about to take water and sink.

"What's wrong, buddy?"

"My Uncle Chester," Leonard said. "He passed."

I followed Leonard's old Buick in my pickup, stopping long enough along the way to buy some beer and ice. When we arrived at Leonard's place, we got an ice chest and filled it with the ice and the beer and carried it out to the front porch.

Leonard, like myself, didn't have air-conditioning, and the front porch was as cool a spot as we could find, unless we went down to the creek and laid in it.

We eased into the rickety porch swing and sat the ice chest between us. While Leonard moved the swing with his good leg, I popped us a couple.

“Happen today?” I asked.

“They found him today. Been dead two or three days. Heart attack. They got him at the LaBorde Funeral Home, pumped full of juice.”

Leonard sipped his beer and studied the barbed-wire fence on the opposite side of the road. “See that mockingbird on the fence post, Hap?”

“Why? Is he trying to get my attention?”

“He’s a fat one. You don’t see many that fat.”

“I wonder about that all the time, Leonard. How come mockingbirds don’t normally get fat. Thought I might write a paper on it.”

“My uncle’s favorite bird. I always thought they were ugly, but he thought they were the grandest things in the world. He used to call me his little mockingbird when I was a kid because I mocked him and everybody else. I see one, I think of him. Hokey, huh?”

I didn’t say anything. I focused my eyes on the floorboards at the edge of the porch, watched as a hot horsefly staggered on its disease-laden legs, trying to make the little bit of shade the porch roof provided. The fly faltered and stopped. Heatstroke, I figured.

“I want to go to Uncle Chester’s funeral tomorrow,” Leonard said.

“But I don’t know. I feel funny about it. He probably wouldn’t want me there.”

“From what you’ve told me about Uncle Chester, spite of the fact he disowned you when he found out you were queer—”

“Gay. We say gay now, Hap. You straights need to learn that. When we’re real drunk, we call each other fags or faggots.”

“Whatever. I’m sure, in his own way, Chester was a good guy. You loved him. It doesn’t matter what he would have wanted. What matters is what you want. He’s dead. He’s not making decisions anymore. You want to go to the funeral and tell him

’bye because of the good things you remember about him, go on.”

“Come with me.”

“Hey, I’m sorry for Uncle Chester on account of what he meant to you, but I don’t know him from brown rice. Fact is, him dying, you coming around upset, and me leaving the rose fields like that, I figure I don’t have a job anymore. He screwed up my income, so why the hell would I want to go to his funeral?”

“Because I want you to and you’re my friend and you don’t want to hurt my teeny-weeny feelings.”

This was true.

I didn’t like it, but I agreed. Going to a funeral seemed harmless enough.

2.

Funeral was the next day at three in the afternoon, so early next morning we drove to LaBorde in Leonard's car and over to J. C. Penney's.

We went there to buy suits, something neither Leonard or I had owned in years. My last suit had had a Nehru collar and a peace symbol about the size of an El Dorado hubcap on a chain a little smaller than you might need to tow a butane truck.

Leonard's last suit had been designed by the military.

Suits from Penney's didn't come with a vest and two pairs of pants anymore, least not the decent ones, and the prices were higher than I remembered. I thought perhaps we ought to go over to Kmart, see if they had something in sheen green. Something we got tired of wearing, we could use to upholster a chair.

I ended up with a dark blue suit and a light blue shirt and a dark blue tie. I bought black shoes, socks, and a belt. I tried the stuff on and looked at myself in the mirror. I thought I looked silly. Like a tall, biped pit bull in mourning.

Leonard bought a dark green Western-cut suit, a canary-yellow shirt, and a tie striped up in orange and green and yellow. Shoes he got were black with pointy toes and zippers down the side. Kind of shoes you hoped they stopped making about the time the Dave Clark Five quit making records.

"You're gonna bury Uncle Chester," I said. "Not take him on a Caribbean cruise. Show up in that, he might jump out of the box and throw a blanket over you."

"Jealousy is an ugly thing, Hap."

"You're right. I wish I looked like a head-on collision between Dolly Parton and Peter Max."

We changed back into our clothes, and I paid up because I was the only one working these days, even if it was sporadically, and because Leonard never let me forget it was my fault his leg was messed up. He'd say stuff like, "You know I got this leg messed up on account of you," then he'd pick something he wanted and I'd pay for it, because what he said was true. Wasn't for him, my funeral would have come before Uncle Chester's.

The services were in a little community on the outskirts of LaBorde, and after we went home and hung out awhile, we put the suits on and drove over in Leonard's wreck with no air-conditioning.

Time we got to the Baptist church where the funeral was being held, we had sweated up good in our new suits, and the hot wind blowing on me made my hair look as if it had been combed with a bush hog. My overall appearance was of someone who had been in a fight and lost.

I got out of the car and Leonard came around and said, "You still got the fucking tag hanging on you."

I lifted an arm and there was the tag, dangling from the suit sleeve. I felt like Minnie Pearl. Leonard got out his pocket knife and cut it off and we went inside the church.

We paraded by the open coffin, and of course, Uncle Chester hadn't missed his chance to be guest of honor. He was one ugly sonofabitch, and I figured alive he hadn't looked much better. He wasn't very tall, but he was wide, and being dead a few days before they found him hadn't helped his looks any. The mortician had only succeeded in making him look a bit like a swollen Cabbage Patch Doll.

After the eulogies and prayers and singing and people falling over the coffin and crying whether they wanted to or not, we drove out to a little cemetery in the woods and the coffin was unloaded from an ancient black hearse with a sticker on the back bumper that read BINGO FOR GOD.

Underneath a striped tent, with the hot wind blowing, we stood next to an open grave and the ceremony went on. There was a kind of thespian quality about the whole thing. The only one who seemed to be truly upset was Leonard. He wasn't saying anything, and he's too macho to cry in public, but I knew him. I saw the way his hands shook, the tilt of his mouth, the hooding of his eyes.

"It's a nice enough place to get put down," I whispered to

Leonard.

"You're dead, you're dead," Leonard said. "You told me that. It's a thing takes the edge off how you feel about your surroundings."

"Right. Fuck Uncle Chester. Let's talk fashion. You'll note no one else here looks like a black fag Roy Rogers but you."

That got a smile out of him.

During the preacher's generic marathon tribute to Uncle Chester, I spent some time looking at a pretty black woman in a short, tight black dress standing near us. She, like Leonard, was one of the few not trying out for the Academy Awards. She didn't look particularly sad, but she was solemn. Now and then she turned and looked at Leonard. I couldn't tell if he noticed. A heterosexual would have noticed if there was anything romantic in her attitude or not. It can't be helped. A heterosexual dick senses a pretty woman, no matter what the cultural and social training of its owner, and it'll always point true north. Or maybe it's south, now that I think about it.

The preacher finished up a prayer slightly longer than the complete set of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and signaled to lower the coffin.

A long lean guy with his hand on the device that lowers the coffin pushed the lever and the coffin started down, wobbled, righted itself. Someone in the audience let out a sob and went quiet. A woman in front of me, wearing a hat with everything on it but fresh fruit and a strand of barbed wire, shook and let out a wail and waved a hanky.

A moment later it was all over except for the grave diggers throwing dirt in the hole.

There was some hand-shaking and talking, and most of the crowd came over and spoke to Leonard and said how sorry they were, looked at me out of the corners of their eyes, suspicious because I was white, or maybe because they assumed I was Leonard's lover. It was bad enough they had a relative or acquaintance who was queer, but shit, looked like he was fucking a white guy.

We were invited, not with great enthusiasm, to a gathering of friends and family, but Leonard passed, and the crowd faded out.

The pretty woman in black came over and smiled at Leonard and shook his hand and said she was sorry.

“I’m Florida Grange. I was your uncle’s lawyer, Mr. Pine,” she said. “Guess I still am. You’re in the will. I’ll make it official if you’ll come by my office tomorrow. Here’s my card. And here’s the key to his house. You get that and some money.”

Leonard took the key and card and stood there looking stunned. I said, “Hello, Miss Grange, my name’s Hap Collins.”

“Hello,” she said, and shook my hand.

“You know my uncle well?” Leonard asked.

“No. Not really,” Florida Grange said, and she went away, and so did we.

3.

Uncle Chester's house was in that part of LaBorde called the black section of town by some, nigger town by others, and the East Side by all the rest.

It was a run-down section that ten years ago had been in pretty good shape because it was on the edge of the white community before the white community moved farther west and the streets were abandoned here in favor of putting maintenance where the real money and power were, amongst the fat-cat honkies.

We drove down Comanche Street and bounced in some potholes deep enough a parachute would have been appropriate, and Leonard pulled up in a driveway spotted with pea gravel and several days' worth of newspapers.

The house in front of the drive was one story, but large and formerly fine, gone to seed with peeling paint and a roof that had been cheaply repaired with tin and tar. The tin patches caught the sunlight and played hot beams over it and reflected them back against the crumbly bricks of a chimney and the limbs of a great oak that hung over one side of the roof and scratched it and gave the yard below an umbrella of dark shade. There was more tin around the bottom of the house, concealing a crawlspace.

A ten-foot, wisteria-covered post was driven in the ground on the other side of the house, and sticking out from the post were long nails, and the mouths of beer and soft drink bottles engulfed the nails, and many of the bottles looked to have been shot apart or banged apart by rocks and clubs. Glass was heaped at the bottom of the pole like discarded costume jewelry.

I'd seen a rig like that years ago in the yard of an old black carpenter. I didn't know what it was then, and I didn't know what it was now. All I could think to call it was a bottle tree.

Front of the long porch some hedges grew wild and ungroomed, like old-fashioned, Afro-style haircuts, and between the hedges some slanting stone steps met the graying boards of the porch, and standing on the boards were two black men and a young black boy.

Before we got out of the car, I said, “Relatives of yours?”

“Not that I recognize,” Leonard said.

We got out and walked up to the porch. The boy looked at us, but the men hardly noticed. The kid popped a thin rubber hose off his arm and tossed it aside, started rubbing his arm. The boy appeared confused but pleasant, as if awakening from a long, relaxed sleep.

One of the black men, a tall, muscular guy in T-shirt and slacks with a wedge of hair cut like a thin Mohawk and a hypodermic needle in his hand, said to the boy, “More candy where that come from, you got the price.”

The boy went down the steps, between me and Leonard, and out into the street. Mohawk dropped the needle onto the porch. There were a couple other needles there, along with the rubber hose.

The other black guy was wearing a light blue shower cap, an orange T-shirt and jeans, and was about the size of a Rose Parade float. He looked down from the porch at us like it tired him out. He said to Leonard, “Shit, if you ain’t the fucking bird of paradise.”

“And propped on a stick,” said Mohawk. “Who dresses you, brother? And you, white boy. You preachin’ somewhere?”

“I’m selling insurance,” I said. “You want some? Got a feeling you might need a little, come a few minutes.”

Mohawk smiled at me like I was one funny guy.

“What are you doing here?” Leonard asked.

“We’re standing on the motherfucking porch,” Parade Float said. “Whatchoo doin’ here?”

“I own the place.”

“Ah,” said Mohawk. “You must be that nutty Uncle Tom’s boy?”

“I’m Chester Pine’s nephew, that’s what you mean.”

“Well, hey, we was just doing a little business,” said Mohawk.

"Don't let your balls swell up."

"This ain't your office," Leonard said.

Mohawk smiled. "You know, you're right, but we was thinking of making it kind of an extension." He came out to the edge of the porch and pointed next door. "We live over there. That's our main office, Captain Sunshine."

I looked. It was a large run-down house on the lot next to Chester's place. A number of young black men came out on the long porch, stood and stared.

"That wasn't any measles vaccination you gave that kid," Leonard said. "How old was he? Twelve?"

"Don't know," said Parade Float. "We don't send him no birthday presents. Shit, all you know, we're free-lance doctors."

"I think you're free-lance assholes," Leonard said.

"Fuck you," Parade Float said.

"Do-gooders," Mohawk said. "Like in the movies. That's what you fucks are. Right?"

Leonard gave Mohawk a studied look. "Get off my property. Now. Otherwise, your friends next door'll be wiping you out of your big friend's ass here. Provided they can get what's left of him out of that shower cap."

"Fuck you," Parade Float said.

"I was wondering about that cap," I said. "You leave the water running? Go looking for a towel?"

"Fuck you," Parade Float said again.

"You run out of your daily word allotment," I said, "how you gonna beg us for mercy?"

"Wooo," Mohawk said. "This little talk could lead to something."

"Don't make me happy prematurely," Leonard said.

And then Leonard moved. His cane went out between Mohawk's legs, and he popped it forward, locking one of Mohawk's knees, and the move tossed Mohawk face-forward off the porch.

Leonard stepped aside and Mohawk hit the ground on his head. Sounded like it hurt.

That was my cue. As Parade Float stepped off the porch to get involved, I shot out a side kick and hit him on his stepping leg, square on the kneecap. He came down on his head too. He got both hands under him, started to rise, and I kicked him in the throat with about a third of what I had.

He rolled over on his back holding his throat, gurgling. The shower cap stayed in place. I never realized how tight those little buddies fit. Maybe it was just the light blue ones.

Leonard had Mohawk up now and had dropped his cane and was working Mohawk with a series of lefts and rights and knee lifts, and he wouldn't let him fall. Mohawk's body was jumping all over the yard, like he had a pogo stick up his ass.

"That's enough, Leonard," I said. "Your knuckles will swell."

Leonard hit Mohawk a couple more under the short ribs and didn't move in close enough to support him this time. Mohawk crumpled on the grass, made a noise like gas escaping.

Parade Float had gotten to his knees. He was still holding his throat, sputtering. I checked out the folks on the porch next door. They were just standing there. In tough postures, of course.

Leonard yelled at them. "You retards want some, come on over."

Nobody wanted any. Which made me happy. I didn't want to tear up my brand new J. C. Penney's suit.

Leonard picked up his cane and looked at Parade Float, said, "I see you or your buddy here again, even see someone reminds me of you two, we're gonna kill you."

"Couldn't we just mess up their hair instead?" I said.

"No," Leonard said. "I want to kill them."

"There you are, guys," I said. "Death or nothing."

Mohawk had casually crawled to the edge of the yard near the bottle tree and was trying to get up. Parade Float had it together enough now that he could get up and go over and help Mohawk to his feet. They limped and wheezed toward the house next door.

A tall black man on the porch over there yelled, "Your times are comin', you two. It's comin'."

“Nice meeting you, neighbors,” Leonard said, and he got out his key and we went inside.

4.

The house was hot and filthy, the fireplace was full of trash, and there were great skeins of cobwebs all about. As we moved, dust puffed and floated in the sunlight that bled through thickly curtained windows and the place smelled sour and the smell came from a variety of things. One of them I felt certain was Uncle Chester himself. You die in a house and lay there for two days in the heat, you get a little ripe, and so do your surroundings.

I left the front door open. Not that it helped much. There wasn't any wind stirring.

"Damn," Leonard said. "It's like he didn't live here."

Considering the aroma he'd left behind, I felt that was debatable, but I said, "He was old, Leonard. Maybe he didn't move around much."

"He wasn't that old."

"You hadn't seen or heard from him in years. He could have been in a bad way."

"Maybe him giving me this place was some kind of final jab in the heart. I loved this house when I was a kid. He knew that. Shit, look at it now."

"Final days he maybe got his shit together. Decided to let bygones be bygones. Ms. Grange said he left you some money too."

"Confederate, most likely."

We moved on through the house. The kitchen was squalid with dirty dishes stacked in the sink and paper plates and TV dinner receptacles stuffed in the trash can. There was a pile of debris around the can, as if Chester had finally given up taking out the garbage and had started merely throwing stuff in that general direction.

Flies buzzed on patrol. On the counter, in a TV dinner tray, squirming in something green and fuzzy that might have been a partial enchilada, were maggots.

"Well," I said. "He damn sure lived in here."

"Shit," Leonard said. "This ain't no recent mess."

"No. He worked on this one."

Off the kitchen was a bedroom. We went in there. It was relatively neat. On the nightstand by the bed was a worn hardback copy of Thoreau's *Walden.* That was Leonard's favorite book, especially the chapter titled "Self Reliance."

I looked around the room. One wall was mostly bookshelf. The books were behind sliding glass.

Leonard went over to the closed curtain and opened it. The window glass was dusty yellow and tracked with fly specks. The frame had bars mounted on the outside of it, and you could see the house where Mohawk, Parade Float, and the assholes stayed.

"Old man was scared," I said.

"He wasn't never scared of nothing," Leonard said.

"You get older, you got to get scared. Courage is in proportion to your size and physical condition and what caliber weapon you carry. Some cases how much liquor, crack, or heroin you got in you."

"Man, this neighborhood hadn't never been ritzy, but it's really gone to the fucking dogs."

"Dogs wouldn't have it."

"This shit next door. I don't get it. Crack house and anyone with a glass eye in their head could tell that's what it is, but what're the cops doing? Kid was getting a jolt of horse on the porch, man. Right out in front of God and everybody."

"That's probably a free jolt," I said. "Horse doesn't come cheap. Later on, they get him needing a little, they'll tell him to try some rock. He takes that and he comes back 'cause it's got him and it's cheap. A kid can get rock for five dollars, even if he's got to steal trinkets to sell."

Leonard closed the curtain and we went out into the hallway and past the bathroom into the room next door.

“Jesus,” Leonard said.

The room was full of ceiling-high stacks of yellowed newspapers. There was a little path between the stuff. We went down that, and the path turned left and opened up. There was a chair and table in the opening with a small rotating fan and papers on it.

If you sat in the chair and looked across the table, you could see the window opposite it, and provided the curtains hadn’t been drawn shut, I figured I’d have been able to see bars and a dusty view of the crack house.

There was a ballpoint pen and a composition notebook on the desk. The notebook was open and I looked at the page. Uncle Chester had been doodling. There were a number of little rectangles and the rectangles were numbered. There were some lines drawn at the top and bottom and on the sides.

It looked as if Uncle Chester hadn’t had enough to do.

It was hot in there and the dust we’d stirred hung about in the dead air and around our heads like a veil. It choked me.

We went out of there and back into the living room, started out the front door to get some air, and that’s when we noticed that besides the lock the key worked, there were no fewer than five locks or barricades on the door frame, you wanted to use them. There were two chain locks, a dead bolt, and a metal bar that fit into slots on either side of the door, and at the bottom and top of the door were swivel catches.

“He wasn’t fucking around on security,” I said.

“The assholes next door, I reckon,” Leonard said.

We stood on the porch and the air was still not moving and it was still hot, but it was a hell of a lot more comfortable than the decaying air inside the house. Another couple of hours, the temperature would be down to ninety and the wind might be stirring, and inside the house, you had all the windows open and a fan going, you might be able to breathe without a respirator.

I looked over at the crack house. No one was visible. I said, “You did all right for a fella on a cane.”

“Motherfuckers are lucky I can’t get around good as usual. Another week, I’ll be taking a dance class.”

"That post with the bottles. What the hell is it? Ornamentation?"

"It's mojo shit. Protects you from evil spirits. Spirits supposed to go into the bottles and get trapped. Or maybe they go in and are tossed out and transformed into something safe. Don't know for sure. I remember seeing them now and then as a kid. Hearing about them. But Uncle Chester, he never believed in that shit. He was always practical as a hangman."

"There's things about people you never know, Leonard. Even people close as you and me. Hell, I might listen to polka records, all you know."

"Reckon so. Listen here, Hap. I got to see that lawyer tomorrow. Think I could get you to stay with me here tonight?"

"If I don't want to?"

"Long walk home."

"What I figured."

Though we hadn't planned on staying, we had brought a change of clothes with us, in anticipation of stopping somewhere to shed our suits so we could maybe get a bite to eat and go to a movie.

We put on the clothes and set about tidying the place up some. I drove into town proper and bought some plastic trash bags and some cleaning stuff, and when I got back, Leonard had started washing dishes in the sink.

While he did that, I pulled back all the curtains and opened all the windows and picked up the trash and bagged it and took it out to the side of the house.

Time I got that done, Leonard had finished the dishes and was doing general cleaning. Sweeping, mopping, beating down cobwebs with a broom, polishing the window bars, spraying Lysol about.

"There's roaches in here big enough to own property," Leonard said.

"I know. One just helped me carry the trash out."

Time we finished what we were willing to do, we were sweaty and dusty, and we took turns in the bathroom, washing up best we could. There wasn't any hot water.

We turned on the porch light and closed the windows and locked up the joint and stuffed the trunk and backseat with garbage bags and drove off. We put the garbage in a university dumpster when no one was looking, and went to a Burger King and ate. We went to a movie after that and came back to the house solid dark, watching to see if any of our friends next door were waiting to surprise us.

Guess they were still mulling over the ass kicking earlier that day. We could see a knot full of them out on the dark front porch over there, looking at us. We picked up the newspapers in the driveway and waved at our crack house buddies and went on in the house.

Leonard gave me the bedroom and took the couch in the living room. We laid about and read newspapers for a while, then sacked out. I left the bedroom door open to keep air circulating and I raised the window and turned on the overhead fan.

From where I lay, I could turn and look out the doorway and see Leonard lying in there on his back on the couch, his arm thrown over his eyes.

"I'm sorry about your uncle," I said.

"Yeah."

"Everybody has to go."

"Yeah. I wish things had worked out better between us."

"He loved you, Leonard. Otherwise he wouldn't have left you the house."

"I'd have liked for him to have told me he loved me. Sometimes, when I'm stupid, I feel guilty for being homosexual. Like I had some choice in how my hormones got put together. Uncle Chester found out, he treated me like I was a pervert. Like being gay means you molest children or take advantage of weaker men for sex."

"He wasn't any different than a lot of folks, Leonard."

"I've never forced anything on anyone else, and mostly I don't bother with sex at all. I got the problem of being attracted mostly to straight men and that doesn't work. Lot of gay guys act gay and that bothers me."

"That's odd, Leonard."

"No, that's pretty standard with a lot of gays. I think somewhat like a woman, I guess. I want to have a relationship with a man, but somehow, gay guys don't normally do much for me. I guess I've been taught they're odd, and I'm one of them. Go figure. I tell you, nature played a fucking joke on me."

"Ha. Ha."

"Hap, you ever feel funny being my friend, knowing I'm gay?"

"I don't normally think about it. I mean, you're not exactly a gay prototype."

"No one is."

"I mean, I'm not aware of it much, and when I am, I guess it strikes me odd. I accept it, but don't understand it. I don't see gays as perverts. Some are, some aren't, same as heterosexuals. But I am an East Texas boy and my background is Baptist—"

"I'm East Texas and Baptist background too."

"I know. I'm just saying. Sometimes, I am aware of it. It doesn't bother me exactly, but I'm aware of it and I feel a little confused."

"Think *you're* confused. Life would be easier, I was straight."

"Yep, but you ain't."

"Damn. Wish I'd thought of that."

"You ever watch *Leave It to Beaver?"*

"Yeah."

"End of that show, way I remember it anyway, the two brothers, Wally and the Beaver, they used to share a room and have a talk before they turned out the light and went to bed. In that talk they summed up the episode you just watched, and the problems they'd gone through, and everything was capped off and solved in those last few minutes and they moved onto new stuff next week with no baggage. You know what?"

"What?"

"Life ain't like that."

"No, it ain't. Good night, Wally."

"Good night, Beave."

5.

Next morning Leonard called and made an appointment with Florida Grange and we drove over there.

Uptown or not, her building was in the cheap section, right next to a burned-out apartment complex on a red clay hill that had a highway cut through it. The apartment complex had burned down three years back and had yet to be rebuilt, and the clay on which it lay had started to shift toward the highway.

We entered her building and rode the elevator upstairs and saw a middle-aged woman exit a door holding her jaw. We passed the office she had come out of. It was the office of a dentist named Mallory. Florida Grange, Attorney at Law, was between it and a bail bond office.

We went in. No secretary. No lobby. The room was about the size of the men's restroom at the YMCA and it was mostly taken up with desk and chairs and file cabinets and a word processor. On the wall were framed degrees and certificates that vouched for Florida Grange's professional abilities.

Florida Grange was sitting behind her desk. She smiled when we came in and stood up and extended her hand, first to Leonard, then to me. When I shook it, the two large silver bracelets on her wrist rattled together.

She was wearing a short snow-white dress that made her chocolate skin and long kinky black hair radiant. I figured her for thirty years old, maybe thirty-five at the outside. Sweet chocolate in a smooth white wrapper.

I felt a bit self-conscious being there with her, wearing the clothes I'd slept in. I had brushed my teeth with some of Uncle Chester's toothpaste and my forefinger.

We took seats and Florida Grange sat back behind the desk and picked up a folder and said, "This is simple and won't take long. But it is a private matter, Mr. Pine."

She smiled at me when she said that, just to make sure I didn't break out crying.

"Me and Hap ain't that private. Nothing you got to say he can't hear. You already said I get the house and some money. There anything else?"

"It's a matter of how much … You're right, Mr. Pine. I'm being melodramatic."

"Leonard. I don't like to be called Mr. Pine. Call him Hap."

"Very well, Leonard. It's not a complicated will, so I'm going to forgo all the formality, if you don't mind?"

"I don't know," Leonard said. "I live for formality. I don't get some of it, I might get depressed."

She smiled at him. I wished she'd smile at me that way. "He left you the house and some money. One hundred thousand dollars."

Maybe that's why she didn't smile at me the same way. I didn't have one hundred thousand dollars.

"Where in hell did he get money like that?" Leonard said. "He was a security guard when he was working."

She shrugged. "If he'd been saving a while, that's not that unusual. Perhaps he had some bonds come due. Whatever, you inherited that much money. I'll arrange for you to receive it. One last thing, he left you this envelope and its contents."

She opened her desk drawer and removed a thick manila envelope. She handed it to Leonard. He opened it and peeked inside. He gave it to me. I peeked inside. There were a lot of newspaper clippings in there. I saw that one was a coupon for a dollar off a pizza. Good. We liked pizza.

I shook the envelope. Something heavy moved inside. I held the envelope so that whatever it was slid out through the clippings and into my palm.

It was a key. I gave it to Leonard.

"Looks like a safety-deposit box," he said.

"My thoughts exactly," I said.

"Goddamn, Doc!" came a clear voice through the wall.

Florida Grange, Attorney at Law, looked embarrassed, said, "I don’t think he’s a very good dentist. People yell a lot.”

“That’s all right,” Leonard said. “We don’t plan to use him.”

“I keep planning to move,” she said.

Leonard said, “Which was Uncle Chester’s bank, you know?”

“Certainly. LaBorde, Main and North.”

Leonard nodded, put the key back in the envelope. “You said you didn’t know him, but you’re his lawyer. You talked to him. You must have got some kind of impression.”

“I met him about a month ago,” she said. “He came to me and wanted me to handle his affairs.”

“Did he seem sick?” Leonard asked.

“He seemed stressed. Like he was having some troubles. He thought he had Alzheimer’s. He said that much.”

“And did he?”

“I don’t know. But he thought he did. He wanted to square things up in case his mind was going or his time was up. That’s the way he expressed it.”

“What I’m really asking is, did he say anything about me, other than what I inherited?”

“No. I’m sorry.”

“That’s all right,” Leonard said, but I could tell it wasn’t all right.

“I guess you know this, he shot a number of people a few months back. Or so the story goes.”

“What?”

“I don’t mean he killed anyone. I heard about it through the grapevine. I’m originally from that part of town. Where your uncle lived. My mama still lives there. Seems your uncle had some trouble with the people next door. Supposed to be a crack house.”

“It is,” Leonard said.

“Someone over there was playing around, shot some bottles off a post in his yard. I suppose they were talking about a bottle tree.”

“They were,” Leonard said.

“Your uncle was on his porch when it happened and a shot almost hit him he said, so he got his shotgun and went over there and shot some men on the porch. He had rat shot in the gun. Way it worked out, the police showed up and he got hauled in and the men went to the hospital to get the shot picked out. Your uncle was let go, and far as I know, it wasn’t even in the papers.”

“Happened in nigger town is why,” Leonard said. “Bunch of niggers popping one another isn’t news to the peckerwoods. They expect it.”

“I suppose,” Florida Grange said. “Anyway, that’s something I can tell you about him, but that’s about all.”

I could tell Leonard was secretly pleased. It fit his memory of his Uncle Chester. Strong and upright, didn’t take shit from anyone.

Grange had him fill out some papers and gave him some to take with him. By the time they were finished, the dentist drill had begun to whine.

“I’m sorry,” Florida Grange said. “Let’s go out in the hall.”

We went. Leonard said, “I guess I don’t really have anything else to ask, Miss Grange. Sorry I pulled you out here.”

“I’m tired of the drill anyway,” she said. “And if you’re going by Leonard, call me Florida.”

“OK, Florida. Thanks.”

“You have any other questions, give me a call,” she said.

“Is it OK I ask a question?” I said.

“Yes,” she said.

“Are you married?”

“No.”

“Anyone significant in your life right now?”

“Not really.”

“Any possibility of me taking you to dinner?”

“I don’t think so, Mr. Collins.”

“I clean up pretty good.”

“I’m sure you do, but I think not. Thanks for asking.”

On the way down in the elevator, Leonard said, “Hap Collins, Lady Killer.”

6.

In the car, while Leonard drove, I looked through the contents of the envelope.

"Anything there mean anything?" Leonard asked.

"Got a bunch of pizza coupons. Some for Burger King. And you get real hungry, we can buy one dinner, get one free at Lupe's Mexican Restaurant."

"That's it? Coupons?"

"Yep."

"Christ, he must have been losing it."

"I don't know. Coupons save lots of money. I use them. I figured up once I'd saved enough on what I'd normally have spent on stuff to buy a used television set."

"Color?"

"Black and white. But I bought some Diet Pepsi and pork skins instead."

"Coupons seem a strange thing for Uncle Chester to give to a lawyer to hold for me. He could have left that stuff on the kitchen table."

"Maybe he wasn't thinking correctly. Coupons could have taken on valuable import. And the key was with them."

"Goes to a bank safety-deposit box, I figure."

"You said that, Sherlock."

"We'll check it out right now."

"Leonard?"

"Yeah."

"These coupons, I just noticed, they're a couple years expired."

Inside the LaBorde Main-and-North First National Bank, I took a chair and Leonard spoke to a clerk. The clerk sent him to a gray-haired lady at a desk. Leonard leaned on his cane and showed her the key and some of the papers Florida Grange had given him. The lady nodded, gave him back the key, got up, and walked him to a barred doorway. A guard inside the bars was signaled. He opened the door and Leonard went inside and the guard locked it behind him. A few moments later, Leonard was let out carrying a large manila envelope and a larger parcel wrapped in brown paper and twine.

"You'll love this," he said, and held up the envelope. "Inside's a paperback copy of *Dracula* and a fistful of newspaper clippings, and guess what? Another key. There's not a clue what it goes to. Uncle Chester's brain must have got so he didn't know his nuts from a couple acorns."

"What about that?" I said, indicating the larger parcel.

"I opened it already."

"I can tell that by the way the twine is rewrapped. What is it?"

Leonard was hesitant. "Well …" He took it over to one of the tables and untied the twine and unwrapped the package. It was a painting. A good painting. It was shadowy and showed a weathered two-story gothic-style house surrounded by trees; fact was, the trees grew so thick they seemed to imprison the house.

"Your uncle do this?"

"I did. When I was sixteen."

"No joke?"

"No joke. I used to want to paint. I did this for Uncle Chester's birthday. Maybe he's giving it back to me now, letting me know things aren't really forgiven."

"He's certainly giving you other things. Money. The house."

"Coupons and a copy of *Dracula.*"

"That's right. Is that all there was? Nothing else?"

"Nothing, besides the fact you're right. There's the house and I'm gonna get one hundred thousand dollars and you aren't."

So, I thought Leonard was gonna be richer, and that would be all right, and we'd go back to normal, except for him not working in the rose fields, and me, I'd be heading on back to the house and back to the fields, provided I could get my old job again, or another just like it, and Leonard, he'd be putting his uncle's place up for sale and living off that and his inheritance, maybe put the dough into some kind of business.

I was sad for Leonard in one way, losing a loved one, but in another, that Uncle Chester was a sonofabitch far as I was concerned, way he treated Leonard, and I was glad Leonard had gotten some money and a house to sell, and a secret part of me was glad the old sonofabitch was dead and buried and out of sight.

So, that afternoon after seeing the pretty lawyer who wouldn't go out with me, Leonard drove me home and dropped me off and went away. I figured he was at his place, his feet propped up, listening to Dwight Yoakam or Hank Williams or Patsy Cline, smoking his pipe full of cherry-tinted tobacco, perhaps reading his uncle's copy of *Dracula* or contemplating his loss and gain, wondering what he'd end up doing with his money.

In the long run, except for the fact he was gonna wither and die like everybody else ever born, I figured things for him were going to be fine as things can get fine.

But I hadn't counted on the black cloud of fate.

7.

The black cloud of fate came with rain, of course.

Two days later, early afternoon, I was sitting on my front porch taking in the cool wind and the view. One moment there was just the same red, empty road that runs by Leonard's place, and beyond it, great pines and oaks and twists of vines, and above it all, clouds as white and smooth as God's own whiskers, and the next moment, the wind abruptly changed direction, blew harder from the north, turned damp and sticky, and the clouds began to roll and churn and go gray at the edges. Out of the north rolled darker clouds yet, and they filled the sky and gave up their rain and the pines became purple with shadow and the road turned from red to blood-clot brown, then darker. The rain slammed down hard, and the wind thrashed it onto the porch in steel-colored needles that stung my face and filled my nostrils with the aroma of wet earth.

I got out of my old wooden rocking chair and went into the house, feeling blue and broke and missing Leonard.

I hadn't heard from him since he'd dropped me off, and I'd called his place a couple times and only got rings. I wondered if he'd finally gotten his money. I wondered if he were spending it. It wasn't like me and him to go more than a couple of days without touching base with one another, just in case we needed to argue about something.

I thought I'd call him again, maybe drive over there after the rain, see if his phone might not be working, but about then the phone rang and I answered it.

It was my former boss, Lacy, the Old Bastard. He sounded friendly. A warning flag went up. I figured whoever had taken my place in the fields had gotten a better job bouncing drunks or shoveling shit, or maybe died of stroke or snakebite, or taken up preaching, which was a pretty good career, you had the guts not to be ashamed of it.

"How's it hanging, Hap?"

"To the left."

"Hey, that's my good side. Nut over there's bigger. You ready to come back to work?"

"Don't tell me you're calling from the field?"

He forced a laugh. "Nah, we had a down day."

That meant either no one showed up, or certain supplies couldn't be coordinated, or they'd expected the rain.

"That little thing the other day," he said. "Let's let it go. I won't even dock you. Tomorrow we got to have a good day, losing this one. So, hell, Hap. I can use you."

"Man or woman's got hands and isn't in a wheelchair, you can use them."

"Hey, I'm offering you a job. I didn't call up for insults."

"Maybe we can jump that shit pay a little. Another fifty cents an hour you'd almost be in line with minimum wage."

"Don't start, Hap. You know the pay. I pay cash, too. You save on income tax that way."

"You save on income tax, Lacy. Wages like that, I don't save dick. I'd rather make enough so I had to pay some taxes."

"Yeah, well …" And he went on to tell me about his old mother in a Kansas nursing home. How he had to send her money every month. I figured he probably shot his mother years ago, buried her under a rosebush to save on fertilizer.

"Couldn't your old mother whore a little?" I said. "You know, she's set up. Got a room and a bed and all. If she can spread her legs, she can pay her way."

"Hap, you bastard. Don't start fucking with me, or you can forget the job."

"My heart just missed a beat."

"Listen here, let's quit while you're ahead. You come on in and I'll get you working. Tell the nigger to come on in when he's ready."

"Shall I tell Leonard you called him a nigger?"

"Slipped on that. Force of habit."

"Bad habit."

"You won't tell him I said it, all right? You know how he is."

"How is he?"

"You know. Like that time in the field, when him and that other nig—colored fella with the knife got into it."

"That guy ever get out of the hospital?"

"Think he's in some kind of home now. I'm surprised Leonard didn't do some time for that. You won't tell him about the 'nigger' business, will you?"

"I did tell him, there's one good thing about it."

"Yeah?"

"You already got the roses for your funeral."

He rang off and I had the fifty-cent raise for me and Leonard both, just like I thought Leonard might actually go back to it.

Frankly, I had a hard time seeing me going back to it, but a look at the contents of my refrigerator and a peek at the dough in the cookie jar made me realize I had to.

My mood moved from blue to black, and I was concentrating on the failures of my life, finding there were quite a few, wondering what would happen ten years from now when I was in my midfifties.

What did I do then?

Rose-field work still?

What else did I know?

What was I qualified for?

I wasn't able to tally up a lot of options, though I spent considerable time with the effort.

I was considering a career in maybe aluminum siding or, the devil help me, insurance, when the phone rang.

It was Leonard.

"Goddamn, man," I said. "I been wondering about you. I called your place and no answer. I was beginning to think you'd had an accident. Refrigerator was lying on top of you or something."

"I didn't go back home," Leonard said. "Not to stay anyway. I packed some of my stuff and came back here to Uncle Chester's."

“You calling from there?”

“His phone got pulled from lack of payment. Months ago. I’m calling from a pay phone. You want to know what I’m wearing?”

“Not unless you think it’ll really get me excited.”

“I’m afraid clothes have to have women in them for you to get excited.”

“Maybe you could talk in a high voice.”

“Cut through the shit, Hap. I’m gonna live at Uncle Chester’s awhile. I been going through his stuff. I feel like I want to do that, get in touch with who he was. And more importantly, find out what this fucking key goes to.”

“His main coupon collection.”

“Could be. I’ve looked everywhere. I got other reasons too. I want to fix the house up some. Maybe sell it for more than I can get now.”

“Sounds smart, Leonard. Things are swinging here too. I got my old job in the rose fields back.”

“Lose it again.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“Hey, you toted me some, move over here a bit, least till I do what I got to do, and I’ll keep you fed and in toilet paper.”

“I don’t know. That’s more charity than I like. I don’t even have a bum leg.”

“Me neither. Hardly. I’ve been moving around some without the cane. Mostly without it. I don’t plan to pick it up again, I can do without it. Look, Hap. It ain’t charity. You can help me fix the place up.”

“What I can’t fix, which is nothing, I shit on. You know that.”

“You can tote a hammer, hand me nails. And there’s something else. These fucks next door. I got no problems with them yet, but I feel one brewing, way they watch me. They’re biding their time. I’d like to have you at my back, and there’s always the chance they’ll get you first, instead of me. I like the idea of a buffer.”

“Well, I can see that.”

“Good. Can I count on you?”

I considered working for Lacy again. I thought of the rose fields, the heat, the sticks, the dynamic pay.

“What the hell do you think?” I said.

8.

The real repairs and cleaning began in earnest.

I went to live with him in Uncle Chester's house the next day, and he got the bed from then on and I got the couch. During the days we did repairs, or rather Leonard did. I walked around with a hammer and nails and fetched things, hummed and sang to myself. I do some pretty good spirituals. Leonard said that's the way it ought be, a black man with a honkie servant could sing a little gospel.

We spent a lot of time on the roof, taking off the old tin and putting down some real roofing. I trimmed the big oak that was scratching the roof all by my ownself, managed to saw off the offending limbs without sawing through a finger or busting my ass on the ground.

It was hot as hell up there and the glare was bad enough you had to wear sunglasses while you worked. I began to tan and lose weight, and I liked the feeling so much I gave up beer and excessive numbers of tacos.

When I wasn't holding down roofing for Leonard to hammer, wasn't fetching something, I'd look off at the crack house and wonder who was inside. People came and went there pretty brisk come late afternoon, and right on through until morning. Come full day, things got quiet. Selling crack wore you out, you had to get some rest before the next tide came in.

Whole thing depressed me, seeing kids and adults, and even babies on the hips of female druggies a couple years into having their period, lining up over there like it was a cafeteria.

I saw a couple of cop cars during that time, and there was even a bust and some folks were hauled in. In fact, it was Leonard made the call, but the next day, same guys that left the house were back. One of them was Mohawk, the other was Parade Float. Great strides in my understanding of our judicial system were made without leaving the house and yard.

Way it worked was simple. I'd had it all wrong. You broke the law you didn't have to really suffer. See, a guy sold drugs to kids or anyone else, they could come get you, they could lock you up, but come morning, you knew somebody, had some money, a good lawyer, a relationship with the bail bondsman, you could go home, get a free ride back to your house. Have some rest, a Dr. Pepper and a couple of Twinkies to lift your spirit, and you were in business again, if come nightfall you had the supplies.

It was depressing, and the folks next door must have known we felt that way, 'cause they liked to hang out on their front porch come dark and stare at us. We could see them over there beneath their little yellow porch light, congregating like the bugs that swarmed the bulb above them.

And their light and our porch light, when we used it, was about all the light there was for Comanche Street, because the street lights had long been shot out and no one had come to replace them. If they had, the crack house people would have shot them out again. The only beacon they wanted on the street was their beacon, one that called people to their place to buy something to make them spin and float, help them coast through another few hours.

There were a couple houses across from us, but they kept their porch lights off, and what lights they burned were filmy behind curtains, looked like lights seen from a distance and underwater. Decent folks on Comanche Street didn't come out of their houses at night, lest they encounter the dealers or the druggies themselves, the latter looking for a quick few dollars to purchase a hunk of rock.

For that matter, during the day you didn't see folks much. The working people came and went, but didn't linger. The kid we had seen on Leonard's front porch that day, we began to see more often. He wore a beeper on his hip. Acquired a cool walk. Had some nice clothes. He looked as if his soul was melting.

The bars and locks on Uncle Chester's door began to make sense. You didn't nail something down in this neighborhood, it'd show up at the pawnshop, and the money received for it would finance some druggie to do some business.

Got so we left the house, we had the impression we might come back to the front door off the hinges, rammed in, and all the little goods that Uncle Chester had left would be gone, except the coupons. Or maybe the shits next door would start to think they ought to get even with me and Leonard, and we'd come back to worse: smoke and charred wood.

Considering all that, way we did, was something had to be bought, one of us nearly always stayed while the other went to get it.

Got so Leonard stayed pissed all the time. Kept his brow furrowed and his uncle's shotgun oiled and loaded, and not with rat shot. He made jokes about how many niggers next door it would take to roof the house, he sliced them real thin.

We cleaned inside the house, too. Uncle Chester and his odors finally departed. The flies went in search of deader pastures.

Nights, after a hard day's work, was when we did our cleaning and searching for what the key went to. No safe or locked box or locked floor or wall panels were found. Some of the coupons from the deposit box were good, though. We used them for eat-outs, one of us running into town to pick up pizza or burgers.

At night, we worked to the sounds of Leonard's country music; hillbilly voices fighting it out with the rap and rock sounds next door, stuff I sometimes preferred to lost loves and drinking in the barroom, but Leonard, he used the decibel knob to drown them out. 'Least they were drowned out in Uncle Chester's house. I don't know they noticed next door. Nobody called the law on either of us. In that neighborhood, somebody wasn't getting hurt or robbed, a little loud music didn't mean much. For all the good the law did down there, they might as well have just drove near the neighborhood and honked, tossed out a few Don't Do Drug leaflets.

Last room we tackled was the one with the newspapers. It was hot in there, and the little fan managed to stir the dust and make you choke. The roof had leaked, gotten on the papers and mildewed them, and in some places the water had soaked through and joined the wood beneath them and rotted out sections of the floor. We could hear it squeak, feel it sag when we walked.

We decided best thing to do was remove the papers, glance through them quickly as possible, see if there was anything there really meant anything.

After a couple pickup loads to the recycling center, we quit looking through the rest, quit thinking they meant anything. Only thing we noticed were gaps in pages, where Uncle Chester had liberated coupons with scissors.

All doubts were cast aside. It was pretty clear by then. Uncle Chester had been off his nut. The key had probably gone to something no longer owned, long lost to time, but significant somehow in the watery cells that made up Uncle Chester's brain.

Leonard put the key away and forgot about it and read *Dracula.* He said he liked it pretty good and thought it would have scared him more had it not been for the crack house next door. Look out there and see that happening, it's hard for some guy with fangs to scare you much. Guys next door were bigger vampires: clutch of assholes made you want drugs way a vampire wanted blood. Made it so you'd do anything to have it. Rob and lie, murder your lovers, take up astrology and reading cozy mysteries.

After we'd been there about a week, Leonard quit using his cane and replaced the broken bottles on the bottle tree. I think he was taunting the folks next door to shoot them out, looking for some excuse to exchange their heads, mix up their internal organs.

One night he woke me up calling out "You sonsabitches" in his sleep. He was making me nervous. He kept the shotgun a little too close. I felt things were coming down on Leonard that were bigger than he was. Somewhere in all this, he had determined the assholes next door were the cause for Uncle Chester's death. And maybe they were. Old Uncle Chester had been everything Leonard knew about manhood.

Leonard had been raised by his grandmother, but it was his uncle he came to see summers, and it was his uncle who taught him what it was to be masculine. Taught him about the woods and guns and carpentry and the appreciation of books. Encouraged him to make something of his life, gave him backbone. Then, when Leonard was a young man and realized he was gay and told his uncle, it had all fallen apart.

But be that as it may, his uncle had formed him, had taken him like dough and shaped him and baked him and made him who he was, and no matter how I felt about Uncle Chester's disowning Leonard, I had to admit, he had done a good job. Or a job that had held up till now—up until Uncle Chester came back into Leonard's life, came back after he was dead like some kind of ghost. And not a happy one.

One Saturday afternoon, hot as the blazes, I was up on the roof with my shirt off, cooking up a skin cancer, considering breaking my ban on ice-cold beer, and Florida Grange showed up. She was driving a little gray Toyota, and when she got out of the car I saw she was outfitted in a simple sky-blue dress that showed lots of leg and happily threatened to show a little more.

She stood in the drive and put a hand over her eyes like an Indian scout and called up to me. "Leonard here?"

"He's in town. Went to get some supplies."

"Oh. Well, I came to visit my mama, thought I'd drop by and see how things are coming along. And I got another paper for Leonard to sign. I missed it at the office."

"One minute."

I got my shirt off a sawed oak limb and pulled it on. It was a cotton jean shirt with the sleeves bobbed short and it felt good and soft against my warm, sweaty skin. I sucked in my gut while I buttoned it, just in case Florida was watching. I climbed down by method of the oak.

I dropped out of the tree, wiped my hands on my pants, smiled, and went over to see her. I stuck out a hand and we shook. She had the same soft hand and the same rattling bracelets. Her hair was dark and wild, like a storm cloud. The wind picked up the smell of her perfume and gave it to me. I needed that like a punch in the teeth.

I caught my reflection in her car windshield. I looked like shit, but my teeth were clean. I'd brushed with my own toothbrush not long ago, and I'd even used mouthwash. Progress was being made.

"Would you like something to drink, Miss Grange?"

“Florida?”

“Yeah. That’s right. Florida.”

“Yes. I would like something to drink.”

“I’ll get it. It’d be best to sit out here on the porch. We don’t have air-conditioning.”

“That’ll be fine.”

“We’ve got Coke. Diet Coke. Ice tea. Beer. We’ve got some nonalcoholic beer too. Sharp’s. It’s pretty good.”

“I’ll have ice tea. No sugar.”

I went in the house and poured her tea and got myself a Sharp’s. I had discovered I actually preferred the nonalcoholic beer to the real thing. It was the taste I liked, not the results.

I carried the tea and Sharp’s onto the porch. Florida was seated in the glider Leonard and I had installed. I had fastened the bolts to the porch roof. I hoped I had done a good job. I’d have hated for Florida Grange to bust her shapely ass.

I gave her the tea and sat down on the other side of the glider and mentally groped for small talk. I almost said something about the weather but restrained myself. I tried not to look at her legs, which were bare and smooth looking. I wondered if they were as soft as her hand.

“You living here?” she asked.

“For now. I’m helping Leonard get the place in shape to sell.”

“I see.”

We sat in silence and sipped our drinks. An old black Chevy chugged along the street and an elderly black face looked out of it at us, looked away, and looked back. The driver was trying to determine if any miscegenation was going on.

It wasn’t, though I was hopeful, in a fantasy sort of way. Actually, seemed to me, from here on out, I’d have to be content to look at Florida Grange’s legs and sneak a look at her panties when she got in or out of her car, way I used to do with girls when I was in high school.

Thought of that made me feel sort of ill. Guys, they’re some piece of work. Next thing I knew I’d be putting quarters in filling station restroom rubber machines, trying to get those special gift items you bought when you really didn't need a rubber. The Instant Pussy, a French Tickler that looked like a plastic squid, and the little book of sex jokes.

Here was an intelligent professional woman, and all I could think about was how much I'd like to dork her. I had to think about something else. Thing to do was to talk to her the way you'd talk to any interesting professional in the law business, male or female.

"You get many whiplash cases?"

"What?"

"You know—"

"Oh. Now and then. I mean, a couple. I mainly do wills, stuff like that."

That was good, Hap. Real good. Why don't you just call her an ambulance chaser?

"Nice day, huh?"

"Yeah. Well …"

"I mean, it's hot, but it's OK. It's not as humid as usual. I mean, it's usually more humid."

Florida Grange looked at her watch. "When do you think Leonard will be back?"

"Soon. Hell, Florida. I'm acting like a fool. I get around a beautiful woman lately, I act like a jackass. I don't mean to."

"That's all right."

"No. No, it isn't. If you prefer, I'll just be real quiet and sit here. … You interested in Leonard?"

She smiled at me. "Leonards gay."

"You knew that? I was hoping to break the news to you, and you'd be so disappointed, I'd have to do in a pinch. I'm not gay, by the way."

"Gee. I'd never have guessed. Most everyone around here knows Leonard's gay. He spent time here in the summers. My mother knew his uncle and knew Leonard all the while he was growing up. She told me about him."

"Ah."

"Listen, Mr. Collins … Hap. I owe you an apology."

"You owe me one? Way I've been ogling you? You got to forgive me, Florida. I been out in the country too long. No female companionship. I'm almost completely fueled by adolescent hormones."

"The other day, when you asked me out, I told you no—"

"Hey, no problem, that's your right—"

"Will you shut up a minute?"

"Sure."

"I got a confession. I didn't go out with you because you're white. That's it."

"You don't like white guys?"

"It's not that. It's that I'm as much a product of racism as anyone else. I don't really think about it much, don't think I'm doing it. But, you see, I feel all that stuff about the white man's world. How, as a black woman, I have to battle uphill for everything I get. How it always seems when I get to a point where I'm ready to advance, there's some kind of white hurdle."

"I guess there is."

"Sometimes there is. Sometimes there isn't, but I've got a chip on my shoulder just the same, so when a white man asks me out, I get to thinking he's thinking, 'This black bitch will be glad to go out with me. I'm white. And because I'm white, I can get me some of her nigger ass,' then Massuh can go on about his business and hook up with someone white, someone respectable."

"Well, to be honest, I was thinking about the 'get me some ass' part."

"I know. I can tell. You sort of ooze musk. But it's the other part. The racist part. I didn't really think you were thinking that. Not then, not now. But conditioning dies hard. I've thought about it a lot since then, and I've regretted it, me thinking that, and you see, I knew you were here, 'cause my mother said she's seen you here, and she knew you from the funeral, and well, I wanted you to know, I'm sorry I was racist. Damn, I'm sort of running things together."

"That's all right. I get your drift. It's very honest of you. It makes me feel like shit, but it's honest."

“Yes, it is. And I still don’t want to go out with you.”

“I see.”

“Know why?”

“I’m ugly?”

“No. Actually I find you attractive, in a gnarly, old-fashioned male sort of way.”

Gnarly?

“But the problem is I like to dance and white boys have no rhythm. And you know what else they say about you white boys?”

I watched a beautiful smile spread across her face.

“What do they say?” I asked.

“You’ve got itty-bitty dicks.”

9.

When Leonard came back, Florida gave him the paper and he signed it and she took it back. We talked her into returning that night for supper. Leonard promised to cook spaghetti and sauce, and I promised to make a salad. Leonard eyed me when I said that, and I said, “Really.”

I tried not to watch too pointedly as Florida climbed into her car. When she was driving off, Leonard said, “Man, you need to jack off or something. You’re starting to look at that woman like she’s a chocolate eclair.”

“Yeah, and I’m embarrassed by it too. I can’t help myself. I been alone too long. I made progress, though. While you were gone we had a polite and intelligent conversation about the size of white guys’ dicks.”

“Those little things?”

I climbed back on the roof and Leonard came up with me and looked over what I had done, and was pleased to see he wouldn’t have to redo it.

“You know, you gonna get where you can flush a toilet without instructions,” Leonard said.

“Yassuh,” I said. “I’s catchin’ on. Ya wants me to sang one them spirituals now, Massuh Leonard?”

“I want you to shut up.”

We knocked off at five to clean up. Leonard had paid for a tank of butane, so now there was hot water. When I finished showering with the hot water, I turned the faucet to pure cold and rinsed in that. By the time I got out of the shower and dried and was stepping into clean underwear, I was already sweating and the old boards and wallpaper in the bathroom, damp from moisture and heat, had taken on the aroma of the ass end of a camel.

I pulled on my jeans and T-shirt and slid my sockless feet into my deck shoes and went into the kitchen. It smelled good in there, which was a nice change. Leonard was hustling about, chopping mushrooms and stirring meat and garlic in a frying pan. There was a big pot of water on to boil.

"Can I help?"

"Yeah," Leonard said. "Stay the fuck out of the way."

"I could do the salad."

"You could, but it's too early. Made it now, time we ate, the lettuce would be wilted and the tomatoes would taste like wet golf balls."

"Maybe I'll just read."

I got one of the books I'd brought along, Neal Barrett, Jr.'s, *The Hereafter Gang*, went out on the back porch and sat in a creaky old rocking chair. The left side of the porch was blocked with plywood, most likely so Uncle Chester wouldn't have to look at the drug dealers next door. The rest of the porch was screened in. The screen door had the bottom part of its screen knocked loose, and it curled up as if suffering from heat stroke.

Out behind the house there was a pile of burned garbage, some of it black, twisted plastic, some of it blackened cans and dark wisps of paper.

On out a ways was a butane tank, and beyond that, a trickle of woods and brambles that gradually became more than a trickle. It turned into full-fledged woods. I wondered how far it went. Had it been in a white section of town, where property values were up, it would have long been cut down and concrete would have been spread over it.

Here, it was a strange oasis of green in the midst of a disintegrating neighborhood that was a slice of human pie neither completely rural nor urban, a world unto itself.

I read from *The Hereafter Gang* until Leonard came out the back door and called to me, "Why don't you go down and rent us a VCR and a movie. And don't get none of those damn socially redeeming films or anything you got to read at the bottom what they're saying. And let's don't see *It's a Wonderful Life* anymore."

"Three Stooges OK?"

I drove into town and rented a VCR and checked out a couple of movies. *Jaws*, which I'd never seen, and *Gunga Din*, which I saw when I was head high to a cocker spaniel's nuts.

By the time I got back to the house I was hot and sweaty and nervous. I was wondering if I should put the move on Florida, or just watch the movies like a good little boy. Frankly, I didn't know how to put the move on anybody anymore. I was too long out of practice. I began to wonder if she'd show up. Maybe she'd bring a date. That would be cozy. Perhaps I could loan him some condoms.

While Leonard hooked up the VCR, I made the salad. I can break lettuce and slice a tomato with the best of them. I didn't even screw up when I put on the bacon bits and the croutons.

About fifteen minutes after I finished, there was a knock on the door and Leonard let Florida in. She was carrying a bottle of wine and a long loaf of French bread. She had a little black pocket book on a strap draped over her shoulder. She was wearing canary yellow this time. It was like all her other dresses, plain in design, but tight and short and flattering to what it covered. She didn't have a date.

"Who're the sweeties next door?" she asked, giving Leonard the bread and the wine.

"Just the local crack house," Leonard said. "They're a real fun-loving bunch."

"They certainly are. They just gave me a verbal anatomical lesson."

"Sorry," I said.

She smiled. "That's all right. I hear worse in court. From my own clients sometimes."

We seated ourselves at the table and started on the salad. She ate some of it, but nothing was said about its excellence. Personally, I thought the croutons and bacon bits were very fresh. She bragged on the spaghetti, meatballs, and sauce. Leonard, a regular reader of *Bon Appetit,* bragged on her choice of wine. To me, all wine tastes pretty much the same. Bad. But I said I thought it was pretty good, too.

After dinner, we watched the movies. *Jaws* first. The TV was a little-screen affair Leonard had bought at a pawn shop, but the movie, cropped at the corners, scared the shit out of me anyway. I've never liked water, and I like sharks even less. Florida sat in the middle of the couch, and during the scary parts she didn't leap into my lap for protection or grab my hand. I thought it would be most unbecoming of me to leap into hers, though I found myself pulling my feet up onto the couch, in case any floor sharks drifted by.

Between the movies we took a coffee break, and Florida took off her shoes, then we watched *Gunga Din.* I loved it again. About midnight the movies were over and we talked about them for a while, then Leonard went out on the porch to smoke his pipe.

I stood up from the couch and found I didn't know what to do with my hands. I didn't know what to do with my mouth either. Should I say "Good night?" How about "What about them Mets?"

Florida didn't help. She kept her seat and smiled up at me. She said, "I'm sleepy."

"Yeah, well, it is late. You need me to drive you home? You can get your car tomorrow."

"I'm not that sleepy. I would like to stay here, though."

"'Cause you're tired?"

She smiled at me again. This was the sort of smile you reserve for the feeble-minded. "You want it spelled out?"

"That would help," I said. "I think I know what you're saying, but if I'm wrong, boy, am I going to be embarrassed."

"You're not wrong. Let's go to bed. Together."

"One minute."

"One minute?"

I went out on the porch. Leonard was sitting on the glider. The smell of his cherry tobacco drifted back to me.

He said, "Well, what's the score?"

"Can I use the bed tonight?"

"Yeah, but you do the laundry tomorrow. I don't want the wet spot."

"Right."

Back inside I tried not to look too much like I was waiting for dessert. "Well, you ready?"

She laughed at me. It was a nice sound. Like bells tinkling. “Where’s the bathroom?”

I showed it to her. Before she went inside, she said, “Go out and look in my car and bring my overnight bag, will you? Keys are in my purse.”

I got the keys out of her purse, went out and got the bag. She knew she was going to stay all along. I began to feel a little taller. When I walked past Leonard, he said, “I hope you still remember what to do.”

“It’ll come to me,” I said, and went inside.

The overhead fan moved moon shadows and stirred the hot air. The shadows fluttered over me and the sweat on my chest dried slowly and comfortably.

I was lying on my back, naked. Florida lay beside me, on her stomach, sleeping. I had my hand resting on one of her smooth, dark buttocks. I couldn’t resist playing my fingers over her flesh. I replayed what we had done time and again in my head. It was a good picture show no matter how many times I rewound it. I liked it better than *Jaws* or *Gunga Din.*

The bedroom window was up, and from where I lay, my head propped on a pillow, I could see out clearly. Across the way there was some laughter and some lights and shadows moved between the windows and the laughter moved with them.

I rolled on my side and put my arm across Florida’s back and kissed her ear. She smelled of sweat and sex and perfume. She moved and made a noise I liked. I ran my hand down the small of her back, over her buttocks, down one of her legs, letting my hand hydroplane over the beads of sweat. She spread her legs and I ran my hand between them. She was soft there and moist, and she moved like she thought she might do some business, but then she went still again and started snoring like a lumberjack.

That was all right. After all we’d done, my ambition might be bigger and better than the tool I needed for the job. And I was thirsty.

I rolled away from her, eased out of bed, and untangled the sheet from my ankles. I stretched, got the sheet off the floor, shook it out silently and tossed it over Florida, taking a good look at her before I did.

I found her panties on the floor, along with the little nightie she had worn so briefly. I folded them and put them at the foot of the bed, went to the window and took hold of the bars and looked out. Still busy over there.

The sound of the wind in the bottle tree came to me, like the faraway hooting of ghostly owls. I listened to the bottles and thought about going to get a drink, then, behind the sound of the bottle tree, I heard a scraping noise. It was coming from the next room.

I found my jockey shorts and slipped them on, then my jeans. I had brought a little .38 revolver from my house, and I got it out of the dresser drawer from under my socks and eased over to the bedroom door and listened.

No sound.

I opened the door carefully and looked into the living room. I didn't see Leonard on the couch. I heard the scraping noise again.

I slipped into the living room and saw there was a light coming from the open door of the newspaper room. I held the gun down by my leg and went over there and looked inside. Sitting on the floor, damp newspapers pushed in a heap behind him, was Leonard. He was pulling at the rotten boards in the flooring, prying them loose with a crowbar, stacking them by the papers. The little fan was pointed in his direction and was set not to rotate. It hummed pleasantly, like a bee at flower.

I went inside.

"I was going to shoot you," I said.

He looked up at me.

"Who the hell did you think it'd be?"

"Guess I've got the jumps a little, those guys next door."

"Did it come back to you? The sex stuff, I mean?"

"Yes, but we did some things I don't remember doing before. I guess it's OK, though. Neither of us got hurt."

"What do you think of her?"

"Well, we haven't sent out wedding invitations, but I like her. She's smart. Witty. Fun to be with."

"And she's fucking you."

"There's that."

"Come here and give me a hand. I've found something interesting."

I put the gun on the table next to the little fan, went over and got down on my knees and grabbed hold of the board he was holding and helped him pull it up. There was a screech of nails as it came loose.

"I couldn't sleep," he said. "I came in here and started looking around, moved some papers and found this spot. You'll notice, not all these boards are rotten."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning what happened was the floor was repaired here with untreated wood to replace old wood, and some of that has rotted because of the roof leak. I think Uncle Chester took advantage of replacing the floor to make a hiding place."

He pointed. "For this," he said.

In the gap in the floor I could see something large lying in the dark against the ground. There must have been about four feet between the floor and the dirt.

"When I moved the papers, I spotted it through the hole and got busy pulling the rest of the lumber out," Leonard said. "I didn't wake up Florida, did I?"

"From what I can tell, she doesn't sleep. She hibernates."

"Help me get this out of here, would you?"

I leaned down and got hold of the heavy metal trunk, for that's what it was, and we pulled it out of there and set it on the floor beside us. It was army green and there was a padlock on it.It had CHESTER PINE stenciled in white letters on the lid. It smelled of damp earth.

Leonard got the crowbar and put it inside the loop of the padlock and started to give it a flex, but I grabbed his arm.

"Before you do that," I said, "I was thinking there might be another way."

He looked at me, and slowly it dawned on him.

10.

Leonard went to get the key while visions of outdated coupons danced in my head.

When he returned, he tried the key and the lock sprang open. Leonard removed the lock and lifted the lid. There was a puff of dust and a smell came out of there I couldn’t quite identify. Musty, a little sharp. Leonard leaned over and looked inside, and stared. I looked too.

It wasn’t coupons.

There was a small, yellowed skeleton, blackened in spots. The skull was turned toward me. Some of its teeth were milk teeth. Probably a male, though I was no expert on that. Eight, nine years old. From the forehead to a spot square between the eyes, the skull was cracked like the Liberty Bell. The legs had been sawed off at the knees so that it would fit in the trunk, and the arms were pulled free at the shoulders, twisted from their sockets like chicken wings. Beneath and around the bones were moldering magazines, and I realized that much of the smell was from rotting paper, but that certainly wasn’t the whole of it. The bones were old, however, and most of death’s stench had long left them, and perhaps what I did smell on the bones was not death at all, but mold.

We held our positions for a while, soaking it in. Leonard got one of the newspapers and crunched it over his hand and made a makeshift glove out of it. He got down on his knees and reached inside and picked up one of the arm bones. When he lifted it, it pivoted at the elbow and some of it powdered and fell back in the box. The bones that made up the hand broke loose from the wrist and rattled back into the box, fragmenting pages from one of the old magazines; the fragments wisped and fluttered like a shotgunned bird.

Leonard held the arm bone and looked at it for a while, then carefully put it back. He used the newspaper to get one of the magazines out of there. He dropped it on the floor. Pages came apart and powdered the way part of the bone had powdered.

The magazines had been mostly photographs. A lot of the photographs were still visible. I didn't like them. They were of children, male and female, in sexual positions with adults and each other. Leonard got out a couple other magazines and put them on the floor. More of the same. They were even some with children and animals.

I looked at them longer than I wanted to, to make sure I was seeing what I was seeing, then I squatted back on my haunches and took a deep breath. The breath was full of rotting paper and that other smell.

Leonard picked up the magazines and returned them to the trunk. He dropped the newspaper he was using as a glove inside and closed the lid of the trunk and put the padlock on it and locked it.

He stood up and wiped his hands on his pants and walked around in a small circle, then went to the desk chair and sat down and turned the little fan on his face. He was breathing as if he had just finished a hard workout.

"Uncle Chester," he said. "Jesus Christ."

I don't know how long we stayed like that, me on my haunches, Leonard in the chair, the fan blowing on his face. Finally, I said, "It may not be like it looks."

"How can it not be like it looks? This is the key he left me. It goes to the trunk and it's got what it's got inside. That skeleton is a kid's skeleton."

"I know."

"And those magazines. That filth … Jesus, was he getting even with me for being gay? Was he telling me he was a sicko, because he thought I was? Or did he get so far gone in the head he thought he had him a real treasure here? That I'd be one happy sonofabitch to have it. What did he do? Get this out now and then, look at the skeleton, the magazines? Jack off?"

"You're jumping pretty far."

"I'm jumping where there is to jump. The sick fuck had the gall to criticize me, and he was … Jesus, Hap. You think there are others?”

“I don’t know what to think. But you’ll need to tell the cops.”

“Yeah, they’re so fucking efficient. Jesus, Hap.”

I stood up slowly. “You could just put the trunk back in the hole, you know. He’s done what he’s done, and now he’s beyond punishment and can’t hurt anyone else. You could just go on with things.”

“You don’t mean that?”

“No.… Just a small, sad part of me means it.”

“This child needs to be identified. There might be others. Jesus. How long could this have been going on? There might be a whole slew of bodies under the house here. They could have been down there when I came for summers. He’s up here teaching me to tie a fishing fly, reading me a story, tucking me in bed, and underneath our feet, children are rotting.”

“He was sick in the head, Leonard. You know that. It could have just happened recently.”

“That only makes it a little better. Shit, it don’t make it any better.… Don’t tell Florida. Not yet.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“Christ.”

“Tell you what, Leonard. Let’s put the trunk up for now. Nothing can be changed tonight. Absorb all this best you can. Tomorrow, after Florida leaves, we’ll do what you want to do. Of course, once the police know, it isn’t a secret any longer.”

“Yeah. Help me with the trunk, Hap.”

We put the trunk back. Leonard put a few boards over the hole and we stacked some of the newspapers over that. When we were finished, Leonard said, “Thanks, man.”

“Not at all.”

We washed up and I got that drink of water I’d been wanting. I went back to the bedroom.

Florida had kicked off the sheet again. She lay on her back. Her face was smooth and beautiful, and her lips fluttered slightly. Her breasts and pubic hair caught my attention, but somehow, having seen what I had just seen, I couldn’t hold any sexual interest.

I took off my clothes and eased back in bed and lay on my back and watched the fan go around and around. I listened to the wind in the bottle tree and hoped the souls of the drug dealers were being sucked inside. I wondered if Uncle Chester's soul had gone in there, the soul of his victim … or victims.

I thought about the trunk and the magazines and I thought about Leonard. The world had certainly come down on him. I thought about the child's skeleton and what the child had been like when he was alive. Had he been happy before it happened? Thinking of Christmas? Had he been sad? Had he suffered much? Had he known what was happening?

Across the way, in the crack house, I heard someone laugh, then someone said something loud and there was another laugh, then silence.

The shadows changed, broadened. A slice of peach-colored light came through the bars and fell across the bed and made Florida's skin glow as if it had been dipped in honey. I watched her skin instead of the fan, watched it become bright with light. I rolled over and put my arm around her. Her skin was warm, but I felt cold. I got up and got the sheet and spread it over her and crawled under it and held her again. She rolled against my chest and I kissed her on the forehead.

"Is it morning yet?" she said.

"If you're a rooster," I said.

"Umm. I'm not a rooster."

"I noticed."

"Your breath stinks."

"Not yours. It's sweet as a rose.… Of course, it's growing by the septic tank."

"You know, you're my first peckerwood."

"And how was it?"

"Except for the itty-bitty dick part, great."

"Nice."

"I'll show you nice. In a moment."

She got out of bed and pulled the sheet off and wrapped it around herself. "I'm going to brush my teeth. Right back. Then you're going to brush your teeth."

"Are we going to check for cavities?"

"There's one cavity I'd like you to look at," she said, and left the room. I actually began to get the trunk and the body and the magazines off my mind. At least off the front burner.

When she came back, she said, "Leonard's up. He always get up early?"

"Sometimes."

"You think we woke him up last night? You know, we were kind of loud."

"It's OK. Why don't you take off the sheet?"

"Teeth."

I went and brushed then. I heard Leonard in the newspaper room. He seemed to be pacing. The old floorboards squeaked.

When I came back to the bedroom, Florida had taken off the sheet and was lying in bed with an unwrapped rubber on her abdomen, a folded pillow under her ass and her legs spread.

"Hint, hint," she said.

11.

It was noon and hot and no breeze was blowing. Florida was long gone to visit her mother. The curb was bordered with cop cars and unmarked cop cars. Leonard had called the police about an hour back.

Next door, the crack house was up early, surprised it wasn't them being paid a visit. They sat and stood on their porch and watched. Mohawk called to one of the plainclothes cops in the yard—a fat guy with a bad toupee—by name. The fat cop waved back.

An old black woman on a walker came out of the house across the street and stood on the porch and looked at us. It was the first time I'd seen her. She reminded me of an ancient, over sized cricket. Above her, on a high line, a crow cawed as if it needed a throat lozenge.

Leonard and I were on his front porch, sitting in the glider. Leonard looked to have shrunk during the night. His complexion had grayed.

A big black detective, fiftyish and hard looking, wearing a loose blue suit coat, was hunkered down by the glider asking us questions, while a white detective in a green Kmart suit like I had wanted to buy took notes and did battle with a fly that kept trying to light on his sweaty, balding head.

"Goddamn fly," he said.

"They go straight for shit," the black cop said.

"Yeah," said the white cop. "Guess they're gonna be all over you."

The big black cop didn't look at the white cop. You got the idea they did that kind of dull banter all the time, just to keep themselves awake. The black cop got a turd-colored cigar out of the inside of his coat and put it in his mouth and chewed it. He didn't light it. He said, "That's about it for now. The both of you will have to talk again. Maybe come down to the station."

Inside, we could hear boards being ripped up. A couple of guys in jeans and T-shirts went by us, carrying shovels into the house.

"My name's Lt. Marvin Hanson," said the black cop. "I guess I should have already told you that. My manners are short. You two might want to hang somewhere else for a while. They're gonna be digging and looking for a time.… You fellas want to go with me and have lunch? I'll make the city pay."

"Thanks," Leonard said. "We'll do that. OK, Hap? I wouldn't mind getting out of here."

"Yeah. Sure."

"What about me?" said the white cop.

"Blow it out your ass, Charlie," Hanson said.

Charlie chuckled and slipped his notepad inside his coat. Hanson stood up and I heard his knees pop.

"Be a minute," he said.

He went in the house and we stayed put. Charlie didn't say anything. He didn't look at us. He just leaned on the porch post and did battle with his fly.

Over at the crack house, a pizza delivery truck pulled up at the curb and a nervous black kid wearing a cockeyed paper cap got out and carried half a dozen large pizza boxes up to the porch.

Some jive talk and some dollars were passed around. The kid got off the porch without his paper hat. I noticed Mohawk was wearing it. It was too small and made him look like a black Zippy the Pinhead. Charlie looked over and saw him. He yelled, "Give it back, asshole."

"Ah, man," Mohawk said.

"Give it back."

"That's all right," the pizza kid said, one foot in the truck, one foot out. "They got another one they can give me."

"Naw," Charlie said. "You look good in that one."

"Whatch y'all got over there?" Mohawk said. "Dead people?"

"Butane leak. Give him the cap back."

"Yeah, sure," Mohawk said. "Come get it, kid."

“Naw,” said Charlie. “You take it down to him. And be polite. Or we might have to look your place over. See if you got any illegal substances behind the commode.”

“You got to have some cause,” Mohawk said.

“A stolen paper pizza hat.”

“I didn’t steal it. I borrowed it.” Mohawk looked around at his porch buddies and smiled, and they all smiled with him. Parade Float came out of the house and let the screen door slam like he meant some kind of business.

“That’s right, ain’t it, kid?” Parade Float yelled to the kid. “My man just borrowed that hat, didn’t he?”

“That’s all right with me,” the kid said. “Damn. You know I don’t deliver this other pizza quick, I’m gonna have to pay for it. I better rush.”

The kid got in the truck and started to close the door.

“Naw. That’s all right kid,” said Charlie. “Keep your spot. I got money. And you, Melton. Let me give you some cause to give that hat back. You don’t, I’ll shove a pipe up your ass. One shoots bullets out the end of it.”

Mohawk—or rather, Melton—smiled. “Well, since you’re talking sexy, Sergeant. I’ll give it back.”

Mohawk went down the steps and toward the kid. He walked slow and cool, like he was styling his duds. He threw the hat at the kid and the kid grabbed at it and missed it, picked it off the ground, put it on his head, got in his truck, and cranked it up. He rolled away from there bent over the wheel.

Mohawk gave us a hard stare, like any minute he might move over and whip all of us. Leonard got up and stood at the end of the porch and looked at him, said, “Why don’t you come over for coffee, later. I’d like to visit … Melton.”

Mohawk smiled loosely and went back to the porch. Some talk floated around over there and the word *motherfucker* came up. Mohawk went inside and slammed the screen door. The little crowd on the porch shuffled positions like dogs looking for the right place to shit, and finally settled down.

“One day, that place over there might have a fire,” Leonard said.

“Yeah, I’d hate that,” said the white cop. “Me being friends with Melton like I am.”

“I could tell he liked you too,” I said.

“We can’t get enough of each other,” Charlie said. “We see each other time to time at the station. Melton Danner’s who he is, but he goes by Strip to them guys. I went to high school with him. I was a couple years up on him. He was OK then, I guess.”

I said, “What I can’t figure is why you can’t just take those fucks off the street for good.”

“We’re figurin’ on that one ourselves,” Charlie said. “We’ve asked Uncle Sam about it, but he don’t have any answers, and I guess we’re not smart enough to come up with any on our own. Shitasses like that, they got rights, you know? And they got expensive lawyers ’cause they got lots of dope money. Kind of makes us feel inefficient, running them in at night so they can get out in the morning after a hot meal and a shower.”

Hanson came out of the house. He took his chewed cigar out of his mouth and flicked it gently and put it back inside his jacket. He walked to the edge of the porch and spat out a little hunk of tobacco. He looked at Charlie and he looked at us. “What?” he said.

“We were just talking to Melton,” Charlie said.

“Sweet boy, that Melton,” Hanson said. “And already got his door fixed from last time we knocked it off the hinges.”

“He’s a beaver, all right,” Charlie said.

Leonard said, “Find anything else?”

“Not yet,” Hanson said. “Come on. Let’s go. Don’t fuck things up, Charlie.”

“Hokeydoke,” Charlie said, and we followed Hanson out to his car.

12.

A burger joint was Hanson's idea of fine dining. I got coffee, a cheeseburger, and fries. The coffee tasted as if a large animal had crapped in it, but the burger and fries had just the right amount of grease; you wrung out their paper wrappers, there was enough oil to satisfy a squeaky hinge.

Hanson said to Leonard, "You doing OK?"

"Not really," Leonard said, "but another hundred years, things will get better. You didn't just invite us to eat so you could cheer me up, did you? You got something on your mind?"

Hanson experimented with his coffee. His was good too—I could tell the way his upper lip quivered. He put the cup down and got out his cigar and put it in his mouth, talked around it. "I knew your uncle. He'd been down to the station."

"For shooting my neighbors in the ass," Leonard said.

"And he reported them a half-dozen times. We take them in, they get out, they start over. It's like fighting back the Philistines with the jawbone of a hamster."

"A game," Leonard said.

"Yep," Hanson said. "And there's a nasty, persistent rumor that some of the cops take bribes."

"Naw," Leonard said. "Say it ain't so."

"All I got to say on the matter is I'm not one of them, and you damn well better believe it. As for your uncle, he fancied himself something of a policeman. You know about that?"

"I know he was a security guard. That he wanted to work in law enforcement. Wanted to be a detective. I remember he read a lot of true-crime magazines and books, read mysteries. Anything associated with crime. I know he tried to get a job on the police force, but by the time he tried he was too old, and before that, they weren't gonna have no black man on the LaBorde cops."

"Trust me," Hanson said, "it ain't no bed of roses now. We still got the legacy of Chief Calhoun."

"As I remember," I said, "in the late sixties the first Chief Calhoun gave his cops six feet of looped barbed wire with a wooden handle and told them to use it on some civil rights folks, a peaceful assembly downtown. He had his cops hit the protestors with the wire. Women and children. The town council was so broken up about it, they issued all the cops new batons and brought some martial arts guy in to show them how to use them. The batons left more legitimate marks."

"That Calhoun was before my time," Hanson said. "But his heritage lives on. Fact is, except for the rhetoric, chief we've got now, his son, makes the original Calhoun look like a liberal. I'm the only black on the police force, and it's not because they want me. Calhoun sees me, his stomach hurts and his dick shrinks up. A nigger with a gun makes him nervous, makes him dream of white sheets and burning crosses. Worse, I'm a former city nigger, a concrete and neon jigaboo. Add insult to injury, I been here nearly ten years and I'm still an outsider, and last but not least, I'm a good cop."

"And modest," I said.

"That's my most pronounced trait," Hanson said.

"You didn't invite us to lunch for this either," Leonard said, "to tell us you knew my uncle and the department thinks you're a nigger. You damn sure didn't bring us here to tell us what a good cop you are."

"I'm not sure I brought you here for any reason makes sense. I wanted to ask some more questions, kind'a."

"The sphinx would make more sense than you do," Leonard said. "You haven't asked a question one."

Hanson sipped the bad coffee without removing his cigar, said, "I don't have any reason to doubt your uncle committed this murder."

"Hey," Leonard said, "thanks for the news flash. But I'm gonna tell you something. My first impression was same as everyone else's. But I've thought on things some, and my uncle could be an asshole, but he didn't kill any kid. I knew him better than that. There's something else to all of this, I don't care how it looks."

Hanson shrugged and spread his hands. “Chester came to the station talking about child killings not so long ago. You know that?”

“No,” Leonard said. “What do you mean he talked about child killings?”

“What I’m saying, is there may be more murders, more bodies than this.”

“Didn’t think you were ripping up my flooring looking for nickels had fallen through the cracks,” Leonard said, “but you still haven’t answered my question.”

“And if he was murdering children,” I said, “why would he tell you?”

“Frankly, everyone thought he was nuts,” Hanson said. “I think he was too, toward the end there. As to why would he tell us? Throw us off. A cheap thrill. Or he was trying to prove what a good cop he could be. Uncover the murders, but not turn up the killer.”

“Which you think was him,” Leonard said.

Hanson shrugged again.

“A friend of ours thinks Chester may have had Alzheimer’s,” I said.

“Could be,” Hanson said. “But Chester said there were child murders, and now there are. One, at least.”

“Didn’t you guys check into what he said?” I said. “You do that sort of thing, don’t you?”

“When we’re not at the doughnut shop.… All Chester said was there were child murders going on in the black neighborhood, and that no one outside of the neighborhood gave a damn.”

“Was he right?” I asked.

“There were reports over the years of missing children.”

“How many years,” I said.

“Ten at least. And according to the files all those cases had been looked into, but nothing had been solved. According to written remarks made by a couple of officers no longer on the force, they felt the parents had done the children in because they were too much trouble to care for, but they couldn’t prove it, and they didn't give a damn. In fact, written at the bottom of one report was 'One less nigger won't hurt anything.' That was just ten years ago. Civil rights is sinking in slow here. At least in the area of law enforcement."

"There's always a difference when a crime is a black crime," Leonard said, "especially if it's against another black and done in the black section. Black man killed a white, cops'd be on the case like hogs on corn. Listen here, Lieutenant, this lunch is scrumpdillyicious and all, but you're trying to be too clever. You're talking, but you're not saying anything. You're trying to see if I've got any strings you can play, aren't you? Think maybe I'm holding something back, something could help your case?"

"Could be you've forgotten something," Hanson said. "Could be you know something about him from the past might have something to do with now, the murders."

"Knew anything, I'd tell you. Him being my uncle or not. Maybe 'cause he is my uncle. You don't have to burger-and-coffee me to find things out. I told you about the keys, the coupons, the paperback of *Dracula.* Turned the skeleton in, didn't I?"

"That's what you're doing?" I said to Hanson. "Trying to see if Leonard knows more than he's told?"

"He ain't hip," Leonard said to Hanson. "He can't see the signs they're on his face."

"Yeah, hip's a problem," Hanson said. "But you may not be so hip yourself, Leonard. I'm merely being polite here. Getting you away from that place, feeding your face and your partner's too. I mean, I got a few questions, but they're all routine."

Leonard smiled at Hanson.

Hanson smiled back.

A couple of sharks trying to outflank one another.

Leonard said, "Why don't you run your program by me one more time, and you can leave out the cryptic stuff that's supposed to scare me, stuff where I'm supposed to think you know more than you know, so if I know more than I'm letting on, I'll get scared and go all to pieces and spill the beans."

Hanson said, "All right then. The bare bones. Your uncle said there were child murders. There was no evidence of that. Just evidence that over the years children had come up missing. It wasn't a case I was familiar with. I gave the file notes on missing kids in the black section a once-over. It didn't look good, but there wasn't anything there to go on. What your uncle wanted was for us to give him a team, some men to work with, and he was going to solve the case."

"He said that?" Leonard said.

"Said he and his associate would prove to us something was happening and who did it."

"Who was his associate?" I asked.

"He wouldn't name him. Said it was best he kept his man on the outside. Said he wasn't willing to turn it completely over to the department because it would be swept under the rug. Said he needed our facilities. Maybe he didn't even have an associate. Maybe he did."

"You mean maybe it was me," Leonard said.

"I didn't say that," Hanson said.

"Needless to say," I said, "you didn't give Chester his own team."

"No," Hanson said. "He was pretty erratic, so he was hard to take seriously. He didn't really present any evidence, just talked. And sometimes kind of randomly. Like he'd forgotten what he'd come around for. Every time he showed up, he was a little less with it. Not that we'd have given him his own team if he hadn't been nuts. No insult intended there, Leonard."

"None taken," Leonard said. "But I still don't know any more than I've told you."

Hanson removed his cigar and put it inside his coat pocket. "OK then," he said, "I'm through being clever. For now. You fellas want more coffee?"

"I'll have a Coke," Leonard said. "Long as you're buying."

13.

Three days later and the morning was very bright and the light that came through the windows was splotched with eyeshade-green patches from the sun shining through oak leaves and there were intervals of jet-black shadows made by the bars over the windows.

We had spent the time since the discovery of the body out at our places outside of town, but now we were back. The cops were through and no more kid skeletons had been found, though Leonard had profited fifty-five cents found on the ground beneath the flooring, turned in by Hanson, who may have done it to prove to us he was an honest cop. Hell, it might have even come out of his pocket.

The law had been nice enough to haul off the newspapers and the rotten lumber, just in case a clue was lurking in a knothole or behind the sports sections, and Leonard bought some one-by-eight pine boards and a sack of nails and we went to putting in new subflooring. That's what we were doing the morning I'm talking about. The boards were fresh cut and the weather so hot you could smell the resin on them and feel a powdering of sawdust on your hands. It was a little odd, putting that flooring down and living in a house where just a few days ago Leonard had made a bony discovery, but with the newspapers hauled off, the smell of new lumber, and the hot sunshine sticking through the windows, the house seemed different somehow, as if it had never held the remains of a long-dead child.

When we had a good chunk of flooring replaced with Lap 'n' Gap decking, Leonard said, "Let's break it."

We poured some lukewarm coffee into our cups and went out on the porch and sat in the swing. It was not so humid this day, so maybe that was better, though it's always been my contention that at the bottom of it all, the distinction is bullshit. Bake or fry, hot is hot. Least when it's humid, I know I'm hot, when it isn't, I get the feeling I'm being cooked up secretively.

We sipped the coffee for a while and looked at the street and watched a few cars go by. Over at the crack house, it was quiet.

Leonard went back into the house and came out with a bag of his favorite cookies, vanilla creme. Well, actually his favorite is vanilla anything. He kept the bag on his side of the swing and didn't volunteer me any cookies. He made me ask for one.

"You haven't been the most talkative about all this," I said.

"A board's a board," Leonard said. "You do what I say, you won't fuck up."

"Your uncle, Leonard. You haven't talked about your uncle."

"I'm still putting it together. Not just the stuff with the skeleton, but my life."

"Is this going to be one of those insightful moments?"

"I think so. You see, all I ever wanted was to be loved and comfortable and fulfilled in my work. Way it stands, the family I cared about is dead, and has been dead for years, except one, and he just died, and without ever saying he was sorry or just taking me as I am. I guess I'm more comfortable now financially than I was a short time ago because he's dead, but the house I inherited and loved turns out to have a dead kid under the floorboards, and my uncle is supposed to have put him there, and if that ain't shitty enough, I've got no work to go to or feel good about. Think I sound sorry enough for myself?"

"You could maybe throw in a favorite dog got hit by a truck or something. And you didn't mention Mama or a train, like in the country-and-western songs."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. And I do have my cookies. What about Florida? What's she think about all this?"

"She came out to my house day before yesterday. She was sorry about the whole thing. Shocked. What you'd expect. She said to give you her best."

"I notice she hasn't been back over here."

"Yeah, well, we just got back. What'd you think, she'd be waiting on the porch?"

"I guess I'm getting sensitive in my old age."

"She'll be back. Or I think she will. I hope she will."

"How's the relationship?"

"I'm not sure. We like each other. We have sex and we can joke with each other, and I want there to be more to it than there is at the moment, but I get the feeling she doesn't want to be seen with me in public."

"I have the same problem."

"Seriously. I think it's because I'm white. She said as much once, but I thought she got past it."

"She may know better than feeling that way, but that doesn't mean she can get completely past it. Not in that short time anyway. Hey, look at it this way, she's made great strides. She's fucking you, and you're white."

"That's what I like about you, Leonard. You're such a romantic."

"Hap, you think my uncle killed that kid?"

"I don't know. It looks that way. Main thing is you don't think so."

"I did at first, and you told me not to jump to conclusions. Remember?"

"I'll be honest. I thought he did it the moment you found the body. I said what I said to be nice to you. There's things point to him having done it, besides the obvious, the skeleton under the floorboards. Stuff like him being a cop freak. That by itself doesn't mean anything, but lots of times, people who are into wanting to be cops and can't, people obsessed with it, have some kind of control fixation. Child abuse, the abuse of anyone weaker than you, is a form of control. Like rape. Wife-beating. Maybe your uncle was an abused child and it affected him. It all goes together."

"I know my uncle."

"You knew your uncle."

"He didn't change that much. I never got any indication from him he was an abused child. And if he was, it didn't make him a child abuser. Lots of abused children aren't child molesters. He was the one taught me how to live, how to think. He didn't just turn around one day and start wanting to kill children."

“It could have been going on for a time.”

Leonard shook his head. “Nope. And I don’t think he had a power fixation. I think the man wanted a job with respect, and law enforcement was it. He just never got it because of who he was and where he was. He may have begun to lose his head some at the end, but that doesn’t mean he lost his ethics. I want to know what happened, Hap, no matter what the results, and I want you to help me.”

“What makes you think you have to ask?”

14.

We finished our coffee and were about to go back to work, when across the street we saw the old, black lady on the walker come onto her front porch. It was a slow and dutiful process, her coming outside, and watching her made me nervous. The screen door slammed her in the hip because she couldn't move away from it fast enough, and she wobbled and the porch groaned loud enough for us to hear across the street. I bet she didn't weigh ninety pounds, but I could see boards sagging as she went.

She looked across the street at us and we waved. She waved back, careful to do it so her arm didn't come off at the shoulder.

She stood in the frame of her walker and watched us awhile, then slowly lifted her hand and flicked a come-over signal with her fingers.

We went over and stood at the bottom step of her porch and looked up at her. The hot sunlight lay on her like a slice of thin cheese and showed her to no advantage. She looked as if she had been boiled down and wrung out and left to dry. The wrinkles in her face were very deep and rivered with sweat. Her prune-colored eyes were runny and the whites were no longer white; they were a Hiroshima of exploded blood vessels: pink, red, and blue. Her false teeth hung too low in her mouth at the top and were set too high at the bottom, giving the impression of living things trying to climb out of a hole. Her head was mostly bald and her hair was spaced in gray tufts and looked like dirty cotton that had been blown by the wind to collect on a damp, black rock. Her breasts sagged and wobbled against her ribs inside her simple blue shift. She wore fuzzy pink house shoes on her feet and one black toe, like a water-logged pecan, poked through a hole in the right one.

I tried to imagine her younger, middle-aged even, but it was impossible to envision that she might ever have looked any different.

I said, “We help you with something, ma’am?”

She took a deep breath, collecting enough wind to speak, ignored me, and turned to Leonard. “You,” she said, “the colored boy,” just in case Leonard might be confused on his ancestry. “I heard about your uncle. I don’t believe it for a minute. I don’t care if they found babies in his toilet, he didn’t murder and saw up no chil’ren. I’ve known that boy all his life.”

“Word sure gets around,” Leonard said.

“Ain’t no secrets in nigger town,” she said.

“No, ma’am, guess not,” Leonard said.

“And if the policemens catch anybody it’ll be an accident. They done decided it was Chester, and that will be the end of it.”

“What I’m afraid of too, ma’am,” Leonard said.

“Them boys next door,” she said. “Y’all don’t have nothing to do with them niggers. They’re on drugs.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Leonard said. “We was kinda thinkin’ they were.”

“You can tell way they walk,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am,” Leonard said.

“And they sell’m too,” she said. “Every little chile you see go in over there and come out, they done sold them some drugs. They kill’n their own, and I betcha some fat-cat peckerwood somewheres is on the gettin’ end of the money.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Leonard said.

She looked at me, as if examining my fat-cat white peckerwood tendencies. I guess none showed. Her wrinkles shifted. She said, “Listen here, I got some apple and pear pies baking. You boys come on in and help me get ’em out of the oven a’foe they burn up. I wore myself out bakin’ em.”

We mounted the porch and it screamed at us. I looked down and saw a split in the boards and the ground looking up at me. That old lady fell through those boards, she’d break a leg or kill herself.

The smell of baking pies from inside was rich and fine and made me hungry. I opened the screen door and held it. Leonard stood beside her while she used the walker, and after she made a few short steps she said to me, “Close the screen door, son. You’re lettin’ in flies. I’m gonna be coming for a bit.”

I closed the screen until she got closer, which, true to her words, took awhile, and when she was close enough, I held the screen open and she and Leonard went past to the tune of straining boards.

I followed inside and closed the screen and left the front door open because it was hot in there with all the heat from the oven and there being only a little rotating fan on the kitchen table to cool the place. I felt mildly dizzy, as if I had been riding too fast on a merry-go-round. When I looked back at the screen door, it had begun to bead and buzz with house flies hoping for a chance to wipe their shitty legs on some pies.

The kitchen was very clean, and beneath the smell of the pies I caught a hint of Pine Sol. I wondered if she cleaned the place herself, and couldn’t figure the how of it if she did. Being frail as she was, a bathroom trip would be like an expedition through the South American jungles.

One wall was quite amazing. It was papered with snapshots taped to it, some in color, some black and white, some very old and very faded. Where the wall gave them up was a doorway, and through the doorway I could see another room, and the part of the wall I could see in there was also covered in photographs.

Over the stove hung an ancient dime-store painting of a serene Jesus dressed in red robe and sandals, a worshipful beggar at his feet. The painting was in a frame behind clean glass, but the frame was too big and the glass wasn’t pressing the picture and the picture had started to fade and heat-curl at one corner, giving the impression that Jesus’s robe was rolling up and would soon expose private matters to the beggar.

The rest of the kitchen was cabinets and pot-holder hooks with pot holders and transparent, time-yellowed curtains over a slanting window.

“Turn the oven off and get the pies out,” she said, and leaned forward on her walker as if getting lower would help her breathe better.

Leonard turned off the oven and got a gloved pot holder off a hook and opened the oven and took out three thick and beautifully crusted pies and sat them on top of the stove. The smell of pies filled my head thick as an allergy.

The old lady said, “You don’t remember me, do you, Lenny?”

Leonard closed up the oven and looked at her for a long moment, then shook his head. “No, ma’am. Guess I don’t.Haven’t been back here in a time. I came to visit my uncle, it was the Browns lived here. Mr. Brown, he worked for the railroad or somethin’.”

“Browns are all dead and buried,” she said. “They call me MeMaw.”

“MeMaw?” Leonard said. “MeMaw Carter. You used to live over on Sheraton. I used to go over to the park there. My uncle brung me. Y’all visited while I played.”

“That was just for a couple of years,” she said. “So I ain’t surprised you don’t remember me. You was practically a baby. I don’t never forget nothing, though. You know there ain’t no park there now? None you can use, anyway.”

“No, ma’am.”

“Drug niggers took it over. Kids with them beepers and needles and pistols in their pants. Ain’t no place to do nothing ’round here anymore but get killed. My youngest son, Clarence, moved me here ten year ago. Thought it was a better place than Sheraton Street. Was, then. Old house was falling apart and all them drug niggers around. Now I got them ’cross the street and this old house ain’t much.”

“You used to tell me stories about Br’er Rabbit and such,” Leonard said.

“And you ate my cookin’ when you come with your uncle. You liked pies and vanilla cookies. Any kind of vanilla cookie.”

“Yes, ma’am, that’s me. I oughta remembered you right off.”

She showed Leonard an acre of dentures and some of her wrinkles straightened out. “I’ve changed a little, Lenny. You know how old I am?”

“No, ma’am. I’m no good guessing ages.”

“Don’t guess no woman’s age,” she said. “That’ll just cause you trouble.’ Course, you get old as me, it don’t matter no more. One day to the next couldn’t make me look no older. Toe long I’ll be bakin' pies for Jesus.… I'm ninety-five years old."

"You don't look it," Leonard said.

She made a noise in her throat that sounded like crisp crackers being crumbled. "You don't start lyin' to MeMaw now. I look a hundred and ninety-five. You boys, help me sit down."

We got hold of her arms, which felt like sweaty sticks covered in foam rubber, and helped her away from the walker and onto a hard-backed chair at the kitchen table.

She sighed and said, "Thank you. That sittin' part and gettin' up by myself tuckers me. Turn the fan on me."

I twisted the fan around so that the rotation stayed mostly in her direction. I said, "You like a drink of water?"

"No," she said, "I'm OK, but I'd like you boys to help me eat some of that pie."

Leonard sliced us pie and poured us milk and we ate. The pie was good. It made me nostalgic for home and my mother, but my mother was long gone and so was the home where I had been raised.

I turned and looked at the photographs. They were of all manner of folks. People black and white and brown. The clothes and hairstyles and backgrounds revealed just how long ago this whole photographic display had begun, though a lot of the photos appeared to have been taken in recent years on MeMaw's front porch, or in her yard, or right here in the kitchen. A healthy number of them showed people eating at her table.

"Quite a collection of photographs you have there, MeMaw," I said.

She turned her head toward the wall and looked at them. "Got a whole nuther room of 'em. I always take pictures of folks. Cheers me, all them I've met. I look at them walls, I got memories."

"Who are they all?" Leonard asked.

"Some family," MeMaw said. "Most ain't, though. There's people come by to check the gas meter or the water or bring the mail, and they're nice enough, I'll take their picture and put it up there, try and remember what we talked about that day. This here,” she waved her finger at a row of photos, “is all my family.”

Some of the photos she was pointing to were old and some were new, and some had been taken by someone other than MeMaw, because she was in a number of the photos with her children. In the earlier ones she didn’t look a lot different than she did now until you got to the oldest black and whites, and even then she looked elderly, but with darker hair and more of it, less wrinkles maybe, and a few of her own teeth.

She pointed out and named her children, and there were eight of them, five girls and three boys. The first seven close together, the last, a boy, born when she was forty-five, way past the time she thought she’d have another child.

“Ain’t one more loved than the other,” MeMaw said, “but Hiram, he’s the baby. A surprise. Lives in Tyler, but travels a lot. He’s a salesman.”

I looked at her baby. In the most recent picture she had of Hiram he looked my age and size, but with thicker shoulders. He had a personable face.

The latest photograph of her eldest child, Pleasant, showed a woman who looked seventy-five if she was a day. MeMaw said she was retired and had a little check, but was in business for herself, selling leather-stitched white Bibles.

We got a look at all the grandkids and great-grandkids, and she told us their names and stories about each one.

“How come you started doing this, MeMaw?” Leonard asked. “Taking all these pictures? Puttin’ ’em on the wall?”

“All my family done gone cept one boy, Cletus. Moved off tryin’ to get somethin’ decent for themselves. I wanted somethin’ to do, and after my husband, Mr. Carter, died, I took to takin’ even more pictures. Anyone I liked, I took their picture and taped it to the wall. Bet I’ve gone through half-dozen of them Polaroids. Every time I wear one out, my children buy me another. There’s pictures of your Uncle Chester in the other room, and an old one of you. I took it when you was just a child.”

“No joke?” Leonard said. “Be all right I see them?”

“Have to look for them,” she said. “I ain’t aimin’ to get up right now. They’ll be in the other room.”

I went in there with Leonard, and it was stuffy and hot and all the walls were full of photographs, some relatively fresh, some wrinkling from age and heat and turning green. It made me feel a little lonely somehow.

On one wall near the floorboard Leonard found a black-and-white picture of his uncle and himself sitting on a merry-go-round in a park, most likely the park Leonard talked about over on Sheraton Street. Leonard was probably about ten years old and his uncle was our age.

The photograph wasn't too good, and Leonard's features faded into his black skin. His teeth showed white in his face and he looked happy. His uncle had caught a ray of sunlight and was more defined. He looked a lot like Leonard looked now. I took a minute to make fun of Leonard, just so he knew I loved him, and he showed me his middle finger to show he cared about me too.

We checked around for a long, hot time and found more photos of his uncle at different ages, and finally, on the way out, we came across one near the door. The Uncle Chester there looked a lot like the Uncle Chester I had seen in his coffin, only a little less puffy and a lot less dead. He was standing next to a tall angular black man about his age, and he had his arm around him. They weren't exactly smiling. They looked self-conscious, as if preparing for a hemorrhoid operation but bound to make the best of it.

"Who's that with him?" I asked.

"I don't know," Leonard said.

MeMaw heard us. "I'm pretty sure that's Illium," she said. "Take it off the wall and let me see it."

Leonard freed the photo and took it into the kitchen and gave it to MeMaw. She said, "That's who it is. Illium Moon."

"Who is he?" Leonard asked.

"He and your uncle was near growed together at the hip," she said. "You seen one, you near saw the other. Illium moved here from San Antonio. He'd been a policemans or somethin' like that. He and your uncle met at the domino shack up by the highway."

"Illium still around?" Leonard asked.

She studied on that for a moment. "I ain't seen him for a bit.

Couple weeks, I reckon. Hadn't really thought about it. Your uncle not around, I ain't expected to see him. Got so you couldn't think of one without the other."

"You know where he lives?" Leonard asked. "Being a friend of Uncle Chester's, I thought I might like to talk to him."

"No, I don't," MeMaw said, "but he works over to the colored Baptist church sometimes. I know that much. He used to drive the bookmobile too."

"For the library?" I asked.

"It wasn't the real library, the one downtown," she said. "Illium, he was like your uncle. He wanted to do good by folks, so he got this bus … or what do they call them now?"

"Van?" I asked.

"That's it," she said. "He had him a van fixed up with his own books, and he went around and loaned books here in the East Side, like a library. I never did take none of 'em, ten year ago I quit reading anything sides the good book since I couldn't get around good enough to go to church. I figured God would let me slide on that, I kept knowledge of His word. But I thought Illium was a good man. Sometimes your uncle helped him out, rode around with him."

"Can you tell us where this church is where Illium works?" Leonard asked.

"I can," MeMaw said. "But first, Lenny, you go over there and open that cabinet."

Leonard went over to the cabinet she was indicating with a cadaverous finger and opened it. There was a snapshot camera inside.

"Bring me that camera," she said.

Leonard did.

MeMaw looked at me, said, "What's your name now, son?"

"Hap Collins," I said.

"Hap, you and Lenny sit together at the table."

We sat and pulled our chairs close and leaned our heads together.

"Ya'll'd make good salt and pepper shakers," she said, raised the camera to her face, grinned, said, “Now, boys, say cheese.”

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“Do you remember seeing Illium at the funeral?” I asked.

“No,” Leonard said, “but I wasn’t looking for him. He could have been there.”

“I don’t think so, and if he and your uncle were as close as MeMaw claims, he oughta been, don’t you think?”

I shifted gears on my old Dodge pickup and we climbed a hill full of potholes and crumbling slabs of weather-heaved blacktop. The sun was near midsky, and it shone on the faded gray hood of my truck and made me squint, and the hot wind blowing through the open windows made me sweat as if I were in a sauna. I reminded myself that in another couple of hours it would really be hot.

I had brought my truck back with me when we returned to Uncle Chester’s house from our three days in the country, and I was glad to have it, old and uncomfortable as it was. When I first moved in with Leonard, he had picked me up and brought me here and left my truck back home because it was giving me trouble. Turned out the trouble was burned-out rings and cheap gas and no money to fix it.

But on our return to Uncle Chester’s, Leonard needed a way to haul lumber, so he paid for me to get a ring job and real gas. Now, I was no longer polluting half of East Texas, and felt better about that, and without my telltale cloud of black smoke following me I was less embarrassed to be seen driving it.

We were following MeMaw’s directions, looking for the First Primitive Baptist Church, and along the way I got a good look at the East Section, saw parts of it I had never seen before, realized just how truly isolated I was from the way of life here. Along with decent houses, there were houses next to them without electric wires, houses broke down and sagging, their sides actually held up with posts, and out back were outdoor toilets and rusted-out appliances in which garbage had been burned and not collected because the garbage trucks didn't always come down here.

Black children with blacker eyes wearing dirty clothes sat in yards of sun-bleached sand and struggling grass burrs and looked at us without enthusiasm as we drove past.

It was near midday and grown men of working ages were wandering the streets like dogs looking for bones, and some congregated at storefronts and looked lonesome and hopeless and watched with the same lack of enthusiasm as the children as we drove past.

"Man, I hate seeing that,"' Leonard said. "You'd think some of these sonofabitches would want to work."

"You got to have jobs to work," I said.

"You got to want jobs too," Leonard said.

"You saying they don't?"

"I'm saying too many of them don't. Whitey still has them on his farm, only they ain't doing nothing there and they're getting tidbits tossed to them like dogs, and they take it and keep on keeping on and wanting Whitey to do more."

"Maybe Whitey owes them."

"Maybe he does, but you can be a cur or you get up off your ass and start seeing yourself as a person instead of an underdog that's got to take those scraps. I've always worked, Hap. Be it in the rose fields or as a handyman laborer or raising hunting dogs, and you ain't never known me to take handout checks because I'm black, and my uncle didn't either."

"Most of the people taking handout checks are white, Leonard."

"That's true, and I ain't got nothing for those sonofabitches either. Unless you can't walk or you're in temporary straits, there ain't no excuse for it."

"One minute it's things are bad here because it's the black section of town, and next time you open your mouth you're saying it's the blacks' fault. You can't have it both ways."

"Yes, you can. Ain't nothing one way, Hap. Everything's got two sides and sometimes the same problem's got two different answers. It's the ambition and pride these folks are missing. They don't want nothing but to exist. They think God owes 'em a living.”

“And some of them just haven’t got jobs, Leonard, and it’s as simple as that.”

“Some of them,” Leonard said. “Some gonna tell you too they got to sell drugs to survive ’cause things are bad, and I say you can rationalize anything. ‘I got to sell drugs, I got to sell myself, I got to eat shit with flies on it.’ You don’t got to do nothin’ like that. You grew up poor, Hap. You ever want to sell drugs or hire out to get your dick sucked or maybe lay back and take a check?”

“Government could mail me a check, they wanted to. But I’d want someone to go out to the mailbox and bring it to me. Maybe getting my dick sucked wouldn’t be so bad either, especially someone wanted to pay me for it.”

“Bullshit. I know you. You got pride.”

“Not everyone has had the chance to have pride, Captain Know-It-All. You don’t come with it built in. Like new cars, there are some options got to be installed.”

“Yeah, but there’s them that go out and get the options, use their own tools to put them in. Like your dad and my uncle. From what you’ve told me, your dad didn’t have it so easy.”

He hadn’t. His mother had died when he was eight, and his father had put him to work in the cottonfields, and when Dad didn’t pick the same cotton as a grown man, his father had put the horsewhip to him. I remember as a child seeing my father without his shirt, lying on the floor in front of the TV after a hard day’s work at his garage, and there were thin white lines across his back, scars from the whip. My father could neither read nor write. He never missed a day’s work. He never complained. He died with mechanic’s grease on his face and hands. I’m glad I never met my grandfather. I’m glad he was dead before I was born.

“I had advantages still, Leonard. I’m white. Even the worst of the whites, the white trash, have had it better than minorities.”

“Minorities are one thing. Choice is another. Check and see how many Orientals are on the welfare roles. You ain’t gonna find many.”

“Check and see how many of those Orientals have ancestors were owned by white folks and sold on slave blocks. Frankly, Leonard, I think a Bible quotation is in order here. 'Judge not least ye be judged.' That's close, anyway."

"Yeah, well, I got one too. 'Decide to be a fuckup, you're gonna be a fuckup.' "

"What bible's that in?"

"Leonard's Bible."

I shut my mouth and brooded. There was some truth in what Leonard said, but ultimately, in my mind, there's no one more obnoxious and self-righteous than the self-made man. And no one more admirable.

Leonard told me to take a right and I did and we rolled off the ravaged blacktop and onto a smooth cement street with beautiful sweet gum trees and broad-limbed pecans skirting it on either side. The sunlight made bruise-blue shadows out of the trees and laid them on the street and behind the trees on either side were nice, inexpensive houses with clean sidewalks leading up to them.

Leonard looked at the house and said, "See, ain't everybody down here got to live in the garbage and walk the streets."

"They got jobs, Leonard."

"My point exactly."

"Remind me to kill you in your sleep," I said.

Soon the street gave up its trees, and there was just the blistering sunlight and on the right a couple acres of land and on it a parking lot and a whitewash church with a plain black-and-white sign out front that read FIRST PRIMITIVE BAPTIST CHURCH. REVEREND HAMIL FITZGERALD OFFICIATING.

Behind the church was a simple blue frame house with a well-tended lawn with a sprinkler spitting on it and onto a number of circular, brick-enclosed flower beds. In the driveway was a recently washed last year's blue Chevy and parked nearby was a small blue-and-white bus with FIRST PRIMITIVE BAPTIST CHURCH painted on the side. The bus looked fairly old, and a few of the back windows had been replaced with plyboard. I figured if you scratched the blue-and-white paint deep enough, you'd find a yellow school bus underneath—one of those they used to call the short bus, the one the retarded kids rode to school.

I pulled up in the lot and parked.

Leonard said, “I see a church and I get to thinking how black folks are mostly taught how to accept their misery through God. It pisses me off.”

I didn’t say anything. We got out of the truck and Leonard looked at the church sign, said, “Never can figure that ‘Primitive’ part out. What’s that mean? Everybody carries spears?”

“Leonard,” I said. “You got a bad attitude. We find the Reverend, maybe I ought to do the talking.”

“A white guy?” Leonard said. “I don’t think so. Trust me, I know how to warm a guy like the Reverend up. I grew up here, remember. I can play the game, I have to.”

We walked alongside the church and on toward the house out back. Back of the church was green grass and a playground that broke into the side yard of the house. The air smelled like mowed grass and floral perfume.

We could hear a sound coming from the back of the church, a thumping sound, so we stopped to listen to it and to the sound of the sprinkler sputtering, and within seconds we both knew what the thumping sound was because we had both made that sound before.

It was the sound of fists striking a speed bag, quick and rhythmic, sweet and sure.

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The sound came from an elongated, low-roofed addition to the back of the church, and from where we now stood, we could see the church was much larger than it appeared from the street. We walked toward the sound.

The back door was propped open, and we went in and down the hall, following our ears. We came to a closed door on the right, and the sound came from behind it. I opened the door and looked inside and felt the air-conditioning and liked it.

It was a small but nice gymnasium. The floor was smooth and shiny and there was a basketball goal at one end, and against one wall some pull-out bleachers. In a corner of the gym was a speed-bag prop, and striking the bag was a bare-to-the-waist black man wearing blue jogging pants and black boxing shoes.He was fortyish, about five-ten with thick shoulders and sweaty skin and close-cropped graying hair. He looked strong, if a bit thick in the middle, but the middle was solid as a truck tire, and the muscles in his arms and chest coiled and released as he hit. He moved quickly and expertly and the bag sang to him as he did.

We stood there for a moment, watching him work, admiring it, then he paused for a moment, caught the bag with one hand, blew out some air, turned his head and saw us.

“I do something for you gentlemen?” he asked, and started slipping off the bag gloves.

We walked over to him and he tossed the gloves aside and we shook hands and introduced ourselves. He turned out to be the Reverend Fitzgerald, his own sweet self.

“You look pretty good,” I said.

“Golden Gloves when I was a kid,” he said, but not to me. He was studying Leonard. “I teach some of the neighborhood boys. I know you?” he asked Leonard.

“I don’t think so,” Leonard said.

“Mr. Fitzgerald,” I said. “We’re looking for a man we’ve been told works here. Illium Moon.”

“Illium?” he said. He used his hands to wipe sweat from his chest, then wiped his hands on his pants. “Haven’t seen him in days. Does a bit of handy work around here now and then. He’s retired, so he doesn’t want anything steady. Sort of chooses his own hours. I pay him a little. He helps run some of the children’s programs from time to time. Assistant-coaches volleyball and baseball.”

“Drives a bookmobile too,” I said.

“That’s right,” he said. “But not for the church. That’s his own project. He’s got all manner of projects.”

“When did you see him last?” Leonard asked.

“I don’t know,” Fitzgerald said. “Week or two ago. You men don’t look like cops.”

“Aren’t,” I said. “We just need to find him on a personal matter.”

“Serious?” Fitzgerald asked.

“He was a friend of Leonard’s uncle. We’d just like to talk to him. Know where he lives?”

“Out in the country. Somewhere off Calachase Road. To be honest, I’m not entirely certain. Here, let’s step into my office.”

We followed Fitzgerald out of the gym and down the hallway and into a small paneled room with a desk and the expected religious paintings: Jesus on the cross. Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist. Some guy wrestling with an angel. On his desk Fitzgerald had one of those old clay ashtrays like get made at camp. It was gray-green and cracked and I had an idea about it and thought I’d warm him up. “Your kid make that?” I said.

“I’m not married,” he said. “Actually, I made that when I was a kid. For my father. Sit down.”

So much for warming him up. There were a couple of leather chairs in front of the desk, and a similar one behind it. Fitzgerald took his position behind the desk, and me and Leonard manned the remaining chairs. Mine had something wrong with the swivel and wouldn’t move, but Leonard’s worked just fine. He was turning slowly left to right. He always got the best stuff.

We sat for a moment listening to the air-conditioning hum. Fitzgerald clasped his hands together. He had a friendly face. The kind of face you'd tell your troubles to. He said, "Just as part of the job, may I ask you boys a question?"

"Sure," Leonard said, "but would it be OK not to call us boys? It's not that I'm overly sensitive, but I'm getting a little long in the tooth to visualize myself in short pants."

Fitzgerald smiled. "All right. It's a habit. We preachers get so we can't help calling every one boy, or son, or daughter. But the question was, are you fellas Christians?"

"Well, you've put us on the spot," Leonard said. "And the answer is no. For both of us."

Fitzgerald looked at me for agreement. I nodded, said, "Yeah. And no offense, Reverend, but we didn't come here to discuss religion. We just need to find Illium Moon."

"I've told you all I know about where he lives," Fitzgerald said. "I've never been to his place. I just know generally where it is."

I didn't believe that. I felt he didn't trust our motives, and that he wasn't about to give out Illium's address to a couple guys he didn't know, and infidels to boot. I respected that, but I still wanted to know where Illium Moon lived. I was considering an approach when suddenly Fitzgerald waved a finger at Leonard. "Wait a minute," he said. "I didn't think I knew the face, but something was bothering me. It's the name. Pine? You the nephew of Chester Pine?"

Leonard assured him he was.

"I've heard about you," he said.

"Word gets around," Leonard said. "And so do newspapers."

"Yours is a family with problems," Fitzgerald said.

"You might say that," Leonard said. "But not of our own choosing. Actually, far as family goes, taking or leaving—let's make that leaving—a few not-too-close and boring cousins, I'm all the family I care about. 'Cept Hap here."

"He appears to be a very distant relation," Fitzgerald said, and smiled when he said it.

"We couldn't keep him out of the bleach," Leonard said.

Fitzgerald looked at me and I grinned, way you do when you're trying to let a third party know you know the guy with you sees himself as a real card, but you merely tolerate him.

Fitzgerald turned back to Leonard. He said, "Your uncle had a quick mouth too. Like you. I didn't like him."

"That's honest."

"He came around with Illium from time to time. I had a few unpleasant conversations with him."

"About what?" Leonard asked.

"About God and religion," Fitzgerald said. "He had a kind of cavalier attitude about the subjects."

"That was Uncle Chester, all right," Leonard said.

"I assure you I wish no one ill," Fitzgerald said, "but the Lord seems to have made his statement with your uncle."

"That didn't have quite the Christian ring I'd have expected," Leonard said. "You sound a little too goddamned happy."

"I prefer you not use the Lord's name in vain," Fitzgerald said. "Especially in His house."

"And I'd prefer you not malign my uncle," Leonard said.

"Sincerely," Fitzgerald said, "I didn't mean to put it that bluntly. I apologize."

Leonard didn't respond. He just studied the Reverend's face. I said, "Reverend. We didn't come here for a fight, and I don't see how we've gotten into one. We got a couple questions to ask. That's it, and we'll be out of your hair."

"You're not in a fight," the Reverend said. "I'm suggesting, respectfully, that you don't use that kind of language here, and I'm apologizing for what I said. I'm overly zealous sometimes. You see the things I see, hear the stories I hear, you get so you want to crusade, do something about the badness out there. Open the world up to God."

"All right," Leonard said. "Apology accepted. And I apologize for my language. Not because I think it matters, but because it is your church."

"However you prefer to see it," the Reverend said. "Listen, about your uncle. Let me say a little more. I'm not happy about what happened to him. I merely meant to point out that we all face judgment in the eyes of the Lord. Not just your uncle, you and me as well. I'm suggesting only that we should all strive to stand in the Lord's light without blinking. I didn't mean it the way it sounded. Or perhaps there *was* some bitterness there. Your uncle was a witty man, and quick with a quip. He seemed to have a special hatred for religion."

"Hypocrisy is what bothered him," Leonard said. "Not religion."

Reverend Fitzgerald refused to be baited. He was very pleasant when he said, "It's unusual that your uncle and Illium Moon were such good friends. Mr. Moon is quite religious. Very involved in church activities. Especially those dealing with youth. And considering what I've read in the papers …"

"Don't believe everything you read in the papers," Leonard said.

"Very well," Fitzgerald said. "I'll keep that in mind. You know, I've been sitting here trying to recall what I've heard about you, Mr. Pine, and now it comes back to me."

"I hope it's flattering," Leonard said.

"You're a homosexual and you flaunt it," Fitzgerald said.

"I don't wear Easter hats and high heels and study floral arrangements, that's what you mean," Leonard said, "but I don't hide out in the kitchen under a chair either."

"You take pride in it," Fitzgerald said.

"You're no one I have to answer to," Leonard said.

"No," Fitzgerald said. "You don't have to answer to me. The Lord is who you answer to. I've nothing against you. I'm merely saying, your way is not the way of the Lord. Are you acquainted with your Bible, Mr. Pine?"

"Me and Hap here were just quoting Bible verses on the way over."

"Are you familiar with the story of Sodom and Gomorrah?"

"Yep," Leonard said. "It's a favorite Baptist queer allegory. I just get cold chills all over when I hear it. Which is pretty often. I especially like where Lot's wife gets turned into a pillar of salt."

“You know the story, then learn from it, sir. Lot met the angels of the Lord at the gates of Sodom and took them to his house for a feast, and the house was soon surrounded by homosexuals who wanted to know them.”

“ ‘Know them’ means ‘fuck them,’ right?” Leonard said.

Fitzgerald batted his eyes a couple of times but pretended not to hear and plowed ahead. “And the homosexuals gathered around Lot’s house and demanded that he bring the angels out and give them to the crowd, and the angels struck the crowd blind. Does that sound like tolerance for homosexuals, Mr. Pine?”

“All right,” Leonard said, “you didn’t get to the pillar-of-salt part, but you left out some good stuff. Like how Lot, wanting to protect these angels who needed no protection, offered his daughters to the crowd. Now there’s the exemplary father I’d like to have. ‘Hey, girls, we got these guests the queers want to screw, but, well, hell, they’re angels and they haven’t finished their chicken-fried steaks, so I’m gonna give them you instead. Shuck your panties and hit the porch.’ ”

“You have an unfortunate turn of phrase, Mr. Pine,” Fitzgerald said. “The problem you have is not dissimilar to that your uncle had. And for that matter, I’ve had. Yeah, even preachers can have a crisis of faith. But in time it came clear to me. What you’re doing is what I was doing. You’re looking for God to operate on human levels. Forget that. God lays down the law, and the law is there, and it’s not for us to question. It makes no difference if it seems just in our eyes or not. It is the law, and that is the long and the short of it.”

“Religion’s not the question here,” I said, “and we didn’t mean to get off on it.”

“It’s always the question,” Fitzgerald said. “Mr. Pine, be proud now, for when you leave this world of the flesh and meet your Maker and you are cast down into the fiery lava pits of hell, your pride will fail you. Rationale will fail you. The law is the law.”

“Now I know why you call this church primitive,” Leonard said.

I thought: *That’s warming him up, Leonard. That’s playing the game.* Only way we could have made a worse impression was if we’d come in with our pants off swinging our dicks.

“Sin is a primitive act,” Fitzgerald said. “Our beliefs here are as basic as I’ve stated. They’re not to be debated, because they are the law and the law is made by a Judge wiser and more powerful than we. In time, in the hereafter, we’ll understand His judgments. And if not, that is not ours to consider. It is our job to obey the law of God. It’s that simple. And if there was ever a time we needed the laws of God, it’s now. Look what this world is coming to. Forget the world. Look right here. We have a tremendous drug problem right here in LaBorde, Texas. Especially right here in the black sector. Kids sticking poison in their veins. Children prostituting themselves for money and dope. Did you know that many of the mothers here in our black community are unmarried? Their children are illegitimate?”

“I’ve heard that rumor, yes,” Leonard said.

“They don’t see that as sin, Mr. Pine. The world says that’s OK. Fornicating is acceptable. These girls, children really, as young as thirteen and fourteen, have produced baby boys conceived by lust and born of the bile of sin. And who is to take care of these children? The children who bore them? What sort of future will they have? The children of children.”

“What you need here is something practical,” Leonard said. “Not more religion. Lessons in birth control and disease prevention are the ticket.”

“That doesn’t stop the sin,” Fitzgerald said. “The act itself. Sex out of wedlock. Abstinence is what’s needed.”

“That’s all right too,” Leonard said. “But for those who don’t plan to abstain, they need rubbers.”

Fitzgerald took a deep breath, but when he spoke, he was as patient as ever. “That’s exactly the problem, Mr. Pine. Tolerance.Too much tolerance. There will be punishment for those who sin against God. That includes you. Homosexuals will not enter into the House of the Lord. Ask God to forgive you for the perverse things you’ve done with other men. Turn your life over to Him.”

“I ain’t gettin’ down on my knees for nobody,” Leonard said.

Fitzgerald turned his attention to me. “What about you, Mr. Collins?”

“Hey, I didn’t do anything,” I said.

“You have to believe to be saved,” Fitzgerald said.

“I’ll think it over,” I said. “Who knows? I might be back.”

Fitzgerald smiled politely. “Well, it doesn’t seem I can be of much aid to you gentlemen, in the areas of the spiritual, or with directions. I’ve told you all I know about Mr. Moon’s address. Somewhere off Calachase Road.” Fitzgerald put his hands on his desk as if to rise. “I’d really like to get back to my workout, now.”

Outside, where the church lawn met the lawn of the little blue house, a huge man stood in the yard. He was over six feet, wearing gray cotton work clothes and his skin was black as sin and everything about him was big and tight and round, as if he were made up of boulders carefully stacked. In fact, there may have been enough of him there for a mining claim.

He was moving the sprinkler and hose, and when he did, little boulders ran up his arms and crunched and ran back down again. His mouth was open and he was studying us. From a distance, he seemed to have very small teeth. He wasn’t concerned that the water from the sprinkler was spraying all over him. He watched us as we went, and may have watched us after our backs were turned.

Out in the parking lot, I said, “That went well, don’t you think? Seldom have I seen two people warm to each other so quickly.”

“Yeah,” Leonard said. “Bet me and Fitzgerald ride together to the next Baptist convention.”

17.

East Texas weather, being the way it is, by the time we got back from the church to the house, ready for lunch, it changed. Before we could get mustard plastered on our ham sandwiches, the hot, blinding sunlight was sacked by hard-blowing clouds out of the west. They swept down black and vicious and brought with them Zorro slashes of lightning and lug bolts of rain.

The rain fell cool and solid for two days, hammered the house, churned pea gravel out of the driveway, broke loose the packed red clay beneath, and ran it in bloody swirls beneath the porch and on either side of the house to collect in the sunburned grass like gore in a crew cut.

The rain was so constant the birds quit hiding. You could hear them singing and chirping between flashes of lightning and rolls of thunder. Not a good sign. It meant the rain would continue, and most likely for some time. Outside, except when lightning zippered open the sky, it was black as the high stroke of midnight on a moonless night.

On the second day of the rain, late afternoon, I glanced up from reading *The Hereafter Gang* by lamplight and looked at Leonard's hard profile framed before the living-room window. He had pulled a hard-backed chair there and assumed the position of *The Thinker*, elbow on knee, fist under chin. He was observing the rain, and I watched as a snake tongue of blue-white lightning licked the outside air above and beyond the bars and strobed his skin momentarily blue. Inside the house, the air became laced with sulfurous-smelling ozone, and I could feel my hide and hair crackle like hot cellophane.

Leonard looked at me. "You told Florida to stay home?"

"Sure, but she listens way you listen. Not at all."

"Then she ought to be here pretty soon?"

"If she didn't run off in a ditch."

Earlier, bored out of my mind and tired of working on the flooring with Leonard, I'd braved the storm with a flimsy umbrella and gone over to MeMaw's and used her phone and called Florida at her office.

Turned out Florida was doing almost as much business as a nun in a whorehouse. She wanted to come by and eat supper with us. I tried to talk her out of it, the weather being like it was, but she told me she was coming anyway and she'd bring a big Pepsi. I wondered if that was some kind of bribe.

I left MeMaw's after being happily force-fed a slice of fresh cornbread slathered in butter, and waded back to the house through ankle-deep water that flooded down the street and tried to trip me.

Back inside and dried off, I looked at my watch and calculated when I had talked to Florida and told her not to come and she'd told me she was coming. I computed the normal rate of travel from her office to Uncle Chester's, doubled it because of the rain.

"She doesn't show in a few minutes, I'm going to look for her," I said.

"Then I'll have to go look for you," Leonard said. "You drive for shit in bad weather."

"You're brooding, Leonard, my friend. What's the problem?"

"I blew it with Fitzgerald."

"I don't think you're giving yourself enough credit. It was more like a nuclear disaster."

"Just can't stand shits like that guy, hiding behind the Bible and a church, judging everyone's got a view doesn't fit tight with his."

"All you had to do was hold your tongue for five minutes and we'd have known where Illium's house is. I think he knew exactly where he lived, but he didn't entirely trust us. After we got what we wanted, you didn't like the Reverend, we could have soaped his windows or shit on the lawn. Actually, I thought the old boy was pretty polite. He's at least trying to deal with his community's problems, and I guess religion is a better way than nothing. Truth is, you were itching for a fight."

"Have me shot, will you?"

“Not the first thing you’ve fucked up. I can think of all kinds of stuff.”

“Thanks, Hap.”

“Seriously, pal. Reverend’s not the only one knows where Illium lives. It’s not like he’s hiding. We’ll find him when the rain stops.”

About ten minutes later, I heard a car sluicing through the rain. I went to the front door and opened it. The rain was like a steel-beaded curtain hanging off and all around the porch. It slammed the ground with a sound like ball bearings. The wind was the coolest it had been since last fall.

I could see car lights in the drive, and they were all I could see. They went out, I heard a door slam, a black umbrella and a yellow, hooded rain slicker split the curtain of water, and Florida was on the porch, her beautiful face staring out of the slit in the slicker hood. She grinned and held the umbrella down and shook it and collapsed it and leaned it against the wall next to the door.

“Hi,” she said.

“You should have stayed home,” I said.

“Good to see you too.”

We went inside.

“Hello, Leonard,” Florida said.

“Florida,” Leonard said. “I was hoping you wouldn’t get out in this. We been worried.”

Florida slipped off her raincoat, and I hung it on a wood-frame chair by the door. She had on laced workboots, blue jeans, and a loose-fitting plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. Under the coat she had been carrying a cloth bag. She sat it on the seat of the chair and spread the mouth of it and pulled out a three-liter Pepsi and a bag of those vanilla cookies Leonard likes.

“Hap told me you were nuts for these,” she said to Leonard.

Leonard got up and took a look. “He’s right. Thanks.” He hugged her.

“You know I’m sorry how things are,” she said.

“Yeah,” Leonard said. “Thanks.”

“First time I haven’t seen you in a dress, Florida,” I said.

“I was doing office cleaning,” Florida said. “I felt like grubbies. Make us some cocoa or something, Hap. I don’t think I’m ready for Pepsi.”

“It’s coffee or tea or slightly curdled milk warmed on the stove,” I said. “Take your pick.”

“That curdled milk sounds good,” Florida said, “but guess I’ll go for the tea.”

I made us a pot of tea, and we were sitting at the kitchen table drinking and eating cookies instead of having supper, when I heard another car come up in the drive.

“Would you get it?” Leonard said. “I’m kind of comfortable next to the cookies.”

“Yassuh, Massuh Leonard, I’s on it.”

I went to the door and opened it and a big shape in a black slicker mounted the porch. He looked a little like the Spirit of Christmas Future. He pushed back the hood of the slicker and smiled at me. It was Lieutenant Hanson.

“Come in,” I said.

Hanson slipped off the slicker, and I took it and led him inside. I hung the slicker over a chair and let the water from it puddle on the floor. I said, “Hey, gang, look who’s here.”

“Damn,” Leonard said, looking through the dividing space between kitchen and living room, “if it ain’t Sherlock Holmes, and come all the way in the rain just to visit. Can I hold your gun, sir?”

“No,” Hanson said, “but you can wear my badge a little while, you promise not to lose it.”

Hanson and I went into the kitchen, and Hanson smiled broadly and said, “Hi, Florida.”

“Hi, Marvin.” Florida had a pretty big smile herself.

“You two know each other?” I said.

“We’ve met a time or two,” Hanson said. “I’ve arrested a couple of her clients.” Hanson nodded toward the cup Florida was sipping from. “That coffee?”

“Tea,” Florida said. She smiled. Rather nicely, I thought.

I offered Hanson my chair and poured him a cup of tea and took my cup and went over and leaned against the kitchen counter and watched him watch Florida out of the corner of his eye. Watched Florida watch him for that matter. I didn't blame him, she was beautiful. And I didn't blame her, Hanson was powerful and charismatic and likable, if big and ugly and old enough to be her father.

Hanson looked at his tea and said, "You got any milk for this? I like milk in mine."

"They just have curdled milk," Florida said.

"I don't like it that bad," Hanson said. "What about sugar?"

"Would you like a rose in a vase to go with it?" I said.

"No," he said, "but I'll have some of those cookies."

Leonard pushed the cookie sack at Hanson, a little reluctantly, I thought. In fact, I didn't think he'd been sharing them all that well with Florida and myself.

Hanson crunched a few cookies and sipped some tea.

"You got questions for us, Lieutenant?" Leonard asked.

"No," Hanson said.

"Then you have something to report?" Leonard said.

"I do," Hanson said. "I thought you might like to know the preliminary forensic findings."

"That's awful chummy of you," Leonard said.

Hanson shrugged. "I'm divorced. I'm lonely. And I got nothing better to do."

"Why don't I think that's why you're here?" Leonard said.

"You're one suspicious sonofabitch," Hanson said. "Your uncle's house is involved. Possibly your uncle. You found the body. I thought it would be only fair I kept you informed."

"Don't pay any attention to Leonard," I said. "He was raised in a barn."

Hanson took a sip of his tea and frowned. He put the cup down, said, "We had a forensics guy come in from Houston. He's taken the bones back with him, but he looked them over here, gave us a preliminary report. He could revise his opinion somewhat, he gets a good look, but the forensics guy says the skeleton in the box belongs to a nine- or ten-year-old boy, and he probably died of severe trauma to the head. After that, the body was cut up to fit into something small."

"The trunk," Leonard said.

"No," Hanson said. "Originally, the body was in a cardboard box. On the bones were paper fibers and remnants of a kind of glue found in cardboard. Could I have some more tea?"

His cup was half-full, but I poured him some more.

"You're saying the body was put in a cardboard box, then the box was put in the trunk?" Leonard said.

Hanson shook his head. "Nope. There's not enough remains of the cardboard in the trunk for it to have ever been put in there whole. What about that sugar?"

I got Hanson the sugar bowl and a spoon.

"You got a longer spoon? You can't stir good with these short ones."

"No wonder you're divorced," I said. "And no, no teaspoon."

Hanson stirred sugar into his teacup. He said, "The body was put in the cardboard box originally, but by the time the bones were put in the trunk, the cardboard had, for the most part, disintegrated. Some of the cardboard fibers stayed with the bones. Another thing. The clay on the bones doesn't go with your uncle's dirt beneath the house. The dirt found on the bottom of the trunk."

"Then the body was moved from somewhere and put in the trunk?" Leonard said. "And before it was moved, it had been in the ground for some time."

"Looks that way," Hanson said. "But that doesn't let your uncle off the hook. Sometimes a murderer kills in one spot, moves the body, buries it, then moves it again. If your Uncle was sick, he might have thought about the body enough he wanted to be near the corpse, went and dug it up. Put it here."

"Uncle Chester wasn't sick," Leonard said. "That kind of thing isn't sick anyway, it's sickening."

"I'm not saying anything concrete about him," Hanson said. "I'm just speculating. We don't even know this was a sex crime. It could have been murder, flat and simple."

"Does it matter?" I said.

"Yes," Hanson said, "it does. It's a sex crime, it may not have ended with one victim. It was a murder, maybe a blow struck in anger, whatever, this could be the whole of it."

"Can the forensics guy tell from the skeleton if the child was sexually molested?" I asked.

"No," Hanson said. "Least not preliminarily, and I doubt later. Just not enough left to work with. He did determine the child was killed some eight or nine years ago."

"The magazines in the trunk indicate a sex crime, though, don't they?" Leonard said.

"They point that direction," Hanson said.

"Any take on the magazines?" I asked. "Were they buried as long as they body? Seems to me, had they been, they'd have gone the way of the cardboard box."

"Smart question," Hanson said. "They were added to the trunk in bad condition, but not bad enough to have been recovered with the skeleton when it was moved from its grave to the trunk. They weren't in the ground as long as the corpse."

"So you haven't any proof this skeleton is tied in with the child disappearances?" I said.

"Nope. Other than circumstantial. Leonard's uncle talking about child murders, a skeleton being found here. Children missing in the community over the years. That's it, really."

"What do you think, Marvin?" Florida asked.

"I don't know," Hanson said. "It do be a puzzle, and I hate them. Agatha Christie shit. Never can figure that stuff out."

"Any chance I might see those files about the missing children?" Leonard said.

"I don't think so," Hanson said. "What good would that do?"

"Seeing them, knowing my uncle like I did, maybe I might see something that'll shed some light."

"I doubt it," Hanson said.

"Very conscientious," Leonard said. "But sounds to me you could use all the help you could get. I think maybe you might even be asking for help."

“Well,” Hanson said, “the subconscious is a tricky sonofabitch, but my conscious mind knows better than to bring a civilian in on this. To be honest, after all this time, someone figures out exactly what happened here, even who the child is, it’ll be an accident. That’s how most of this gets solved, by accident. If it gets solved.”

Hanson tipped his teacup up and got up from the table. “Gentlemen. Lovely lady, who I apologize to again for my past rudeness, and stupidity. I have to go. I have work to do.”

“Tonight?” Florida said.

“Every night,” he said. “It’s either that or watch TV, so I take files home and work.”

“Considering most of it gets solved through accident,” I said, “any of what you do matter?”

“Very little,” Hanson said, “very goddamn little.”

18.

That night, with the rain heavy on the house, a sweat-cooled sheet drawn over us, I held Florida in my arms and had the sad, dreamy sensation that no matter how tight I held her, she would soon slip away.

I kissed her on the nose, and she opened her eyes and blinked and closed them again, said softly, “Can’t sleep?”

“No,” I said.

“Horny?”

“Not really.”

She opened her eyes again and looked at me. “It’s the rain.”

“I guess so.”

“What’s the matter?”

“How are we, Florida?”

“What?”

“How are we? You and me?”

“We’re OK.”

“I mean, really?”

She eased out of my arms and raised up on one elbow. I couldn’t see her features clearly in the dark. “We’re how we’ve always been.”

“And how is that?”

“You’re not going to get complicated.”

“Maybe.”

“We haven’t been together that long.”

“Long enough for me.”

“The cliché is women are the ones who always want to get married.”

“I didn’t say anything about getting married.”

“But if we get serious, that’s what you mean?”

“I guess so.”

“Every guy I’ve dated has been ready to put a ring on my finger, Hap. A few dates, especially if they get a piece of ass, they want to tie the knot.”

“I don’t want to hear about that part … dating. Is that what we’re doing?”

“Yes, we’re dating. We’re fucking too, but that’s sometimes part of dating.”

“I thought we made love.”

“Oh, Hap. Don’t get technical.”

“Fucking’s technical. Making love is the same as the flow of a river. A cloud in the sky.”

“Where in hell did you get that shit?”

“I think the big-cheese monk on *Kung Fu* said it to Grasshopper. Ever watch that? David Carradine didn’t know kung fu from shit.”

“Before my time. I’m twenty-nine.”

“No shit?”

“You think I look older?”

“No. I just thought you were older. Lawyer and all.”

“See, Hap, way it works, some of us go to high school, get out, go to college, and in my case, law school, then go right into gainful employment. Some of us.”

“Is there a hidden slight in that?”

“Some. Hap, I like you. I like you a lot. You’re funny. You’re a decent guy. You’re not bad looking, and you make love beautifully. But you don’t strike me as a secure bet.”

“You’re boiling it down to financial prospects. What happened to love?”

“I’m not in love—hear me, completely. But I could be. In love, I mean. But …”

“But what?”

“My mother married for love. My father married to be mothered. After I was born, he decided he’d work when he wanted to. He had a college education, Hap. He was smart. He was a sweet man. But my mother ended up working and supporting him and me both, and every now and then, the time of year was right, he'd work at a pecan orchard over by Winona. He liked to make just enough for a six-pack or two before he came home. I love my father. But my mother was miserable. Is love worth that?"

"Who says I'm going to lay around with my feet propped up watching TV reruns while drinking six-packs of beer?"

"What's your profession, Hap?"

"I do field work most of the time."

"That's not a profession. That's a temporary job. Or should be. You're in your forties, correct? And right now you're living off Leonard—"

"He lived off me for a while. Hey, listen. I pay my bills. I tote my load. I'm not your father."

"Maybe you aren't. But I like ambition. I like someone who gets up in the morning and has a purpose. A real purpose. I have one. I want whoever I love to have one."

"I always look forward to breakfast."

"You dodge behind jokes too much too."

"And you don't listen to your heart enough."

"My heart isn't as smart as my head, Hap. And who says I can't find someone I love who has ambition and purpose? For that matter, maybe my heart isn't telling me what you want it to hear."

"I'm not without ambition. I've just been temporarily derailed, that's all. Something will come along—"

"That's exactly what I mean, Hap. You're waiting for luck. Waiting to win the lottery. Waiting for something wonderful to show up on the doorstep. You're not out there trying to make anything happen."

"I've got enough money for now."

"For now. And it's not money, I tell you. It's purpose. Ambition. You'd rather coast."

"And maybe it looks bad for a beautiful black lawyer to have a rose field worker for a husband too. And I'm white. Let's throw that turd out and dissect it. Not once since we've been … dating, as you call it, have we gone out together. Really out. You come here or out to my place, and we eat here and go to bed and make love, and then in the morning you leave. You don't want to go to a movie with me, out to dinner, because someone might see you with a white man."

She rolled over on her back and looked at the ceiling. She pulled the sheet up tight under her chin. "I never said anything other than I had problems with it."

"So it boils down to I'm white, I'm lazy, I don't have money, and I could have a better job."

"That makes it all sound so harsh. I don't mean it that way. Not exactly. If those things really bothered me, I wouldn't be here." Florida rolled over and put her arm around me. "Are you really in love with me, Hap, or are you in love with being in love?"

I thought that over. I said, "You're right. I'm pushing things. Maybe I just been lonely too long, like the *Young Rascals* song."

"Who?"

"Before your time. Like *Kung Fu.*"

"Do you want me to go?" she asked.

"In this rain?"

"Do you want me to go in the morning and not come back?"

"Of course not."

We lay quietly for a while. Then she said: "Hap, even though I'm a racist castrating bitch that wants you to be better than you are, wants you to do something with your life besides be a knockabout, do you think you could find it in your heart, in your itty-bitty white man's dick, to get a hard-on for me? In other words, want to fuck?"

I rolled up against her, kissed her forehead, her nose, and finally her lips. She reached down and touched me.

"Is that your answer?" she said.

"Sure," I said. "I have no shame."

19.

In the gray morning I awoke to the smell of Florida's perfume and the dent her head had made in her pillow. I had not heard her leave. It was still raining.

After breakfast, Leonard and I went to work on the subflooring, our hammering not much louder than the pounding of the rain on the roof.

We worked off and on until about suppertime. Then the rain quit and so did we. We locked up and took Leonard's car and went out to a Mexican restaurant to eat, then decided to try and drive out to Calachase Road and see if we could find Illium Moon's place. That didn't work, we'd do what you're supposed to do. We'd scout around till we found someone who knew where Illium lived.

It was still light, the summer days being long here in East Texas, but the sun was oozing down over the edge of the earth, and the sky in the west looked like a burst blood vessel. The air was a little cool and it smelled sweetly of damp dirt.

Calachase Road is a long road of clay and intermediate stretches of blacktop and gravel. It winds down between the East Texas pines and oaks, and in the summer the air is thick with their smell, and the late sunlight filtering through them turns the shadows on the road dark emerald.

We drove around for a while, saw some houses and trailers, but no mailboxes that said Illium Moon. We finally pulled up to a nasty shack that looked as if a brisk fart might knock it over. It was gray and weathered with a roof that almost had a dozen shingles on it. The rest of the roof was tar paper, decking, and silver tacks. The tiles that belonged up there were in ragged torn heaps beside the house, and leaning against the house was a crowbar and a hammer. A couple window screens were swung free of the windows, dangling by single nails. The front porch and front door were flame-licked black. There was a healthy stack of beer cans by the porch that weren't even damp, and it had been raining solid for nearly three days. Budweiser was a major label.

Beside the house was a man. He was black and bald and bony and wore a T-shirt that was stained to a color that wouldn't be found on any paint charts. He had on khaki pants with red-clay knees. His once-black loafers were colored with red clay and gray something-or-other. He had a shovel and he was digging, and he was somehow managing to hang onto a beer can while he did. He looked up when we pulled into the yard.

We got out of the car and walked over to him. The gray something-or-other on his shoes was immediately made identifiable by smell. Sewage.

Up close, we could see he had quite a trench going.

"Hello," Leonard said.

The man looked at us. His face was boiling in sweat. He opened his mouth to speak and revealed all his front teeth were missing. When he spoke, his missing teeth made him sound a little like he was talking with a sock in his mouth. "Shit, man. I thought y alls comin' tomorrow." He stood up and pushed his chest out. "I know y'all seen them beer cans, but we ain't no algogolic's here."

Algogolics? What was that? An alligator with alcohol problems?

"You've got us confused with someone else," I said. "We've just come to ask directions."

"Y'all ain't from Community Action?" he said.

"Nope," I said.

"Damn, that's good," he said. "I'm hoping to get them cans up."

"What's Community Action?" I asked.

"They come and see I deserve to have my house weather-proofed or not. It's for the underprivileged. Figure I tear a few more shingles off the roof, they got to fix the whole thing instead of just spots, which is what they did last time."

"I don't know," Leonard said. "I doubt that dozen or so up there is worth bothering with. I'd go with what I got. But I'd move the shingles in the yard outta sight."

"I'm gonna tell 'em the wind done it," the man said. "There was some bad wind with that rain. ’Course, I took ’em off ’fore the rain.”

“That crowbar and hammer look suspicious,” I said.

“I’ll throw ’em up under the house,” he said. “Say, you fellas was Community Action, seen my roof like that, would you fix it?”

“I’d be all over that sonofabitch,” Leonard said.

“That’s what I figured,” the man said. “Wish I hadn’t started taking them shingles off ’fore it rained. Leaks between them tacks. Top of the TV’s all fucked up. Run into the VCR and fucked it too, but I got it at Wal-Mart. They take anything back and give you another. One time I wore some shoes a year and took ’em back. You got to keep your sales slip, though.”

“Digging a new sewer line?” I asked.

“Naw,” the man said, swigging from the beer can and tossing it on the ground. “I’m digging in the old one. I lost my teeth.”

“Ah,” Leonard said.

“Got so drunk last night I was puking in the toilet, and I pulled out my bridge and flushed it. It’s here in the line somewhere, it didn’t go into the septic tank. It’s in the tank, reckon I’m fucked.”

“Sorry about the teeth,” I said.

“They ain’t gone yet,” he said. “We ain’t flushed the commode since, so I’m kinda thinkin’ them teeth’s here somewhere in the line. It runs slow.”

I looked at the line. It was a ditch seething with broken red sewer tile and gray sludge. Flies pocked it like jewels.

“I don’t want to buy no new teeth,” the man said, “and I need to get ’em now so I can flush the crapper. Damn wife shit in there a couple of times knowing it ain’t supposed to be flushed. Can’t go in the house it stinks so much.”

I looked at the house and thought a little shit stink might actually give it some charm.

“We wanted to know about someone might be a neighbor of yours,” I said.

“Shit,” the man said, “these neighbors ’round here are all motherfuckers. Our house caught on fire and these motherfuckers didn’t even bake us a casserole or a cake.”

“That’s cold,” Leonard said. “Listen, this guy may not be a main neighbor of yours. He lives on this road.”

“This a long road, man.”

“Illium Moon’s the name,” I said. “Drives a bookmobile.”

“That motherfucker,” the man said. “Shit, he tried to come by here see we wanted to read some books. I told him I got the *TV Guide*, and my wife can read it, so what I need a book for?”

“TV *Guide* does hit the highlights,” Leonard said.

“That motherfucker’s crazy,” the man said. “He come by here ’nuther time and wanted to know I wanted to fix my place up with some scrap lumber he’s got. Said me and him could do the work. Shit on that. Community Action, they use new lumber and do the work too.”

“You know where this guy lives?” I said.

He pointed. “Down the road a piece there.”

“We been down the road a piece,” I said, “and we don’t know what we’re looking for.”

“He has that van, one with the books, parked out ’side the house,” the man said. “It’s white. And there’s piles of that old sorry-ass lumber and things under tarps there. You didn’t see that, you just didn’t go down a good enough piece.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Good luck with Community Action, and I hope you find your teeth.”

“You do,” Leonard said, “what you gonna do with them?”

“Rench ’em off and use ’em,” the man said.

“That’s what I figured,” Leonard said.

“I’d do more than rinse them,” I said. “You ought to use a little Clorox to kill germs, then rinse ’em in alcohol and then water.”

“I don’t go in for that nonsense,” the man said. “I ain’t never seen a germ, and I ain’t never been sick a day in my life.”

“Okeydoke,” I said.

We left him there, poking his shovel around in the sewage. In the car, Leonard said, “I know it’s an ugly thing to say, him being ignorant as a post and all, but maybe, luck’s with the world, that shiftless sonofabitch will die in his sleep tonight. He ain’t doing nothing but makin’ turds.”

“Yeah,” I said, “and his teeth are in them.”

20.

Red fingers of sunlight were all that remained of the day, and they clawed at the trees on the horizon. By the time we found the place described to us by the man with no front teeth, the sunset was still bleeding, but in the east the full moon was out and clearly visible and the color of fresh coconut.

The man with no front teeth was right. We had not gone far enough. Illium Moon's place was a small cottage-style house set off the road. We recognized it by the tarp-covered stacks we presumed to be lumber and by a mailbox across from it with MOON painted on it in black letters.

To get to the house you had to go through an open gap in a barbed-wire fence and over a cattle guard and down a muddy-white sand drive. The house was white with a blue roof and shutters, and beside it was a little open carport that sheltered a very clean-looking '65 white Ford. The yard was impeccable. Out to the far side of the house were several neat stacks of something with huge gray-green tarps pulled over them. No bookmobile was visible.

We parked by one of the stacks and got out. I took hold of the edge of the tarp closest to me and pulled it back. Underneath was lumber on treated pine pallets. The lumber on the pallets was used lumber, as the man with no teeth had said, but it was good lumber and free of nails.

We knocked on the front door and waited, and no one answered. We walked around the house and didn't see anyone. Out back we walked a ways into a large, recently mowed pasture. The pasture smelled sweet, like a fruit drink. Off to the far left was a small, weathered-gray barn. From where we stood we could see a little brown-water pond with a big oak growing by it, and behind it, a long dark line of pine trees. The leaking sunlight visible above the trees was like a fading flare.

As we walked out to the barn, grasshoppers leaped ahead of us.

The barn door was partially open and we went inside and called Illium's name, but no one answered. Inside it was stuffy hot, and there was a tractor and some equipment and a few bales of low-quality hay. I was uncertain how much land Illium Moon owned, but I didn't get the impression he ran livestock. Most likely he had a little cash crop of hay, and that was it.

Behind the tractor were two small piles under tarps. I looked under one. Stacks of newspapers on pallets. Under the others were neatly stacked cardboard boxes, and in the boxes were aluminum cans and plastic bottles. A few things clicked around inside my head like Morse code, but they didn't click long, and I couldn't decipher it.

We walked back to the house and stood on the front porch.

"No bookmobile," I said, "and no Illium."

"Let's leave a note," Leonard said. "Tell him I'm Chester's nephew, see if he'll get in touch."

Leonard went out to his car and got a pad and a pencil. He came back and leaned the pad against the front door and started to write. The front door swung open under the pressure.

"Open sesame," Leonard said.

I peeked inside. It was a very neat house. The living room furniture wasn't new, but it was well cared for. The white walls looked to have been painted a short time ago. There was no carpet, but there were some colorful throw rugs. The blue-and-brown couch had plastic protection sleeves over the arms. There was a cardboard box on the couch.

I called out, "Illium."

No answer.

"He ought to lock up," I said.

"Maybe he couldn't lock up," Leonard said.

I let that lay, and Leonard went in the house, and I went with him.

"We could get our ass in a crack for this," I said, but we kept right on looking.

We went through the house. Illium's kitchen was even neater than MeMaw's place and smelled of some sort of minty disinfectant. The bedroom was very tidy and the bed was made. The bathroom was neat except for the tub. It had a sandy ring around it and there were little hunks of damp hay. We went back to the living room.

I looked in the box on the couch. There were magazines in the box. I saw immediately by the cover of the magazine on top that it was the same sort of magazine we had found in Uncle Chester's trunk. I picked it up. There were more magazines of the same ilk underneath. Unlike the magazines in Uncle Chester's trunk, these magazines weren't as aged. They looked as if they might have been damp once, but they were in pretty good condition. I said, "Uh-oh."

Leonard was looking at them too. He said, "Yeah, uh-oh."

Under the magazines was a pile of clothes. Pants. Shirts. Underwear. All little boys' clothes.

"A bigger uh-oh," I said.

"I don't know," Leonard said. "We come by and Illium ain't here and he's left the door unlocked and he's got him a box of kiddie porn sitting right here on the couch with kids' clothes. Seems awful damn convenient."

"Nothing says he couldn't be stupid."

We put the stuff back like it was and went out and closed the door. I used my shirttail to wipe the door knob and wondered what all I'd touched in the house besides the magazines.

"Let's look in the carport," Leonard said.

We looked in the old Ford first. Nothing there.

"Must be doing the bookmobile route," I said. I turned then, and in the corner of the carport, on shelves, were a number of large jars, and in the jars there were little cuts of paper, and even though I wasn't close to them, I guessed what they were right away.

Leonard saw what I saw. He went over and got one of the jars and twisted the lid off and pulled some of the pieces from the jar and held a handful out for me to look at.

I'd guessed right. Coupons.

Leonard replaced the coupons and screwed the lid on the jar. "While we're snooping," he said, "why don't we look under those tarps?”

We checked under all the tarps. Under some was lumber, and under others were mechanical parts of all kinds, everything from plumbing to automotive. Illium seemed to be a neat pack rat. Maybe he used the stuff to fix up his house and car, tried to be neighborly to folks like No Front Teeth down the road by sharing his goods.

And in his spare time he cut hay and sold it and worked at the church and freelance drove the bookmobile, and in the evenings, after a hard day of public service, he read child pornography with a young boy’s underwear stretched over his head. It could happen.

We walked back to Leonard’s car and leaned on the front of it and we crossed our arms and watched the sky grow darker and the moon grow brighter. Stars were popping out. In the distance, the pond sucked up the moonlight and turned the water the color of creamed coffee.

“What the hell is it with the coupons?” Leonard said. “First, I thought Uncle Chester had gotten to be a nut shy a pecan pie, but now I’m wondering. This guy’s got the same thing going.”

“Hate to bring it up,” I said, “but another stretch of coincidence is kiddie porn showing up here as well as your uncle’s. And there’s the fact they knew each other, and were good friends. Lots of circumstantial evidence. It’s beginning to look bad for a certain good friend’s relative, and I say that with all due respect.”

Leonard was quiet for a time. He said, “Doesn’t matter. I believe in Uncle Chester. He didn’t kill anyone, not a kid anyway. Someone fucked with him, he might have killed them, but a kid, no way. And he wasn’t reading kiddie fuck lit. There’s an answer to all this, I don’t care how it looks.”

I hoped so, for Leonard’s sake. I glanced down at the ground and watched the moonlight silver the rainwater collected in a set of deep tire ruts in front of us, ruts from the bookmobile, I figured.

Where was the bookmobile? Where was Illium? Did moss really only grow on the north side of trees, and why did the Houston Oilers keep losing football games?s

I took a careful look at the ruts. They ran on out across the grass and hay field. The grass and hay was pushed down, but starting to straighten slowly. That meant the grass had not been pushed down too long ago, but with the rain beating for a couple of days, it probably hadn't had the chance to pop back up. It would have taken this warm day and this much time for it to come back to its former position. Those tracks had been made three days, four days before.

I said, "Look here."

Leonard and I squatted down and looked more closely. The night was bright and we could see well. We also knew what we were seeing. Put us in a city and we couldn't hail a taxi, but we'd both grown up in the woods and had learned to hunt and track when we were head high to a squirrel dog's balls, so we could read sign. Animal sign, or human sign. A paw print or a tire track, it was all the same to us.

We got up and went across the grass and the mowed hay field. Another couple days and the hay stubs and the grass would spring back up completely, and there wouldn't be any trail to see. Not unless you knew to look for it.

It didn't take an expert in nanotechnology to figure where the ruts were leading. They played out at the lip of the pond, and there were deeper tracks in the bank where the vehicle had gone over. There were a couple of hardback books in the mud by the water, and the moon rode on the pond's brown surface like a bright saucer. I could smell the pond, and it smelled of mud and fish and recent rain. A night bird called from a tree in the distance and something splashed in the water and rippled it, turned the floating moon wavy.

Leonard eased down the bank and got hold of one of the books and came back up with it.

"Don't tell me," I said. *"The Old Man and the Sea."*

"No. *How to Repair Your Fireplace."*

"Bound to have been a big run on that one," I said.

I looked at the pond, then looked at Leonard. He said, "I'd go in, but I got a problem with my leg."

"I thought it was well."

"Sometimes it gives me trouble."

"Like now?"

"Right."

"That figures. Look, we know it's there."

"For all we know, he run an old tractor off in there, or some drunk came through the cattle guard and run out here in the pond thinking it was a parking lot."

"Sure," I said.

I unbuttoned my shirt and tossed it to Leonard, stood on one foot and took off a shoe and sock, switched feet, and repeated the process. I pulled off my pants and underwear. I folded the underwear and pants together and tossed them to Leonard and put the socks in the shoes.

"Aren't you embarrassed undressing in front of a queer?" Leonard said. "All you know, I might be sizing up your butt-hole."

"Just call me a tease."

I slipped down the bank and started to go in the water.

Leonard said: "Hap, be careful, man. We haven't finished that flooring yet."

The water was warm on top, but three feet below it was cold. The bank sloped out and was slick. I went in feet first and slid down and under. The water flowed over me, and I looked up and could see the moonlight shining through the murk.

Going down the bank like that I had stupidly stirred up the mud, and a cloud of it, like ink from a squid, caught up with me, surged over me and frightened me. For a moment I was in complete darkness, then the mud thinned and I went down deeper, feeling for the van I knew was there.

The water, though less muddy down deep, was darker. I wondered what ever had possessed me to do this. We should have called the cops, let them look. I should never have promised Leonard I'd help him out in this matter. I should have finished college and gotten a real job. I wondered how long Florida would remember me if I drowned.

The pond was not deep, and soon I could reach down and touch bottom with my hands and feet. I crawled along like that a little ways, stirring mud, raised up and swam forward, felt myself starting to need air.

I rose up swiftly in the blackness and hit my head sharply on something solid and nearly let go of what breath I still had; it was as if the water above me had turned to stone. I swam left and hit a wall and something from the wall leapt out and touched me and I kicked out with my feet and pushed backward into another wall, and things jumped off it and touched me too. I clutched at them and they came apart in my hands.

My lungs were starting to burn, and I couldn't go up, and I couldn't go left or right. I pivoted and swam forward and hit a low barrier and reached above it and touched something soft. I grabbed at it, held with one hand, and my other hand touched something else.

Suddenly I realized where I was and what I was touching.

The back doors of the bookmobile must have been loose and popped open when the van went over. That would explain the books on the bank; they had bounced out when the vehicle went into the water, and due to the way the bank was sloped, the van had landed at a slant with its rear end up, and I had accidentally swum inside. The walls I had hit were the sides of the bookmobile, and the things that had jumped off the walls were books.

What my right hand was touching now was a steering wheel. That's what had cued me. Tactile memory reaction. Common sense, something I seemed short on these days, told me what my left hand was most likely touching. A water-ballooned corpse. I made myself reach around and feel along what I thought to be the face. I couldn't tell much about features, nose, jawbone, the like. The flesh was too swollen. After a few seconds, I'd had enough. I jerked my hand away from the corpse but held to the steering wheel with the other.

I was beginning to pass out from need of air. Black spots swirled inside my head. It was hard to remember not to try and breathe.

I pulled myself over the seat and reached between the corpse and the steering wheel to where the driver's window ought to be. It was open. I yanked myself through and shot up, surfacing like a dolphin at a marine show. The moonlight jumped on me. The air was sharp, and I took in deep breaths that seared my lungs.

I swam to the bank where Leonard stood watching. He leaned out and gave me a hand and pulled me up. I coughed and shivered, said, “Next time, you go in.”

“The van down there?”

“Yeah,” I said. “And I believe Illium Moon is too.”

21.

“I think we should go to the police,” I said. “Talk to Hanson.”

“Not yet,” Leonard said. “Let me think on it.”

My shirt was still damp from dressing while wet, but it felt comfortable in the close heat. I smelled faintly of pond water. We were back over on the East Side, at a little, smoky black juke joint called the Congo Bongo Club, having a beer. Well, Leonard was having a beer. I was having a nonalcoholic beer. The place served them, but they seemed embarrassed about it. The bartender, who was also the waiter, kinda slunk over and put it on the table like a patient giving a pretty nurse a urine specimen.

The lights in the joint were not too good. Most of what light there was came from red-and-blue neon beer signs at the bar and the blue-white glow from the jukebox. In fact, it was so dark in the back of the place you could have pulled your dick out and put on a rubber and no one would have known it. It wasn’t the kind of place had a no-smoking section either. The cigarette and cigar smoke was thick enough to set a beer glass on.

The joint smacked of fire hazard. If there was a rear exit, you probably had to go through a back office to get to it. A fire started here, the office was locked, and the front door got blocked, you could kiss your charred ass good-bye. The music on the juke was great, however. John Lee Hooker.

We were trying to figure our next move. Or Leonard was figuring our next move. I was wondering what the cops did to you if they found out you had discovered a body in a pond and went away and didn’t tell them. I was certain dire consequences hovered above the question. I had already spent some time in prison, and I didn’t want another stretch. I wasn’t even crazy about a small fine.

“There’s things here don’t jive right,” Leonard said, “but I can’t put my finger on the problem.”

In the glow of the jukebox, I saw a big black man eye-balling us from a table across the way, throwing back beer like water. Actually, he was eyeballing me, as carefully as a birdwatcher might a rare yellow-throated two-peckered brush warbler. I suddenly realized just how white my skin was. Maybe we'd have done better to have picked up a six-pack at a convenience store.

I didn't say anything to Leonard, as the faintest hint of intimidation made his dick hard, but I kept my eye on the guy.

We shouldn't have gone in the Congo Bongo anyway. In my old age it seemed I was becoming less wise and cautious. It was supposed to be the other way around. Maybe, after forty, a kind of self-destruct button kicks in.

"I don't know for a fact there was a body in the van," I said, blinking away tobacco smoke. "It just seems likely, because it damn sure didn't feel like a bundle of books I was touching. Question is, if it is a body, and it is Illium, why is he in the pond?"

"Bad driving?"

"That's not high on my list. Seriously, Leonard."

"Suicide?"

"Actually, I thought of that one. Don't get pissed, but let me throw out a theory, OK?"

"Toss it."

"Say your uncle and Illium met and took to one another like flies to shit, discovered they had something in common. They liked little kids, and not to pet on the head."

"I see this coming."

"Say your uncle did kill the child under his flooring. Killed him somewhere else and brought him back to the house."

"To play with?"

"I'm trying to be delicate here."

"That don't mean you ain't thinking it."

"Illium and Uncle Chester find they both like this kind of thing, and Uncle Chester likes to show Illium what he's got in the trunk under the floorboards, and they share a few magazines, and let's say when your uncle dies, Illium begins to feel guilty.... No, let's say lonely. I mean, this isn't a club. You can't go to Child Molesters United and find a bunch of guys like you."

"Way I understand it, it ain't as hard as you think."

"So Illium misses your uncle. Gets tired of looking at the kid fuck magazines by himself, just sitting around in the house, waxing his well rope—"

"So he gets all dewy eyed, puts his box of pornography on the couch, and his kid's clothes, possibly acquired from murders he's committed, or my uncle's murders if Illium was just a fantasizer, and he says, 'Good-bye, cruel world' to his box of toys, jumps in the bookmobile, runs off in the pond and drowns himself."

"It's a theory."

"It sucks, Hap. It sucks the big ole donkey dick. I don't buy any of it. And what's with the coupons? And you know that book I picked up on the bank? It had a mark in it that's in the copy of *Dracula* Uncle Chester gave me. A black circle with a red heart on the inside."

"It's my turn to say that's nothing. They were friends. Makes sense Illium marked the books he loaned that way, and your uncle got one."

"Yeah, and my uncle left me a safety-deposit box containing a book with that inside, and some coupons, so maybe it means more than it seems like it ought to. The coupons seemed nuts until we found those coupons at Illium's, now I'm beginning to think Uncle Chester was trying to tell me something."

"And he left you a painting," I said.

"Yeah, and there's that," Leonard said. "And if he was trying to tell me something, why didn't he just write it down and explain it? Or get in touch with me and tell me? Why the code business? What's it all mean?"

"I'm afraid Hanson's right," I said. "This is starting to sound like Agatha Christie shit, and I don't know from puzzles. They make my head hurt."

"Reckon we need Miss Marple?"

"Could be she's coming over right now," I said.

The big black guy who'd been watching strolled over to our table. Well, not exactly strolled. He listed a little. He'd had just the right amount of beer. I sized him up, looking for striking zones just in case it wasn't his intention to discuss politics or summer fashion.

He stopped at our table, said to Leonard, "What the fuck you doin' in here with this honkie, brother? You trying to get a job promotion? This ain't no honkie place."

Leonard leaned over the table, said, "He's talking about you."

"Yeah?" I said.

"Yeah," Leonard said. "You see, *honkie* is a very derogatory black term for whites," Leonard said to me. "You see, stuff like *peckerwood, ofay*, and *honkie*, it's very insulting. It's like whites calling us *nigger* or *coon* or *jungle bunny"*

"No shit?" I said.

The big black guy glared at me, said, "You ain't never heard *honkie* before, motherfucker?"

"He's sheltered," Leonard said. Then to me: *"Motherfucker*, Hap, is a common term meaning you fuck your mother. Even if you don't fuck your mother, folks say it anyway if they're mad at you or want to make you mad. It's designed to be derogatory."

"I see," I said.

"You cocksuckers best quit fuckin' with me!" the big black guy said.

"Cocksucker," Leonard said to me, "is a common term—"

"Cut it out, you motherfuckers!"

A lot of folks were looking at us now, wondering how much blood would be involved. The jukebox wrapped up its tune and the air went silent with the threat of murder.

The bartender said over the bar, softly, "Clemmon, ease off, these fellas just come in for a drink."

"I ease off I want to ease off," said the big black guy.

I glanced out of the corner of my eye at the front door. About twenty steps. Five, if you were leaping.

"Hey, buddy," I said, showing more confidence than I felt, "I'm not bothering you."

"You come down here and slum with the niggers, is what bothers me," said the big black man. "You white pieces of shit always lookin' down your noses at us. Come in here, smart-mouth me. It's gonna get you hurt. I bet you think I'm on food stamps."

"I hadn't thought about it," I said.

"Well, I ain't. I own my own business."

"Congratulations," I said, "but I'm warning you, go on about your business. 'Cause you fuck with me, tomorrow your relatives will be splitting up your belongings."

"What's that mean?" the big man said. "What the fuck you talkin' about?"

"He's threatening to kick your ass plumb to death," said someone at a nearby table.

"Appreciate that translation," I said.

"You're welcome," said the man at the table.

It finally registered with the big black guy that he was being insulted, and the game was over. He reached for me.

I batted his hand to the inside with my palm and raised out of my seat and hooked my other arm behind his head and dropped down quick with all my weight, brought his head into the edge of the table, sharply. The bottles on the table jumped and fell over. I slammed the guy behind the neck with my forearm and he came down and met my knee and rolled over on the floor and made a sound like he might get up, but didn't. He lay there in a ball and tried to look comfortable. I was glad he was drunk.

Leonard stood up. A lot of folks were standing up. I heard the click of a knife opening nearby. I picked a fallen bottle off the table and held it by the neck. Some of its contents ran out and splashed on my shoe. I reached in my pocket with my free hand and got some money and put it on the table. I wished I was wearing a wide-brimmed black hat and a serape. A damp shirt and pants would have to do, though.

The bartender said very softly, "Go 'head on and leave, boys."

I turned and looked at him. He was a little jet-black man wearing a white shirt with black bow tie. The neon throbbed colors on his shirt. He was holding a sawed-off pump shotgun, gauge of twelve. He wasn't holding it tensely, just showing it off. If he'd thought it through, he'd probably loaded it with slugs. You let down on it, you cleaned out fewer innocent customers that way.

“We were just leaving,” I said.

“I thought you was,” he said. “Don’t forget the tip.”

22.

When we got back to Leonard's place, Florida's car was parked in the drive and she was on the porch sitting in the glider. It was a bright-enough night I could see she was wearing some kind of cartoon character T-shirt, blue jean short-shorts and big wooden shoes that reminded me of miniature pontoons. She looked cute as a new puppy.

Next door there was the usual activity of drug selling, and I could hear Mohawk's, alias Strip's, alias Melton's, voice above everyone else's. When Melton got excited, his vocal cords achieved a kind of shrill quality, like something oily was trying to crawl up his ass and he was liking it.

"Not a real good place for a lady to hang out this time of night," I said to Florida.

"They think I'm inside, I bet."

The way the glider was positioned, the shadows, that was possible, but I still didn't think it was a good idea. Guys like the ones next door knew we were gone, saw her car over here, they might decide to investigate.

"You'll promise me you won't do this again, though, won't you?" I said.

"I promise," she said.

"Want to come in?" Leonard asked her.

"No," she said, "I'm going to steal Hap from you. I'm taking him on a picnic."

"Picnic?" I said. "This time of night?"

"I been waiting since dark," she said. "I'm hungry. And I don't care if you just ate dinner, we're picnicking, and you will eat. I made the stuff myself."

"Yes ma'am."

"I don't mean to be rude," Florida said to Leonard, "stealing

Hap off and not inviting you, but—”

“That’s all right,” Leonard said, hanging his head and pretending to be sad. “I have a TV dinner, meatloaf, I think, and they’re having a *Three’s Company* rerun marathon on channel nine. I wouldn’t want to miss that. And right before it, there’s an hour of *The Brady Bunch.”*

Florida giggled sweetly and Leonard raised his head and smiled.

I said to Leonard, “We’ll talk later.”

“I want to sleep on a few things anyway,” Leonard said.

“Pretty mysterious, you two,” Florida said.

“That’s us,” Leonard said, “The Mysterious Duo.”

I got in the car with Florida and she drove us out Highway 7 East. I reached in the back for the picnic basket, an official wicker one with handle, and she said, “Uh-uh.”

“I just wanted to know what we were having on this picnic,” I said.

“It’s a surprise. You find out as you eat it. But I bet you can guess what dessert is.”

“Is it chocolate colored and sweet and shaped like a taco and you keep it in a warm place?”

“My God,” she said, “The Amazing Kreskin. Come over here and ride bitch, big boy.”

I slid over next to her and she smelled sweet and delectable. She said, “What’s that cologne, Hap? Frog and Pond?”

I slid away from her. “Do I smell that bad?”

“Get back over here,” she said. “Always did like a man smelled faintly of frog. Maybe you’ll tell me how you came by that aroma?”

“Maybe,” I said, and slid back and kissed her softly on the neck.

We continued until we came to a turnoff that announced a Scenic Overlook. The idea of an overlook in East Texas, especially if you’ve ever been to Colorado, someplace with mountains, is pretty funny. What it means here is a high hill, and not all that high.

We drove up there, and at the top were a couple of concrete picnic tables, a chained-down metal trash receptacle, and a whitewashed chain that ran between thick white posts that designated the area.

We got out of the car, and I carried the basket over to a table. Florida put her arm around me, and we walked to the chain barrier and looked down. You fell, you'd go almost six feet before you were in a pasture. Not exactly scary or breathtaking. But the deal was this: Here, on this hill, you looked straight out, there was a big V in the usual line of trees, and you could see a long ways, and the trees in the distance, especially now at night, looked like blue and purple mountains, and above those trees, the stars were like glitter being poured into a funnel. Directly overhead, it was so clear the stars seemed close enough to snag with a butterfly net. The air was invigorating.

The depression I was feeling after the rush of adrenaline from discovering the body in the van and the brief bar fight was subsiding.

"This is nice," I said.

"Yes, it is," she said, and hugged me tighter. "You can see forever itself from here."

"You come here a lot?"

"Now and then. An old boyfriend in high school showed it to me."

"Never mind. I'd rather not hear it."

"He was an astronomer-to-be," she said. "He was interested in the stars."

"Right," I said.

"Well, he did have a theory or two on black holes."

"Ha. Ha."

She laughed. "I've never been here when someone else was. Not yet. I've always had it to myself."

"Good," I said.

A shooting star flamed across the sky and snuffed out. We oohed and aahed it.

Damn, what a day. A nude swim. A dead body. A bar fight, and now a picnic with a beautiful woman, and a shooting star. What next? A UFO encounter?

The picnic basket contained barbecued chicken, egg salad and ham and cheese sandwiches on wheat bread, and sweet pickles and hot peppers and chips and potato salad.

“That’s a lot of food,” I said.

“Figured an old guy like you might need to recharge himself later.”

“Honey, I look at you, I don’t need any jumper cables.” We put the food on paper plates and ate and drank sweet tea out of a large thermos. There was another thermos with coffee;when we finished eating, I reached for it, but Florida stopped me. She said, “After dessert.”

She stood up and took off her shorts and she wasn’t wearing panties. She put the shorts on the picnic table. She slipped off her shirt and she wasn’t wearing a bra.

“You saving on laundry?” I said.

She put the shirt with the shorts. She moved up close to where I sat on the stone picnic bench, and I kissed her belly button. She pushed away from me and smiled and gathered her clothes and walked back to the car. She looked funny and sexy wearing nothing but those big shoes. She opened the back door and sat on the seat with her legs outside and unfastened her shoes and put them on the floorboard. She crossed her legs and looked at me. “Do I have to write you a letter?” she said.

“Don’t even need to send a telegram,” I said, and I got up and went over there.

Later, we dressed and had coffee while we lay on the hood of the car, our backs against the windshield. We must have seen a half-dozen shooting stars.

“This was a nice surprise,” I said. “I especially liked the part where you shucked your shorts.”

“Glad you liked it, but could I say—without intent to hurt your fragile male ego, because I enjoyed myself very much—you seem a little distracted?”

“I’ve had a big day.”

"Hap, I've been thinking, and I got to tell you, what I said the other night—"

"That's all right. I was pushing."

"What I mean is, I really don't have the right to judge you. You are who you are, and that's a pretty good thing. I shouldn't try and make you something else."

"You made some good points. I am coasting."

"I suppose another thing is we haven't had time to know each other that well. One day I see you and you're this grungy guy, and the next day I see you you're on top of the house sucking in your stomach—"

"You noticed that?"

"Sure. And then we're in the sack, and I like you. I like you a lot, and I don't really know who you are."

"What do you want to know?"

"You don't know me either. Not really. Let me tell you something about myself. Something to clear the air a little. I'm laying on you how ambitious I am, right? Telling you what a ball of fire I am, and what a wet ball of twine you are. So let me be honest. I'm not living up to my ambitions either."

"Maybe no one does."

"It was my plan to be a serious criminal lawyer. I wanted to try murder cases. I wanted to specialize in cases dealing with blacks, helping them get fair trials in a white world. The whole nine yards. But I've settled for divorce work and a little ambulance chasing. I've been in that shitty office of mine for three years, and half the time my clients don't pay me, or if I get a percentage of something, it's not a percentage of much, and I haven't made one bit of real difference in the world, and I thought I'd make oodles."

"Everyone starts somewhere, Florida. Hell, you're young. You'll build into a bigger career."

"I've got to be willing to do that, though. You see, I found out most of the people I was dealing with, defending, white or black, were guilty. If they weren't guilty of the crime they were up for, they were guilty of two others they got off from. Most of them were guilty as hell."

"That could have just been your experience so far. There're bound to be innocent people who need you."

"Yes, but I was trying to get guilty people off. Trying to find loopholes. And I'm disillusioned with people. Not just the crooks I've dealt with, people in general. Not long ago there was a murder near here, over in Mud Creek. A husband lost it and shot his wife and two kids and even the dog."

"I remember."

"People talked about the crime for a month or so. A lawyer friend of mine was assigned to the case. She proved the murderer was insane. She told me people asked her about the case all the time, and you know what she said their most common question was about what happened?"

"I don't know."

"What kind of dog was it? Yeah. What kind of dog? Like the people didn't matter. But if it was a cute dog, then we're talking tragedy. How could someone think that way?"

"You're running idealism up against reality, Florida. It happens to everyone eventually. But don't think the two aren't compatible. I've been through that myself."

"Point is, I've lost a lot of my ambition this last year or so, and just that stupid thing about the dog had a lot to do with it. What I'm saying, Hap, is who am I to cast the first stone? And another thing. You're right. I am nervous about being seen with you because you're white—"

"You never denied that."

"But that's not an excuse. I'm going to change."

"Hot damn, you're gonna take me to a movie."

"Yeah, but you have to wear gloves and a bag over your head."

"It's a start."

"I don't think of myself as prejudiced, but when I was a little girl we lived briefly up North. My mother had gone up there to stay with relatives. She left my father for a time, and she thought, up there, out of the South, she had a chance to do something without skin color mattering. That was in New Jersey. Well, there wasn't much more in the way of jobs there, and the relatives we were staying with were living in a white section of town and had been for a couple of months, and one morning we woke up with snow on the ground and a cross burning in the yard. Burned into the yard with gasoline was the word *nigger*. We moved back here, and the relatives moved out of that neighborhood and into a black one, and the whole idea of sanctuary, that there was somewhere you could go where there wasn't any prejudice, any racial hatred, was gone.

"It made an impression, Hap. I don't blame all whites for the stupidity of those people who put up that cross and burned those words into my relatives' lawn, but it left something here," she touched her heart, "that has to do with me and white skin. I'm smart enough to know it's a knee-jerk response at times, and I fight against it, but it's there, and what really makes me mad is, late at night, sometimes I wake up bitter. Memories like that don't go away easy."

"So now you don't trust whites, and you don't care to be seen with them—romantically, anyway?"

"It makes me feel dirty. I even feel a little inferior a lot of the time. Like I should be grateful I'm doing what I'm doing, and that I'm doing good for a little colored girl from East Texas. I know better intellectually, but emotionally, I feel maybe I am a nigger. That I'm second-best. I fight against it all the time."

"Do you feel dirty right now?"

"No. You don't make me feel that way. In this setting. But we went out in public, the old feelings would come back. I'm not saying I'm not willing to fight them. I'm being honest. But they'll come back. And maybe that's OK, as long as I confront them. All right. I've showed you my dirty laundry. Told you stuff I've never told anybody. Now, tell me something about yourself. Help me learn who you are."

"I'm a guy who hopes he can show you there's more to white guys than someone who just wants in your pants. More to this white guy, anyway. I don't deny that getting in your pants is on my mind. I look at you and biology takes over, and I'm enjoying the sexual aspect of our relationship, but I want more. I'm not going to push you on the matter, but I want you to know that.

"OK. Enough on that. Let's see. What else? I'm a college dropout. I was a draft resister during the Vietnam War, and I'm proud of it. I stood up for something and didn't wimp out. Didn't run off to Canada. Didn't get religion. 'Course, there was a down side. I went to prison for refusing to step forward at the induction ceremony. I did eighteen months. Let's see. What else? I was married. The woman made a fool out of me, even after we were divorced. She was like catnip to me. She waved her butt and I followed. She nearly got me and Leonard killed once."

"What?"

"I'm only going to talk so much about this right now. Later, maybe I'll have more to say. But the gist of it, without being too specific, is I let her pull us into something I should have known better about. A way to make quick money, easy. Only it wasn't easy. Leonard knew it was a dumb idea and he told me so, but I was headstrong, and he went along with it anyway, because of me. Ended up my ex-wife, Trudy, got killed and I got injured, and Leonard got his leg hurt bad. He was lucky it healed up the way it did. They thought for a while he'd lose it."

"My God, Hap…. That explains those scars you've got?"

"Some of 'em. So, I'm an ex-con and I nearly caused my friend to lose his leg because I couldn't keep my dick in my pants."

"I don't believe that."

"You're right. I'm giving myself too much credit. It wasn't my dick leading me around. It was some foolish vision of true love. I used to believe in that. Sometimes I still do. Maybe that's what sapped my ambition, there not being any true love.Though to be honest, before Leonard got hurt, I wasn't exactly a ball of fire either.

"Trudy and prison could be blamed, but I guess finally, you always got to blame yourself. I let my idealism get stepped on, and I began to think it was a sham, that there never was anything to it, because nothing ever changed. But I've come out on the other side, now. I'm not ambitious, but I'm not lost either. I've got my faith back in humanity, and it's people like you that do it.

"There's bad stuff out there, but you look around, there's good too. I'm not saying I'm ready to wear flowers in my hair and tell everyone to just love one another, but I do think things can be better than they are, and that each of us, in his or her own way, can have something to do with making it better. I also like blueberry ice cream, fluffy bunny rabbits, stuffed animals, especially teddy bears, and cute shoes, if they don’t fit too tight.”

“You silly ass,” Florida said.

“Oh, one more thing. Earlier today, I found a dead body in a pond.”

23.

We got back to the house late and took the bedroom Leonard had left us. He was asleep on the couch. We made love again and talked some more. I told Florida all I knew about Illium Moon, about how we found the body. She thought we should call the police. I did too. But Leonard had taken bullets because of me, the least I could do was give him some time.

"You never heard any of this," I said. "It comes up, except with Leonard, you don't know a thing."

"Oh, Hap."

"Not a thing, Florida."

"That poor man … down there."

"He don't know he's up or down. Another day isn't going to matter."

We finally snuggled and fell asleep, and I dreamed.

And in this dream I was under water. Down there in the bookmobile with Illium, but I could see clearly this time. It wasn't as dark as it had actually been. Uncle Chester was there too. They were swollen and spongy and their faces were no longer black. They were the color of damp oatmeal. Illium was sitting behind the wheel. He had a jar of coupons. Beside him, on the passenger side, reading a paperback copy of *Dracula*, was Uncle Chester. I was in the back, leaning between the seats, watching them. They didn't seem to notice I was there. I looked over Uncle Chester's shoulder. He was reading the part of *Dracula* about the "Bloofer Lady," the vampire child murderer. I could read it clearly, even though the words were gibberish, hieroglyphics at best.

Illium unscrewed the lid on the jar in his lap, and the jar filled with water and the coupons floated up and out, paraded before him like small, wafer-thin fish. He plucked one of them between his fingers and put it back in the jar. He grabbed another, and another, but as fast as he put them in the jar they floated out.

Uncle Chester turned and looked at Illium. He shut the book and held it in one hand. With the other he reached over and clutched at the floating coupons. He helped put them in the jar, and still they floated out. The process was endless. Illium and Uncle Chester grabbing the coupons, putting them in the jar, and the coupons floating out.

I turned to the back and there was a trunk in the van, and the lid was up. It was Uncle Chester's trunk. I looked inside. There was a little black boy in there. Nude. His eyes wide open. His lips formed the words *Help me*, but I turned away.

On the opposite side of the van, mounted on the wall, was the painting Leonard had done of the old house amid the trees. The paint began to bead, then bubble. The bubbles filled with colors of the paint and streaked down its length as if crying Crayola tears.

I felt uncomfortable. Hot. I realized I was holding my breath. The back door of the van was shut. I tried to open it. It wouldn't budge. I turned and tried to walk to the front of the van, but now I was swimming. I tried to ease between Uncle Chester and Illium, make my way to the driver's window, but it was closed. I was growing weak, dizzy. I grabbed at the window crank and attempted to roll the window down, but the crank wouldn't work, and now Illium and Uncle Chester had hold of me and were yanking me back. I twisted and tried to fight them. Their faces were more puffed than before. Their eyes poked from their heads like peeled grapes. The little black boy was out of the trunk. He swam between them, took hold of my shirt. His eyes were pleading. His hand tugged at me. His arm came loose at the shoulder and floated up, but still his fingers held my shirt. Then his other arm came loose at his shoulder and floated to the top of the van. Then his legs. And finally his head. His torso came down to rest on my chest, and his body parts bobbed all around me, shedding flesh, leaving only the floating bones, the rib cage lying across me. I tried to pull the skeletal arm and fingers from my shirt, but I was too weak. The bony arm began to tug. Coupons swam by me. Illium and Chester Pine leaned over me and smiled. The water turned murky. I felt as if I were blacking out.

Then I woke up hot and mummy-wrapped in the covers. The moon was filling the room. Florida had rolled to the other side of the bed. The moonlight was mostly on her, and I was in shadow. I noted that the shadow made my skin dark as hers. I untwisted the sheets and sat on the edge of the bed and took in some deep breaths. After a while, I rolled back on the bed and took hold of the sheet and covered Florida and myself.

I thought about what I had dreamed. It seemed pretty silly now. There was a logical explanation for everything in the dream, but I felt my unconscious was also trying to tell me something I'd overlooked all this time. I still didn't know what it was, but I thought I had hold of the edges of it, and if I kept my grip, I might pull the rest of it into view.

I lay awake until the moon slipped away and the sun eased up, rose and gold and already hot.

Florida was still asleep, and so was Leonard, when I tiptoed into the kitchen and started coffee. By the time the coffee was beginning to perk, Leonard was awake. He came in wearing his gray robe and some grungy bunny-rabbit slippers. You know, those silly things with the ears on them, white cotton tails at the heels. Personally, I've always wanted a pair.

Leonard yawned, sat at the table. "Where's Florida?" he said.

"Still sleeping. We were up late."

"Contemplating the universe, of course. What's this?"

He was pointing at his painting. After I got the coffee going, I had brought it into the kitchen and propped it up in a chair. I had the copy of *Dracula* on the table. I had a pencil and paper there too. I had drawn on the paper.

"I been thinking stuff over, Leonard. I believe I've come up with some ideas."

"Like what?"

I poured him coffee, poured myself a cup, and said, "I'm looking at this now from your standpoint. Your uncle isn't guilty. Once I could get myself to think that way, I began to get some ideas. That's all they are, though, ideas."

"Let's hear them," Leonard said.

"Your uncle was a fan of mysteries. He wanted to be a cop. He was a security guard. He claimed to have information regarding child murders, and wanted to have his own personal investigation with assistance from the police, but he didn't want them in complete control. We know from what Hanson said that the child disappearances here on the East Side weren't exactly given top priority, and now, even if someone came in and wanted to pursue them, like Hanson, it's such an old case, it would still be a back-burner operation. We know too racial prejudice most likely affected the conclusions of previous investigators."

"Bottom line, my uncle didn't trust the police, but he saw himself as an investigator. It was his big chance to solve a real mystery."

"Let's say Illium, who was an ex-cop, met your uncle through one of his personal programs. Bookmobile, the recycling, whatever. They became friends, and they began to investigate this business. I don't know why they began to investigate. Some little pieces of evidence got them curious, and they were bored, and they went to it. Or they found the skeleton by accident, and your uncle brought it here because he wanted to examine it, try and figure what happened. Thing is, though, if he was investigating with Illium, and they were serious about what they were doing, they must have made notes. But where are they?"

"You're right," Leonard said. "Uncle Chester would have made notes."

"Let's hold our water there and back up. Your uncle began to lose it. Alzheimer's, not enough blood to the brain, whatever, but he began to experience problems. He got his will straight through Florida, left his stuff to you. But his thinking continued to muddle. Say he couldn't work on the case anymore, and that just left Illium. Your uncle wanted this business solved, but it was different now. His brain was melting. He couldn't hold his thoughts. I think that's why you have that bottle tree out there. A part of him knew there was something corrupt about, but he couldn't remember what."

"So he translated it as something supernatural?"

"Something evil. If he heard about bad spirits when he was a kid, it could have come back to him as real, his mind messed up the way it was. He might have thought he was actually doing something that could protect him. And in clear moments he wanted to tell you about it, or write it down, but he couldn't remember long enough, so the things that were important to the case became all the focus he had, and those things became symbols rather than thoughts."

"The coupons. The book. The painting."

"In a way, he was giving you a mystery to solve, not on purpose, but because those elements, those clues, were all that remained of his thinking on the matter. He might not even have known what those clues related to anymore, but they were important to him, and you were important, and he had enough savvy left to put those items together and have them stowed away in a safety-deposit box."

"It really is Agatha Christie shit?"

"Let's see what we got. The book, *Dracula.* I don't think it means anything particularly. I believe your uncle was thinking about Illium. Not directly, perhaps. But the book had to do with Illium, and it merely indicates a connection."

"Illium has, or had, the notes, is what you're saying?"

"Could be. If he did have them, I figure whoever left him the little present of the kiddie pornography and the clothes found them and destroyed them. The coupons, now. Both Illium and your uncle had them, and they seem important, but not so important Illium's killer took note of them. We certainly found them easy enough."

"Meaning, if they were important," Leonard said, "Illium's murderer didn't know they were."

"Yeah. Your uncle gave some coupons to Florida to give to you, and he put some in a safety-deposit box. Illium had coupons in jars. But what's it all mean? I haven't come up with a thing on that."

"The painting?"

"That one's up to you, Leonard. Tell me about it."

"I painted it when I was a kid, for my uncle. It's of the old Hampstead place."

"It's a real place?"

"Yeah. It's behind the house here, back in those woods. I used to go there now and then. The house was abandoned years ago.

Hampsteads were white folks, and they owned all the woods back there. Used to be a couple hundred acres. The black community ended right behind the house here, where those woods begin. Guess it still ends there, but I don't know if all that land's still owned by the Hampsteads. They may have sold some of it. I really don't know anything about it anymore. Just that the house was once a fine house, there was some tragedy in the family, and they moved out, but kept the land and the house, but didn't attend to it. I been inside a couple of times. When I was a kid. Climbed through a window. It was a pretty spooky place. I don't even know it's still standing."

"Better and better. Look here." I picked up the pad and showed it to him. I had drawn a series of little rectangles within a series of lines.

"I don't get it," Leonard said.

"First day we came here, I saw a composition notebook on your uncle's desk. I glanced at it. It had a drawing, or chart, or whatever, like this on it. I didn't think much of it. I thought it was just doodling. For all I know, that's what it was, but I suspicion it might be a note that didn't end up with Illium. After the cops came, it disappeared. I guess they have it. Maybe they have more notes than we think, but I don't believe so."

Leonard studied the pad. I said, "I'm not sure I've remembered it exactly right, but that's close. Does it make you think of anything?"

"A floor plan with six rectangles in it."

"My thoughts exactly. What about the rectangles?"

"Furniture?"

"I don't think so. But leave that for a moment. If it is a floor plan, it's not to this house. Too many rooms. And the rectangles don't correspond with your uncle's furniture at all. Do you see what I'm getting at now?"

"If the coupons connect. If the book connects. Then the painting connects, or the location of it connects, and that location could go with this floor plan."

"Right. We just don't understand h*ow* they connect. Now, what comes in rectangles?"

“All kinds of things. A stick of gum. Books. He liked books, that could be it.”

“Proportion throws that. The rectangles are too big to be books if this is a legitimate floor plan.”

I hummed a few bars of the death march. Leonard’s eyes widened. “Graves,” he said.

“Ta-da!”

“You mean under the Hampstead place?”

“Could be.”

“I’ll be a sonofabitch.”

“When Florida wakes up, she’s going over to see her mother. When she does, you and I are going to go take a look at the Hampstead place.”

24.

Late morning, a half-hour after Florida left, we entered the woods, Leonard carrying a shovel, me with a flashlight clipped to my belt, my remembrance of Uncle Chester's diagram folded up in my pants pocket.

At first the going was easy, as the woods were made up mostly of well-spaced pines and there were soft paths of straw to walk on, but soon the trees sloped uphill and there were hardwoods, vines and brambles, and the pines grew closer, and the going wasn't so good. It was humid too, and the smell from the pines and sweet gums became cloying, like being splashed with a bucket full of cheap perfume.

We scouted around until we found a little animal path and made our way down that. Traveling became easier. We startled birds and a deer. About an hour later the trail trickled out at the edge of a little dry creek bed. We didn't cross. Leonard led along the edge of the creek and deeper into the woods. We fought our way through the vines and brambles, and finally, thorn-torn, tired and hungry, we broke into the section of woods that held the house hostage.

Leonard leaned on the shovel, "I was set up right here when I painted it. It's in worse shape now. I don't remember a damn thing about the insides. There were fewer trees around it then."

The house was huge and had once been elegant. Two-story, with a porch that went all around, lots of windows and a railed upper deck, now sagging, like a dental plate hanging out of a drunk's mouth. There were some fallen-down outbuildings nearby and a tumbled-over rock well frame, and around the old well vines twisted and young saplings sprouted.

Trees were growing close to the house, and it appeared as if they were holding it up. An oak had erupted through rotten porch boards and was crawling up the front of the place, poking a limb through a glassless window frame, like a bully poking a big finger in a sissy's eye. The house's lumber had gone gray as cigarette ash. At one side, a persistent hickory had grown to the height of the house and was still growing, and in the process, one humongous limb was lifting a corner of the roof as if tipping a hat.

We carefully mounted the porch, watching our step as it protested our weight. A burst of birds exited a nearby window with a noisy flutter. I said, "Shit."

"Just yellow-bellied finches," Leonard said. "Not known man-eaters."

The front door was still intact, but when I took hold of the rusted doorknob, it budged only slightly before jamming. The hinges were rusted tight.

The window from which the birds had exploded was our next bet. Leonard kicked out the few remaining fragments of glass and broke apart the wood trim that had held the glass in the frame, and we climbed inside.

The room was large and decorated with vines and dust and a peeling, bubbled wallpaper that had a faded design on it that must have been colorful and jim-dandy about 1928. There was an old fireplace filled with trash from hunter and/or hobo camps. A chicken snake, big enough to play a starring role in a Tarzan movie, slithered quickly across the floor and disappeared in a gap in the wood.

The first-floor ceiling was mostly gone, and you could clearly see the roof was pocked with holes, and the shadowed sunlight through the gaps was like spoiled cheese oozing through the splits in a food grater. The flooring was also gapped, and there were sections where it was bowed up and the boards had popped and split from weathering.

We made it across and into the next room without falling through, and the flooring there was better because the ceiling was complete and less water had dampened it. The room was smaller and contained an old-fashioned chifforobe. The wood of the chifforobe had swollen and cracked. There was a bird's nest on top of it, and dried birdshit streaked its sides. The wallpaper here was good, and you could recognize the pattern as a series of pale green shamrocks.

In the next room, the kitchen, there was a black, dust-covered wood stove with white porcelain facing, and a long table shoved up against the wall. The table was weather faded but sound, with thick carved legs that terminated in lion's feet. Above the table, on the wall, the wallpaper—sick beige with no pattern—had water-stained itself in an interesting manner. The stain was dark and shaped like a face and there were darker dots on the face, like splash marks, and the shape of the face was familiar.

Leonard said, "The Wallpaper of Turin, or rather, of LaBorde, Texas."

"I read once about this Mexican gal saw Jesus's face on a tortilla," I said, "but I think we got her beat here."

"I don't know," Leonard said, "get tired of it, you can't eat it."

We went over to the table for a closer look. Leonard stepped back and glanced down, said, "Check out the floor."

I saw what he meant immediately. A large section of the floor we were standing on was newer wood. It was dark, as if weathered, but it was, in fact, treated lumber. About the size of a Ping-Pong table. You looked close enough, you could see it was all of one piece. You might not have noticed it, you weren't looking for something suspicious.

I got out the floor plan I had drawn from memory. I said, "According to this, if I recreated it right, and the basic design certainly fits this house, there are no graves at this spot."

"Yeah, but I think, good friend, we have just found the doorway to hell."

We got off the square of flooring, and Leonard worked the tip of the shovel into a corner of it and lifted. The square of wood creaked up. When it was high enough, I grabbed hold of it and helped raise it. It wasn't too heavy.

We pulled the section back and looked down. It was about three feet to the ground. You could smell the dampness of the earth. The ground was packed down there, as if it were well traveled.

I lay down on the floor, leaned over the edge of the gap, and looked underneath the flooring with my flashlight. There had been a lot of new wood put under there for support. About three feet to my left there was a metal container about the size of a personal safe, pushed back against the rotten wood skirting that went around the house. I flashed the light in the hole some more, looking for snakes. I didn't see any.

I climbed down there and got the metal box and handed it to Leonard. The box was made of tin. It was like an oversized breadbox. It rattled when I moved it. There was nothing but a slap-and-snap latch to keep you out of it.

I climbed out of the hole and watched Leonard open the box. Inside was a large Bowie knife, a small hacksaw, about a dozen child pornography magazines, a purple tablecloth, two candlesticks, and two new white candles.

I noted something was sticking out of one of the pornography magazines, an undersized page that didn't seem to belong. I pulled it out. It was a page from the Bible. The Psalms. I checked the other magazines. Each contained a page from the Psalms.

"I'll be damn," Leonard said. "Read a little Psalms, whack off to kiddie porn, read a little Psalms. That's some combination."

I unwrapped the purple tablecloth. It was stained in the center with something crusty, and at either end there were white stains that were obviously candle wax.

"Let's slide the lid back on the floor," I said.

"Aren't we going to look down there?" Leonard asked.

"Humor me. I need it to stand on."

We put the flooring back. We stood on it, and I ran a finger through the dust on the table. I said, "The dust here is a lot thinner than the dust everywhere else. Now, watch this. I think."

I pulled out the purple tablecloth and spread it on the table. It fit nicely. I took off my shirt and used it to pick up the candlesticks at their bases so as not to leave prints. I put one at either end of the table where the cloth had remnants of wax staining it. I shoved the candles into the sticks, tossed the porno magazines on the table for the hell of it.

I said, "Is a picture starting to form?"

Leonard let it cook a moment. "It's like an altar. And if that crusty stuff in the middle of the cloth is what I think it is, could be what we have here are sacrifices to a water stain of Jesus?"

“A water stain to some is but the face of God to others,” I said. “Remember those idiots and the tortilla?”

“Well, it ain’t a ritual we done much at our Baptist church.”

“Not my church either, though I might have missed a couple of Sundays.”

I put my shirt on, and Leonard shoveled the flooring up again. We pulled the section back, and I got down in the hole on my hands and knees with my flashlight and waved it around. I saw a number of termite mounds. I unfolded the floor plan and studied it with the flashlight. I felt certain I was close in memory to Uncle Chester’s floor plan, if not dead on. When I thought I had the plan in my head, I folded it up and put it away. I stood up in the hole and said, “Give me the shovel and just hang tight a minute.”

I took the shovel and started crawling toward what I remembered as a rectangle on the map. It was dark under there, but the trim around the house was rotten in spots and pencils of light came through like laser beams.

I got to about where I thought the map indicated a rectangle, and looked around. There wasn’t a mound there, but there was a slight depression about two feet wide and four feet long. Water had run up under the house and filled it and the water had partially evaporated.

I put the light on the ground at an angle where it would shine in the depression, and got to work. It was so low I had a hard time managing the shovel, but I lay on my stomach and poked it in the depression and sort of rolled the handle in my hands and flipped mud and dirt to the side.

About the fourth time I flipped the dirt, a smell came out of there that filled my head and made me choke. It was so potent, I crawled back from it. I must have called out too, because Leonard said, “You all right?”

“Come down here.”

A moment later Leonard crawled up beside me. “Shit, that’s stout. It’s something dead.”

“Yeah.”

We worked our shirts off and tied them over our faces, and while Leonard held the light, I crawled up to the depression and went back to work. I rolled a couple of shovelfuls out of there and came up with something. Leonard put the light on it. It was stuck to the tip of the shovel and I couldn't move it out of the hole.

Leonard's voice was muffled behind his shirt. "Chicken wire."

I edged the shovel beneath the wire and worked along the edge of the depression and picked up another shovelful and came up with more dirt-plugged wire.

Leonard said, "If I buried something and didn't want animals digging it out, I might put a little chicken wire over or around it. … Jesus, Hap. I don't think I can stand this stink for long."

It was strong, shirts over our noses or not. I was beginning to feel dizzy and ill. Another shovelful turned up some cloth, and the cloth ripped and snapped on the end of the shovel, and I pulled the shovel over closer and looked at the fragment. It was caked with mud and what I figured was lime. The lime had faded the cloth, and I couldn't tell much about it.

When I stuck the shovel in again and worked it back, I had a fragment of bone. It might have been a piece of a rib. There was something clinging to it. It looked like lardy chunks of flesh and cloth twisted up together. The smell from it was so intense I thought I was going to pass out.

"Maybe it's an animal bone?" I said.

"Yeah, and my dick's a water snake."

I dug around some more, and after a while I came up with what I knew I would. A hard round ball of mud. Except the mud came off the ball, and it wasn't a ball at all. It was the top part of a small, dirt-colored skull.

"Sonofabitch," I said.

I used the shovel to push all I had found back in the hole, then shoveled all the dirt back on top of it.

"We better look around some more," Leonard said.

We moved back a few paces, away from the smell, and I got my map out and Leonard held the light on it. We studied it, crawled around under there and found some likely locations, and I poked my shovel in them.

Once I came up with a chunk of damp cardboard box dripping doodle bugs. In another spot I came up with more chicken wire.

Over near the front of the house, just up under the rotten front-porch steps, we found an open grave about four feet long and two and a half feet wide and two feet deep. It was empty. I pushed at the steps with the shovel. They moved. They weren't attached to the porch. I also noted that the steps were made of newer wood.

I thought about that. Whoever had made this graveyard had fixed it so they could get under here easy—through the trap in the kitchen or by sliding away the front porch steps. I thought too about this empty grave. Could this be where the skeleton in Uncle Chester's trunk originally belonged?

"You looked hard enough, sifted through the dirt under here," Leonard said, "I got a feeling you might turn up more of what we found in that first hole. In different degrees of disintegration."

"I've had enough," I said. "Let's get some air."

25.

We didn’t eat any lunch that day. When we got back to the house we took turns showering. There didn’t seem to be enough hot water and soap to make me feel clean. The smell from the grave was still with me. At least in my head.

While Leonard showered, I walked around the living room, nervous. I had put on jogging pants, a T-shirt, and tennis shoes, and I took advantage of the comfortable clothing to stretch and go through some Hapkido kicks in the living room. I shadowboxed at the air. I side-kicked the couch hard enough to slide it across the room.

After a while, Leonard came into the room. He had put on gray sweatpants and tennis shoes without socks. He wasn’t wearing a shirt. We looked at each other but didn’t say a word. He got one end of the couch and I got the other and we moved it to the far wall. We moved some chairs around. We had a little room now.

We started to spar, lightly, just tagging one another with control. We did that until we were sweaty and tired and needed showers again. But we didn’t shower. We got to work on the subflooring, and by late that afternoon we were finished. During that entire time, we hardly said a word, just something now and then about nails and boards and such.

When we finished, we sat on the subflooring for a while, sweating, letting time go by. I broke the silence.

“It’s gone far enough, Leonard. I love you like a brother, man, you know that. But Illium didn’t just drive off in that pond by accident. And under that house … no telling how many bodies there are. Your uncle’s diagram is probably just for what he located. Or maybe he put them there.”

“You’re back to that,” Leonard said, and he was angry.

“I’m not back to anything. I’m saying we don’t know. We’re not investigators. It’s time we call in the law.”

“The law has been on this case for years, Hap. We’ve found out more in a few days than they have in all that time. Or rather my uncle and Illium found it out and we picked up on it. We let Hanson in on this, he’s still got to mess with the system. I don’t even think it’s purely a black-white thing anymore. It’s more a thing makes the police force look stupid. Justice seldom overrides embarrassment.

“But black-white thing or not, white people run this town, and they’re going to be a lot more rested they think a nigger did it, and did it to little niggers. That fits in with the general thinking and keeps it out of their backyard. They don’t see anything black as being part of their immediate problem, even the liberals.”

“Leonard, most likely, all things considered, a black man did do it. It sure points that way. A white guy would have to be pretty clever to cruise around over here and not get noticed.”

“I’m not saying it isn’t a black man. You’re missing the point. Way it stands now, all we got to show the cops is certain proof my uncle killed those kids and hid their bodies at the Hampstead place, and that this Illium fellow was in on it. Shit, he’s got kid’s clothes and pornography setting on his couch, just waiting for the cops to eyeball it. Cops see that, they aren’t going to look any farther, and Hanson isn’t going to get the chance to look either. They’ll have it all solved. Couple old dead niggers did it, or rather my uncle did it and Illium got in on the business late. Case closed. And I ain’t having it. Uncle Chester’s the one taught me about pride and honor. Taught me not to care about color, one way or the other. Not to hide behind it, not to use it to roll over nobody.

“I was growing up, you hear a crime newscast, read a newspaper, they were always quick to point out when the criminal was a black, but not when they were white. I got the impression it was blacks did everything. It was my uncle showed me things straight. That people were people and there were good and bad, and to just look at a thing head on, not try and dress it up any. And that’s just a reverse way of saying it turns out to be a black man, it’s a black man. That’s no skin off my ass. I just want whoever it is nailed. But I don’t want to give the cops the easy way out. Uncle Chester was a good man, Hap. He had honor. Me and him, we had our problems, but he wasn’t a child killer.

There's no reason you got to believe in him, but I believe in him, and I want to see he gets a fair shake."

"Thing is, Leonard, whoever killed these kids and did Illium in is still out there. Guys like that, they don't stop. You know that. While we're investigating, he could be planning to kill another child. That's who he's after. Kids. Illium only got aced because he got in the way, and somehow let on he knew something."

"I realize that."

"That first grave we dug into. That's fresh, Leonard. You know that. It doesn't take any time at all for a body to decompose. That one still had the stink on it. He'll kill again, and I don't want that on my head."

"And I don't want my uncle's reputation destroyed, and I don't think the cops are going to find who's doing this anyway. Like I said, they got their suspects. Uncle Chester and Illium. They'll close the book on this case so quick it'll make your head swim."

"I don't know what to say. I really don't."

"Don't say anything for a while. Don't tell anybody."

"Leonard, I already told Florida about Illium."

"Goddamn you, Hap!"

"She won't say anything. For a while."

"You shouldn't have done that. We had a deal. That goddamn pussy always did mess your thinking."

"Watch it, Leonard."

We sat there looking at each other like bad asses for a moment. Leonard smiled slowly. "Hell, Hap, I love you, man. We gonna fight?"

"'Course not."

"That would be some fight, you know?"

"I couldn't take you," I said.

"I don't know. I think you might. You hesitate now and then, you think you're gonna hurt someone bad. You ain't got that killer instinct, but you got mad enough, you'd be some bad business all right."

"I couldn't get that mad at you, buddy."

“Yeah, we’re stuck with one another.… Shit, Hap. It’s OK you told Florida. Hell, I know you got a head on you. She’s all right. I mean, you’re a dumb asshole, but what’s done is done, and she’s all right.”

“It just slipped out. A thing like that, it’s hard to keep under your hat.”

“It’s all right, bubba. It’s just I don’t know what to do exactly.”

“Me either,” I said.

26.

A few days went by. The recollection of those bodies burned my memories at night, found their way into my thoughts during the day. It was the same with Leonard. Not that he said much about it. But I could tell. I had known him long enough to see his feelings expressed in the way he moved or smiled or tried to laugh.

To flush the memories out we took to hard work. Manual labor has a way of sweating out impurities. Both physical and emotional.

We finished up the surface flooring late one afternoon and took what scraps of lumber were left over, and went to see MeMaw, dumped the stuff in her yard and made a pledge to patch her porch.

She was agreeable and very grateful. She told us how much Jesus loved us and took us inside and showed us our snapshot. She had pinned it on the wall near the snapshot of her youngest son, Hiram, who she said Leonard reminded her of. She said her boy would soon be home for a visit. When she said it, her entire face brightened and she looked no older than seventy-five. OK, eighty-five.

I looked at the snapshot of her son and the one containing me and Leonard. Well, Leonard and her son were both black, that much was similar.

We had to eat some homemade bread and preserves before we were allowed to consider leaving. It wasn't a difficult task. We insisted she let us do a few chores for her as well, then we left out of the kitchen and shoved the lumber under her porch and vowed to be back to do the work in a day or two.

Back at Uncle Chester's, just as the sun faded, Leonard put some water in a pot of yesterday's pinto beans, dropped in a fresh strip of ham hock, and peppered it. While it stewed, I drove my pickup down Comanche Street to the East Side Grocery for a few supper items. It was a beautiful death to the day, and in the red and gray time before the dark, the East Side took on a sort of fairy brilliance. A lot of walkers had disappeared from the streets for supper, and those who had jobs were back from them and settled, so the streets were near empty and stained with the blood of the sun.

East Side Grocery was a center for more than commerce. It was where the old men gathered to rattle dominoes and cuss and tell about how they used to do this and used to do that. A bunch of them were sitting out front of the grocery, to the right of the door on the concrete walk, underneath an overhang with a tin-capped light that was already on and already swarmed with bugs. They were sitting on old metal lawn chairs playing dominoes on a fold-out table, laughing and drinking beer out of paper cups.

Behind them, stapled on the store wall, there were ads for great black blues musicians, like Bobby Blue Bland. Guys like that played the East Side often, and the white community never even knew it. There was also a colorful poster announcing East Side's Summer Carnival, August 27th, the "Only All Black Sponsored Major Carnival In East Texas," if one were to believe the poster. In addition, there were a variety of church and community project bulletins.

I nodded at the old men when I went in the store. They nodded and grinned amiably enough, but even though I had been here a lot of late, there was the usual suspicion on their faces, the unasked questions: Who's the white guy? What's he doin' here? Why's he keep hangin' around?

The store owner had been at the domino table, and he reluctantly followed in after me and got behind the counter and waited. I picked up some bread and eggs and cornmeal mix, a six-pack of beer for Leonard, and looked for some nonalcoholic beer for me but didn't find any. I got a six-pack of Diet Coke instead.

I took my stuff to the counter, plucked a couple of jerky sticks out of a box up front, threw them down with my purchase, and watched some hot links on metal pins turn and sweat and drip inside a humidity-beaded glass enclosure.

The owner had a lot of belly and a lot of gray hair and a sun roof that revealed a dark bald spot. He might have been five two. He appeared to have all his own teeth, and one of the front ones was gold as Rapunzel's hair. He said, "That do you?"

"Yeah. How's the dominoes?"

"I'm losing," he said.

He tallied up my goods on the adding machine, and I continued to look around. I examined a frame on the wall behind the register containing the first dollar the store had taken in, and noted the dollar was play money. Below that, on a shelf, I saw something that startled me. Next to a jar of pickled pig's feet was a larger jar stuffed with little slips of paper. It looked like one of the jars at Illium's.

I said, "That jar with the coupons in it? That is coupons, isn't it?"

He was bagging up my groceries; he stopped, glanced where I was indicating. "Yeah."

"I've seen that setup a couple times," I said. "The jars, I mean. There something to it besides you saving coupons?"

"That's the church's," he said.

"How's that?"

"Reverend Fitzgerald, he's got him a deal with all the businesses in town. We cut coupons, we see them. Folks bring them and donate 'em. Fitzgerald saves them coupons for his youth programs. You know, take the soccer, baseball team out to eat. He's got this deal with damn near everybody in the city. Even if the coupons expire, they let him use 'em. They gonna make money anyway, discount or not, him bringing in ten, twenty kids at a time, and often. He's got more coupons than he can use. Illium done told us he gonna stop picking up for a while, he gets this batch. He says they done gettin' yellow, they got so many. They could take soccer teams out for the next ten years and not run out of coupons. He done s'posed to got this here jar, but he ain't showed. I reckon he's been sick."

Yeah, I thought, real sick.

"Mr. Moon's the clearinghouse?" I asked.

"You know him?"

"Not really. Know who he is."

“Yeah, he runs all manner errands for the church. He’s a real do gooder, that Illium. That sonsabitch dies, he’s gone sit on the right side of Jesus, and Jesus gone give him a juice harp, personal like, let him play a few spirituals.”

I figured Illium was probably twanging out a rendition of “The Old Rugged Cross” even as we spoke. I thanked the old man, paid up, and started back to the house, thinking about Illium, the church, Reverend Fitzgerald, and all those coupons, the connection right under our noses all the time.

Next day. A Saturday. Hot. Me and Leonard and Florida and Hanson, out at the lake near my old house, standing on the bank, shadowed by drooping willows, casting fishing lines in the water.

The fish weren’t biting, but the mosquitoes were. They were bad here because of the low areas where the water ran out of the lake and gathered in pools and turned torpid beneath the shades of the willows and gave the little bastards prime breeding grounds.

Florida, dressed in blue jean short-shorts, a short-sleeved blue sailor-style shirt, low-cut blue tennis shoes, and one of those stupid white fishing hats with a big brim that turns up in the front, was doing more slapping than casting.

“You should have worn long pants,” I said. “I told you.”

“Well, damnit, you were right,” she said.

Hanson slapped a mosquito on the side of his face, hard. He looked at his palm. In the center of it was a bloody mess protruding broken insect legs. He wiped the palm on his pants.

“Boys,” he said, “this is just peachy-keen fun, but you didn’t invite me out here to fish. I can tell way you keep looking at each other, so don’t fondle my balls—sorry, Florida.”

“It’s OK,” Florida said. “I’ve heard of them.”

“Get on with it,” Hanson said. “And next time, skip this fishing shit and take me to a movie.”

“I don’t know you’re gonna like this,” Leonard said, “ ’cause, you see, what we want to do is make some kind’a deal.”

“I don’t like deals,” Hanson said. “It always means some guilty asshole gets off with less than he deserves.”

“We’re not guilty of anything,” Leonard said.

“Except withholding evidence,” I said.

“Yeah,” Leonard said, “there’s that.”

“All right,” Hanson said, reeling in his line, “that’s enough bullshit.… You in on this Florida?”

“Nope,” she said. “I’m just a humble fisher girl. And their lawyer, if they need me.”

We all took a moment to slap at a black cloud of mosquitoes. Hanson said, “Let’s go someplace we can talk without pain. Few more minutes of this, I’m gonna need a transfusion.”

We walked back to Leonard’s car, which was up the hill and in the sunlight. The mosquitoes weren’t swarming there, there was just the occasional kamikaze. We took the rods and reels apart and put them in the trunk of the car with the fishing tackle. We poured the worms out so that they might breed and multiply. I watched them squirm around in the soft sand, making their way into the earth.

Florida climbed up on the hood of the car and stretched her legs and scratched at the knots the mosquitoes had made. On her, even the knots looked good. Hanson seemed to be taking note of that himself.

Hanson said, “I’m waiting. And not patiently.”

“Once upon a time,” Leonard said, “me and Hap found a dead guy in a pond.”

“Yeah,” I said, “in a bookmobile.”

“Come again,” Hanson said.

We explained about Illium but didn’t give his name or say where his body was. We didn’t tell him any more than we needed to. When we finished, Leonard said: “It’s gonna look bad for the ole boy, things you’re gonna find on his couch. A box of kid’s clothes and some kiddie fuck books. But it’s bullshit. He isn’t guilty of anything. Neither’s my uncle. You see, all this is connected to those missing kids, but it’s not connected the way it looks.”

“Another thing,” I said, “me and Leonard got to talking last night, thinking about what we’d seen, and we came up with something else. In this guy’s house—”

"The drowned guy?" Hanson said.

"Yeah," I said. "You'll find a dirty bathtub with pieces of hay in it. We figure he'd just finished mowing his field, was grabbed by whoever while he was in the bath, and drowned in his own tub. Then they put him in the van and ran it off in the pond. An autopsy will probably show the water in his lungs isn't the pond water."

We didn't say anything else. We leaned against the car and waited. Hanson looked at us for a while. "That's it?" he said. "You're not telling me any more than that?"

"We'll tell," Leonard said, "but we want something."

"You're not in any position to want shit," Hanson said. "It's best you talk your asses off."

"You know we haven't done anything," Leonard said. "We want to solve this crime, bad as you, but we want the deal you didn't give my uncle. You help us solve the case, but we lead."

"I can't do that," Hanson said. "Department wouldn't stand for it, a couple of amateurs. Why do you think they didn't let your uncle do it?"

"He was nuts?" Leonard said.

"Well," Hanson said, "that was part of it."

"We already got more leads than you on this missing child business," I said. "You might be amazed what we got."

Hanson studied the lake in the distance. A soft hot wind brought the smell of it to us. It stunk faintly of dead fish and stagnation. A large bird's shadow fell over us and coasted away.

Hanson said, "If I wanted to do it, I couldn't. I tell my superiors, they'll laugh their asses off, me suggesting you guys run an investigation. They'd be on you assholes like rash on a baby's butt. They got through with you, you wouldn't know if you wanted to shit or go blind. And they'd stick me writing parking tickets."

"We don't want you to ask them anything," I said. "Not yet. What we want is you to join up with us, and cheat a little. Show us the stuff you got on the case, we'll show you something. We think we know what's going on, but we want to set everything up, and the more we all know, the better. We see the files, we might recognize something there goes with what we already know."

"I've read those files," Hanson said. "There's not a whole lot of help there."

"Something that'll jump out at us," Leonard said, "won't necessarily jump at you 'cause you don't have the information we got."

"Sounds like some shit talk to me," Hanson said.

"This way," I said, "when we turn it over to you, and nod out like we never existed, no one's going to know we did anything, unless you want them to."

"Of course, *we'll* know," Leonard said, "and that's all that matters."

"You had all your ducks in a row on this," I said, "you could make those jackasses at the station stand up and notice, and you'd get the respect you deserve."

"Not to mention solving an important crime," Florida said.

Hanson turned and looked at her. "I thought you weren't in on this."

"Just a wee bit," she said. They held each other's eyes longer than made me comfortable.

"We're deadly serious," I said, drawing Hanson back to me. "We've got the guy that's been murdering these kids by the ying-yang, and now we're gonna put it in the wringer, crank it up a couple notches. You don't help us, we'll find some other way to get it done."

"I could just run your asses in for obstructing justice," Hanson said. "And ought to."

"You could," Leonard said, "but you don't want to."

"Say I don't?"

"You want this murderer bad as we do," I said, "and we can make things happen a lot quicker if you do it our way. You help us, we get the benefit of your experience, and you get to look like Supercop. Hell, aren't you tired of being neglected? You solve this, on your own, with our help, you might end up chief."

"And most important," Leonard said, "those kids will have justice. Well, some kind of justice.”

“I don’t know,” Hanson said.

“We start with the body in the pond,” I said. “Telling you who it is and where it is. It’s not like we say, then to hell with it. It is, you play that one any way you want, then we feed you some more. Tell you what we know and how we know it and what we think it means. Then we’ll stick the killer’s dick in the wringer and put your hand on the crank.”

Hanson crossed his arms, furrowed his brow, and looked into the distance. A minute ticked by like it was an hour on holiday.

“What’ya say?” Leonard said.

“I’m thinking,” Hanson said. “Give me a minute to breathe here, will you? I’m thinking.”

27.

Some mornings the beautiful face of my ex-wife, Trudy, hangs over me like a moon, but when I open my eyes there's only the sunlight as seen through tears. Some mornings the light itself is the color of her hair, and the smell of summer flowers is the smell of her skin.

Some mornings I awake and the bed is too huge and I cannot remember how I've come to where I am, cannot believe what happened to Trudy, or imagine that beautiful body and face of hers in the ground, withering, feeding the bugs and worms. I won't allow myself to look straight on at the memory of violence that took her and wounded me and Leonard. She went wrong and I went after her, pulling my best friend behind. Gunpowder and bloodshed, sulfur and death were Trudy's final perfume. And me and Leonard, we've got the scars.

I awoke the next morning having dreamed that way about poor, pretty Trudy, awoke feeling old and blue and not much for coffee. All this the consequence of Florida not being in my bed. She had not invited herself to stay and I hadn't the guts to push it.

Her absence between the sheets had been part of why the old dreams of Trudy came back; part of the feeling behind my bones and viscera that violence was oncoming direct in my path, like bright lights on my side of the highway on a dark, wet night; the feeling I was about to meet wet grillwork head-on, followed by two hot tons of speeding steel.

I got dressed and went outside without waking Leonard and sat on the porch steps in the cool of the morning and watched the sunlight brighten. Long about the time you could call the morning golden, Hanson pulled up at the curb in a car I had not seen before, a beige Buick with a dent in the rear fender. He got out of the car with something under his arm and looked at me.

He managed his cigar out of the inside of his coat and put it in his mouth and came up to the porch and sat on the step beside me. He looked tired. He rolled the cigar with his tongue and put what was under his arm on the steps between us. It was a thick manila folder.

“Glad you’re up,” Hanson said. “I was gonna wake you.”

“Thanks for giving Florida a ride home last night,” I said.

“Yeah, sure,” he said.

“That was damn nice of you.”

“No problem.”

“I like the idea of an officer of the law seeing her home safe.”

“Part of the job.”

We sat in silence for a while. Hanson shifted on the step so that he could pick up the folder and open it. He looked at the contents for a few moments, then put the folder on the porch. He said, “All right. We got a deal. I want you to know, ’cause of you and Leonard, I almost lit this damn cigar last night. Haven’t smoked in years, just sucked on it now and then, but I almost lit it.”

“Thanks for the folder,” I said, and meant it. “And the world thanks you for not lighting that damn cigar.”

“I photocopied all this shit last night, on the sly, and it gets out, well, my job is gone, and I just might be sleeping behind bars. And you and Leonard will be there too. You can bet on that. Here’s how it’s gonna work. I’m gonna leave you this, you give me the name of this guy in the pond, tell me where the pond is. I got some lies ready to use for leads. I find him there, we’re in business. I don’t, you are not only gonna give me this stuff back, I’m gonna punch both of you in the mouth and see to it you’re out of town.”

“Before sundown?”

“Just as quick as the toe of my shoe in your asses will move you.”

I told him Illium’s name and where to find him. I didn’t tell him any more than that.

“OK, son. Let’s see how we play the game.”

He got up, leaving the folder on the porch. He started down the walk. About halfway to his car I said, “Marvin.”

He turned.

“I really like Florida,” I said. “A lot.”

“I know, son, but sometimes things don’t work out the way a man wants them to. Ask me about that sometime.”

He finished off the distance to his car. He drove away.

I fixed coffee and breakfast and woke Leonard and showed him the folder. We ate and cleared the dishes and spread the contents of the folder on the table. There were a couple of photocopied snapshots of missing kids. Just a couple. Both boys, and both staring at the camera, the way young kids do, like startled deer.

One of them had his head shaved close and had ears that if he could have moved them would have given him lift-off. He was the first reported to disappear. It occurred to me that had he lived, he’d be a young man now.

The other boy was a nice-looking kid with a couple of front teeth missing. I looked at those photographs hard. I wanted those kids to be real, not just reflections on colored paper. I thought about the other kids. No photographs available. While they were living, no one had bothered. It was as if their existence was of no importance, no need for a matter of record.

We studied the material for a while. There was a lot of it, but it didn’t say much. There were notes from the cops and detectives. Hanson had a few notes of his own. The obvious thing was that one child a year had come up missing from the East Side for the past eight years and had not been accounted for.

I said, “See any patterns?”

“All boys,” Leonard said. “All about nine or ten. All of them noted as not having the best of home life, and in some cases, not being reported missing until some time after their initial disappearance. Part of that might have been the parents, and part of it may have been the sorry attitude of the police force.”

“What about when they were killed?”

Leonard studied the contents of the folder. After a while he said, “I’ll be damned. Every one but one came up missing in August. Corey Williams was reported last September.”

"Before you woke up, I did some figuring on that," I said. "Taking in the fact a lot of the reports came in late, they were probably all kidnapped sometime in the early part of the last week of August. Personally, I think that's a little too big a coincidence."

"This is August," Leonard said.

"Yep. And week after next is the last week of the month."

"So what's with the last week of August?"

"I don't know. It sounds like a pattern, but I also got to thinking about the smell that was in that grave. That's fresh, or seems to be. So maybe all this late-August stuff is just coincidence and he got started a little early this year, but I don't think so. Stink could be due to slow disintegration. Soil like that, sometimes it happens, something gets buried just right.

"Another thing that jumps out at me is all the children were illegitimate. No fathers. The mothers were all teenagers. Couple of the kids had been shuffled around to foster homes, had been in some kind of trouble almost before they were out of diapers. Little robberies. Drugs. Stuff kids ought not to even be thinking about. See the pattern?"

"I don't know that's a pattern," Leonard said. "Not the way you mean, anyway. Just shows they're the type of kids to be at risk."

"Well, we've already got our good Reverend in mind here, due to the church connections, coupons, recycling—which explains all those goddamn newspapers Uncle Chester had. And if you remember, Fitzgerald really had a hard-on for illegitimate children. Do you recall anything he said that stuck with you?"

"It all stuck with me.… Yeah, when he was talking about the mothers of illegitimate children, he said the mothers had produced baby boys. He didn't say girls, or children. He said baby boys without fathers. Something like that."

"It didn't mean anything to me then," I said, "not really, but I caught it. What I think is, we got a religious nut serial killer. He's somehow tied his religion in with his sex and power urges. I don't know, maybe something that happened to him in his childhood."

"Shit, Hap, I don't give a damn what happened to him in his childhood. I mean, he got fucked by his next-door neighbor who was a scout leader, I'm sorry for the kid he was, but for the man he is, I don't give a shit. He made his own choice."

"I don't know some people have a choice, if certain things happen to them."

"Cancer does what it does because it's got no choice, but I get a cancer, I'm not going to psychoanalyze the little bastard. I want it cut out. This guy's a cancer."

"Even so, if we understand what drives him, we got a better chance of nailing his ass. Obviously, he doesn't care for illegitimacy. Gets him worked up."

"OK, Hap, I'll play. He's got a thing for boys, so he was maybe nine, ten, when he was raped by a man. Good guess?"

"Probably a person of authority."

"A preacher like himself? That what you're driving at? Something that links God, religion, sex, and abuse together."

"If Fitzgerald was illegitimate, I wonder if he knew who his father was and what his father did for a living? Preach, maybe? And think about the position Fitzgerald's in. It's perfect. He's trusted. He has access to children. He has all these youth programs. Kids like the ones in this file, neglected, probably not wanted, they'd be raw meat for this wolf. And I think this guy's a psychotic, not a sociopath. Or he's both. He gets off on the power of controlling the kids, and he thinks he's doing God's will. He controls them to some extent through positive services. Baseball, soccer, what have you, but—"

"It's not enough."

"For certain illegitimate children, it isn't enough. The ones that maybe remind him of himself at that age. If he can control them, destroy them, he can control his past, destroy it. At least for a year at a time."

"But why a year? We're talking a pretty perfect pattern here."

"I don't know."

"OK, Hap. When he was nine or ten, he was raped by a man, his father maybe, who was a preacher. Or he was raped by a preacher. If not a preacher, someone in authority he trusted. It warped him. And he's a religious nut. That your track?"

"Yep."

"OK. He's tied fanaticism in with his deviance. That's why there's a page of Psalms stuck in each of the porno mags we found. The two are linked with him. Or maybe a part of him knows what he's doing is evil, and somehow the Psalms consecrate it in his mind. Say he's a psychotic. That he's killing for God. Any of that's true, it doesn't take us one whit closer to nailing the bastard. Let's just try and put together the hard evidence, and you can play Freud on your own time. Come on. What have we got?"

"That's the problem," I said. "I don't know it's such hard evidence. But here's what I think we've got, and what I speculate. Your Uncle Chester and Illium were friends. Illium worked with the church. That's why Uncle Chester's poor addled mind thought the coupons were important. He was trying to point a finger at the church. The painting led us to the Hampstead place, and what's under it. We've already established what the book's connection was."

"Illium," Leonard said. "And maybe with the title of the book, he was trying to give us the nature of our criminal. Dracula ain't nothing compared to this guy."

"I think your uncle and Illium, probably because of something Illium saw at the church, got onto Fitzgerald. Perhaps the way he dealt with the boys in the programs there, the illegitimate ones especially. And somehow Chester and Illium connected him to the Hampstead place. Could be the good Reverend makes a pilgrimage up there to worship the water stain or something. Illium followed, watched from hiding. Fitzgerald went home to memorize his sermon, and Uncle Chester and Illium poked around and found the bodies. Six of them anyway. I bet the other two are up there."

"So my uncle took one of the bodies and hid it here while he and Illium did their own investigation. Probably in case the old boy moved the remains."

"That's where they screwed up. They should have gone to the cops."

"Yeah," Leonard said, "and by not going, the body being found here, it just helped give the Reverend a way out."

"That's right," I said. "Your uncle loses his memory, dies, so he's out of the picture. Add Illium into the equation, dead at the bottom of his pond with porno mags and kid's clothes on the couch, and the Reverend isn't going to look as ripe for the part as he might have back then. So we have a lot of circumstantial evidence. Is it enough?"

"Have you thought about this?" Leonard said. "Could be we just don't like the bastard, and we're tying all this together the way my uncle got tied. It looks bad, but are we seeing smoke or fog? Just because it all leads back to the church doesn't mean it leads to Fitzgerald."

"I've thought about that," I said. "I've also thought about the last week of August coming up. I've thought too, we play our hand before we have the evidence, the bastard could get off. He did, he wouldn't quit doing what he's doing, but he might get more cautious doing it."

"It's not like he's been sloppy so far," Leonard said. "This has been going on for years."

"Kids like this, to some extent, they're like prostitutes when they're victims. They're considered expendable. Illegitimate black kids with no hope and no future and no one to care. It's easy to waste someone like that and not get caught. And consider that the murderer started wasting them during a period of police administration when views toward the ethnic community were less than considerate, and are maybe still that way—"

"He could go on indefinitely."

"Exactly."

"Got a next step, Mr. Sherlock Freud?"

"We wait until Hanson finds Illium, then we tell him what we suspect. Tell him about the Hampstead place and show him what we found, and see what he has to say."

"And in the meantime?"

"I guess we fix MeMaw's porch."

Leonard poured us another cup of coffee. He said, "Something else is wrong, isn't there?"

"Why do you say that?"

"I can just tell. Florida?"

“Yeah.”

“She went home with Hanson last night, didn’t she?”

I looked at him. “You could see something too?”

“They had eyes for each other. You could kind of smell it too. His musk, her in heat.”

“Thanks for being delicate.”

“Well. Did she?”

“I think she did.”

“I’m sorry, man.”

“She’s a grown woman. She does what she wants.”

“Hey, she’s the one messing up here. You’re good people, Hap. It’s her loss. Even if Hanson probably has a bigger dick.”

“Thanks, Leonard, that perked me right up.”

“Hey. We friends, or what?”

28.

It’s hard to deal with knowledge like that. Dead kids under a house, a killer on the loose, and his prime time for new murder fast approaching, and then there was the matter of my woman done gone off and left me for an older man, and me and Leonard were building a porch.

Fortunately, the work we were doing was soothing. I had begun to like the lumber, the feel and smell of it in the hot open air. I liked the sensation of taking something weak and insubstantial and turning it into something solid and pleasing. I liked helping MeMaw.

MeMaw looked rough that day, but she gave us a dentured smile and invited us in for late-morning coffee. We drank it, even though we were already floating in our own. We finished that up, she asked us to help her to bed, said she felt weaker than usual and wanted to be perked for when her baby boy showed up. We helped her out of the walker and onto the bed and Leonard covered her with a light blanket and turned a fan on to circulate the warm air.

“Won’t our hammering bother you?” I asked her.

“Tired as I am, only one can wake me up is the Lord. And he gonna have to shout today.”

“Rest, MeMaw.”

She looked so ancient lying there. Not like a person, but like a praying mantis. All bone and tight-stretched skin. She was asleep before we could leave the room.

We worked as quietly as possible, and long about noon, Leonard decided he wanted hamburgers and fries and was going to use one of Uncle Chester’s coupons to get it. I stayed to crawl beneath the house and pull out some old lumber that was under there so we could take it to the dump. It had fallen out from beneath the porch ages ago and was wet and rotten and an invitation to termites.

I was doing that when the porch above me squeaked like a sick rat. I figured it was Leonard. I crawled back to the front of the house and out from under the porch and stood up, ready for a burger. But it wasn't Leonard. It was a black man about my size and age, and I knew who he was immediately, though we had never met. He has wearing a cheap blue suit and was looking at me like I was a snake that had crawled out from under the house.

"Who are you?" he said, and he had the look of someone ready to fight.

"Hap Collins," I said. "You're Hiram, right?"

He eyed me for a second. "How'd you know that?"

"I've seen your picture. I'm a friend of MeMaw's. Me and my buddy Leonard are fixing her porch."

"Where'd she get the money for that?"

"Doesn't need any. She paid in pie."

He grinned slowly, and when he grinned, damned if he didn't have that confident air Leonard's got, like he's immortal and knows it. MeMaw was right. They did favor.

I stuck out my hand. "Good to meet you."

"You too," he said, and we shook.

"She's sleeping. Said she was resting up for you. I didn't know she meant you were coming today."

"She didn't know exactly, but I called and told her it was likely. I always come around this time of year. It's my vacation time from work."

He nodded toward his white van in the drive. I saw on the driver's door the stenciled words EASTEX SCHOOL SUPPLIES.

"That's right," I said, "you're a salesman."

"I can sell socks to a legless man, Hap."

He certainly sounded as if he could. I said, "But you don't sell socks to schools."

"Nope."

"Pencils? Notebooks?"

"Nothing like that. They get that stuff at the drugstore. I carry stuff like American and Texas flags, sell those on the spot. Take orders for flagpoles, podiums, sweatshirts, senior rings. That kind of thing. Mostly it's riding around and talking and showing my teeth a lot."

Across the street, Leonard pulled into the drive and got out with a greasy white burger bag. He crossed over and nodded at Hiram. He said, "MeMaw's baby boy."

Hiram grinned. "That's me. You Hap's friend?"

"Gosh," Leonard said, "I hate getting put on the spot like that."

Hiram laughed like that was really funny. You could certainly see the salesman in him, but he seemed like an all-right kind of cuss too.

"We can split this stuff with you," I said.

"Naw, thanks. I reckon Mama's got something in the box in there."

"Just stuff that tastes like ambrosia of the gods," Leonard said. "Can't figure why you'd want to eat that and not share our burger."

"I got a strong character," Hiram said. "I'm gonna tiptoe in here and check on Mama. You boys take it easy. And thanks for doing this work. I wasn't so damn tired right now, I'd help you. I been driving all over. Come in from El Paso today."

"That's on the other side of the world," I said.

"Yeah."

"Say, Hiram," Leonard said. "We're gonna work a little more, then clean up some of this lumber and stuff, then we're gonna knock off a bit. We gotta run in and get some nails, a few things to finish out."

"Need money for it?" Hiram said.

"It's on us," Leonard said.

Hiram smiled at us and thanked us, and quietly went inside and closed the door.

Way the world was, the things I knew about, it was good to see everything wasn't crazy. Good to be reminded sons still loved their mamas and came home to see them. Not everyone had dead children under their house.

About two that afternoon, right after we'd come back from the lumber yard with nails and stuff, Hanson pulled up in Uncle Chester's driveway and got out. He had the white cop Charlie with him. Charlie was wearing the same sheen-green Kmart suit he'd had on last time, but he'd added a porkpie hat to his outfit. Maybe to keep that pesky fly off his head.

Charlie stayed by the car, and Hanson walked across to MeMaw's where we were working.

"You boys got a moment?" he said.

We put up our materials and crossed the street and went into the house with them. Before we could get seated at the kitchen table, Hanson said, "Charlie's in on it, boys. I had to have some help."

I looked at Charlie. He looked the way he always looked. Calm, a little bored, old-looking for his age, disinterested, dumb. I figured he was about as dumb and disinterested as the proverbial fox. When we were seated, I said, "OK. How'd it go?"

"Well, he was down there," Hanson said.

"Identify him?" Leonard said.

"It's Illium Moon. Looks like a suicide. Providing you accept the old bookmobile in the pond method."

"That's unusual, all right," I said.

"I've seen weirder," Hanson said. "I seen a guy that had frayed a lamp cord, plugged the good end into a socket, put the frayed end in a cup of water, along with his dick. Barbecued that fucker."

"His dick?" Leonard said.

"The rest of him too," Hanson said.

"About Illium," I said. "Find the goods on the couch?"

"Yep."

"And?"

"I think it's like you guys think," Hanson said. "A setup. It's too goddamned cute."

"Yeah," Charlie said. "Some of those kids' clothes were new. Could be of recent victims, but we don't think so."

Hanson said, "Whoever did Moon in wanted to make him look like he killed some kids and had some souvenirs from the killings, but he didn't want to give up his own souvenirs, 'cause I'm sure he's got 'em. A killer like this has always got 'em. A few magazines he's willing to lose, but the actual clothes his victims wore, that's much too special for a dick like this."

"Couldn't part with the stuff," Charlie said, "so he went and bought some at Kmart. I checked myself. Kmart is where I like to shop."

"They got some deals all right," I said.

"Yeah, and they take shit back easy, it don't fit right," Charlie said.

"I know a man likes Wal-Mart for that same reason," I said.

"Yeah, well," Charlie said, "Wal-Mart's all right."

"You guys through shopping?" Hanson said.

"He's always business," Charlie said. "He don't get any recreation."

Hanson ignored him. He got out his sloppy-ended cigar and put it in his mouth and did the side-to-side routine with it. He said, "Some of the jeans are brands and styles not made until this year. There might be one authentic piece in there, something belonged to one of the dead boys, but that's it. And I'd stake my career on it."

"Actually, way this is going," Charlie said, "you're staking my career on it too."

"Wouldn't that be a loss?" Hanson said. He turned to us. "Newspapers are gonna be bad to Moon, I think. I can't do anything about that. We can hold off what we found a little while, but not long. Best thing we can do is prove the truth here, show he's been set up. You boys look at the files?"

"Sure." I said.

"Anything?"

"Maybe," I said.

"Don't be coy," he said, "we had a deal."

"Still do," Leonard said. "The deal is we let you in on what we know when we want you to know it."

Hanson took the cigar out of his mouth and put it in his coat pocket and took a deep breath like his chest hurt. I hurt with him. I wasn't sure we were right in holding anything back.I was still going by Leonard's rules, but I wasn't certain how much longer I could do that. I was getting scared.

"Listen," Hanson said. "I'm playing with you guys 'cause I think you got something and I want it and I don't want to climb mountains to get it. But you start thinking we're too cozy, start thinking this is all play, I'll wring your fuckin' necks for you. I'll throw you so far under the goddamn jail you'll be wearing a coolie hat."

"Damn," Leonard said, "I think my pulse just jumped a little."

Hanson seemed to swell. "Fuck with me, you smart-ass motherfucker, just fuck with me, see where it gets you."

"I wouldn't fuck you with Hap's dick," Leonard said. "Hell, I wouldn't fuck you with Charlie's dick."

Hanson moved toward Leonard, and Charlie caught him, and I put an arm across Leonard's chest. I said, "Boys, let's ease off, now."

Hanson took a deep breath. He tried to smile but made a face like a man that had just found a dog turd in his mouth. "All right," he said. "All right, I'm OK. I'll play your way. But only for a little while. A very goddamn little while."

29.

A night of heat lightning. A giant bed.

Leonard had found that the couch was more to his liking for some reason, so the bed had stayed mine. That had been all right when Florida was around, but now I felt I ought to try and get him to trade. I decided that would be an important topic of conversation tomorrow. Why I should have the fold-out couch and he should have the bed. It was the time of night when stuff liked that seemed significant.

I lay there and counted sheep, tried to remember the name of every dog I had ever owned, attempted to let my mind go blank, all the stuff you do when you're restless, but I still couldn't sleep. I thought about Florida. The way she smiled and talked, the nights we had spent together. That special first night we had made love, that night out at the overlook when I thought our relationship was cementing.

I thought about Hanson. I wanted to be mad at him, but he hadn't done anything but respond to what was there to respond to. Hell, I liked the big bastard. Really. He was a swell guy. I just hoped his dick would fall off.

I got up and sat by the window awhile and watched the heat lightning leap around. When that bored me, I watched the drug sellers and their clients. The clients came and went as brisk as patrons at a drive-through hamburger joint. I attempted to listen in on conversations, but all I could hear was talking that sounded like bees buzzing, that and occasional bursts of laughter and the sound of their music, which from where I sat was mostly the throb of the bass line; I felt it more than I heard it.

When I tired of that, I put on my sweatpants and did a few Hapkido moves, shadowboxed a bit, then turned on the end-table light, stretched out on the bed, and tried to get back into reading *The Hereafter Gang.*

I was managing to do that when along about midnight I heard a noise, like whimpering. Then there was a slight banging under the house, followed by silence.

I listened a moment, and it didn't repeat itself. I figured a dog had gotten up under there, bumped its head, and moved on, but I was too nervous to let it be. Lately, with the stuff we'd found and the assholes next door, a bird chirped, Leonard cut a fart, I was ready to leap.

I turned off the reading light, got out of bed, put on my shoes, got my .38, and went out into the living room.

Leonard was up and putting on his shoes. I wasn't the only one hearing things. There was enough moonlight in the room I could see his face. He nodded at me. He went over to the closet and opened it quietly and got the twelve-gauge pump. "Front or back?" he said.

"Front."

"Get the door, count twenty-five slowly. That'll time us close."

I went to the door and quietly as possible freed the locks. I was up to fifteen on my counting when I heard Leonard open the back door and slip out. The shitass was counting too fast. I opened the front door and darted onto the front porch, bending low.

The outside was lit with starlight and the clean silver rays of the moon, and off in the east was the heat lightning. I could see quite well, but there wasn't anything to see.

I held my position and listened, felt a little silly. All I could hear were the assholes next door. Their voices. Their music. I looked over there. The porch light had been turned off, but I could see a couple of people on the porch. I could hear them talking. They weren't looking in my direction. I eased down the porch steps and stopped to listen again. And heard something this time.

The whimpering. It reminded me a bit of a dog I'd had when I was a kid. It had been fed glass in raw hamburger meat by our next-door neighbor who didn't like it digging in his flowerbeds. The dog died. When my dad found out what happened, he worked the neighbor over with his fists and tried to feed him about three feet of a garden rake handle. He finished up by using the neighbor's head to plow the man's flowers up. My dad liked animals. For petunias, he didn't give a damn.

I eased toward the sound, which was consistent now and had turned to a moaning. I went around the side of the house and saw Leonard down on his hands and knees. He had put the shotgun on the ground and was crawling through a gap in the skirting around the house.

By the time I got over there, Leonard was backing out and pulling something out with him. It was a kid. He had the boy by the pants, and when he had him tugged out from under there, I recognized him in the moonlight. It was the boy who had gotten the shot of horse on Uncle Chester's front porch, the boy who'd ended up with a beeper.

The boy was shaking and his eyes were rolled up in his head and he was making the sound that had reminded me of the dog. He was in a bad way and didn't seem to know where he was. He'd crawled under the house like a wounded animal, seeking the dark, the cool pressure of the ground. I thought it odd that the gap in the siding, the place he'd chosen to hide and try and ride out his pain, was beneath the flooring Leonard and I had built. He had been lying not far from where Leonard had discovered the trunk with the pathetic little bones inside. I realized now in my dream, when I had visualized the child in the trunk, the bones dressed in flesh, it had been the face of this boy I had seen.

"He don't seem to be injured," Leonard said. "I don't see any blood."

"Overdose," I said. "He's riding the merry-go-round, hard."

"Goddamn them," Leonard said. "He's just a baby."

I gave the revolver to Leonard and picked up the boy. "I'm calling an ambulance."

I started across the street to MeMaw's. I heard an asshole yell from the crack house, "Hey, whatcha got there?"

The sound of that guy's voice was like sandpaper on my brain. Later, I would think back and know that voice had been the snapping point, the catalyst for what was to follow. I heard that voice and was reminded of what was going on next door, and thought: here Leonard and I were trying to stop some whacko from torturing and killing kids, and in quite a different way, next door to us, operating against the law, but not restrained or bothered by it, a whole houseful of ball sweats were doing a similar thing, and we weren't stopping them, weren't making any effort to. Kids were being tortured to death by addiction, and the drug dealers were taking in big money and making friends with the bail bondsmen, and were practically being treated like businessmen.

I went up on the porch and kicked the bottom of the door, yelled, "MeMaw. Hiram. Emergency. It's me, Hap."

A few minutes later the door opened. It was Hiram. He stood looking at us through the screen. He was dressed in his bathrobe and the expression on his face was odd. You'd have thought I was bringing him a take-out order.

"Wha …?" he said.

"Wake up, man. Got an emergency here."

I could feel the boy shivering in my arms. I glanced down at him. Saliva was running out of the corner of his mouth and his body was trying to bend into a fetal position.

"Yeah … yeah," Hiram said, and opened the screen.

I slid inside, said, "I need to call an ambulance. We found him by the house. Drug overdose, I think."

"I'll take him," Hiram said. "No need to wake Mama. She's sick."

I handed the boy to Hiram, and he held him and looked at him, then took him around the table and into the back room. I used the phone to call the ambulance. I'd no sooner done that when I heard a shotgun blast.

I ran outside, keeping low. I saw Leonard standing in the yard of the crack dealers. He had a shotgun. He fired another shot into the side of the house. He yelled: "Out, ever'body out!"

"Leonard," I yelled, and I started running across the street. I wasn't fast enough. He'd reached the porch over there, and there was one guy still standing on it, standing between Leonard and the front door. Not because he was brave, because he was petrified.

Leonard reached out and shoved him aside. The guy went over the edge of the porch and rolled on the grass and got up and started running.

Leonard tried to open the front door, but someone had locked it. I got up on the front porch about the time Leonard screamed, “Stand back, motherfuckers,” and shot a hole through the door big enough to poke your head through.

I grabbed Leonard by the shoulder, “Hold up, man.”

Leonard looked back at me, and I saw in his eyes what I had felt moments ago. Anger. Frustration.

“You can’t kill them, Leonard.”

“I can kill the house.”

I took my hand off his shoulder and stood back, and he kicked the door where the blast had torn a hole, and the hole got wider, and he kicked again, and an entire panel of the door collapsed, and swift as a summer cloud blowing across the face of the sun, Leonard hit the door and it went to pieces and he was inside.

And I was in after him.

The house was poorly lit, and when we came through the door, Mohawk and the one I called Parade Float came out of the dark. They leaped and grabbed Leonard, one on either side, Mohawk trapping the shotgun against Leonard’s body.

Mohawk yelled, “Now, baby.”

Over Leonard’s shoulder I saw a stringy white woman with greasy hair, dressed in nothing but a pair of shorts, stick a little automatic in Leonard’s face and pull the trigger.

Nothing happened. The gun had jammed. A rush of adrenaline shot through me like a gusher of crude oil blasting to the surface.

I stepped in and hit Mohawk in the side of the head with a right and he loosened up on Leonard just as Leonard kicked the woman in front of him in the stomach and sent her tumbling down the hallway.

I reached out and clawed my fingers across Mohawk’s face, raking him in the eyes, and then I turned sideways and kicked him in the side of the knee. The kick was off, and the knee didn’t break, but he yelped and let go of Leonard and fell backward through an open doorway.

Leonard was using the shotgun stock to do some dental work on Parade Float when I went by him and grabbed the woman.

She was obviously fucked up on something and feeling no pain, and she'd gotten up on her knees and grabbed the gun again. She pointed it at my groin, and I reached down and scooped it aside with my palm and jumped in close and grabbed her head with both my hands and gave her a knee in the face, hard as I could. I figured I'd be hearing from the Southern Club for Manhood after that, but I didn't give a shit, you try and hurt me, I'm going hurt you back. She went backward with her nose flat and blood flying and the gun went off and plaster puffed out of the wall. I kneed her again, and the automatic went sailing away from her, down the hall, and now there were guys coming out of nowhere, all over, a half-dozen of them, and one of them came up behind me and grabbed me in a full nelson. I dropped to a wide stance and punched forward with both hands, and that loosened the guy's grip. I wheeled and hit him in the side of the head with my elbow, and followed on around with my body and scooped my arm around behind his head and pulled him down and kneed him in the groin and kicked the inside of one of his knees and then the other, and the second one broke with a sound like a drumstick snapping.

I took a punch in the side of the head and one in the kidney and I yelled and turned and hit a guy with a forearm and saw another guy fly by me on the end of Leonard's foot, and then I saw the stock of Leonard's shotgun catch another one in the side of the head, and after that I saw less of Leonard because I was busy.

I threw some punches and kicks, but mostly punches and knees and elbows, because the working conditions were tight. Guys started running past me and Leonard, darting for the door.Back of the house I heard a woman scream, and some guys yell, and the back door slammed, and I knew a fistful of folks who'd been on the buy were out of there and making tracks.

I checked the woman. She was still out.

I looked behind me. Parade Float was on his ass, unconscious, leaning against the wall, dribbling blood-soaked teeth down his chest. He was still wearing his shower cap. Those things were really worth the money.

Another guy, the one whose knee I'd broke, was on the floor screaming so loud I thought my brain would turn to mush.

Leonard walked over and kicked the guy in the face, hard, and I grabbed him to keep him from doing it again.

Leonard turned away from me and went into the room where Mohawk had gone, and I ran over there and entered just behind him. And there was Mohawk, on the bed, on his knees, holding a revolver, pointing it at Leonard. The gun vibrated like a guitar string. Mohawk said, “Don’t! Don’t now. I’ll shoot your goddamn dick off. Get away from me, you crazy nigger.”

And Leonard, truly crazy, crazed as if he had a hot soldering iron rammed up his ass, walked right up to him. Mohawk didn’t fire because he was too scared to fire, afraid the bullets would bounce off Leonard’s chest.

Leonard tossed the shotgun on the bed, reached out and grabbed the barrel of Mohawk’s gun and twisted it away from him and grabbed him by the throat with the other hand. He tossed the gun aside and whipped Mohawk around and put his forearm under Mohawk’s chin and applied a judo choke. One of those that doesn’t cut the wind, just cuts the blood off to the brain, and because of that, I knew Leonard had gotten himself together.

Mohawk thrashed a little, then got still.

I put a hand on Leonard’s shoulder. “Let him go, man.”

Leonard let him go, and Mohawk fell off the bed and onto the floor. He was out. With that choke, it only takes a few seconds.

Leonard got Mohawk by the feet and dragged him out of the bedroom, and I watched from the hallway as Leonard pulled him onto the front porch, and down the steps, Mohawk’s head thumping the steps like bongos. Leonard laid Mohawk out in the yard and came back in the house. He reached down and got Parade Float by the shirtfront and boosted him to his feet and put the big bastard over his shoulder and turned to me.

“Drag ’em out,” he said.

I went over and picked the woman up. She was very light. A temporary feeling of guilt went over me, hitting her like that, but then I thought of the gun pointing at my balls and her firing it, and I wanted to hit her again. I took her out in the yard and laid her between Mohawk and Parade Float. I went back inside and got hold of the guy with the broken knee and pulled him onto the porch and shoved him off. He screamed all the way and really screamed when he hit the ground.

In the distance, we could hear the ambulance sirens.

“Inside,” Leonard said.

We went inside and into the bedroom where Mohawk had been. Leonard pulled the mattress off the bed and started dragging it through the doorway. He piled it in the hallway, and I followed after him as if I were a strand of toilet paper stuck to his shoe.

We went into the kitchen, and Leonard rumbled around and found a box of kitchen matches. He tried to open the box but was so wired he dropped them on the floor. I picked up the box and opened it and got a match out and struck it on the side of the box and handed it to him.

He grinned at me. The devil was behind that grin. He took the match and carefully lit a curtain over the kitchen window. The curtain began to blaze. I got a match out, went over to a sack of overflowing garbage, struck the match on the counter and looked at the flame. I saw the overdosed child in it, saw the dead bodies beneath the house, the bones in the trunk, the shadowy shape of Illium.

I dropped the match on top of a grease-splattered Hamburger Helper box. A moment later the sack was flaming. I kicked the fiery sack under the kitchen table and the flames licked up and caught the plastic table cloth. The table itself was littered with garbage. It caught fire pretty quick.

We moved down the hallway, and Leonard took out his pocketknife and cut the mattress open. I lit the stuffing inside, and the mattress blazed mightily.

We did the same sort of thing in the bedroom with the curtains and the sheets. Leonard rescued his shotgun, and we went over to the bathroom and found some bottles of alcohol in the medicine cabinet. We sloshed that around the place and lit it. Flames raced up the walls.

By the time we walked out the front door our matches were used up and the house was seriously on fire. There were ambulance attendants in the yard, looking at Mohawk and the others. There was an ambulance at the curb.

“Not those assholes,” Leonard said, pointing across the street. “There’s a boy over there.”

One of the attendants looked at us, let his eyes rest on the shotgun cradled in Leonard’s arms. “Easy, fellow. We’re on it.”

I looked at MeMaw’s house. I was sure she was up now, sick or not. Lights were on all over. There was an ambulance out front. Attendants were sliding a stretcher into the back of it. Hiram was on the front porch. He looked over at me and Leonard. The red-and-blue lights from the ambulance strobed across him, blended with the yellow-white porch light. He didn’t lift his hand toward us.

I turned back to the crack house. I could see flames behind the windows, like the light inside a jack-o’-lantern. One of the windows exploded suddenly, and a thick coil of black smoke rolled out into the night. It carried a stench with it. Burning plastic perhaps. Or just all the badness in that house on fire.

“Those old wood-frame houses certainly do catch quick,” Leonard said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Lumber’s mellow when it gets that old.”

Me and Leonard walked back to Uncle Chester’s house. Leonard had tossed my .38 onto the porch, and he showed me where it was, and I got it.

We went inside and waited for the inevitable.

30.

Holding cells are very small and short on comfort. And this one smelled like a dog kennel. Me and Leonard were sitting on the floor with about ten other guys, and the floor was cold and hard and not a single throw pillow was in sight. A drunk kept trying to put his head in my lap and wanted to call me Cheryl.

There was one toilet in the place, but you sat down on it to take a dump, everyone was going to be looking at you. I can take about anything, but I like private toilet space. In my book, defecation is not a spectator sport. It wasn't that I needed to go, but I was worried about the situation if the necessity arose. Of course, the bars and the back wall of the cell were painted a very comfortable blue, and that's supposed to be a relaxing color if you're trying to make with a bowel movement. If memory serves me, however, green is better. Perhaps I could suggest that to the jailer. Get an audience with the mayor.

Another bad thing about a holding cell is you don't exactly meet a great crowd of people. A lot of them are criminals.

The people we'd had our row with weren't around. I figured Parade Float was visiting an oral surgeon, and the rest were at the hospital. But we had some real cuties nonetheless. One of them, a greasy white guy with the physique of an industrial meat freezer and a swastika tattooed on his forehead in red ink, got his dick out and pissed between the bars on a jailer's leg. A cop came over and yelled at him, and the guy pissed on the cop. The cop hit the bars with his nightstick and cussed, and the big guy laughed and turned around and shook the dew off his dick.

"Fucking assholes," the big guy said, then he quit grinning and looked all of us in the holding cell over. "You're assholes too," he said.

None of us assholes argued with him. Me and Leonard, we were tired and sore assholes. The big guy, without putting his dick up, wandered over to the far edge of the cell and intimidated a sad-looking little Mexican guy by giving him the hairy eyeball. Also, a guy staring at you with his dick out will make a person nervous.

Hanson came up to the bars and stood looking inside. He was dressed in a black T-shirt and jeans and what looked like house slippers. His stomach bulged inside the T-shirt, but it looked hard, like a washpot. The wet end of a chewed cigar stuck out of the T-shirt pocket. I gave him a little wave. He smiled insincerely and spread his arms wide. “My boys! How are you?”

“We’re a little tired, Lieutenant,” Leonard said.

“Arson and assault, trespassing,” Hanson said. “These things wear on you. Jailer. Open up.”

The jailer opened up. Hanson stood in the open doorway and said, “My boys, come to me.”

We got up and started out. The big guy with his dick out came over and tried to follow after us. “Not you,” Hanson said, and after we passed Hanson pushed the guy back inside.

“Piss on you,” the big guy said and thrust his hips forward like he was going to piss on Hanson. Hanson reached very quickly and grabbed the guy’s crank and yanked it as if he were popping a whip. The guy made a noise like a sudden hole in a helium balloon and went down to his knees.

Hanson said, “Put that thing away, or I’ll have it mounted on a board.”

Hanson came out of the cell, the jailer closed the door, and Hanson gave us a soft shove down the corridor.

We came to a door and Hanson reached between us and opened it. “Gentlemen,” he said.

We went inside. It was an office full of smoke. Charlie was sitting behind the only desk in the room with his feet propped on it. He had thin soles on his shoes. He had a copy of a trash rag and was reading it. He had his suit coat slung over the back of the chair, and he was wearing a green pajama shirt stuck in his slacks, and he had his porkpie hat tilted back on his head.

Mohawk was sitting in a fold-out metal chair on the left side of the room. Just sitting there smoking a cigarette. There was an ashtray on the floor in front of him and it was filled with cigarettes. There were stomped out cigarettes all around the ashtray.

Charlie wasn't paying Mohawk the least bit of attention. He didn't look at us when we entered the room. He was deep into his rag.

On the right hand side of the room, wreathed in Charlie's smoke, was Florida. She was leaning against the wall next to a fold-out chair. She was dressed in jeans and a tight white T-shirt; she was a knockout. Just what I needed to see at a time like this.Then again, I knew she'd be here. She was mine and Leonard's lawyer, and when I got my one call, I'd called her.

"Hap," she said.

"Florida," I said. "Thanks."

Leonard nodded at her.

Hanson said, "Charlie, watch 'em. I got to wash my hands. I been pullin' a guy's dick."

Charlie didn't look up from his rag. He just lifted a hand over it. Hanson went out and shut the door.

I glanced at Mohawk and Mohawk glanced at me. He'd looked better. His mohawk was leaning a bit to the left, and there wasn't one ounce of cockiness about him. There was a knot on the side of his head where I'd hit him. He looked away from me and took in Leonard.

Leonard smiled at him. It was one of those smiles Leonard can give that you'd really prefer not to see. Mohawk's Adam's apple bobbed up and fell back down. He dropped his eyes to the floor. The cigarette between his fingers was almost burned down to his skin. He sucked it once and dropped it. It nearly hit the ashtray. He said, "Where the hell's my motherfuckin' lawyer? They got their lawyer here, I want mine."

"Got to call him first," Charlie said, and turned a page on his rag.

"You ain't let me call shit, man," Mohawk said. "That ain't legal."

"Hey," Charlie said, "we're busy, we'll get to it."

"You look busy," said Mohawk.

“The work of the mind is subtle,” Charlie said.

During this exchange, Charlie hadn’t once looked away from his paper. He kept reading. After a few moments, without taking his face out of the paper, he said, “You know, there’s some strange things in the world. They found a picture of Elvis in an Egyptian tomb.” He put the paper down and looked at me. “You know that, Hap?”

“No shit?” I said.

“No shit. Painted right there on the fucking wall. Had his hair slicked back and stuff. Had on a white jump suit and aviator glasses. It’s right here in the article. They got a picture.”

“Yeah?” I said.

“Yeah,” Charlie said. “They hunt around the tomb some more, they expect to find a mummy with the facial structure of Elvis.”

“You’re certainly on top of things,” I said.

“You’d be surprised the stuff I know,” Charlie said. “I keep up with current events. I’m real current. Most current is I had to get out of bed ’cause I heard about a fire tonight, and I heard it was you two assholes set it.”

“We looked out our window and saw a fire,” Leonard said. “We went over to help pull the victims to safety. We’re goddamn heroes.”

“That motherfucker’s lying!” Mohawk said.

“Keep your seat, Melton,” Charlie said.

“Don’t say anything else,” Florida said to Leonard. “You and Hap be quiet. You’ll do better being quiet.”

“Ah hell,” Charlie said, “Hap and Leonard, they like to talk.”

“That’s true,” Leonard said. “We can’t shut up.”

Hanson opened the door and came in. He went over to the desk. “You mind I have my chair?” he said to Charlie.

“Naw,” Charlie said, “it’s all right.”

Charlie got up and went over to Mohawk. He said, “Get up, Melton.”

Mohawk looked at Charlie. Charlie grinned. Mohawk got up and leaned against the wall. Charlie sat down and used his foot to move the ashtray and the ill-aimed cigarette butts aside. He scooted the chair forward and put his feet on the edge of the desk and rocked back so the chair was against the wall. He looked pretty precarious.

Hanson sat behind his desk and studied me and Leonard. “First time I seen you guys, I liked you. I don’t like you so much now.”

“That hurts,” Leonard said. “Shit, man, we like you.”

“I been eating Rolaids like they’re candy,” Hanson said. “I almost lit my cigar again. And you guys know why? I’m tired of the bullshit. Arson, that’s a serious crime.”

“So’s selling drugs,” I said. “That boy under our house might even think using them’s a bad idea.”

“He don’t think nothing,” Hanson said. “He died before he got to the hospital.”

Silence reigned for a moment. Leonard said, “I think the whole goddamn police force has got some gall, that’s what I think. These fuckers,” he jabbed a finger at Melton, “they been in that house for ages, selling drugs. They fed that boy dope. That boy is dead, man, and I’m not supposed to have a right to get pissed? I know they’re selling drugs. Everyone here knows it, but now you got us on arson, and you’re saying we’ll do time?”

“Could be,” Hanson said. “I ain’t got shit to do with the way the law works, just with doing what it says.”

“Some law that lets people like this creep do what they’re doing,” I said. “What happened to justice?”

“We get enough evidence, we pick ’em up,” Hanson said.

“And let them go,” Charlie said.

Hanson looked at Charlie. “You quittin’ the force? You with them?”

“I’m a cop ’cause I want to lock bad guys up,” Charlie said. “I don’t want to pick ’em up so they can come down here to use the phone and toilet. And I certainly don’t want to arrest no citizens on a misunderstanding.”

“Misunderstanding?” Hanson said.

Charlie took his feet off the desk and let the chair rock forward. “Couple of citizens see a fire, go in and rescue some people, I don’t see that’s a crime.”

“They kneed a woman in the face!” Mohawk said. “They knocked out my main man’s teeth.”

“That woman’s a crack head,” Charlie said, “and she got that way ’cause of you. She’s a hooker. She stabbed a girl friend near to death three years ago. She’s got a record longer than a basketball player’s leg. And your main man, hell, he’s fixed up good now. All them teeth missing. You ought to be grateful. He can suck your dick like a vacuum cleaner.”

“Just the thought of that gets me excited,” Leonard said.

“I’d also like to mention the woman got kneed in the face stuck a gun in my balls,” I said.

“Let’s cool our language,” Hanson said. “We got a lady present.”

“Why all of a sudden?” Charlie said. “And besides, she ain’t a lady now. She’s a lawyer.”

Florida smiled. She said, “Marvin, my clients just saw a fire and went to help.”

“Oh, God,” Hanson said, “not you too.”

“I’m sure the owner of the dwelling, Mr. Otis—”

“Some fat cat honkie, I reckon,” Leonard said.

“One of the fattest,” Florida said. “Mr. Otis, who I know is an upstanding citizen, and a friend of the police chief, would be upset to discover the house he’s renting out is being used to sell drugs.”

“Naw,” Charlie said. “Old fart gets a slice of the action.”

“We don’t know that,” Hanson said.

“We can’t prove it,” Charlie said. “Ain’t the same thing.”

“I’m sure he would be upset,” Florida persisted. “But I know he’d be happy to hear of the bravery of men like Hap Collins and Leonard Pine, who selflessly went to the rescue of the inhabitants.”

“We see our duty,” Leonard said, “we do it. We can’t help it. It’s the way we were raised.”

“Yeah,” Hanson said, “and in the process of doing your duty y’all knocked a man’s teeth out, broke another’s knee, and busted up a woman’s nose.”

"Hey," Leonard said. "My knuckles hurt. They're all scraped up. Show him your head, Hap." I turned the side of my head toward Hanson. Leonard pointed to it. "See there, he's got a bruise."

"Christ," Hanson said.

"Sometimes, in the heat of the moment," Florida said, "even when you're trying to do a good deed, you can make mistakes. They were rough, but they saved lives."

"They set the fire!" Mohawk said.

"I been in that place," Charlie said. "Knocked the door down and come to visit a number of times. Joint's a shit hole, a fire hazard. Fire could have started any kind of way."

"You have a shotgun with you to shoot the fire out?" Hanson said to Leonard. "EMTs said you were carrying a shotgun."

"I was cleaning it. We heard the boy under the house, didn't know what it was, and we'd seen the fire out the window, so I rushed out with it in my hand. I was so excited I forgot I had it."

"Shut up!" Hanson said. "Every one of you, shut up. Charlie, take Melton here to the rest room."

"I don't need to go," Mohawk said.

Charlie stood up and took Mohawk by the elbow. "Sure you do. Come on, I'll show you how to fold the toilet paper."

Charlie and Mohawk started past us. I said, "Thanks, Charlie."

"Us Kmart shoppers got to stick together," he said, and he and Mohawk went away.

Hanson said, "All right, let's cut the bullshit. Here's the deal. I don't give a damn about that house or Melton and his asshole buddies. I want them nailed bad as you do. I don't want any more drugged-out dead kids. But I've had all the cat-and-mouse I'm gonna do on this child murder thing. I don't want any more dead kids that way either. You jerks are gonna come clean, or I'm gonna use this arson thing to nail you, and don't think I won't."

"And don't think I won't give your case a hard time in court," Florida said. "Melton wouldn't exactly make a sympathetic witness. Neither would the rest of the house's occupants."

"You'd do that to me?" Hanson said.

"Business," Florida said, and smiled at Hanson.

Hanson smiled back. “Yeah, guess you would. All right, here’s how it’s coming down. You two saw a fire, went to help, couple of occupants panicked, didn’t know you were trying to rescue ’em, so they got rough, and you got rough, but you saved them. OK?”

Leonard and I agreed.

“I’ll call Melton back,” Hanson said, “explain to him he wants to fight it, he can fight it, but it’s just gonna be shit for him. He’ll talk tough a couple of minutes and let it slide. He don’t want any court trouble, I’ll promise that.”

“He hasn’t seen court trouble till I get on his ass,” Florida said.

I looked at Florida and smiled. She smiled back. For a moment it seemed like we were together again.

“In return for me being the generous fella I am,” Hanson said, “for not dragging your asses through court and sending you upriver, you’re gonna be sweet as sugar to me. You’re gonna tell me some things you know that I don’t know. Got me?”

I glanced at Leonard. He nodded. He said, “I guess we’ve played detective enough.”

He told Hanson about the Hampstead place and what we found. But I noticed he conspicuously left out the sweet Reverend Fitzgerald.

31.

Hanson let us go, charge free. Florida took me and Leonard home. When she pulled into the driveway and we got out, she got out too. The smell of burnt lumber from next door was strong in the air. Florida said, “Hap, can we talk a moment?”

“Sure,” I said.

Florida looked at Leonard.

“I’m worn out,” Leonard said. “I’m just going to take a cheerful look of what’s left of next door, then go to sleep.”

We walked around to the bottle tree and stood there looking at the smoky, blackened shell of the house.

“Mucho mojo,” Florida said.

“What?” I said.

“Much bad magic,” she said. “Next door was mucho mojo. Something my grandmother used to say. *Mojo* is African for magic.”

“I thought it was sex,” I said.

“That’s because you listen to blues records,” she said. “It is sex, or even the sex organs. But that’s bastardized. Meaning sex is like magic. *Mojo* means magic. My grandmother knew some Spanish, and when things were bad, she’d say ‘mucho mojo.’ Spanish *mucho* for much, African *mojo* for magic. But what she meant when she said it was much bad magic. To her, mojo was always bad.”

“Well, they’re a little less bad next door,” Leonard said.

“Yeah,” I said. “And we can feel good looking out our windows, but they’ll just move to some other street. They’re not really gone, they’re merely inconvenienced.”

“I’d rather inconvenience them than just let them go,” Leonard said. “Scum like that get inconvenienced often enough, they might think the career they got isn’t worth it. It’s the good folks of the world that are supposed to be in charge, not the assholes. Though, in my darker moments, I sometimes fear the assholes outnumber us. By the way, Florida, who's this Otis guy?"

"White guy who owned the house, and a lot of houses here on the East Side," Florida said. "I've heard he openly refers to these as his nigger rent houses. And it's pretty well known he gets a cut of the drug pie over here."

"And he's a friend of the police chief's," Leonard said.

"Yes," Florida said. "And he'll just build the house back. Cheaply, of course."

"Well, that's for another discussion," Leonard said. "Good night, Florida. Hap, don't you stay up late, now. I don't want you fussin' when I get you out of bed tomorrow."

Leonard went in the house and Florida and I sat on the porch in the glider. I remembered that the glider was where our romance had begun.

I said, "This is sort of the Dear-John talk, right?"

"I've wanted to talk to you, I just haven't had the guts, because I really don't know what to say."

"I guess 'Bye-bye, Hap, and don't forget your hat' would be OK."

"It's not like that."

"How is it?"

"I'm going over to Marve's tonight."

"I'd rather you just said, 'Bye-bye, don't forget your hat.' "

"He's a good man, Hap."

"That's what pisses me off. It's hard for me to feel self-righteous. I like the big bastard. But I still don't like hearing it. Not that I didn't already know."

"I wanted you to hear it from me. I just didn't have the courage to do it right away. I should have said something soon as I knew. Hap, it wasn't like you and me were a hundred percent anyway. I never said our relationship was forever."

"Hurts just the same."

"You'll get over it."

“Yeah, but I’d rather it have worked out.”

“Me too. Really. I do care for you. I maybe even love you a little.”

“Please.”

“It just happened, Hap. I don’t know what to tell you. It happened, and it happened fast. It was good between you and me, and you taught me some things about myself, but—”

“Hanson’s black.”

“I suppose, if I’m honest with myself, I’ll admit that makes it easier.”

“You never took me to that movie, Florida. You know, I never even been to your place. I bet Hanson has. Hasn’t he?”

“Yes. But I knew the night I saw him over here he was the one. I don’t know why. I’d seen him before, but that night was the first time I was really close enough to feel the heat.”

“Maybe it was just a hot night.”

She smiled. “No. It wasn’t just a sexual thing. There was that, but it’s not that he’s the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“He’s not the prettiest thing anyone’s ever seen.”

“But I saw him, and somehow I knew. And the other night, when he took me home, we didn’t go to bed or anything like that. I wanted you to know that. We didn’t just jump in the sack. We talked, and talked, and talked. There was a connection between us that goes deeper than the one you and I’ve got. It’s that simple. Maybe being black does give us a kind of history, but what I feel for Marve isn’t merely because he’s black.”

“Of course, you two don’t just talk now.”

“First time we made love was tonight. Charlie called for him at my place when they got the news about the fire and about you and Leonard. After Marve left, you called and told me where you were. But of course, I already knew. I was about to be on my way. I figured you and Leonard could use a lawyer.”

“Did Charlie calling interrupt anything?”

“That’s juvenile, Hap.”

“Sorry.”

“We were lying in bed talking. Talking about you.”

"Comparing dick sizes?"

She got up briskly and started to leave. I caught her wrist and she jerked it away from me. "Let go of me, damnit!"

"Florida," I said. "I'm sorry. Really. But this isn't easy for me."

"It's not easy for me, Hap. I don't want to hurt you."

"But you want us to be friends, right? Isn't that the thrust of this talk?"

"I know you're hurt, but I didn't plan this. It happened, damnit. It just happened."

I turned my head and looked toward the pile of blackened rubble that had been the crack house. Smoke was drifting up into the starlight. I turned back and looked at Florida.

"There really isn't anything I can say to that," I said.

She slowly and carefully sat down beside me. She sat close. I could smell her perfume. It was the same perfume I often smelled on my pillows. She took my hand.

I said, "You really sounded like someone who was more than an ambulance chaser tonight."

"I did, didn't I?"

"Hanson knew you got our case in court, personal feelings or not, you'd have given him hell."

"And I'd have beat him too. Even if you did burn the house down. And on purpose."

"You'll do all right," I said. "Maybe you just needed a little rest. Sounds to me, you got your ambition back."

"Can we be friends?" she said. "I know it sounds cliché. But I really and truly want to be friends."

I spent a minute thinking about it. "Give me some time on it. Right now I look at you, I don't see you that way. I don't know how I see you."

She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. "You're a good find for the right person, Hap. I'm just not the right person."

"That's what they all say."

She stood up and touched my shoulder. "I'll see you, soon?"

"Soon as I can handle it," I said.

She drove away. I watched her taillights till they were out of sight. The wind picked up and turned cool and hooted in the bottle tree.

32.

When I awoke it was early morning and I was lying on the glider and my back ached. Where I'd caught those punches hurt too. My wrist ached from the shock of the blow I'd dealt Mohawk on the side of the head.

There was a blanket over me and a pillow under my head. Leonard, the one constant in my life, had been out to check on me. I hadn't even felt him move my head or cover me. Bless him.

I sat up slowly, feeling the stiffness. The air was intense with the charred aroma of next door. The sunlight was beautiful. It was still cool. I missed Florida.

Before we left the station last night, Leonard told Hanson about the Hampstead place and what was under it. Today, late morning, Hanson and a hand-picked crew would be out. He was also bringing in a friend from Houston, a retired coroner.

In spite of his talk, Hanson wasn't ready to turn what he knew over to the police chief after all. He wanted to make sure everything we told him was as we said, wanted to make sure we'd translated the evidence properly.

I think he knew too, if he told the police chief what he had discovered, told how Illium was linked, the chief would take the case away from him for not coming forward sooner. But if Leonard and I were right, if Hanson could get all his ducks in a row and solve this case, no matter what the chief thought, things were going to turn out OK. It'd be pretty hard for the chief to fire Hanson for solving a multiple child-murder case, considering the publicity that would surround it.

And I was pretty certain Hanson knew we were still holding out on him. That we had an important part of the puzzle we weren't showing.

So, Hanson was going to get a court order, quickly and quietly, not hide it from the chief, but not announce it either, and he and his crew were coming out.

His crew was going to be Charlie, the retired Houston coroner, me and Leonard, and a couple other folks he thought he could trust. It wasn't a morning I looked forward to.

I stood up and stretched and checked out the remains of the crack house, felt a rush of adrenaline from last night. I also felt a rush of shame.

Violence and anger against another human being always made me feel that way, no matter what my justification. I lost it, I always feel somewhat diminished. But I would have felt even more diminished to have done nothing. That little boy, dying up under the house like a dog with a belly full of glass.... It's hard to figure why it has to be that way.

But had it been just that? Had I done what I did, followed Leonard because I wanted vengeance for that child, all the children they infected with their slick talk and drugs? Or had my willingness to lose it also been part of my problem with Florida? Was I finding a way to self-righteously vent my disappointment and rage? I didn't like to think about that kind of snake inside me, crawling around, waiting to strike.

Across the street I heard a screen door slam, and looked to see Hiram out on MeMaw's porch. He had a cup of coffee and was wearing blue jogging pants, a blue T-shirt, and dirt-tinted white tennis shoes. He walked to the edge of the porch and hacked up a big wad of phlegm and spat into the yard. He looked up and saw me.

"Hap," he called.

I walked out to the curb, talked across the street. "Thanks for last night," I said. "I didn't know where else to go."

"What else could I do? How's the boy?"

"Dead."

Hiram nodded. "I'm not surprised. He didn't look none too good. He had that look about him, like he wasn't long for this world."

The screen door opened and MeMaw started working her walker outside. Hiram grabbed the screen and held it open. "You don't need to come out here," he said.

"But I want to," she said. After a full minute, she was in the center of the porch, leaning on her walker. She said, "I'm glad you did it. I'd been younger, I'd did it. Lenny up?"

"No, ma'am," I said. "I don't think so."

"Well, you come on over," she said. "I've got breakfast cooking."

"Ma'am," I said. "I don't want to intrude."

"Biscuits, eggs, and bacon," she said. She turned her walker slightly, then slightly again, until she was facing the screen. Hiram opened the screen for her. She worked her way inside, called over her shoulder, "Don't let it get cold."

Hiram smiled at me. He said, "I think you better come on to breakfast."

MeMaw looked extremely frail that morning, but she was radiant just the same. Happy about the crack house being turned to smoke, happier yet her baby boy Hiram was home. The breakfast was great. The bacon was thick. She'd gotten the meat from one of her sons who raised hogs, and we spread real artery-jamming butter on the biscuits and dipped them in the sun-yellow yolks of farm-fresh eggs acquired from a friend of hers who had his own chickens.

After breakfast, MeMaw entertained me and embarrassed Hiram with stories about when he was a child, told some cute incidents, explained what a good Christian child Hiram had always been, and when Hiram had had all of that talk he could take, he said, "Hey, what're your plans today, Hap?"

"Not much," I said, not prepared to mention that I was going to exhume bodies.

"You ought to work out with me."

"After last night, I'm pretty bushed. What kind of workout?"

"Boxing."

"I hate that boxing," MeMaw said. "Two grown men hitting one another in the head for fun. You'd think Hiram and Reverend Fitzgerald would be old enough to know better."

"Reverend Fitzgerald?" I said.

“Yeah. I come in once a year, we get together, do a little boxing, talk old times. Play chess. I do it mostly to please MeMaw. She thinks I ought to know the right hand of the Lord. Not that we didn’t get drilled with religion all the time we were growing up.”

“When I was able,” MeMaw said, “I saw that this family lived in the church.”

“You know Reverend Fitzgerald pretty good then?” I said.

“Didn’t you meet him the other day?” MeMaw asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, “just briefly.”

I gave Hiram the *Reader’s Digest* version of that, leaving out all the tense stuff between him and Leonard. I was getting to be a pretty good liar.

“I’ve known Fitz for years,” Hiram said. “We used to go to his daddy’s church. Me and him played together. His daddy taught the both of us how to box. Fitz is a little older than me, but I’m a scrapper. ’Course, he still beats hell out me. Or has in the past. I’m kind of hoping age will catch up with him.”

“It hasn’t so far,” I said. “I saw him working a bag. He’s in shape. He can still hit hard. He drags his back foot in the bucket a little when he moves, but that could just be the way he works a bag.”

“You know something about boxing then?” Hiram said.

“A little.”

“Another man likes to get hit in the head,” MeMaw said. “I can’t figure it.… By the way, how’s that little boy?”

It took me a moment to shift gears and know who she was talking about. Then it came to me. I said, “He died, MeMaw. We found him too late. The drugs snuffed him out.”

“Oh,” she said. “I’m so sorry. A child like that, in that den of wolves, he ain’t got no chance. What I’d like to know was where his mother was.”

I’d found out a little about the boy last night from Charlie and Hanson, and I told MeMaw what I knew. “He was a street kid, MeMaw. Name of Ivan Lee.”

“I heard of the Lees,” MeMaw said, “but I can’t say I knew nothing about them."

"Ivan lived with an aunt," I said, "but apparently there wasn't much going on there in a family way. He was on his own. Wasn't even going to school, hung out on the streets most of the time. He'd been picked up for little crimes here and there. He fell through the cracks."

"Over here," MeMaw said, "lots fall through the cracks. There's always somethin' pushin' in on a person here. Bad people and bad things from all sides. A baby has got to have a shield from the world. Got to learn how to shield themselves. I'm lucky I raised all my chil'ren without none of them gettin' messed up."

"Don't fret, Mama," Hiram said. "That little boy was a goner from the start. Ain't that right, Hap?"

"I don't know anyone's a goner, you get to them in time," I said. "But there's a line you can step across that puts you on a path of no return. In little Ivan's case, I don't know he stepped across so much as got shoved over it."

"Maybe so," Hiram said. "But if he runs with the dogs, he, well… 'becomes like them that go down into the pit.' "

"I presume that's biblical," I said.

"Yeah, I guess it's a way of saying birds of a feather stick together. Or if you lie down with dogs you get up with fleas. Whatever … whatcha say, Hap? You gonna work out with me? We won't be there long."

I considered a moment. There really wasn't any clear evidence, other than circumstantial, that Fitzgerald had done the things Leonard and I thought he had. There was still the possibility that Chester Pine and Illium Moon were what we thought they were being framed to be. Another look at the Reverend might be of interest.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm game."

33.

We took Hiram’s van. It was a cluttered thing, and I had to move a small box of folded Texas flags off the seat to sit down. I sat them on a box of American flags in the back. Strewn on the floorboard, front and back, were booklets containing designs for senior rings and samples of paper to choose from for high school yearbooks and bulletins, and there were pamphlets advertising photocopying machines, typewriters, and the like.

“Yeah, I know,” Hiram said. “I’m messy.”

When we backed out of the drive and hit the street and the merchandise stopped shifting, Hiram said, “I didn’t want to say anything in front of MeMaw, but actually, going over to see Fitz isn’t always that wonderful. He’s a little quirky.”

“I thought as much when I met him. I mean, he was nice enough, just a little fanatic.”

“That’s not all bad. I mean, he’s a good guy. But that’s why I was hoping you’d come along. I’m not saying I mind boxing him or playing a game of chess now and then, but he can be a little much sometimes.”

“I understand.”

“MeMaw is just crazy for church and religion though, bless her sweet heart, so she always sort of invites me to go over there, I want to or not. She thought Fitz’s old man was something special. Had the hot line to God.”

“But you didn’t think so?”

“Actually, the old man could put up a good front for someone when he wanted to. I was around Fitz a lot when I was a kid, spent the night over there now and then, and I saw the old man was kind of a bully. Never let the kid really enjoy his childhood. Always had some kind of complaint. And he was very much a hands-on person. He was hard on Fitz ’cause Fitz wasn’t his child.”

"A former marriage?" I asked.

Hiram shifted gears and shook his head. "I can't figure why the old man married Fitz's mother. Didn't seem a preacher's type. She'd been a kind of sportin' woman before they met. I guess he liked the idea of transforming her from a Jezebel to a woman of God. Though I don't know she changed all that much. There were stories went around, and enough of them, so I figure where there was smoke, there was fire."

"What about Fitz's real father?"

"Don't know nothing about him. Neither does Fitz. He was some guy who bought Fitz's mother and did his job and left. Probably never even knew he'd made a baby."

We cruised by the East Side Market. The old man who owned the place was sitting outside at the domino table, watching the street, perhaps planning his strategy for when the rest of the players showed up.

I said, "So the Reverend is actually illegitimate?"

"Well, he got his stepfather's name, of course. But strictly speaking, yeah. I figure that's what makes Fitz such a hard-nose. He's trying to live up to something. The old man never let either Fitz or his mama forget where they come from and what a big deed he was doin' for them."

I thought about the profile I had put together on the Reverend Fitzgerald. I was beginning to think I should pursue a career in psychology. Of course, when it came to putting together a profile on women, I'd have to pass. I understood the secret life of the hummingbird better than I understood women.

I said, "The mom still around?"

"Fitz's mama disappeared. Probably ran off. The old man got some kind of cancer or something. Died slow. Lot of people thought God was paying him back for the kind of man he was. As for Fitz, well, he's got his good points. He's developed things to keep kids off the street. He's real antidrug. He's introduced soccer and boxing and baseball and the carnival."

"Carnival?"

"Yeah, I like the carnival myself. I go every year 'cause I'm here at just the right time. There's something about seeing black kids who can't even afford to get across town being able to walk over to the fairgrounds and have a good time. And Fitz has a bus so he can pick up kids might not be able to make it, or might have to walk through a bad section of town. He takes them over there, and they haven't got the money, he sees they get in and get some rides."

At mention of the carnival, something had shifted inside my head. I said, "Saw a sign on the carnival. It's next week, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Does it always take place sometime during the last week of August?"

"Yeah, it's just for one night. One night is all can be afforded. Fitz gets the local merchants to sponsor it, throw in donations. He raises money for it other ways too. The carnival owners sell tickets to get in and for the rides, but they're cheap, so most anyone can afford it. It's a little operation. Black owned. Goes around to black communities. Fitz heard about it and made the deal with them, so the carnival comes back every year. Wasn't for Fitz, lot of the kids here wouldn't have anything going for them."

I felt a sickness in the pit of my stomach. "How long ago was it Reverend Fitzgerald set this carnival business up?"

"Let's see. Nine, ten years ago."

"That's real benevolent of him."

"He's got his good points. Like the way he protects his brother, T.J."

"Brother?"

"Half-brother, actually. He's retarded and about the size of a small army tank."

I thought of the big man Leonard and I had seen working in the yard outside of the church.

"Rumor has it," Hiram continued, "the boy wasn't really the old man's son either, but that the wife had been slipping around again. I don't know. Maybe the Reverend wanted to believe she was slipping around. Man like him, it might have been easier to believe that than believe his seed could be tainted, could produce something like T.J. A giant with the mind of a poodle. Fitz, though, he always treated T.J. special. Real special. T.J. didn't have Fitz, he wouldn't last long. They got a serious bond."

When we were close to the church and Reverend Fitzgerald's house, Hiram said, "This might be the last year I see Fitz. When MeMaw passes, I know I'm through. Me and Fitz were kind of close when we were kids, but the older I get, harder it is for me to connect with the guy."

We parked in the church lot, and before we got out of the van, I said, "I got a confession. Me and Leonard were over here the other day, like I said, but it didn't go that well. We came looking for someone Leonard's uncle knew that Reverend Fitzgerald was supposed to know, and well, Leonard and him didn't hit it off."

"How bad did they not hit it off?"

"Hard to say. Fitzgerald was polite. No one came to blows, but it was a little tense."

"It was a point of religion?"

"That, and the fact that Leonard's homosexual." Hiram was quiet for a time. "He's queer?"

"That's not a word he prefers."

"Well, I didn't mean nothing by it … I guess I didn't. You queer?"

"No, I'm a Democrat when they've got the right people to vote for. Listen, Hiram, Leonard's a good guy. I don't know what your deal is concerning homosexuals, and frankly, I don't care, but I wanted you to know what happened."

"Leonard seems all right."

"He is. Gay guys come in all shades and types. Leonard's one of the good guys."

"It's just a surprise."

"I know."

"He's not like I thought a queer was. He's like us, you know. I mean … hell, I don't know what I mean."

"Nothing to know. I took you up on your offer to box so I could apologize to the Reverend. Things could be a little awkward is what I'm saying. I figured I ought to tell you now. You're uncomfortable, you can drive me back."

"No. No. I know how Fitz is. We'll get through it."

"Thanks," I said.

We got out of the van and walked around to the back of the church.

T.J., dressed in gray sweatpants and T-shirt and tennis shoes, was standing at the back door and it startled me. He was just standing there, not moving. His arms hung limp by his sides. He seemed to be waiting on something, or considering some deep, forgotten secret that wouldn't quite come to him. He looked like a black golem. He lifted his huge arms slightly and his hands flopped forward like catcher's mitts on pegs.

Hiram said, "Fitz in, T.J.?"

"Uh-huh."

"You remember me, T.J.?"

T.J. thought about it for a moment, and shook his head.

"That's OK," Hiram said. "Would you tell Fitz I'm here? Just say Hiram's here. He's expecting me."

The giant nodded, turned and opened the door, and disappeared inside. Hiram turned to me, said, "Every year T.J. forgets who I am. He can only hold certain kinds of thoughts for so long. Remembering me from year to year isn't one of them."

A moment later T.J. came back, and Fitzgerald was with him. T.J. let Fitzgerald go outside, then took his place in the doorway, filling it, substituting for a door. Fitzgerald was wearing a white T-shirt and white shorts and tennis shoes. He was grinning until he saw me. He looked at me, then Hiram, then back to me. Slowly the grin came back.

"You decide I was right?" the Reverend said. "About wanting to hand your life over to God?"

"Not exactly," I said. "I conned Hiram to get a ride over here. I wanted to apologize for the other day. I'm sorry about how it went with you and my friend."

"Ah, yes. Him. Well, it didn't go so bad. Apologies were made all around. It's over with."

"I didn't apologize," I said, "and I wanted to. For me and him. We just got sideways. It wasn't our intent to step on your beliefs."

"You didn't. They're too solid for that. And I don't need an apology. I was merely trying to do what it's my mission to do. Point out how God sees things. Then let you, and your friend, take your own path. If you're going to owe anyone an apology, it's God."

"Maybe I'll drop him a card," I said, then immediately wished I hadn't. I was getting as bad as Leonard.

The Reverend, however, hadn't lost his grin. He said, "You can laugh about anything in this life, my friend, but in the next—"

"Hap boxes," Hiram said. "He's a friend. That's why I brought him. To box. Why don't we just do that?"

"All right," Fitzgerald said, "we can do that. T.J., move aside. You fellas come on in."

34.

The only light in the gym was the sunlight that came through high shutter windows, and it was bright to the center of the gym, but there its reach played out and the shadow took over, grew darker toward the far wall.

The Reverend took off his T-shirt and showed us a hard body, and said, “Hiram, you and me. We’ll start easy, get warm.”

Hiram nodded, picked up some blue boxing gloves lying against the wall, and put them on. They were the slip-on kind. No strings.

The Reverend pulled on a pair of red gloves, and he and Hiram moved toward the center of the gym, and the line of light and shadow split them down the middle, putting one side of their body in the light, the other in the dark, but then they began to move, to bob and weave, to shuffle and dance, and they were one moment in brightness, the next in shadow.

Back and forth, around and around, reaching out with the gloves, slow at first, touching, jabbing, and then they came together and the blows were smooth and soft and not too quick, and on the sidelines T.J. watched like an attack dog, ready for the word.

They slugged and dodged and bobbed and weaved, and Hiram was, as he said, a scrapper, not a boxer but a scrapper. He threw his punches wide and dropped his hands, but he was fast and game and landed shots because of it. Fitzgerald was somewhere between a boxer and a brawler. It was obvious he was holding back. He could easily have been a retired heavyweight, a guy that might have been a contender.

They eventually came together in the center of the gym, locked arms, and began moving around and around in a circle, light and shadow, their foreheads pushed together as if they were Siamese twins connected by flesh and brain tissue. Around and around.

T.J. carefully watching.

Finally Fitzgerald pushed Hiram away and smiled at him. “You’re a little better, my man.”

“I been working out at a gym,” Hiram said when he got his breath. “But I’ve had all I want.”

“You tire too easily,” Fitzgerald said.

“That’s the truth,” Hiram said.

Fitzgerald looked at me. “You want to go?”

“Sure,” I said.

Fitzgerald turned to T.J. “Take it easy, T.J. It’s just fun.”

T.J. nodded, but there wasn’t anything on his face that showed he thought any fun was going on. He didn’t relax a bit. Tiny rivers of sweat rolled down his face, and he stood partially crouched.

“Kinda takes the thrill out of it with him at my back,” I said.

“He’s all right,” Fitzgerald said. “He’s just overly protective.”

I got the gloves from Hiram and pulled them on. They were sweaty inside, and hot. It was starting to warm up in the gym, as the air-conditioning was off and the air came from the same place as the light—the outside.

“You should go to church,” Fitzgerald said to me. “Everyone should go to church.”

“How do you know I don’t?” I said. “I might preach somewhere. God might have sent me here to whip your butt.”

“No,” he said, smiling. “I don’t think so. Your friend, he went to church, he might realize the perversion of his homosexuality. He could change his ways. There might be forgiveness from the Lord.”

“Might be?” I said.

I took up a southpaw position and we moved and threw some jabs, but there was no real connection. Fitzgerald said, “There’s no true home in the House of the Lord for the sodomite, young man.”

“Let it be, Fitz,” Hiram said from the sidelines. “Just box.”

I threw a quick jab and hit the Reverend on the forehead, and we started shuffling about, looking for openings. I said, “You make homosexuality sound like a true sin. Right up there with murderers, child molesters, false prophets. You might as well include unmarried mothers and illegitimate children.”

Fitzgerald studied me curiously. He jabbed and right-crossed and hooked. Lightly. I blocked and countered with a weak combination.

We moved apart, he said, “There are some who are lost to the joys of heaven. They have to be put aside.”

“Aside?” I said, and hooked him with a left to the gut, hooked him hard. He covered and slid back. “What’s ‘aside’ mean, Reverend? You sound as if you’re out to punish souls instead of save them.”

His face turned into a black Kabuki mask, and he came with a jab and a crossing combination. I took it on the side of my face and rolled it, but it still hurt. We weren’t playing tag now. I got my focus. I let myself settle. I tried not to concentrate too much. I tried to relax and let the reflexes take over. I thought too much, I was going to get hit while putting together a combination. I had to react, not plan, and I had to remember not to kick. We were boxing.

I threw a jab and tried a hook, and Fitzgerald leaned away from the jab and moved outside of the hook and came over my hand and hit me with a right cross over the left eye.

I bobbed and weaved and let a couple of shots ricochet off me while I got it together, then we were close and the fists were flying and I was distantly aware of the sound of the gloves as they slapped on our sweaty flesh, and I was aware of moving in and out of light and shadow, and finally, when he stood in shadow and I stood in light, with the sun at my back, I decided to hold him. I wasn’t going to move. He wasn’t coming into the light. He was going to take what I had to give in shadow. Take it and like it.

I took a few myself and had to like it, but I had moved beyond pain. It was going to take a damn good shot for me to feel it now. We weren’t playing. We were hitting. Hiram said, “Hey, men, too much,” but we didn’t stop, we kept slinging and the sound of the gloves became sweet, like a backbeat to good music, and

Fitzgerald tried to press hard, to move around me, to move into the light, to push against me and bring himself to my side of the gym, but I wouldn't let him. He tied me up, I shoved him off and jabbed him. He tried to circle, I hooked and crossed.

Hiram was calling something from the side, but I wasn't aware of it anymore, I couldn't make sense of his words. There was a copper taste in my mouth. And then there was a great shadow, like a cloud moving before the sun, and I knew T.J. had slid up behind me, eclipsing my light, and I sensed him close to me, ready to grab me, and I thought of those children, like rag dolls in his hands.

Fitzgerald tried to bob and explode, like Smokin' Joe Frazier, but when he bobbed, I uppercut him solid enough to bring him on his toes, and I hooked him on the jaw and was driving him back farther into shadow, going with him, deeper into shadow, and he was in trouble, but holding up, and then I felt a vise fasten around my body, trapping my arms to my sides, and I could smell anxiety sweat as T.J. crushed me to him and the gym began to spin. I struggled in his grasp, thought about stomping back and down to break his kneecaps, or driving the back of my head into his face, but this was a friendly situation, nothing serious here—a little out of hand, but friendly. Any second T.J. would let go. He'd realize his brother was in no real trouble here. He'd drop me. Someone would stop him.

The walls of the gym turned to hot liquid and flowed over me and the ceiling fell down and light and shadow scrambled and there were bongos in my head and I realized I had waited too late, because T.J. wasn't going to put me down, and I was too weak now to do anything about it.

Bright and dark, bending in upon themselves, whirling around and around to the tune of blood pounding in my skull, and I had a flash of that dream where I was underwater in the bookmobile with Illium and Chester and the dead boy with the flesh floating away from his bones.…

When I awoke, I was on the floor of the gym. First thing I saw was Hiram. He was leaning over me. He looked concerned. He said, "Hap, you OK?"

"Yeah," I said.

Fitzgerald came into view. "Sorry about T.J. Normally, he stays in check. He got the feeling we were really into it. He squeezed your air out."

"I know," I said. "And we *were* into it."

I sat up slowly. The gym was only moving a little. My ribs were mildly sore. I figured that would balance out the knot on my head I'd gotten the night before. I'd certainly had an interesting two days, and it wasn't even lunch yet.

T.J. was standing against the far wall with his hands by his sides and his head hung. He looked as passive as a puppet. I thought: *Klaatu barada nikto.*

"Yeah," Fitzgerald said, "we were into it. It's my turn to apologize again. For T.J. And for going so hard, keeping up with the rhetoric. I guess I do bear a little animosity for the other day, and I just can't help but be a preacher. By the way, you were putting it on me pretty good. But I'd have come back."

"Now we'll never know, will we?"

"Maybe we'll do it again sometime."

I got up slowly with Hiram's assistance. "It could happen," I said.

On the way home, Hiram was quiet until we turned onto Comanche Street. He said, "Man, there's more than stuff between him and Leonard. What's the deal with you two, that's what I want to know?"

"Bad chemistry," I said.

35.

When we got back and I was out of the van telling Hiram ’bye, apologizing for going in the first place and letting things escalate the way they did, I began to feel a strange sensation.

It was partially due to the fact that Hanson’s car was parked at the curb along with a pickup I didn’t recognize, and of course, I knew what that meant. But there was something else, and I didn’t understand it until I was on Uncle Chester’s porch about to open the door. Then it hit me.

The sensation was fear. Because now I knew what I thought I’d known all along. Fitzgerald was a killer.

I had been with him and his giant brother, and I had been unconscious on the floor of Fitzgerald’s gym. I had pushed certain buttons inside Fitzgerald and inside myself, and it was possible I had fucked things up. I had let the Reverend know I knew something was going on with him and the kids.

Perhaps all that had saved me and Hiram was the fact that Fitzgerald assumed someone, like MeMaw, knew where we were going. Then again, had he been inclined, he could have taken his chances, put us unconscious in Hiram’s van and taken us for a little drive that ended at the bottom of some pond somewhere—an exit like Illium’s. Maybe kiddie porn would be found in our possession. And when the good Reverend was questioned, all he had to say was we never arrived. Or that we came and went.

Then again, that might have been too complicated in broad daylight, or Fitzgerald may have figured me for nothing more than a belligerent sinner and not worthy of action.

I felt like a fool attempting to beard the lion in his own den, but I felt another thing now. An absolute certainty Fitzgerald, with the help of his poor brother, was our killer. It all fit together too damn neat to be otherwise.

I was trembling by the time I discovered the front door was locked. I realized Leonard and the others had gone on up to the Hampstead place.

I got a shovel off the back porch and went up there too, along the creek bed and through the woods.

When I arrived at the Hampstead place, Hanson was there, along with his crew. Unexpectedly, the retired coroner from Houston had brought his own crew. They were dressed in white paper suits and gas masks with charcoal filters. The front steps had been removed and a number of boards had been taken off the porch. White suits were crawling under there, busy as grubs in shit.

Inside the house, down in the open trapdoor, Leonard and Charlie, wearing paper suits and gas masks, were bringing out buckets containing dirt and worms and dirty lard. The worms were long and red and very busy. Leonard put his flashlight on the bucket, and I watched them squirm, like dancers under spotlights. The odor that came from the bucket and from the dank dark below was stronger than sun-hot road-kill.

“Where you been?” Leonard said through his mask. He sounded like Darth Vader.

“Visiting a friend.”

“Good time for it, asshole.”

“Sorry.”

“Hi, Hap,” Charlie said.

“Hi, Charlie. See you’re wearing those Kmart shoes.”

“Won’t leave home without ’em.”

“You see Mohawk … Melton, tell him Hap says hey, will you?”

“Absolutely.”

Hanson introduced me to the retired coroner, Doc Warren, an old wizened white-haired guy who looked as if he might have been dug up himself. He had on a paper suit and gloves. He was sitting on the floor by the trapdoor taking a rest. He was sweaty and tired looking. His filtered mask was in his lap. There were fragments of bone on a plastic dropcloth beside him. Very small bones. He didn’t bother to get up or shake my hand.

He said, “You and your friend have found quite a mess.”

“Tell me about it,” I said.

Turned out they had located four bodies. One of them, the one that smelled, the one I had first discovered, had been there about a year. As I had suspected, something in the soil down there, the way the water flooded in, had caused it to decay slowly, in spite of the East Texas heat. That lard in the bucket was not lard at all. It had once been flesh. It was now the result of decay and putrefaction. With the lard were bones. A child’s bones.

The rest of the bodies were not bodies at all, but bones, skeletal remains. Warren estimated the other bones had been there some time. They were all the bones of children. There was enough evidence to suggest the bodies had been cut up and wrapped in cloth and put in cardboard boxes and wrapped in chicken wire, then buried carefully.

“I believe you’ll find enough bones to make up for the missing kids from the East Side,” I said. “Maybe more.”

“I believe you’re right,” Doc Warren said.

Leonard popped out of the hole. He said, “Hey, Hap, you gonna supervise, or what?”

“Is the job open?”

“Ha,” Leonard said, and disappeared back into the trapdoor hole.

“You’ll need to slip on one of these paper suits, get a gas mask,” Hanson said.

“You got to watch infection,” Warren said, “case there’s any more bodies with meat on them. Streptococci likes to get in your lungs and into cuts. It can fuck you up big time.”

I put on a paper suit and gas mask and went to work. It’s not a day I’ll forget. Sometimes, even now, I awake from a dream where I’m crawling on my belly beneath that old, rotten house, turning my shovel awkwardly in the dirt, and the smell of that child, the one that was lard and bone, still seems strong in my nostrils.

By nightfall we’d found the remains of nine children. And one large skeleton—well, what was left of a large skeleton. Warren said it was a woman. He estimated she had been there a long time. Thirty years or longer. Warren concluded her skull had been cracked, and she had most likely been cut up the same way as the kids. There were no immediate signs of cloth, but around her remains was a coil of chicken wire.

Later, paper suits disposed of, back at Uncle Chester's, we sat around and drank coffee. The crew that had come along with Doc Warren had parked on the far side of the woods, and when they finished for the day, they left that way. I never saw them again. Hanson's crew, a black man and woman who worked for the fire department, departed in the pickup in the yard. I never saw them again either. That left me and Leonard, Hanson, Warren, and Charlie.

We were sitting around the kitchen table drinking coffee, and I was thinking about those big fat red worms, wondering how long it would take them to work their way into my coffin when I was dead, and trying to tell myself it didn't matter, when Hanson said, "Something licks the bag here. That woman's body being that old, the killer would have to have started when he was a kid. Unless he's a geriatric fucker."

"Watch your mouth," Warren said.

"No offense," Hanson said.

"Yeah, well," Warren said, "I get my feelings hurt easy."

"But that's right, ain't it?" Hanson said. "Same M.O."

"It's passed down," Warren said. "Just a fucking minute." Warren put his fingers in his mouth and plucked out his false teeth and put them on the table by his coffee cup. "Sonofabitches are a bad fit," he said, and his lips flapped like flags in the wind.

"Goddamn," Leonard said, "put 'em back. I'm trying to drink my coffee here."

Warren ignored him. When he talked, he could be understood, but it sounded as if he had a rag in his mouth.

"You see, I think the original murder, the woman, was done by someone who had a child helping. Took him up there, showed him how to do it. Sanctified it somehow in the child's mind—"

"And he's repeating it," Hanson said.

"Yep," Warren said. "Good ole Freudian stuff. 'Course, nothing says the murderer has to be a man, or that it was a boy that saw him do it, but I'd bet you money. I'd say too, whoever did this is some kind of religious nut, and he's got that and this ritual, this murder he saw take place as a child, all twisted up in his head. That water stain up there looking like it does, and his first impression of it coming to him as a child, well, it could have had quite an impact."

"I think I understood all that," Hanson said. "But … Christ, I'm with Leonard, put your teeth back in."

Doc Warren ignored him, sipped his coffee. He sounded like a pig at the trough, way his loose lips flopped.

"Hap gets an *A* in Psychology 101," Charlie said, "but so what?"

"Yeah, well," Warren said, "lots of folks think Freud was full of shit. Not everyone who's seen bad stuff as a child responds by becoming bad. Maybe this psychology stuff is all horseshit, and whoever is doing this just likes doing it. Which brings us to the fearful question that there may in fact be real evil in the world. No one likes that idea. Everything has to have cause and effect, and maybe it does. But why do some people respond to evil with evil, while others do not?"

"Personally," Leonard said, "I don't give a shit. I've always believed in evil, and I don't need religion to believe it. I just want this guy. And I want you to put your fuckin' teeth in, Doc."

Warren sipped more coffee.

Hanson looked at Leonard, said, "I'm with you. On the teeth and this guy too. You say you want him, so isn't it about time you tell the rest of it? I know there's more. I've stood for all the dicking around I'm gonna take."

"Yeah," Leonard said, "there's more."

I said, "Allow me, Leonard. I got something to add you don't know about."

"This have to do with where you were this morning?" Leonard said.

"Yeah," I said. "OK, Doc. I think you see it the way it is. Let me run over your territory and fill it in some more. Say there's this preacher, a real do-gooder in some ways, but you see, he comes from a background where his father was a religious nut too. Say the father wasn't actually the father, but a stepfather. The stepfather married this woman with a child, and this woman's child was a bastard. She was a prostitute, or at least a loose woman. The preacher, the stepfather, he thinks he can do right by her, show her the way of God. And perhaps, down deep, a whore is exactly what he's looking for. With me so far?"

"We're with you," Hanson said.

"So he marries the woman, but he can't reconcile the shame. He treats her badly. He treats the boy badly. He never lets them forget that she's a slut and the boy's a bastard, and that he's doing them special as the right hand of the Lord. The woman gets pregnant again. The child is retarded. The preacher can't stand it. He can't accept his seed would produce such a child. Now he has two bastards, and one of them has the sense of a cement block. He gets it in his mind the woman's gone back to her old ways, that she'd been with another man. Maybe she has, maybe she hasn't. It doesn't matter. The preacher broods, and one night something sets him off, and in a moment of anger he strikes and kills the woman."

"And the stepson sees it," Doc Warren said.

"Yeah. And let's say the preacher knows the boy saw it, but instead of killing the boy, who's already warped enough to think his father is God incarnate, he forces the child, or the child is willing, psychologically browbeat, however you want to put it … But say the boy goes along with the father to help get rid of the body. The father makes a religious ritual out of it. Perhaps to cover his guilt to the boy, to himself, both, or maybe he really believes that he's done the righteous will of the Lord.

"Out of brutality, or convenience, the preacher cuts the woman up to fit in a cardboard box, wraps her body parts in a cloth and takes her to this abandoned house he knows about, wraps the body in chicken wire, to keep the animals out of it, probably in cloth too, like the others, buries her under the house. Later, she comes up missing, he says she ran off. She's got a reputation to go with this possibility. What he was ashamed of before, now protects him. She was just a whore. She used a good man. She ran off and left him with two sons to raise, one of them retarded. See where I'm going?"

“This is guesswork, right?” Hanson said.

“Some of it,” I said. “And now it takes up where you left off, Doc. The boy is continuing to do that work in his own way, copying his stepfather’s pattern.”

“Why isn’t he killing women then?” Hanson said. “Me and Doc here, we dealt with a guy in Houston once, called himself the Houston Hacker. He had a thing against women, and women were all he killed, ’less someone got in the way. This kid sees his father kill a woman, why’s he killing kids? Wouldn’t he have a thing against women because his stepfather did, even if it was his mother?”

“That’s easy,” Doc Warren said. “He’s killing himself. He’s killing the nine- or ten-year-old fatherless, unwanted child that he was. Killing him in the righteous manner his stepfather killed his mother. He’s not associating the crime with women, he’s associating it with the evil of what she produced. A bastard. Himself. And somewhere, deep inside, he’s maybe killing himself because his existence is what turned the stepfather against the woman in the first place.”

“It has a nice ring to it,” Charlie said. “It sounds like bullshit to me, but it rings nicely. It’d sound better you had them teeth in, though, Doc.”

“What about the page of Psalms in the kid porn mags?” Doc Warren said. “You’re suggesting this isn’t a sex crime, but one of religious psychosis, so what’s with that?”

“I really don’t know,” I said. “Maybe the whole thing has turned sexual for him. Somehow he’s cleansing himself of that sinful preoccupation by getting rid of his magazines and destroying their power with a page of the Psalms. Like a cross in a vampire’s grave. I really don’t know. But here’s another piece of the puzzle. The retarded child grew up to be only slightly smaller than the Empire State Building. He does what his brother tells him. He helps him do this thing he does. And they do it every summer, last week of August. Which is, probably, about the same time of year the first murder occurred, the mother’s murder, and coincidently it’s a great time of opportunity for our man. It’s the week the East Side carnival comes to town, something our man helps sponsor.”

“I’ll be damned,” Leonard said.

“Now for the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question,” Hanson said. “Who the hell is it?”

“A fella I went to visit this morning,” I said. “The guy who killed Illium Moon, and would have tried to kill Chester Pine if Chester hadn’t died first. A preacher’s son. *The* preacher’s son. A preacher himself. Reverend Fitzgerald of the First Primitive Baptist Church.”

36.

Space suits in daylight. Red worms in flashlight, writhing and twisting in dark, odoriferous lard....

That night I lay in bed and remembered all that. It was not conducive to sleep.

I got up and went into the kitchen for a drink and saw Leonard had not made the couch into a bed. He was sitting on it watching television. The screen jumped with snow and rattled with static.

The movie he was watching was coming from a long ways, and the cheap rabbit ears weren't picking it up too well. I could see it clear enough to make out noble German shepherds crawling on their bellies toward some nasty space aliens. I recognized the movie. *I Married a Monster from Outer Space.* It had scared me when I was a kid. I doubted any monster movie would scare me again.

I forgot the drink of water and went over to the couch and sat down by Leonard. He didn't look at me. I saw in the reflected light of the television screen that he had tears in his eyes.

I turned my attention to the TV set. The aliens were catching hell now, both from German shepherds and good-old American citizens who weren't going to stand for no space aliens messin' with their women.

I said, "You all right?"

"Yeah."

"Uncle Chester?"

"Yeah."

We sat until the end of the movie and then another one started up. This one was about a guy that got some kind of radiation on him and grew incredibly big and had to wear a loincloth.

Leonard said, "What about you and Florida?"

"What about us?"

“That bad?”

“She just wants to be friends. I don’t know how you fags work, but a gal wants to be your friend after you’ve been fucking her, it usually means she doesn’t want to be anything to you but gone.”

“I’m usually the one wants to be friends. I used to want a relationship. These days, the shit I’ve been through, except when I have a hard-on, celibacy seems acceptable and preferable. You, on the other hand, don’t feel that way. If ever there was a guy wanted to be married and have two kids and a dog in the yard, it’s you.”

“Call me transparent.”

The big guy on the screen was starting to have some serious trouble with the U.S. Army. They were blasting the shit out of him.

“This murder case,” Leonard said, “how do you think we did?”

“It’s not over, but I think we did all right. Hanson believes he solves this case he’ll be in for a promotion. Him and Charlie both.”

“Charlie don’t think that. Told me he’s put in applications at burger joints, claims he’s one hell of a cook.”

“What Charlie is, is full of shit.”

“Hap, what if we’re wrong, and it ain’t Fitzgerald?”

“It’s him. And his brother too, though I don’t know you can count T.J. as knowing what he’s doing. He’s like a fuckin’ golem. Just does what he’s told.”

“We got so much circumstantial evidence, Hanson could get a warrant. Look around the church and Fitzgerald’s house. That might be better than this plan of nabbing the Reverend at the carnival with a kid in hand. Whatcha want to bet Hanson gets a warrant, looks hard enough, he’ll find some dead kid’s underwear with the Reverend’s cum in ’em?”

“But if he doesn’t, then the motherfucker’s tipped off and he can get real careful. Hanson plays it his way, he just might nab him. Fitzgerald puts his hands on a kid, kidnaps him, then Hanson’s got something to work with, a righteous reason to bring the bastard in. Then, with a little luck, the rest of it will come out.”

"We're out of this now, right?"

"You betcha."

"Hap, not that I'm petty or anything, but I told you Uncle Chester wasn't the one."

"I shouldn't have doubted you."

"I'm a good judge of character."

"I'm proof of that."

Leonard was silent for a moment. "Well, even I fuck up now and then."

* * *

The All Black Carnival came to the East Side on a hot morning that threatened storm. The storm lay in the west, dark as an army boot, and the heavens rattled with poisonous thunder.

Our fear was the storm blew in, the carnival might be canceled, and if that happened, Hanson's plan was gone with the wind, and the Reverend would have to wait for another night. Strike somewhere unexpected.

Me and Leonard were out of it, but we couldn't resist the temptation to drive over to the fairgrounds early that morning and watch the carnival trucks pull in behind the tall chain-link fence, observe the machineries of fun going up: the Tilt-a-Whirl, the coaster rides, the Slingshot, as well as rides I couldn't put a name to.

I kept wondering how Fitzgerald was nabbing those kids and getting them away from there to commit murder. He was a high-profile individual. People on the East Side knew him well and weren't likely to forget him walking off with some kid, but somehow, every year, he was grabbing a kid and taking him up to that death house.

How was he choosing his victim? Was the kid someone Fitzgerald had been watching, someone who'd been attending church activities? Someone Fitzgerald knew would be going to the carnival? Someone whose home life was a disaster, or someone who had no home life at all? Someone whose past would indicate anything could have happened? Someone like the little boy under Uncle Chester's floor?

I tried to tell myself it wasn't my problem now. It was Hanson's. We drove back home.

About two in the afternoon, Leonard and I went over to MeMaw's, and Hiram helped us finish up the porch. There wasn't a lot left to do. About an hour's work. It was very hot. The sky was clear and blue except in the west, and from those brooding clouds there came a kind of mugginess that was almost overwhelming, and I couldn't get my mind off the oncoming night and the carnival and what might happen. I hit my thumb with the hammer three or four times, dropped boards and nails, and cussed enough Hiram had to ask me to stop.

"No offense, Hap," Hiram said. "But I don't talk that way, and don't want that kind of talk around Mama. She might hear you."

I apologized, truly embarrassed for making Hiram uncomfortable. I hoped MeMaw hadn't heard me.

When we had driven the last nail, Hiram said, "Come on in. Mama'll want y'all to have some ice tea."

"I need it," I said.

Hiram went inside, and Leonard and I promised to follow, after picking up a few nails and boards. When Hiram was out of sight, Leonard said, "I'm fucking ashamed of you, all that cussing."

"Yeah, well, you can eat shit."

Then we heard Hiram yell for us from inside the house.

"Hap! Leonard! Oh, God! Come here, quick!"

We rushed inside. MeMaw was slumped in a kitchen chair, almost falling off of it. There was a pool of urine in the seat of the chair, dripping on the floor. Her walker was turned over, as if she had let go of it in the act of trying to rise.

The stroke had come swift and silent, lethal as a black mamba. She was alive, but comatose. We stretched her out on the floor and packed a pillow behind her head and called the ambulance. They came quick, hauled her off to Memorial Hospital. We followed after, Hiram in his van, me and Leonard in my truck.

At the hospital, we sat with Hiram in the waiting room while the doctors did their work. Which wasn't much. The bottom line was MeMaw was old and it didn't look good. All they could do—all we could do—was wait.

When we got the word, me and Leonard went into ICU with Hiram and looked at MeMaw. She was wired up like a spaceman and seemed to be smaller and frailer than was humanly possible. I was somehow reminded of those pictures you see of Mexican mummies, the ones that have been exhumed and put on display because the relatives couldn't afford to maintain the burial plot. I noted the liver spots on her hands. Why hadn't I noticed them before? They looked like old pennies viewed through weak coffee.

We stayed for a while, then Leonard said, "Hiram, we'll check back. You need anything, just ask."

"Yeah," Hiram said. "Thanks. Man, I can't believe this. I mean, I can. Her being old and all, but I can't believe it either."

"I know," Leonard said.

"Need us to call relatives?" I asked.

"No," Hiram said. "A few minutes, I'll do that."

We left Hiram sitting by MeMaw's bedside, holding her hand.

37.

Late that afternoon, the storm in the west really started to boil, turned darker, and moved our way. We were sitting on the porch glider, watching it, when Hanson drove up.

He walked up on the porch with his cigar in his mouth. The end of it was dead, but I could tell it had recently been lit. There were ashes all over his cheap sports coat.

I said, “I thought you quit smoking.”

“I did,” he said, “and I just did again. Listen here, I wanted to tell you it’s going down. You deserve that much. It’s all over, I’ll tell you how it went.”

“We’d appreciate that,” Leonard said.

He nodded, turned, and looked toward the storm clouds. “Man,” he said.

“It’s moving slow,” Leonard said. “Things could still go all right, he makes his move soon enough.”

“Yeah, well,” Hanson said, “see you.”

He went out to his car, and I watched as he lit the cigar and took up smoking again before he drove away.

“Nice guy,” Leonard said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Thing I like best about him is he took my woman and he sucks on a nasty old cigar. Asshole.”

We watched the storm some more, then got in Leonard’s car and drove over to the First Primitive Baptist Church, telling each other all the way over we were just going to have a look.

We didn’t pull up out front of the place but parked a block down. There wasn’t much to see from there, but before we parked, we drove by once, and I was able to see that the bus and the Chevy were still in the yard. I also noted that a block up from the church, parked on the opposite side of the street, facing the wrong way, was what looked like an unmarked police car. I didn't recognize the balding white guy behind the wheel, but he looked like a cop and he had his eyes on the church. I thought it was a good thing Fitzgerald wasn't expecting anything. This guy was about as inconspicuous as a pink pig in overalls.

We drove on by and went around the block and came back the other way and parked. From where we sat we could see the church and we could see the cop car. Gradually we saw less of both. It turned dark and the storm clouds from the west turned it darker yet.

After a while, lights came on inside the church, then outside of it, lighting up the driveway. An hour passed and cars began to pull up at the curb, and one, a tan Volkswagen, drove around back. Men and women and kids got out of the cars and walked up to the church, around the side of it, and out of sight.

Another fifteen minutes went by, and men and women came away from the church without their kids, got in their cars, and drove away. I thought about that. Parents bringing their kids to a safe place, the church. Leaving them with someone safe, the Reverend, assured in their hearts that their kids were off to have a good time.

And most likely they were. It wasn't the loved kids the Reverend wanted, so just exactly what was the Reverend's game? Figuring what he did want made my head hurt.

A minute or two later, the short bus came out from behind the church with its lights on. I could see the Reverend driving, glimpsed the shadowed forms of kids through the windows. The bus turned left and drove past the cop car and on down the street.

The cop car fired up quick and pulled around in the center of the street and went after the bus. Mr. Sneak. He might as well have been standing on a bucket, jerking his dick and singing a song.

Leonard cranked up and we followed after. Actually, neither we nor the cop had to be sneaky. The bus did what we expected it to do. It drove straight to the carnival, paused at the gate and went on into the fairgrounds. So far, things were going as expected.

Not having a special pass, we, along with the cop, parked outside of the fence, and walked up to the gate. When we got there, we were standing behind the cop. The guy at the gate, a black guy with a physique like the Pillsbury Dough Boy and black glasses with white tape on the nose bar, wouldn't let the cop in because he didn't have a dollar. The cop, a hard-boiled guy wearing what was once called a leisure suit, a style of clothing that went out of favor and production not long after the demise of the seventy-five-cent paperback, wanted to show him his badge and let that do.

"I don't need a badge," said the fat gatekeeper. "I need a dollar."

"Listen, this is police business," the cop said.

"You're shittin' me," the gatekeeper said. "The carnival's police business?"

"Here," I said, handing the gatekeeper a dollar. "Let him in for heaven's sake. You're holding up the line."

The gatekeeper took the dollar. The cop eyed us the way cops do, said thanks like he didn't mean it, and went inside. The gatekeeper said to me, "Man, look at this, two white guys back to back, ain't that some kind of lucky omen or something?"

"Two white guys, one in an ugly leisure suit, means it's going to rain," I said.

"I can believe that," the gatekeeper said, "That guy, I don't think he's on cop business at all. I think he's too used to free meals and shit. That might work uptown, but not here. And where'd he get that suit? What the hell color was that anyway?"

"Orange or rust or dirty gold," Leonard said. "Take your pick."

We paid and went inside. We saw the cop walking toward the lot where the permitted vehicles were parked. He walked wide of the lot and onto the pea gravel, went over and leaned against the fence where the carnival lights were weak, got a cigarette out, lit it, and tried not to act as if he was looking at the bus. He wasn't very good at it.

The bus door opened and Fitzgerald got off the bus, and a line of loud, excited kids came out behind him, followed by a pretty, middle-aged black woman. I assumed she was one of the kid's mothers, helping the Reverend out.

The kids, mostly six to ten years in age, evenly split between girls and boys, bounced on their toes and stood in a line that gyrated like a garter snake on a hot rock. The woman and Reverend Fitzgerald chatted amiably. He smiled. She smiled. The Reverend went back to the bus and leaned inside, then leaned out. I thought maybe he had said something to someone inside. T.J. perhaps. From where we stood, no one was visible, but the plywood window replacements in the back and on the side could have hidden them.

The Reverend smiled at the woman again. They spoke. Half the kids went with her, the other half with the Reverend. Mr. Leisure Suit followed after the Reverend and his charges. T.J., the walking eclipse, did not make an appearance.

Me and Leonard were trying to decide what we were going to do next, when Hanson walked up and surprised us. "You assholes," he said. We turned and got a look at him. He was his usual pleasant-looking self, but he no longer had his cigar. I presumed it was in his pocket. I hoped he remembered to put it out before he put it up. "Didn't I just see you fucks? I said I'd let you know."

"I'll say this," Leonard said, "you walk light for a big dude."

"It's my fuckin' Indian blood. What you two doin' here? I said you were out. You done more than you're supposed to already."

"And very well, I might add," said Leonard.

"Don't let your dicks get too hard," Hanson said. "You did all right, but you had some luck."

"So did you," I said. "We came along."

"You didn't even know for sure you had a case before we showed up," Leonard said.

"I still don't know I got anything," Hanson said.

"Bullshit," I said.

"All right," Hanson said, "you're goddamn wizards of detection. Now go home or take in the carnival. I want you out of my way. I mean it now. I got men on the job, and they even know what they're doin'. Well, they got an idea, anyway."

We left Hanson and walked around the carnival. It was bright with lights and the sounds of voices and the cranking of machinery and the blasting of music, presumably conceived by ears of tin and played on matching instruments. There was the smell of sweat from excited children and tired adults, the butter-rich aroma of popcorn and the sugar-sick sweetness of cotton candy, the burning stench of fresh animal shit from the petting zoo.

We were over by the petting zoo when we came across Hiram. He was standing there with his hands in his pockets, looking forlorn as a man who'd just prematurely ejaculated. He was looking at a spotted goat.

We walked up beside him. I said, "Hiram."

He turned and looked at me, but it took him a moment to know I was there.

"Oh, hi," he said.

"Surprised to see you here," Leonard said. "Mama's with my sister. She drove down."

"How is MeMaw?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Same. Doctor said she could stay like that awhile. A day, six months."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Me too," Leonard said.

"I had to get out, you know?" he said.

"Sure," I said. "Nothing wrong with that. There's not a lot you can do."

"I just needed a break," he said. "Even if I just end up watching a goat."

Hiram turned back to watch the goat, and a little boy came up and started petting it. We stood there in awkward silence for a time, then said good-bye and slipped away.

"Too bad," Leonard said as we bought cotton candy. "I like MeMaw and Hiram."

"Yeah," I said, "but she lived a full life. We all got to check out sometime."

"It's not dying I hate for her," Leonard said. "It's lingering. I think we embarrassed Hiram."

"Yeah, he feels guilty. Like he ought to be with her, but there's just so much of the deathwatch a person can take."

"You know what?"

"What?"

"This cotton candy is making me sick."

I guess we wandered around for a couple of hours. We saw the Reverend and his kids and their leisure-suited shadow a few times, but the Reverend didn't see us. We saw Melton, aka Mohawk, walking with a young black girl who looked as if she had not long back abandoned her training bra and dolls. They went around behind a hot dog stand and we lost sight of them. We saw Hanson a few times. He looked as sullen as ever, as if the sight of us was causing his nuts to shrink.

As we strolled, a lot of blacks looked at me like I was an exotic animal, maybe belonged in the petting zoo. And in a way, I suppose I was exotic, least here and on this night. There were only a handful of white people at the carnival, and some of them were cops.

Another hour passed, and you could smell the storm on the warm night wind. It mixed with the other aromas and became a heady cocktail. You could taste electricity in the air. The machinery that wound around and around and took the children up into the sky and back down again, creaked and whined and groaned and squeaked and rattled bolts in its metal joints and made me nervous. Off in the distance, amid that swirling darkness, was the occasional flash of lightning, like a liquid tuning fork thrown against the sky.

Not long after the lightning flashes, the machineries stopped and the rides got canceled. All that was left was the petting zoo and the booths where you lost your money trying to throw softballs into bushel baskets or baseballs through hoops.

A half-hour later they canceled the whole thing and disgruntled patrons were moving toward the gate. Before we got out of there, the rain blew in, came faster and harder than anyone would have expected. Through the sheets of aluminum-colored rain, the lights of the carnival were like winking gold coins at the bottom of a fountain, and now there was nothing to smell but the rain, and the rain was cold, and within seconds Leonard and I were soaking wet.

We made our way through the crowd and out to the car. We sat there and watched as people rushed out and cars pulled away. We watched as the short church bus came through the gate and drove off. We drove off after it.

The deluge was intense, and the bus drove slowly, and so did we, and so did Leisure Suit. He was following behind us. After a little bit, we decided to beat the bus back to the church, get our parking place. As we passed, Leonard said, “Hap, the Reverend ain’t driving. It’s that woman. I don’t see him at all.”

I drove on around, tires sloshing and tossing water. “Don’t mean he isn’t there. I didn’t see the woman when they left the church. He could be in back.”

“Yeah, but … I don’t know. Something sucks the big ole donkey dick here.”

We beat the bus, got our parking place, turned off the lights, and sat there and ate from a box of M&Ms Leonard had left in the glove box. They had melted into a colorful mess, but we ate them anyway. We were licking our fingers when the bus drove up to the church and stopped in the driveway.

“Reckon they’re staying close to the curb to help the parents out,” Leonard said. “Kids are already soaked to the bone.”

Leisure Suit drove over to the curb opposite the church and parked facing the wrong way.

“Cop is less smart now than he was earlier,” Leonard said. “I don’t think he’s even made us yet, ain’t figured we been riding around behind him and paying his way into the carnival. Mr. Sneaky, he don’t see any connection between us and him and the bus.”

“As the day wears on,” I said, “a cop’s brain settles. It’s kind of like sediment.”

“And he ain’t fueled by the magic of melted M&Ms.”

“There’s that too.”

“Ain’t the green M&Ms supposed to do something to you?” Leonard said. “I always heard you had to watch the green ones.”

“The guy at the factory, he jacks off in the juice makes the green ones, that’s what I heard.”

“No,” Leonard said, “that’s the mayonnaise at McDonald’s, or Burger King, or one of those places. It’s supposed to be a black man does it. That way it scares the shit out of the pecker-woods, ’cause the black customers, they’re in on it, it’s a conspiracy-type thing. They know to hold the mayonnaise. The white folks, they don’t all know about it, so some of ’em eat it. Oh, and the black guy, he’s got AIDS.”

“No shit?”

“No shit. Ain’t that awful, a nigger with AIDS jacking off in the poor honkie folks’ mayonnaise?”

“A queer nigger, of course?”

“Without question. And he’s ugly too.”

38.

We sat there until our asses and the seatcovers seemed one and the same, then the cars started to arrive and park at the curb, beating their wipers against the rain.

It was hard to see with the rain the way it was, but we could see kids come off the bus and rush into cars, and those cars would go away, then more would show up, and a new flock of kids would come off the bus, and pretty soon all the cars were gone, and no more came. The bus cranked up, turned on its lights, drove to the back of the church.

“What now?” Leonard said.

Before I could answer, the tan Volkswagen, which I had forgotten about, came out from behind the church and turned left. The church lights gave me enough of a view to tell the driver was the woman who had been driving the bus, and she had a little girl with her. Mom, having done her duty, was on her way home with her own child.

“You’re right,” I said. “I don’t think the Reverend was on the bus when it came back. He could have got off out back just now, but I don’t think so. I think he stayed at the carnival.”

“We’ve been hoodwinked, and not on purpose,” Leonard said. “I can’t figure how Fitzgerald did it exactly, but he had prearranged plans with the woman. I don’t mean she was in on it —”

“I know what you mean. He had her drive the kids back, but he had a kid in mind wasn’t on the bus.”

“Someone won’t be missed. Some kid he gave a free pass to. And he had another way of leaving the carnival other than the bus.”

“If we’re right,” I said, “where does that leave us?”

“With the clock ticking,” Leonard said.

We sat silent for a moment, then almost in unison said: “The Hampstead place.”

Leonard drove us by the cop in the leisure suit. He was still watching the church. He didn’t even blink as we went by.

We made our way to the Hampstead place from Uncle Chester’s. Up through the woods on foot. The rain hadn’t slacked, and it was slow going. The wind had picked up and turned surprisingly cool, and it tossed the rain hard as gravel. Tree branches whipped and cut us, and our single flashlight did little to punch a hole in the darkness. We hadn’t taken the time to get rain slickers, so we were soaked to the skin. I wished now we’d bothered to get guns. But all we’d brought were ourselves and the flashlight in Leonard’s car.

When we got to the Hampstead place, we were exhausted. We didn’t want Fitzgerald and his brother to see us coming, so I turned off the flashlight just before we broke out of the woods, into the partial clearing.

Out there, with no light, pitch dark without moon or starlight, the rain hammering us like ball bearings, we only had our instincts to guide us. It was rough going. We could hear the boards in the old house creaking, begging the wind to leave it alone, and we linked arms and let those sounds guide us. I barked a shin on a porch step, and Leonard followed suit. We climbed onto the porch, trying to be as quiet as possible, which was difficult when you felt like your leg was broken. We found our way along the porch to the busted-out window we had used before, cautiously crawled inside.

Rain was driving into the house from the hole in the ceiling and the hole in the roof above. It was so dark inside we couldn’t see the rain, but we could hear it and feel it. We listened for other sounds, the sounds of movement, but there was only the wind and the expected creaking of lumber.

We had no recourse but to turn on the flash, and we used it to avoid the breaks in the boards, but still they squeaked as we walked. We went through the room with the chifforobe and into the kitchen, and it was dry there, and I realized suddenly that my nerves were starting to settle. The pounding rain had been like a severe case of Chinese water torture.

But as soon as we were both inside the kitchen, not really expecting to find anyone since we'd heard neither movement or seen illumination, my flashlight caught a shadow on my left, and I whipped the light that way, and the shadow came at me. I swung the flashlight, and there was a grunt and a shattering of bulb, and the light went out. Then I felt hands on me. I shifted my body and jabbed with an elbow and then there was light on the right of me and I saw Leonard out of the corner of my eye, and he was planting a side kick in a man's midsection, and in that same instant my hands felt their way around my injured attacker's body, and I hip-threw him hard against the floor. Then a light shot up at me from the floor, and behind the light the shadow shape said, "Goddamn you, Hap." It was Charlie.

The cop Leonard kicked was named Gleason. I had seen him the day they tore Uncle Chester's flooring up. He was the fat cop with the bad toupee Mohawk had yelled at. He wasn't any slimmer, and now his bad toupee was wet and in the light of his and Charlie's flashlight, it looked like some kind of strange tribal skullcap.

Leonard had really planted that kick. Gleason took a long time to start breathing naturally, but the guy had enough fat nothing got broken. Charlie wasn't feeling that good either. He had a knot on the side of his head where I had connected with the flashlight.

"Man, that flashlight hurt," Charlie said.

"Sorry," I said.

"Goddamn, you motherfuckers are quick."

"How's the head?" I said.

"It hurts, what'ya think?" Charlie rubbed the knot on his head. "Goddamn."

"Sorry, Charlie. If it's any consolation, I think you broke Leonard's flashlight."

"Yeah, well, buy another. My head, I just got this one. What the fuck you two doing here?"

We told him.

"You think Hanson didn't think of covering this place?" Charlie said. “Jesus, we may not be the incredibly clever sleuths you boys are, but we think of a few things. We even brought along a lunch.”

“Charlie forgot the chips, though,” Gleason said. “I told him twicet about the chips, and he still forgot ’em. A sandwich without chips ain’t no good.”

“Would you lose the chips, Gleason?” Charlie said.

“I just said you forgot is all,” Gleason said.

“The point here is not that I forgot the chips out of our lunch,” Charlie said, “it’s that you two morons are screwing stuff up.”

“I told you we’re sorry,” I said. “Jesus, what you want us to do, shoot ourselves?”

“You could have fucked up an investigation.”

“Considering Fitzgerald hasn’t showed yet,” Leonard said, “I think things are already fucked.”

“Man,” Gleason said, “I think this guy busted something inside.”

Charlie put the light on Gleason. “You’re all right. Lose some fuckin’ weight. And take off that stupid toup.”

“He ought to leave it,” Leonard said. “The bad guys show up, he can scare ’em with it.”

“Yeah, well, you guys laugh,” Gleason said. “I had this special fitted.”

“Fitted for what?” Leonard said. “A fence post? You got more head than you got hair there. You need to shoot and field-dress another mop, pal.”

“Right, you’re Vidal Sassoon,” Gleason said.

And that’s when we heard someone coming through the woods from the back of the house.

“The lights,” Charlie said, and he killed the flash and Gleason killed his. We listened as the tromping came closer.

Charlie whispered, “Spread out, here’s you guys’ chance to use that karate shit on someone deserves it.”

We spread out. I took position by the door that led into the kitchen. I knew Charlie was somewhere to the left of me, and Leonard and Gleason were across the way.

We waited and the tromping went on around the side of the house and onto the front porch, then we heard the porch boards squeak, and not long after, the inside boards squeaked louder. The squeaking came our way. I felt the hair on the back of my neck bristle and there was a tightening of the groin and a loosening of the bowels. A light came from the room with the chifforobe, and the light bobbed into the kitchen, and a man came after it. Then the light swung to the right and its beam fell square and solid on Gleason, standing there like a stuffed bear, his toupee dangling off his skull like an otter clinging to a rock.

"Hey," the startled man with the light said, and it was Fitzgerald's voice, and for a moment, time was suspended. Then time came loose and from behind Fitzgerald a monstrous shadow charged into the room, and I moved, and everyone else moved, and I realized then that someone was running away from the chifforobe room, someone who had been with Fitzgerald and his brother, someone who had panicked.

I started to go after him, but I couldn't get past the Reverend, so I stepped in and hit him with a right cross to the jaw and he dropped the flashlight and staggered across the room and Gleason grabbed him. When I hit him, the flash hit the floor and went around and around, showing Gleason and the Reverend, then shadow, then light, then the flash quit rolling and pinned them.

The big shadow was T.J., of course, and when Gleason grabbed Fitzgerald, T.J. grabbed Gleason, got him by the head with his huge hands, held it like it was a basketball he was about to shoot.

I heard the one who got away fall through some boards in the front room, heard him grunt and scramble, then Gleason let go of Fitzgerald, and Fitzgerald spun and hit Gleason in the stomach with a hook, and though I was already moving, and so were the others, it was all too fast. T.J. had Gleason good. He twisted Gleason's head like he was screwing the lid off a stubborn pickle jar. Gleason's sad toupee popped loose, soared above the light of the flash, then came back to it like a hairy UFO and slapped the floor. Behind it all, you could hear Gleason's neck crack like a plastic swizzle stick.

"Stop them!" Fitzgerald yelled to T.J., and Charlie was on Fitzgerald, and Leonard stepped in and kicked T.J. flush in the groin and drove his palm up into the giant's chin, and the giant grunted and reached for Leonard, and Leonard moved away into shadow.

Charlie flew into me unconscious, courtesy of Fitzgerald's left hook. I eased Charlie aside, and me and Fitzgerald came together.

The rhythm of our punches and the constant kicking of Leonard against T.J.'s body filled the room. I hit Fitzgerald with a jab and he hooked me to the body and I felt a rib crack, but I'd had that before. It wasn't poking through the skin, so it was a pain I could isolate. I bobbed in and jabbed again and threw an overhand right, but Fitzgerald had moved out of the moon of light the flashlight provided, and I threw my punch at movement instead of substance. He leaned away and landed another in my ribs, same spot; it hurt like a knife had gone there.

But I had something Fitzgerald didn't have: a four-wheel drive. I kicked him hard in the side of the leg, just above the knee, and he wobbled into the light, and I could see him good now, and I hit him with a right in the face and kicked with a left roundhouse to his ribs. He faded back into the darkness and ran.

I turned to look at Leonard, just as Leonard scoop-kicked the inside of T.J.'s knee, then side-snap-kicked to the front of it. T.J. went down with a yell, hit the floorboards hard, rolled over and screamed, tried to get up, but the shattered knee wouldn't hold him.

I heard Fitzgerald break through glass and kick out window struttings, then I heard him drop to the ground outside. I grabbed the flashlight and went after him, my ribs throbbing. When I got to the window and started through, I heard Fitzgerald scream like a man with a stick in his eye, then the scream turned to an echo, then a flat, soul-breaking whine.

I dropped to the ground and shone the light around. The rain was still pounding, and even with the light it was hard to see. I could hear him, though: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death … Oh, Jesus, not this way."

I went toward the sound, and it was coming from the old well. Fitzgerald had tumbled down there in the darkness. I cautiously slid up to the pile of rubble that had been the well's rock foundation, bent over, and shone the light down.

Fitzgerald wasn't saying anything now, he wasn't making any kind of sound, but he was alive. I could see his eyes blinking at the rain. The well was not wide, and the fall had been hard, and there was all manner of rubble down there—rocks from the curbing, limbs and brush, stagnant water—and he had hit in such a way that his waist was twisted and his legs were turned at an angle only pipe cleaners should make.

"I'll get you out," I said.

But he wasn't listening. He bent his head toward his chest, and his ruined body shifted and his chin went to his knees, which were too high up for anyone but an acrobat, then he was still. He eased slowly into the water, then hung on some kind of debris.

I didn't need an M.D. to tell me the Reverend Fitzgerald had passed into darkness. I held the light on him for a time, watched the rain beat him, realized that the way he was now, he looked like nothing more than a peaceful embryo waiting for birth.

I went back to the house by the porch and window. I didn't see anyone lurking about. I found where the one who had gotten away had fallen through the boards, and down there I found something else too. Lying on his side on the ground, a black bag over his head, hands bound behind his back, ankles tied, was a child.

I got the boy out of there and pulled the bag off his head. He had a bandanna around his mouth, and under that something stuffed in his mouth, and he was having a hard time breathing. I got the thing out of his mouth and saw that it was a sock. I sat him on the side of the floor where the boards had given away, let his legs dangle. He looked at me. He was shaking.

"Please," he said.

"It's OK, son. I'm not one of them."

"Please."

I saw there was something else down in the hole, and got back down in there and grabbed it. It was a large piece of cloth, and under it was a book of the Psalms. I wrapped the book up in the cloth, which wasn't just a cloth at all, and picked the boy up and made my way around the gap in the boards and carried him into the kitchen. He was stiff and frightened. I sat him on the floor with his back against the wall. He saw T.J. twisting on the floor, and he started to struggle, but the ties on his hands and feet prevented any real movement. He merely fell over and lay still.

“Easy,” I said. “You’re OK now.”

I glanced over and saw that Leonard had gotten Charlie’s handcuffs and was putting them on T.J. T.J. kept yelling over and over, “Bubba. Bubba.”

When Leonard had T.J.’s arms cuffed behind his back, he limped over to where me and the boy were.

“The runner lost the prizes,” I said, and lay the cloth and the Psalm book on the floor.

Leonard got out his pocket knife, and the boy flinched and made a sound like something dying.

“It’s OK,” Leonard said, and he cut the boy’s hands and feet free. “We got ’em for you, boy.”

Free, the child lay on the floor with his knees drawn to his chest. “They hurt you?” Leonard asked him.

The boy didn’t answer. He stared at Leonard. Leonard stroked the boy’s head. “Gonna be all right.”

I checked on Gleason. It didn’t take much of an examination to determine he wouldn’t be coming around. His head was twisted at such an angle it made my throat hurt. I found his toupee and stuck it on his head as best I could.

I went over then and looked at Charlie. He was lying on his back, conscious, but weak. “Where’s it hurt?” I asked.

“My head,” Charlie said. “Jesus, what a lick. The world’s spinning. I’d rather you hit me with the flashlight again.”

“Left hook,” I said. “He had a good one. He hasn’t got anything now.”

“You kill him?”

“The old well took care of him.” I worked Charlie’s coat off of him, folded it up and put it under his head. “Man, you going to have to go shopping. This suit coat is ruined. Pocket’s ripped clean the hell off of it.”

“Got his hand caught in it,” Charlie said. “Think Kmart’ll take it back?”

“Even they got to draw a line somewhere.”

“Gleason?”

“Afraid not. Take it easy, now. You might have a concussion. I’ll get some help.”

“Hanson don’t hear from us in a while, he’ll be up here.”

“I’m not going to wait that long, Charlie.”

I went back to Leonard. He said, “My ankle’s bad twisted. I’ve got down here now and can’t get up. It’s swollen from me kicking that big devil. I must have hit wrong. I think I’ll have to cut off the shoe.”

“Leonard, it’s not over yet.”

“I know. You’ll get him, won’t you? For me and you, and Uncle Chester?”

“You know it.”

“And Hanson for that matter. Boy is he gonna be pissed.”

“That’s how I like him best. Pissed … You’ll be all right?”

“Get him, Hap. Get him now.”

I folded the cloth around the Psalmbook and went away.

It took me a while to get from the Hampstead place back down to Uncle Chester’s, but not as long as it had taken us to go up there. I wasn’t trying to sneak and the rain had subsided. I thought all the way down. I thought about how stupid I’d been. I was so mad my ribs didn’t even hurt.

When I got to Uncle Chester’s, I went on past and across the street to MeMaw’s. The porch light was on, and Hiram’s muddy van was in the driveway. The porch overhang was dripping water like rain off the bill of a cap. I climbed on the porch and knocked on the door. A full minute passed before Hiram answered. He was wearing a different set of clothes than I had seen him wearing at the carnival. His hair was wet and his face was flushed and sweaty. He was a little out of breath. He had his van keys in his hand.

I said, “How’s MeMaw?”

“The same,” he said. “I’m going up there.”

“Can I come in?”

“Man, I don’t mean to be rude, but I got to run. I was just going out.”

"I just need a minute," I said and pushed my way inside, and he closed the door. The house had the faint and pleasant aroma of home cooking. I looked at the photographs on the wall, the picture of Jesus behind the stove. The cheap, yellowed curtains. The place seemed a lot less clean than when I had seen it last, and smaller, and darker.

Hiram said, "You look like hell."

"I been busy. I bet you're fixing to light out, aren't you?"

"What I was saying. I got to get back to the hospital. I need to get on back right now, spell my sister."

"I think you think the Reverend's going to do some talking. I don't think you're going to the hospital. I think you're going to run like a goddamn deer."

He looked at me, trying to think of something to say. "The Reverend?" he said.

"Did you know you and I just missed each other?" I said.

"How's that?"

"I got something for you that'll explain."

I went over to the kitchen table, took the cloth out from under my arm, and shook the book of Psalms out of it. I took the American flag, popped it wide, let it float down over the table and the book.

"I believe you dropped this," I said. "At least it wasn't the Texas flag.... You were going to wrap a child's body in it, weren't you, Hiram. Stick a sheet from the Psalms in one of the magazines hidden up there. That day I was over here, you quoted part of a Bible verse. That was from the Psalms, wasn't it? MeMaw saw you got religious training."

"Hap—"

"You didn't know I was at the house, Hiram. You thought the Reverend was caught and going to talk, and you were just about to make a run for it. You know what? Fitzgerald's dead. And T.J., hell, he wouldn't remember you an hour from now. Not so it'd cause you any trouble anyway. But you panicked, and that's what nails you."

"Hap—"

“Oh yeah, there is someone who’ll remember you. You dropped the kid too. The one you were watching at the petting zoo. I bet he got a good look at you, seeing how it wouldn’t have mattered had things gone according to plan. Simple plan, huh? Fitzgerald loaded the kids back in the bus, said he had to stay for some reason, would catch a ride, whatever, then you helped him grab the boy. Or rather you helped trick the boy. He was someone Fitzgerald knew from the church, someone he gave a free pass to, someone he was acting like a father to, one of the lost ones. And T.J., he was on the bus, but he got off too, to help. He’d do anything for his brother.”

“You got to understand, Hap. I didn’t start any of this.”

“I don’t need to understand anything. All I understand is you and Fitz and T.J., every year, killed a young boy, cut him up and buried him under that house. That’s all I need to understand. The why of it doesn’t mean a thing to me.”

“I was going to stop. Really.”

“No. I don’t think so. And it doesn’t matter anyway.”

Hiram seemed to consider a moment, then whirled and snatched up one of the kitchen chairs and came for me. He brought it around and hit me on the side, and my injured ribs exploded with pain, but I moved into him as he swung, and cut the force of the blow. I grabbed his face with both my hands and slammed my forehead forward, into his nose, and he jerked back, spewing blood. He dropped the chair, fell leaning against the stove. The impact shook the wall, and the picture of Jesus rocked on its nail and came loose and fell on top of the stove and the glass shattered.

He came at me again, but I moved in with a right to the stomach, hooked a left to his head. It wasn’t a good left. My ribs hurt too bad to put the torque into it. He hit me high above the ear, not a good shot, but all those blows I’d taken from Fitzgerald were wearing on me. I could feel my legs going rubber. I covered my face with my arms and fist and let him chunk a while. He wasn’t any better a boxer than he had been before, just a scrapper, and his wind wasn’t any better either. The blows stung a little, but Leonard gave me worse when we sparred.

After a few hits Hiram began to breathe hard through his mouth, gulping air like a whale gulping plankton. I broke my cover and hooked between his hands with a solid right and took out what breath he had left, then put him down with a swinging elbow. That last technique made my injured rib move a way it wasn't supposed to move, and I felt it stab against my side. The damn thing had been cracked, and now it had broken loose. I couldn't help but lean against the sink and feel sick, and when I turned to look at Hiram, he was up. He'd gotten a butcher knife off the cabinet, and he lunged at me with it. He wasn't any better a knife fighter than he was a boxer.

I parried the lunge to the outside with my arm and grabbed his wrist and pulled him off balance and tugged him against the sink counter and used my free hand to strike him behind the head with my forearm, driving him down into the porcelain sink. His head made a sound like a clay jar breaking and he went out, would have hit the floor if his chin hadn't hung on the edge of the sink. I kicked his feet out from under him and he went down, sprawled on the floor with blood running out of his mouth. His hand opened slowly, like a flower blooming, and the knife lay free in his palm. I kicked it away. I stood over him a moment, feeling something I couldn't put a name to.

Finally, I leaned against the sink and tried to get my breath. I was starting to lose it. MeMaw's kitchen was spinning like a Disney World ride. I turned on the faucet and ran some cold water into my hands and splashed it on my face and rubbed it through my hair. That didn't help much. I held my head low in the sink beneath the faucet and let the water run over my neck and the back of my skull. A few minutes later the spinning stopped and my rib really began to ache.

I eased my way over to the phone and called the law, asked them to patch me through to Lieutenant Hanson, and to tell him his good buddy Hap Collins was on the line with a murderer in tow.

39.

Four nights after Hiram went down, MeMaw died, and two months later I was still thinking about her. I was glad she never woke up. Never knew. Hiram had lied about his sister being with MeMaw. He'd never called anyone. The need to kill had been so strong inside him, he'd left his dying mother's side to do what he felt he had to do. The whole thing haunted me like a ghost.

I was thinking about this one warm but pleasant afternoon while me and Leonard were out on the lake fishing, not catching anything, of course, just drifting around in the boat, untangling moss from our lines and watching birds fly over.

At least most of the mosquitoes had called it a season. It was still warm enough that a few of them came out on scouting missions, looking for a place to land, a place to refuel, a place that generally seemed to be located somewhere on the back of my neck, but an occasional quick slap took care of that matter.

"Get your mind off of it," Leonard said.

"What?"

"You just took the bait off your hook and cast the empty hook back in the water. I'd say you're thinking about Florida or Hiram."

I had been thinking about Florida earlier. And Hanson. They were going to get married. Florida had invited me to the wedding. By mail. She said she hoped I'd come. Word from Charlie, who still shopped at Kmart, was that Hanson was hoping I'd stay home. I kept thinking I ought to wish Florida and Hanson well and be happy for them. That was the right thing to do, but I kept hoping she'd miscalculate and get her period on her wedding night. It was the least fate could do for me.

"It's Hiram," I said. "The whole mess."

I reeled the line in, gingerly. My ribs were a lot better, but I still found simple things painful. The doctor had wanted to put a body cast around me, but I'd had broken ribs before. After he helped me get them set, I'd insisted on an Ace bandage, wrapped tight. I figured another month from now I could put on a Chubby Checker record and do the twist. Leonard had recovered just fine; the sprain had gone away within a week.

"You know," I said, "I kinda liked Hiram. He had a good side."

"You kinda liked his bullshit. There's no balance in having a good side when you got the other side he had. Hell, you don't know he had a good side. He had a good front, man. That guy had more masks than a gaggle of trick-or-treaters. Look the way he went off and left his mother so he could kill that kid."

"I guess. You think he'll get life, or a needle full of shit?"

"I pray for the needle. I'd like to be there to push the plunger in the fucker, or maybe just forget the dope and jab him to death with the needle."

"The thing that worries me about you, Leonard, is you have such a hard time getting in touch with your true feelings."

"Yeah, I'm gonna get me an analyst can help me out on that. Tell me why I'm queer, too. They like stuff like that. He'll want to know if I dream about my daddy's dick. Hell, maybe I'm lucky, shrink'll be some blond stud that's queer himself."

"Hope springs eternal."

"Listen, man, you worry too much about the psychology of things. That stuff's just head voodoo. It don't mean a thing. You took all the psychiatric and psychology degrees in the world, balanced that paper against the truth, there wouldn't be enough there to wipe a baby's ass on."

"Maybe. But it figures with Fitzgerald, if the stuff Hiram says was true, and I think it was, but Hiram, I don't know."

"You want everything to come up neat, Hap. That's bullshit. What Hiram said about Fitzgerald is probably true, what he said about himself is probably bullshit. What you're doing, is still blaming yourself for not figuring Hiram sooner."

"I should have seen it. Shit, everything was there. Boxes of flags in Hiram's van, and each of the bodies had been wrapped in cloth, and he had quoted that piece out of Psalms. Add to that the fact he was here every year at the time of the murders, knew the

Reverend and had a history with him. Toss in the religious connection, the way he'd acted that night I handed him Ivan, all drugged and dying, the way he looked at the kid like I'd given him a gift from God. The thought of that, knowing what I know now, gives me chills."

"Monday morning quarterbacking. I've heard it all, Hap, and frankly, I'm tired of it. Look, amigo, I don't blame myself. You shouldn't blame yourself. Hiram was cool, and Fitzgerald, hell, he was ripe for the part and was guilty too. We had our eyes on him and couldn't see the whole of it. That flag shit, hell, who would have thought of that? Only way it would come together is the way it did. You found the flag and the kid. But the thing is, another kid didn't go down. We got 'em all. I'm gonna feel sorry for anyone, it's T.J., rotting away in some state institution. Not that I'd want the fucker on the street, but in his case, I got a tear or two for him."

"I don't see any."

"I cry on the inside. And I hope every day the poor bastard will die in his sleep. He ain't nothing for this world. Shit, Fitzgerald told T.J. his own dick was a snake, he'd have believed it. Cut it off and tied it in a knot had Fitzgerald wanted him to."

"No doubt about that."

"Actually, thing that cheers me at night is thinking of that motherfucker falling down that well. I wish I could have been close enough to hear his bones break."

"Your humanity overwhelms me, Leonard."

"Now forget Hiram, the whole mess. Set your hook. Personally, I put my next bait on the hook, I'm gonna pretend I'm putting the needle in Hiram's eye.… Come on man, let's catch at least a couple perch. I'd like fish for dinner."

"You know what it is, Leonard?"

"No, but I'm gonna find out."

"It's the fact they were the same, and yet, they were different."

"Hiram and Fitzgerald?"

"Yeah. I mean, Hiram says they were the same, but what do you think?"

"Same thing I thought yesterday. They're both better off dead, and when Hiram goes and makes it a duo, I'll buy a party hat and a noisemaker. But since you just got to talk about it, let me give you my last word, brother. Fitzgerald, if Hiram can be believed—and like you, I believe this part—got jacked around early on, right? What did you call him?"

"Psychotic."

"Right. And Hiram, he was a psychopath. No matter what story he tells about how he and Fitzgerald were turned into what they were. I don't buy it. Least not in Hiram's case."

I remembered the story Hiram told, or at least I remembered it as best Hanson would tell it to me later. Hiram told the law and the psychiatrists he couldn't help himself; he'd been made that way. Said when he was a boy he spent time with Fitz, and Fitz's father raped not only his son, but him as well. This, he said, was why the old man killed his wife. Not that he thought she might be sleeping around. That was just the bullshit he told me to distance himself from Fitzgerald. The old man's wife caught the elder Fitzgerald in the act with him and Fitz. Hiram said they watched the old man murder her and wrap her in a flag from the church. Then he made them help load the body in his car, go to the Hampstead house with him, watch him dispose of her by candlelight, all the while telling them it was the will of God. Words confirmed by the image on the wall, the water-spot face of Christ.

Hiram said the old man told him he ever said a word, he'd do the same to MeMaw, so Hiram had been quiet all those years. But the memory wouldn't go away, and he'd wake up at night and see the blood and think of it oozing through that flag. He'd envision the water spot on the wall and smell the fresh dirt beneath the house, and he'd feel angry. He developed an urge to light fires and make little animals suffer. He did both on the sly.

When he was a grown man, animals weren't enough. And he and Fitzgerald, scarred by the same crime at the same time, found a linking between them. The murders began. They felt they were doing the will of God, getting rid of those sad cases, those admonitions. Or so said Hiram.

"You see, man," Leonard said, "Hiram was lying. He understood the reasons Fitzgerald was the way he was too well to be operating by them himself. It had been Fitzgerald who had believed in what he was doing; he was the one with the psychotic delusions that he was doing God’s work as given him to do by his daddy. But you can’t let Fitzgerald off the hook either. He made a choice. And there was something else, man. He had those porno mags same as Hiram, and the sex with the kids, they can say that was part of the pattern, but it all sounds like a power trip to me, plain and simple. But let’s give Fitzgerald a little room and say it isn’t all his fault. Not much room, but enough to turn around in, and then let’s go on to Hiram.

“Hiram, he got a bad break for a kid too, but hell, that wasn’t his environment. He’d got over it in time, dealt with it, told eventually, he’d wanted to. But he liked the killing from the start, was born with a wire twisted and a piston loose. I bet he was doing them animals in before he ever got butt-fucked and in on that murder. With Hiram, it was like dropping ole Br’er Rabbit in the briar patch. He was born and bred for it, same as some dogs come out bad and others come out good, and they come from the same stock. MeMaw was good people, but that didn’t mean the genes didn’t come together in Hiram crooked somewhere. Got the wrong combination.”

“Then in a way,” I said, “that means he couldn’t help it.”

“Bad dogs can’t help but bite either. I’ve seen ’em born vicious and just get worse as they got older, no matter how good you treated ’em. They can’t help it, but I couldn’t help putting a bullet through their heads either. You don’t bite me, or try to bite me but once.… Shit, Hap, some things just are. Hiram was a predator from birth, and he enjoyed feeding Fitzgerald’s religious frenzy, so in turn he could feed his own needs. Think about what they found in Tyler.”

When Hiram’s home was checked into, the police in Tyler found souvenirs, more souvenirs than could have come from those dead boys under the Hampstead place. It looked as if once a year in LaBorde hadn’t been enough for Hiram. In time, if he talked more, the Tyler police felt certain they’d clear up a lot of local cases involving missing children.

“No telling how many kids Hiram’s nailed,” Leonard said. “Here, in Tyler, on his route. He had the perfect job for his little hobby. And he’d kept right on doing it until he was stopped or the grave got him."

"I know," I said. "I guess there's a part of me thinks somewhere along the line everyone could have been saved. Maybe not come out perfect, but not come out a monster either."

"Hap, my man, there is evil in the world. True evil. It doesn't twirl its mustache and it doesn't wear black and it doesn't slink and it doesn't come in any one color or sex. Sometimes evil comes from good places, like MeMaw, and sometimes it can wear all kinds of good faces and talk good as anyone can talk, but it's just a face and it's just talk. Evil's real, man. Same as good."

"And what about T.J.? How does he fit into your theory?"

"I don't care if he fits at all, Hap. Now shut up and fish."

I baited my hook and did just that, but I never could get my mind right. I kept thinking about it all, wondering if the kid we'd saved would have a chance now, or if he'd just go right back to the street. I wondered if at this very moment he might be sticking a shot of horse into his arm.

We didn't catch any fish. Leonard was pissed. His mouth was set for a finny friend. We stopped off at Kroger's on the way home and went in there to buy a fish to fry. They were all out. We got some fish sticks and took them home and baked them in the oven.

Later that month, on a cool night with the sky black and the stars bright, I moved away from Uncle Chester's. The work on the house was completed, except for painting, and Leonard decided to live there at least until spring. At that time, I was supposed to move back and help paint the place, then he'd put it up for sale.

But for me, for now, I wanted away from there and the remains of the drug house next door, MeMaw's house, the woods out back, and the Hampstead place. I felt it all closing in on me at night, as if the houses, the remains of the drug house, were living things that could reach out and touch me.

I suppose, believing that way in some primitive part of my mind, I should have believed Uncle Chester's bottle tree could protect me, but it had become easier to believe the evil than the good.

Me and Leonard had a big dinner that night, and after dinner I shook hands with him, put my stuff in the back of the pickup, and we stood around outside and listened to the wind in the bottle tree. It was a cool wind. It was an agreeable night.

“You be true, Hap.”

“Don’t be surprised you don’t hear from me for a week,” I said.

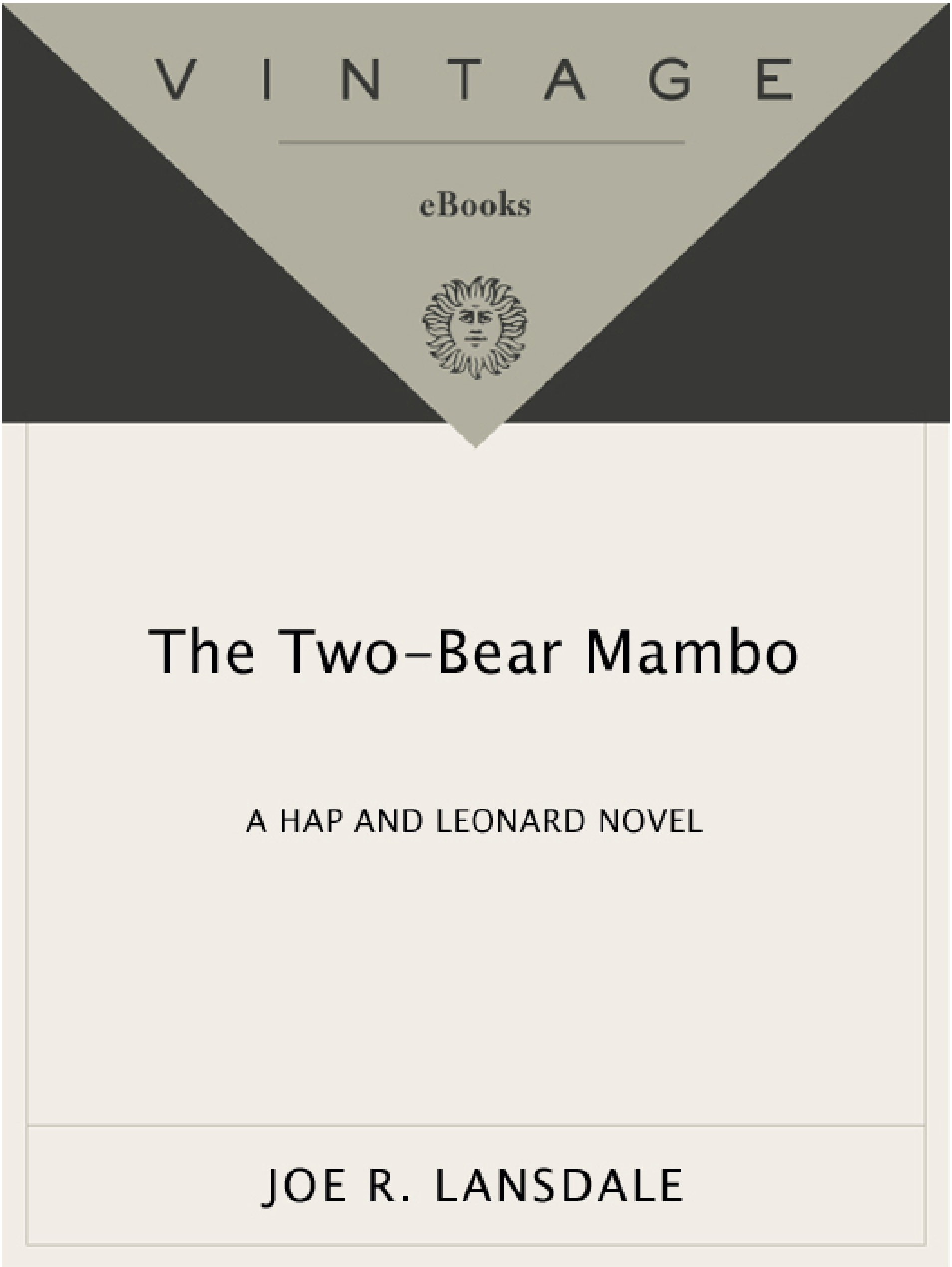
“All right.”

“Don’t be surprised you hear from me tomorrow.”

He smiled at me. “Drive careful, man.”

I hugged him and drove away from there, started home, but didn’t make it. I went out Highway 7 instead. I drove on out to the scenic overlook and went up there and parked. I got out and lay on the hood of the truck with my back to the windshield and looked at the sky. It was a beautiful night and the stars were as clear and bright as a young girl’s eyes. Beautiful like that time Florida and I had come up here. It was hard remembering exactly who I had been then. I felt older now and the world seemed sadder, and it was as if everything I had ever learned was ultimately pointless. When I had lain here with Florida beside me that night, not so long ago—but in another way, a million years past—she told me we could see Forever. And we could. But Forever then was a wonderful place, full of mystery and hope and eternity.

Tonight, I could still see Forever, but Forever was nothing to see.



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A Hap and Leonard Novel

Joe R. Lansdale

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This one is for my family, Karen, Kasey and Keith.
Thanks for putting up with me.

The rising world of waters dark and deep.
John Milton: *Paradise Lost*

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1

When I got over to Leonard's Christmas Eve night, he had the Kentucky Headhunters turned way up over at his place, and they were singing "The Ballad of Davy Crockett," and Leonard, in a kind of Christmas celebration, was once again setting fire to the house next door.

I wished he'd quit doing that. I'd helped him the first time, he'd done it the second time on his own, and now here I was third time out, driving up. It was going to look damn suspicious when the cops got here. Someone had already called in. Most likely the assholes in the house. I knew that because I could hear sirens.

Leonard's boyfriend, Raul, was on the front porch of Leonard's house, his hands in his coat pockets, looking over at the burning and the ass-whipping that was taking place, and he was frantic, like a visiting Methodist preacher who'd just realized the head of the household had scooped up the last fried chicken leg.

I pulled my pickup into Leonard's drive, got out, went over and stood on the porch with Raul. It was cold out and our breath was frosty white. "What got this started?" I asked.

"Oh, hell, Hap, I don't know. You got to stop him before they haul his black ass to the calaboose."

"It's too late for that, they got him. Those sirens aren't for jaywalkers."

"Shit, shit, shit," Raul said. "I shouldn't never come to live with a macho queer. I should have stayed in Houston."

Raul was normally a pretty good-looking kid, but out here in the night, the house fire flickering orange lights across his face, he looked desiccated, like the victim of a giant spider. He was sort of wobbling back and forth, like a bowling pin that hadn't quite got nailed solid enough by the ball, watching Leonard drag a big black guy out of the burning house and onto the front porch over there. The guy's shirt and pants were on fire, and Leonard was kicking him off the porch and across the front yard.

I recognized the guy. Mohawk they called him, ’cause of his haircut, though, after this night, they might just call him Smoky. Mohawk and a friend of his had once jumped on me and Leonard and we’d whipped their asses. I still dreamed about it at nights when I needed something to cheer me up.

Other folks were coming out of the house through the windows and the back door, scrambling for the woods out back. None of them seemed securely on fire, but a few had been touched by flames. A short stocky woman was in the lead. She wore only a brown bathrobe and some floppy house shoes and had a wig in her right hand. Her short legs flashed when she ran and the house coat moved and her breath went out and whiffed back in cool, white bursts. The wig was slightly on fire. She and her smoking hair hat and flopping bathrobe disappeared into the woods at a run and the others followed suit, melting into the timber with her, leaving in their wake a trail of scorched clothing smoke. A moment later they had vanished as handily as a covey of quail gone to nest.

The fire truck screamed into sight, and damn near hit Mohawk after Leonard swiveled a hip into him and twisted and tossed him into the street. The fella rolled on across, banged the curbing on the other side, and the fire truck swerved and ran up on the lawn of the burning house, and Leonard had to jump for it.

One good thing, though, all that rolling had put Mohawk’s fire out. You know how it goes, that old advice the fire department gives you, “stop, drop, and roll,” and that’s what Mohawk was doing. Thanks to Leonard.

If you took the rose-colored view, you might say Leonard was doing nothing more than saving Mohawk’s worthless life.

’Course now, Leonard had gone back into the house and a short black guy with his hair on fire came out on the end of Leonard’s foot, and when he hit the lawn he got up running toward Leonard’s house, Leonard yelling at his back, “Run, you goddamn little nigger.”

I tell you, Leonard standing on the front porch, smoke boiling out behind him, fire licking out the windows, the roof peaked with a hat of flame, it caused Leonard’s face to appear as if it had been chipped from obsidian. He was like some kind of backwoods honky nightmare vision of the Devil—a nigger with a bad attitude and the power of fire. Come to think of it, the black folks in that house probably saw him as pretty devilish as well. Leonard can be irritating to most anybody when he wants to be.

I left Raul standing on the porch about the time the little guy came out on the end of Leonard's foot, walked over and into the yard where Leonard was practicing arson and ass-whipping, put my leg out and tripped the little guy as he ran by.

He got up and I slapped him down with the side of my hand and put my foot on the back of his neck and reached down and scooped up some loose dirt in the driveway and dumped it on top of his head.

It put the fire out, except for the patch of hair burning low on the back of his head, like a spark in steel wool. The rest of his skull was smoking like a dry cabbage with a cinder in it. His body gave off quite a bit of heat, and he was wiggling as if he were being cooked alive. He was making a kind of bothersome noise that was so shrill it made my buttocks crawl up my back.

"I'm burning here," he said. "I'm burning."

"It's okay," I said. "There's not much hair left."

The cops got there then. Couple of cruisers and Sergeant Charlie Blank in his unmarked job. Charlie—wearing some of Kmart's finest, including high-gloss, black genuine plastic shoes that shone brightly in the light of the house fire—got out slowly, like his pants might rip.

He paused long enough to watch one of the blue-suit cops nab Mohawk, cuff him, and slam him in the back of a cruiser, after "accidentally" bumping his head into the car door while helping him inside.

Charlie came over to me, gave me a sad look, sighed, pulled out a cigarette, stooped, lit it off the little guy's head, and said, "I'm fucking tired of this, Hap. Leonard's giving me gray hairs. What with the Chief in cahoots with the bad guys and Lieutenant Hanson acting like he's got a weight tied to his dick all the time, I can't think straight. Get your foot off that fucker's neck."

I did, and the little guy, who hadn't yet stopped whimpering, came up on his knees and slapped at the back of his neck with a yell. The fire had already gone out, giving itself up to Charlie's cigarette, but I think the slapping bit made that dude feel better.

Charlie looked at him, said, "Lay down, buddy, and stay there."

The guy lay down. His head was smoking a lot less now.

"You know I got to run Leonard in?" Charlie said.

"I know. I thought you didn't smoke?"

"I started. I start two or three times a year. I like to quit so I can really enjoy it when I start back. I got to run you in too."

"I didn't do anything. I was just puttin' this guy out. I threw dirt on his head."

"You got a point. The dirt could make things all right." He said to the guy on the ground, "You think he was putting the fire out, sir?"

"Shit, man, that motherfucker tripped my black ass and knocked the dog shit out of me. I'm gonna file on his ass. I'm gonna file on everygoddamnbody."

"See there, Hap, got to run you in."

"Would it make any difference if I said when I hit him it hurt my hand?"

"I'll put that in my notes. You know, being this close to the fire, it's kinda warm. Toasty even. Very Christmas-like."

"That's Leonard," I said. "Always festive."

"The Ballad of Davy Crockett" was long gone and the Kentucky Headhunters were singing "Big Mexican Dinner."

"I keep trying to figure that song is offensive to Hispanics or not," Charlie said, "way the guy does that corny Meskin accent. You think it's offensive?"

"I don't know, ask Leonard's boyfriend, Raul. He could tell you. He's Mexican. But I can let you in on this, Leonard was using some bad language a while ago."

"Uh oh. I'll put that in my notes too."

"He called the young man on the ground here the N word."

"That's right," said the young man on the ground. "And in the house, he called me a motherfucker too."

"Wait a minute," Charlie said. "I got a problem here. Being how Leonard's black, is that racist? I mean, me or you said it, it's racist, but it's okay a black guy uses the N word, ain't it?"

"Changing times," I said. "It's hard to keep up. If it's not racist, I think it may be politically incorrect."

"There you are," Charlie said. "That's it. Politically incorrect. I think there's some kind of fine for that."

"Man, this is some shit," said the guy on the ground. "Let me up. Someone sees me layin' here, it ain't gonna look good."

"You think we got you out here to style?" Charlie said. "Shut the fuck up." Then to me: "Think Leonard's finished?"

"Well, the house is lit up good."

And it was. The fire peaked and popped and rose up into the night sky like a red demon, roiled and licked around the blackened frame of the house. Lumber screeched and sagged. The heat was not quite as pleasant as before. I said, "It was nice of you to stand here and wait."

"Hey," Charlie said, his face popping sweat in the firelight, "Christmas Eve."

Charlie looked at the firemen who were standing by with their hoses, and gave them a wave. They didn't exactly rush, but they went over to wash the place down, get it ready for the dozer to come in and push the burnt lumber around, make room for the dopers to bring in a new crack house.

And they would. Rumor was, the Police Chief had friends who had connections to the LaBorde dope traffic, and he liked to help them out for a little slice of the pie. Rumors like that could make a man cynical, even one of my naive and trusting nature.

When I was growing up, guy with a badge was just assumed to be honest, and the Lone Ranger didn't shoot bad guys in the head either. These days, Jesus would carry a gun, and the disciples would hold down and corn-hole their enemies.

"You think Leonard will do time for this one?" I asked.

"So far he hasn't, and I'll do what I can. A night in jail, maybe. But I keep him out of bad stuff this time, you got to make him understand he needs a new hobby. I know a hobby has done wonders for me. I used to be tense, then I got a hobby. You know, I don't get Leonard. I thought queers were into passive stuff. Like knitting and bridge."

"Don't even let him hear you say that," I said. "The passive part, I mean."

"You can bet I won't."

"I'll tell him," said the guy on the ground.

"You do," Charlie said, "And I'll stomp a mud hole in your head."

"I'm cool," said the guy on the ground.

Leonard strolled over to us then. He looked a little bushed.

"Charlie," he said.

"Howdy," Charlie said. "Okay, Leonard, you and Hap get in the cruiser … wait a minute. I'm gonna handcuff you together."

"Come on, Charlie," I said. "I didn't do anything, really."

"You hit this young gentleman. Put your hands out, both of you. Supposed to handcuff you with separate handcuffs, behind your back, but like I said, it's fuckin' Christmas Eve."

We were about to be handcuffed when Raul came over and took Leonard by the arm and started to cry. "Don't," Leonard said. "I can't stand all that cryin'. You're always cryin'."

"I'm fucking emotional," Raul said.

"Well, cut that cryin' shit. It makes me nervous."

"I'm crying, not you, so what are you embarrassed about?"

"It's got nothing to do with embarrassment."

"Hell," Raul said, and he tugged on Leonard's arm, but Leonard wouldn't look at him.

"Sorry, Raul," Charlie said. "You got to let him go. You want to see him, come down to the station. We got special times for asshole viewing."

"No," Raul said, letting go of Leonard's arm. "I won't be here when you get back, Leonard."

"Don't let the screen door hit you in the ass on the way out," Leonard said.

"You could ask me not to leave."

"I didn't ask you to leave in the first place."

Raul looked at Leonard for a moment, pushed his dark hair out of his eyes, turned and walked back to Leonard's house. He moved as if he were carrying a piano on his back.

"Shit, Leonard," I said, "Raul is just worried about you."

"Yeah, Leonard," Charlie said, "you don't always got to be an asshole."

"Man, you are one cold dude," said the guy on the ground. "I wouldn't talk to my woman that way, and she's stupid as a stick. You homos, man, y'all are chill motherfuckers."

"Shut up," said Charlie. "This ain't your business."

"Man," said the guy on the ground, "Merry fucking Christmas."

"Here," Charlie said, "hold out a hand."

He handcuffed me and Leonard together and sent us over to the unmarked. Part of the neighborhood was standing out on the curb watching the crack house burn. One old man, Mr. Trotter, stood there with his arms crossed inside a coat a grizzly bear might have worn. He was smoking a cigar. He said, "Of them three fires, this one's the best, Leonard."

"Thanks," Leonard said. "It's the practice makes the difference."

We got in the unmarked. We watched through the window as Charlie got the little guy off the ground and into an armlock and walked him toward a blue suit who came over and put the guy in handcuffs and shoved him into the back of the cruiser with Mohawk.

A handful of blue suits were combing the woods out back, and we could see one cop coming out with the bathrobed woman in tow. She was cuffed and had on her wig, which was giving off a faint trail of light gray smoke in the moonlight. She was cussing a blue streak. We could hear her with the windows rolled up. She was good at including "you fuckin' pale-dicked ass licker" into all her sentences without it sounding strained or overworked.

Leonard settled back in his seat and sighed slowly. "Shit," he said. "Raul's right. I always got to be the tough guy. I really like that fag. Really. Why have I always got to play it tough?"

"You're black and gay and inadequate sexually, and therefore find yourself doubly oppressed by white society, as well as being ill-suited emotionally for adjusting to the macho, black community that is your birthright."

"Oh yeah. That's right. I forgot."

"You also smell like a smoked ham."

Charlie slid in behind the wheel and closed the door, sharply. "We're leaving a couple of cops here to watch your house, Leonard. Make sure Raul's okay too. Least till he gets packed up and out. He said he's, and I quote, 'gone like the fucking wind,' unquote."

"All right," Leonard said. "Thanks."

"Will he really go?" I asked.

"Who's to say?" Leonard said.

Charlie cranked the car. Leonard said, "Could we stop for ice cream before we go in?"

"It's cold for ice cream," Charlie said.

"I like it anyway," Leonard said. "So, what do you say? I'm kinda depressed."

"I don't see why not," Charlie said. "Frozen yogurt all right? I'm on a diet."

"Suits me," Leonard said. "You're paying though. I don't have my wallet on me."

"I'm not paying shit," Charlie said. "You brought it up, you treat. Damn, Leonard, you're making my eyes burn."

"It's that cheap paneling in the house," Leonard said. "It goes up quick and stinks and the stink gets on you. Fucking walls are like they're made out of starter logs, which I guess is okay, seeing how I'm lighting the fire."

"I didn't hear you say that," said Charlie.

"I got money," I said. "My treat all around."

Charlie eased away from the curb. I took a last look at the burning house. Some timbers were sagging and crashing in with an explosion of sparks and smoke. Raul was standing on Leonard's porch watching us drive by. Leonard looked in Raul's direction. Neither of them waved.

I said, "Oh, Leonard, don't let me forget. We ever get back, I got your Christmas present in the pickup."

“Yeah, well,” Leonard said, “I hope it ain’t HIS and HIS towels.”

2

We were in Lieutenant Hanson's office finishing off what was left of our yogurt cones, but the Lieutenant wasn't there. Considering we hadn't bought him anything, I guess that was best.

Charlie was sitting behind Hanson's desk. I was in a chair against one wall, and Leonard was in a chair against the other. We were supposed to be in a cell like Mohawk and the little guy with the burned head and the others, but we weren't. You might say we were getting special treatment. We were also getting a shadow show.

Charlie had the overhead light out and he had the desk lamp on, and he was using his fingers to throw shadows on the wall, make shapes. He did a pretty good dog and duck, but after that everything else looked like a spider.

"How about that?" Charlie said. "How's that?"

"It still looks like a spider," I said.

"I got to practice some more," Charlie said. "I got me a book now. Wife says I ought to have a hobby, so I got this. It relaxes me, but the wife thinks it ain't much. She wants me to go to the gym and work out, but this way, I can stay home and sit in the easy chair with the big light out, use the end-table light to throw a few shadows. I get tired of it, I watch a little TV. Look here, this one looks like a pussy, don't it?"

"How in hell do you get a cat out of that?" I said.

"No, a pussy. You know, a vagina. Women have 'em."

"Oh, yeah," I said. "I faintly remember."

"Look here, it does, don't it? It's kind of a dark V, ain't it?"

"It looks like a spider with its legs pulled in," Leonard said. "And don't tell me that book of yours has a section on shadow vaginas."

Charlie stuck out his middle finger and wiggled it. “This one’s for you, Leonard.”

A blue suit opened the door and light flooded in and the blue suit came in with it. He stopped and looked at Charlie and Charlie’s hand shadow.

“What’s this look like to you?” Charlie asked him.

“What?”

“The shadow, Jake, the shadow.”

“Oh. I don’t know. It looks like a shadow.”

“Swell,” Charlie said.

“Hey, listen,” Jake said. “Chief ain’t in—”

“Surprise, surprise,” Charlie said.

“And Lieutenant Hanson’s out.”

“He’s on his way.”

“Well, we got a guy in cell three, he wants we should call his wife, tell her to tape a *National Geographic* special on bears. We got to do it now, he gets to catch it. It starts in fifteen minutes.”

“What?” Charlie asked.

“He’s gonna miss it,” Jake said. “ ’Cause he’s gonna be here tonight. Drunk and disorderly.”

“What the hell does he think we’re running here?” Charlie said, not looking at Jake, but wiggling his fingers in such a way that brought him back to his shadow shape standards. A dog, which he made a barking sound for, then a duck, which he quacked for.

“I’ll tell him no,” Jake said.

“I guess you will,” Charlie said. “I can’t believe you came to me with that shit. Wait a minute.” Charlie swiveled in the chair and looked at the cop. “A *National Geographic* special?”

“On bears,” Jake said.

“Hell, call her. I ought to be glad it’s not *Charlie’s Angels*, some shit like that. Maybe we’re getting a better class of criminal in here. Go on and do it.”

“All right,” Jake said, and closed the door.

“Can we go?” Leonard said.

Charlie was back to trying to make a pussy. I think.

“Go?” Charlie said. “You fuckin’ me? You burned your next-door neighbor’s house down. That’s three times, man. First time you and Hap did it, we worked it out. Second time you did it, we worked it out. But you’re gonna have to take up shadow shapes or something, Leonard. Quit this arson. We could put you behind bars so long, you got out, hair on your balls would be white.”

“They’re scum, Charlie,” Leonard said, “and you know it.”

“I went around burning houses belonged to scum, this town would mostly be a cinder.”

“Bullshit,” Leonard said.

In the middle of our examining another of Charlie’s shadow shapes, the door opened again. It was Lieutenant Marvin Hanson this time. He was framed by the hall light behind him, and it made him look like the Golem. His black skin was all shadow and no features. He watched Charlie a second, then closed the door and turned on the light. I suddenly realized I preferred looking at him in the dark. That rugged face of his could be scary.

“Talent show’s over,” Hanson said. “And so’s sitting behind my desk.”

“Yassuh,” Charlie said, and he eased out from behind the desk and took a chair and lit a cigarette.

Hanson went over and sat down behind his desk, swiveled his chair and looked at Leonard.

“Well, well,” Hanson said, “If it isn’t the Smartest Nigger in the World.”

“Hi,” Leonard said.

“That’s the N word again,” Charlie said to me.

“Yes,” I said, “but it’s two black guys talking to one another, so we’ve got the same problem as before. Is it racist, politically incorrect, or all in fun?”

“Ain’t nothing fun about it,” Hanson said. Then to Leonard: “You dumb motherfucker. I’m sick of your goddamn cavalier attitude.”

“They killed a kid last year,” Leonard said.

“He took the dope on his own,” Hanson said.

“He was a kid,” Leonard said.

“All right, all right, one house burning is okay,” Hanson said. “But twice? Then three times? You got to respect my position here.”

“Your goddamn Chief of Police has ties to the fucks who provide that house, and you know it,” Leonard said.

“That’s a point for Leonard,” Charlie said. “He’s right. You know it, I know it, the guys in the slammer know it. They know too they’ll be out of here come morning. If it takes that long. They’ll be suing Leonard, most likely.”

“Shut up, Charlie,” Hanson said.

“Yassuh, Massuh Marvin.”

“That’s kinda racist, isn’t it?” I said to Charlie. “A white guy doing slave talk?”

“Think so?” Charlie said.

“Will you two assholes shut up?” Hanson said.

I could see “Yassuh” forming on Charlie’s lips, but he decided to just wiggle them instead. Wise choice, I thought.

“What are these two fucks doing in here watching you and your fucking shadows?” Hanson said. “Why ain’t they in a cell?”

“I figured they were kind of guests,” Charlie said. “I mean, hell, I like ’em.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t,” Hanson said. “Especially the Smartest Nigger in the World here. He’s always doing what he wants. He doesn’t think the law applies to him. He’s some kind of crusader. Some kind of vigilante. Yes sir, he’s the Smartest Nigger in the World.”

“I don’t know,” said Leonard. “I hear great stuff about you and Jesse Jackson.”

Hanson moved suddenly, and considering his size, it was a fast move. He grabbed the lamp on his desk and jerked it hard enough the plug came out. He threw it at Leonard, who slipped casually sideways in his chair, as if avoiding a punch. The lamp went by and hit the wall and exploded. Leonard and Hanson both stood up.

There was a beat of silence during which a lot of things could have happened, but didn’t. Finally, Leonard smiled. Then Hanson smiled. Hanson and Leonard slowly sat back down. Hanson said, “Shit, my ex-wife gave me that desk lamp.”

“And what a special little prize it was,” I said.

“What I do when I lose a family heirloom,” Charlie said, “is I go get drunk.”

“That sounds about right,” Hanson said. “Boys, get your coats.”

3

Hanson said, “Can you believe that, two bears fuckin’, right there on the television set?”

We were at Hanson’s house watching the *National Geographic* special. Hanson and Charlie were drinking lots of beer. Leonard was nursing one, and I was having a Sharp’s nonalcoholic beer. I’d given up drinking because I thought it was stupid and expensive and not very healthy.

Beer, however, didn’t hurt Hanson’s and Charlie’s feelings.

Charlie said, “Actually, Marve, my man. Them bears are neither on, nor in, the set. Those bears fucking is recorded on videotape or something. Then they play it back so we can see it. You see those trees? That grass? It’s spring there behind them. That means those bears could have done this fucking a year or two ago. Anytime really.”

Hanson wasn’t paying attention. He took another drink from his can of Schlitz, said, “Can you believe that shit? I was a kid, they wouldn’t show two dogs one behind another for fear you might think one was gonna mount the other. And now, right there, in front of God and everybody, two bears doing the mambo.”

“That’s kind of a sexy angle too,” Charlie said. “Only thing we’re missing here is a diagram showing us the inside of the girl bear’s ass, so we can see the boy bear’s dick swell into a knot. They do that, I think. Like a dog.”

Not being specialists on bear’s dicks, none of us responded. We didn’t want to look like fools.

The bears on the special finished up the mambo, as Hanson called it. Neither of them lit a cigarette, but they both looked fairly satiated. The camera cut to a guy in khakis. He was talking about bears as he walked. The guy came across a pile of bear shit in the woods and you’d have thought he’d found a fifty-dollar bill. He whisked that shit around with a stick and told us about the health of the bear that had left it. In fact, he told us everything about that bear but its blood type and hat size. I was impressed. I know how to track in the woods, know most of the species of trees and bushes, and can tell some basic things about critters from their stool, provided I have the urge to stir their shit around with a stick. But this guy was remarkable. It just looked like a pile of bear shit to me, but here he was seeing all kinds of stuff in it.

I wondered if you went to college to learn about bear shit.

The bear show was pretty good, but I got to admit, I burned out on it. I think decoding bear shit was about as far as my interest in bears went, and I felt uncomfortable at Hanson's house. I kept fearing Florida would come in. It was bad enough there was plenty there to remind me of her.

It wasn't any specific thing, it was the way the house looked. I'd never been in Hanson's house before. We mainly insulted each other at the police station and bad hamburger joints, but it was apparent there had been a feminine hand at work here. And not Hanson's mother.

Florida might still have her apartment, might not stay here all the time, but from the well-decorated Christmas tree to the way objects were laid out on the shelves, the house spoke as much of her as it did Hanson.

And there were little clues. For instance, I seriously doubted the books in the shelf on aerobic dancing and how to make love to a man were Hanson's, though you can't be sure about something like that.

I did observe, however, that all around Hanson's chair it looked like the city dump, but a little less organized. It was littered with cigar butts, ashes, junk food wrappers, and beer cans. When we came in through the kitchen, I noticed, while kicking a plastic bag of spoiled celery out of my path, that it appeared as if the place had been blown about by a tornado. I know I don't keep a greasy frying pan full of molding scrambled eggs upside down on the floor or leave my refrigerator door open when I'm out of the house. And most everyone agrees the floor is a bad spot for celery.

I tried not to let old-fashioned ideas about women and kitchens get into my thinking, but they did. I knew Florida. She wasn't a classic housewife type any more than she was a classic women's lib type, but she wouldn't have let the joint get like this. Even if it was confined to the kitchen and around Hanson's chair.

I couldn't imagine Hanson, slob that he was, allowing the place to get this bad either, unless his head was somewhere sad and distant.

And earlier, hadn't Charlie made some crack about Hanson going around as if a weight was tied to his dick? Then there was that lamp-throwing business. That seemed a little intense even for Hanson.

And inviting us over to his place to watch a *National Geographic* special? That was too nice. That wasn't the Hanson I knew. And why hadn't he mentioned Florida? Was she visiting relatives? Caroling?

I began to suspect he and Florida had broken up, and a sense of warm well-being flowed over me before it was replaced by a warmer sense of shame, because secretly, I had been hoping me and her might get back together. This was a somewhat bitter and wistful sort of thought that came and went from time to time, and truthfully, I was glad to feel it go. Hanson was an all-right guy, and Florida and I had taken our shot and it hadn't hit target. She had decided on Hanson, and I reckoned it was best all around. I knew it was over for me and her, and always would be. But I couldn't help remembering her soft honey-brown skin and the way she moaned when I gave her pleasure, the way her legs moved, the smell of her. I couldn't forget her smile and the razor sharpness of her thinking. And, of course, I couldn't forget she was kind of an asshole.

I asked about the bathroom, and Hanson pointed it out. I had to go through the bedroom to get there, and as I went, I looked at the bed. It was unmade and the covers were thrown back and it smelled of sweat and perfume. Chanel No. 5. Not Hanson's brand. He was an Old Spice man. The rest of the room looked in good shape, except there was a pile of Hanson's clothes on the floor at the right-hand side of the bed.

The bathroom was clean and orderly except for toothpaste and whisker hair in the sink. Hanson had made a kind of pig trail from the kitchen to his chair to the bed to the bathroom, leaving the rest of the joint neat and clean.

When I got back from the bathroom, Leonard was still on the couch, but he had the book that told how to make love to a man. He was turning it at an odd angle.

He said, “I didn’t know you could do that.”

“Maybe you can’t,” Charlie said. “That’s man and woman stuff.”

“Homosexuals are pretty smart,” Leonard said. “Sometimes we improvise.” He put the book in his lap. “Figures. Me and Raul are broke up, and here’s something nifty we could have tried.”

“Leonard,” I said, finding my Sharp’s and my place on the couch. “You got to quit watching bears fuck. It gets you worked up.”

Hanson cranked back his easy chair, laid his catcher’s mitt hands on his chest and looked at the ceiling light. We looked with him. Nothing really important seemed to be going on up there.

“Guess I need to figure what to do with you boys,” Hanson said.

“How about paper hats and whistles and we all go home?” I said.

“I don’t think so,” Hanson said.

“Well, how bad could it be?” Charlie said. “You got them over at your house drinking beer and watching TV.”

“What I’m gonna do,” Hanson said, “is make you boys a little deal. You two go over to Grovetown and do me a little favor, and I’ll find a way not to press charges. You don’t, I’ll find a special way to press charges.”

“Hey,” Leonard said, “that’s blackmail. And what the hell would you want us to do in Grovetown anyway? Look for antiques?”

“No,” Hanson said, “I want you to check on Florida.”

“I was wondering about her,” I said.

“Figured you were,” Hanson said. “Deal is, she went over there to do a little lawyering, kind of. You fellas hear about that Bobby

Joe Soothe problem?"

"Nope," Leonard said. "I have enough problems of my own. Me and Raul, we've had hell trying to get a lubricant we like. K-Y is highly overrated. I bet we been through twenty-five tubes of this and that."

"I don't want to hear about it," Charlie said. "But you might check Kmart. They got all kinds of lubricant stuff there, at reasonable prices. From Vaseline to forty-weight lube oil."

"I don't think I'll be needing it now," Leonard said. "Unless I'm just gonna use a little bit of it in the palm of my hand."

"Bobby Joe Soothe," Hanson said, "was a black man had him a little accident."

"I did hear about that," I said. "On the news. Hung himself in Grovetown jail with his shoelaces. Something like that."

"Something like that," Hanson said. "There's a back story though. You see, this Bobby Joe Soothe, he was the grandson of L.C. Soothe. Heard of L.C.?"

"Hell yeah," Leonard said. "Country blues guitar. I got some of his stuff. One of those boxed set things. One of the greats. East Texas legend of the late twenties, early thirties. Kind of like Robert Johnson. Had the same story about him. That he sold his soul to the devil to play way he did. Some kind of deal where he took a piss in a fruit jar and took it to the crossroads and the devil came and drank it, then the devil peed in a jar, and L.C. drank it, then L.C. had the devil in him and the devil had his soul. After that, L.C. could play that old standard guitar like a sonofabitch. Used a pocketknife or a bottle neck for a slide."

"I can't think of nothing I'd want so bad I'd drink wee-wee out of a fruit jar," Charlie said.

"L.C. only made a few records," Leonard said, "but he was a big influence on East Texas blues men. The records are rare. I think he made some recordings on 78s, whatever the method was then, and they were never released, or lost. I don't remember the details. It's just the general stuff I know about, and I got that out of the booklet in the collection box."

"All I know," Hanson said, "is a fella from up North read an article in some music magazine about this Bobby Joe Soothe who was tryin' to build a name on his grandfather's name, and Bobby Joe said he had in his possession this recorded, but unreleased record L.C. had made. Said too he was singing some songs L.C. had left written down, but never recorded. This Bobby Joe had a bit of reputation for good blues himself, see. So this Northern fella made contact with him, made some promises of money for the record, came down here to check it out, and supposedly, Bobby Joe cut that white boy's throat, took his money, then got hauled into jail where he decided he couldn't go on and hung himself with his shoe strings."

"I thought they didn't let prisoners keep stuff like shoe strings and belts," I said.

"Not supposed to," Hanson said. "Interesting thing is, there's been more hangings and accidents and suicides of this kind in that jail in the past forty-five years than there's been accidental prisoner deaths in all the state of Texas since nineteen sixty-five. And that includes goddamn Huntsville Prison. Guess I ought to give the cracker runs the place now some credit, though. Only one hanging, the Soothe hanging, has happened in the twelve years he's been Chief in Grovetown."

"What happened to the recordings?" Leonard asked.

"No one knows," Hanson said.

"How does Florida come into this?" I asked.

"I'm gettin' to that," Hanson said. "Florida, as you know, is an ambitious gal. She decided lawyering wasn't enough. She wanted to go out and do some investigative work. Go to Grovetown, ask some questions, use her law credentials, maybe get some kind of article out of this, move herself into investigative journalism. I think she wants to be on television. She's got the looks, the voice, the brains, and the personality, so it's not a far-fetched kind of idea. She's been sort of looking around for something to tie her to a bigger gig. A journalism career. Thought if she cow-girl'd this one, she could write her own ticket."

"In other words," I said. "Florida was looking for a rat to ride, and smelled one in Grovetown?"

"Yep," Hanson said. "She went down there couple weeks ago. I told her not to, that it was dangerous. She didn't listen, and that didn't surprise me. We hadn't been doing that good anyway. We were supposed to get married, but didn't."

"Kind of thought the date for that had come and passed," I said.

"Figured you were marking your calendar," Hanson said. "Thing is though, me and her had a fight. She thought I was being a male chauvinist jerk. If being worried about someone you care about, being realistic about what can happen to them is being a jerk, then I'm a jerk. Grovetown is a scary place for black folk to go hang around and try to pry into stuff, but she went anyway."

"Florida doesn't strike me as that brave," I said. "Least not in that way. Considering my own experiences with her, I'd say she's been cautious in the past."

"She's cautious till she wants something," Hanson said.

"True," I said. "Selfishness is one of her major traits."

"She got to Grovetown," Hanson said, "cooled some, called to say she was okay, and that things between me and her had reached a wall. She called again a few days later to say she was okay, and things were going good, but she didn't give details, and she said she'd have someone come for her stuff when she gets back."

"So you're split up?" Leonard said. "Like me and Raul. It's like a disease going around."

"Guess that means you don't get to keep the aerobic book and the one on making love to a man," I said.

"Looks that way," Hanson said. "I gotta tell you. I like that gal. Really. But I gotta tell you too, and this will sound like some horseshit since I've been fuckin' her, but it was getting so our relationship was more like father and daughter, her being so much younger. Thinking so different and all."

"I don't think I like the sound of that father and daughter stuff," Charlie said. "Not with you throwing the pork to her."

"You know what I mean," Hanson said. "I think I was gonna cut it off between us. I didn't feel right. Maybe it's not just because she's so young, but because I still love my ex-wife, goddammit. You know, like that's gonna go somewhere."

This was a new wrinkle. I said, "So if you were developing a more father-daughter relationship than a romantic one, and she cut the romance off, why are you so moony? And why does your kitchen look like a tornado blew through it?”

“She spent the night with me morning before she left,” Hanson said. “We had an argument. It got out of hand. I grabbed her. I’m ashamed of that, but I did. But she got right up in my face, see, and it was just reflex. I grabbed her and hurt her arm a little. It wasn’t on purpose, guys, really. I’m no woman beater.”

“We’re all human,” I said. “Everybody fucks up now and then.”

“Really, I never hit a woman in my life, and I didn’t hit her, but I grabbed her. She could be so infuriating. She was standing in there with the refrigerator open, looking for something for breakfast, and that’s when the argument started and the door got left open. She pulled some celery out of there, hit me with it, and I grabbed her. When I realized what I’d done and let her go, she snatched up the frying pan and hit me on the shoulder with it and burned me, dropped it on the floor. I still got the egg on my pajamas. She left five minutes later and I haven’t changed a thing in there since.”

“Kind of a shrine, huh?” Leonard said.

“I keep telling him she’ll get over it,” Charlie said. “Hell, she called from Grovetown, didn’t she? She knows Marve just lost his cool, and she had something to do with it. They’re both to blame. A lesson was learned.”

“It’s not the getting back together that’s bothering me,” Hanson said. “I mean, not that way, you know. I’m just worried about her down there, and if I go check on her, that’s just more male chauvinist stuff, and there’s no reason she should report to me, and theoretically, she’s out of my life, but …”

“Why don’t you go there anyway?” Leonard said. “You could see she’s all right, and if you’re telling it straight, it’s not like the relationship is coming back together anyway. Or that you want it to. So what’s it matter she gets mad at this point?”

“I’d like to end this on a note of respect,” Hanson said. “Not like I’m spying on her.”

“And you think these two dimwits showing up down there ain’t gonna make her suspicious?” Charlie said. “Hell, she knows them. She knows Hap biblically.”

"Thanks, Charlie," I said, "you certainly know how to defuse a tense or worrisome moment."

"It's different," Hanson said. "She sees you two, you could say Charlie told you about her, and you thought you might go down and check on her. Old times' sake."

"Oh, now I told them about her," Charlie said.

"Maybe you could act like you'd like to take her on a date, Hap. Something like that."

"That sounds convincing," Charlie said. "I can see why you been so tired all week. All the heavy thinking it took to come up with that, I'd be strained too."

"Yeah, you're right, Charlie," Hanson said. "It won't work. It was a major stupid idea. It's like I been having a sack of shit for a head lately. Idea like that sucks big time."

"I can feel a draft from it over here," Charlie said.

"Yeah," Hanson said. "Let's have some eggnog, then, Hap, Leonard, we'll take y'all back to the hoosegow."

"Grovetown," I said, "it's a place I been wanting to visit. I'd just like to go by the house, get a change of clothes, maybe a paperback to go."

"Unless, of course," Leonard said, "you'd prefer we leave tonight. Right now."

4

It was after midnight, Christmas Day, when I took the wheel of Charlie's car and drove him over to Leonard's. Idea was, Leonard was going to get his car and follow me to Charlie's place. I'd drop Charlie and his car off, then we'd leave in Leonard's heap. Charlie was just too drunk to drive.

It had grown quite cold and it was a clear night. Kind of night I relished when I was a kid. My dad, who worked as a mechanic, or at the foundry from time to time, would go out in the yard with me and we'd throw a blanket over our shoulders and sit on the porch stoop and look at the stars. We were well out in the country then, and there were no streetlights, and with the house lights off the stars glowed in the black satin heavens like white dots of neon.

Dad was a heavy man and very tired and we didn't play ball together or do any of the classic stuff fathers and sons are supposed to do. He put in twelve-hour days and did hard manual labor, so he wasn't up for much ball chasing when he came home. But he did his best. He taught me about the woods when he had time, went to my school plays, made sure I had money for comic books, and found the time, now and then, when he should have been sleeping, to sit on the porch and point out the Big Dipper and the Little Dipper, and he had names for some of the other stars I've forgotten, but they weren't the names you normally hear. They were names given the constellations by his father or grandfather, and they had known the stars as well as a seasoned truck driver knows a road map.

Dad told me stories while we looked at the stars. He had known Bonnie and Clyde. He had driven around Gladewater, Texas, with them one Fourth of July and tossed firecrackers out the windows of their automobile. At the time, he didn't know they were being pursued by every law enforcement agency in Texas.

Late one night during the depths of the Great Depression, down by the railroad track where he was hoboing, he and his friends had met Pretty Boy Floyd. He had fought bareknuckle and wrestled at county fairs for money. He knew handed-down stories of Billy the Kid, Belle Starr, Sam Bass, and Jessie James, and when he was a child, he'd seen Frank James giving a talk in a Sears store on the ills of crime. He may have yarned a little, but I liked it all anyway.

Now, the stories I heard were off the late-night news. Rapes and serial murders and child molestations. Children with guns and no imagination and less ambition. It wasn't a world my father would have understood. Last time I had seen him was a Christmas many years ago. He looked as if he'd just viewed the new world he was living in for the very first time and didn't like it and didn't want to stay. He was dead in two weeks. A heart attack and he was out of there.

When we got to Leonard's, I knew he was hoping Raul hadn't left, but Raul's Ford station wagon was gone. There were a couple of cops there, watching the place. Leonard thanked them, shooed them off, and Charlie let him.

Leonard went inside while we sat in Charlie's car with the engine running and the heater turned high. It was quite cozy. Charlie was pretty drunk, but when he spoke his words were clear, so I figured he still had a few brain cells left.

"Here's y'all's Christmas present," Charlie said. "Some advice. Don't do this thing for Hanson."

"It beats jail," I said.

"You ain't goin' to jail. You know that. Hanson ain't gonna do shit. He'll get Leonard out of this. He knows the Chief knows he knows about the crack house. Chief knows Hanson is gonna nail him one day, somehow, if he don't get rid of him first. They're just playing some kind of cat-and-mouse shit. Chief fires him, Hanson can make a big enough stink all the fumigators in LaBorde couldn't get rid of it. Chief knows he's got to get rid of Hanson, but he hasn't figured how. Gives him every shit job there is, hoping he'll get killed. But Hanson, he takes a lickin' and keeps on tickin'. So, what I'm saying is, Hanson decides to get

Leonard off, he'll get him off. He knows enough about where the bodies are buried to handle that."

Charlie turned to look at what was left of the house next door. A charred frame, a pile of gray ash, and a few wisps of smoke. "You know," Charlie said, "that is Leonard's best job yet."

"He likes his work. And Charlie, thanks for the advice, but odd as this sounds, Hanson's kind of a friend. Considering Florida and I once had this thing going, I think he's pretty much in need or he wouldn't ask me to get involved."

"All right," Charlie said, cracking the passenger window and getting out a cigarette. "I give you that." He pushed in the car lighter. "But this is his problem. Not yours. He feels there's something really wrong, he ought to take care of it himself. He ought not send citizens down there to do his dirty work."

"I think he's just a little concerned is all and doesn't feel it's a legal matter."

"Grovetown is a shithole, Hap. You ought not go down there with Leonard. They don't like black folks unless they're swabbing out a toilet or sweeping a floor. That's the main reason Hanson didn't want Florida going down there. He thought it was dumb some little black gal like her going down to Honky-land. He told her so. She thought it was some kind of male chauvinist bullshit. He was just talking good sense. There's people down there don't believe civil rights is a real law. They still think everyone ought to own 'em a nigger. Let me tell you something. I spent a week in that armpit on account of my sister's husband, Arnold—may he grow like an onion with his head in the ground. He left her. He was working the lumber mill there, had this thing going with a secretary, decided one day this chippie's pussy was all he wanted to smell, so he and her got out of Grovetown and left Sis sittin' on her ass with two kids, both of 'em in diapers. I had to go over there and get her. There were arrangements to be made. Old bills. Some things to sell. Usual shit. I sent her home and stayed to do the stuff she wasn't emotionally fit to do. I went into that town three, four times a week, and I tell you, man, it's like a time warp. Hardly any blacks come into town if they haven't got some kind of business—like buying groceries. Getting gas. Necessary stuff. And they see a white man coming they step off the sidewalk and assume a Rastus position. All teeth and bent heads. It's what's expected of them. It's what they know. They don't do that, Klan over there—or rather some offshoot of it, calls itself the Supreme Knights of the Caucasian Order, or some ridiculous handle like that—decides some black is uppity, they'll come down on 'em. Blacks in Grovetown are outflanked. Whites have all the power there. All the power."

"Lot of blacks would argue it's that way everywhere."

"And they'd be wrong. Everywhere ain't like Grovetown. They go to Grovetown, they're gonna find out things are a lot better elsewhere than they think. They're gonna find what it's like to be back in the sixties, before that Civil Rights Act. They're gonna realize things aren't near as bad as they've been. Except in Grovetown. Late as four, five years ago, a black woman was tarred and feathered by some of those Klan ass wipes. She was raped too, ten, fifteen times. Guys did that are the kind of creeps would stand up and tell you how whites and blacks ought not to be together, and whites and blacks shouldn't date, but they don't mind stealing some black pussy from some poor woman, tarring and feathering her. Hot tar, Hap. That shit is intense. That's not something anyone wants on them. She damn near died 'cause most of her pores were closed up. And then there was one other little touch. They sewed up her snatch. Sewed it up with a leather-craft needle and baling wire."

"Good God. What the hell did she do to get them down on her?"

"You'll like this. They didn't like the way she dressed. She was some young gal, nineteen, twenty at the oldest. Grew up in Grovetown, went off to the university here, went back to Grovetown for spring break, forgot how to play the game. Maybe thought times had changed. Year or two to someone that young is an eternity. Maybe she took an Afro-American course and bought a dashiki. Thought 'cause of that the whole world changed. She developed some pride, like anyone ought to. But then she went home and got that knocked out of her. Word was—and this was based on a couple of unsigned, unaddressed letters the editors of the university paper got from Grovetown—this all happened because this Klan offshoot thought she wore, as they put it, provocative clothing of an indecent nature,' and that the university wasn't for 'colored,' and such things as education were wasted on them. It was signed the Grand Exalted Cyclops of the Supreme Knights of the Caucasian Assholes, or whatever the fuck they are.”

“They certainly sound like a progressive bunch.”

“The letter denied she’d been raped, said if anything she’d been cavorting with her ‘colored friends’ before she was tarred and feathered, and then there was some bullshit about women in general and how they ought to stay home and raise kids and not venture into the world of men, and so forth, and that she had gotten sewn up to suggest, symbolically, that the world didn’t need any more black babies.”

“Sometimes you got to wonder if we’re all part of the same human race.”

“We aren’t. Those motherfuckers are evil aliens. Got to be. Way I figure, one of those crackers came on to that gal, figured he had him a little nigger sweetie just couldn’t wait to give a big white man some pussy, and when she turned him down, it pissed him off. He and some of the boys got together, caught her off some place, and he got what he wanted. And so did his friends. Used the Assholes of the Caucasian Knights as a blind. It’s just plain old rape and brutality, justified with bullshit rhetoric.”

“Anyone ever arrested for that?”

The cigarette lighter had popped out long ago and cooled. Charlie pushed it back in. “Nope. No one over in Grovetown seemed to know anyone in any kind of Klan-like organization. No one had seen a thing. They got away with rape and brutality. No telling what it done to that young woman. Not just physically, but emotionally.”

“Do you know any nicer bedtime stories than this one, Charlie?”

“Nope. All I know is them kind. It’s all I see. It’s all I hear about. Don’t go, Hap. It ain’t for you.”

“I guess Hanson figures we can take care of ourselves.”

“Hell, yeah. He knows you can. You guys are dumb asses, but ain’t no one ever said you were cowards. Hell, man, Leonard, that motherfucker would wade through the fires of hell with a hand bucket half full of creek water if he thought he was doing the right thing. And you, well, I ain't got you all figured out yet. But no one's so tough they can beat a town. You go over there and fuck around, don't come whining to me someone tars and feathers your ass and sews your dick to your leg. Or worse … Damn, I'm sick. My wife is gonna kill me I come in like this."

The lighter popped out and Charlie lit his cigarette. He turned and blew smoke through the crack in the window. He replaced the lighter and leaned back in the seat, held the cigarette tight between his knuckles.

After a moment he said, "I'm just telling you that you ought not do this thing. Hanson doesn't want to do it because he's a cop. Not his jurisdiction. And him being black, it'll look like he's stirring trouble with all this stuff going on down there about that guy hanging himself. Then you got the bit about he don't want Florida to know he's sniffing her ass. Add it up, it comes out two plus two equals shit."

"I appreciate your concern."

"You feel you just got to do it, leave Leonard here. Not only is he black, in case you haven't noticed, but he's got a smart mouth, same as you. He can't stand to let anyone think they're putting one over on him. Guys in Grovetown, they can't stand a smartass black guy. And it's not like Leonard is quiet about being queer, neither. He ain't bashful, you know what I mean?"

"I know what you mean."

"Man, you think a black guy will work their bowels, you add queer to that, toss in you and him together doing your stooge act, it's like throwing gasoline on a fire."

"Leonard wouldn't let me go by myself, even if I wanted him to. Not since Hanson asked him to go."

"That's where Hanson fucked up," Charlie said. "He ain't thought a clear thought in damn near two weeks. He's really messed up. A week from now. A month. He'd know better'n to ask something stupid like that of either of you."

"Leonard told Hanson he'd go. Leonard says he'll do something, he'll do it, Charlie. You know that."

Charlie sighed. "I'm too drunk to argue. Let me just sum up here, Hap. You and the Smartest Nigger in the World go to Grovetown, it's askin' for trouble. But if you're goin'—"

He eased his ass up, got his wallet out, unlimbered it, and gave me two hundred and fifty dollars. "You'll need this."

"I don't want to take it, Charlie, but I got to."

"I know."

I put the money in my wallet, said, "I been sitting here wondering how I was going to afford this little trip. I hate to keep sucking off Leonard, and it's not like he's rich either. He sunk a lot of his inheritance into this house. Fixing it up."

"Well, that ain't really enough money. You're gonna have to dip into Leonard's jack, but as for that two hundred and fifty, don't worry about it."

"That's good of you, Charlie."

"Naw it ain't. Ain't my money. Hanson gave that to me to give to you before we left his place."

* * *

I dropped Charlie and his car off at his house and Leonard followed. We wished Charlie a Merry Christmas when he got through puking off the side of his porch, then I drove Leonard's car back to his house while Leonard sat on the passenger side, looked out the window and brooded.

"Was Raul's stuff gone?" I asked.

"Yeah. There was one box of his things in there, packed with an address label on it. Had a note asking me to mail it to him at his parents'. Said he'd pay me back. My Christmas present for him was on top of the box. Unopened."

"This your first spat?"

"We had one every goddamn day, but I guess this is the worst. We were fighting right before I burned those assholes' house down. I don't even remember what me and him were arguing about. I think that's why I beat those fucks up and burned their place down. I mean, you know, I don't like 'em, and that's the biggest reason, but shit, these days, I get worked up, I burn whatever house is there down. It lets off some tension."

“What are you gonna do until they get a new house put up?”

“I don’t know. Squeeze a rubber ball. Jerk off.”

“And what if the house gets put in there isn’t a crack house next time, but some old lady who just wants to putter around her flower garden?”

“I guess I could go over there nights and pull up her roses.”

“I can see you’ve thought this through with options.”

Leonard tapped his temple with a finger. “Thinking all the time.” He sat for a moment, said: “That goddamn Raul. I kinda thought I was ready for him to go, but you know, I miss him.”

“Raul seemed okay to me, but it’s not like I been around him much. Maybe him going away isn’t so bad.”

“That some kind of comment?”

“I haven’t seen much of you lately either, Leonard. It’s not like I know anything about y’all’s relationship. See, I sort of thought you and me being like brothers, I’d get the inside scoop on things.”

“Hey, you got to remember, I ain’t had no loving in ages. You forget how you get when you have a woman. All you want to do is fuck.”

“I guess that’s normal at the beginning of any relationship. I just thought maybe you’d have brought him around. You and me, compadre, we’re family. Besides, you can only screw so much, after a while, you got to maybe read a book, talk to friends.”

“You got enough problems in your life doing crap work for a living, being mostly worthless without ambition, and being friends with me. Figured you didn’t need me and my lover dropping by.”

“You think it’s like I got neighbors? And if I did, think they’d know just by looking at you? And if they did, think I’d give a fuck?”

“That’s not what I mean, and you know it.”

“What do you mean?”

“No matter how close we are, I think the whole thing jacks you around. You know, me fuckin’ a guy.”

“It’s different is all. I’m not used to it. I see two guys hugging up, one of them my friend, guy I think of in a traditional way most of the time, well, I won't lie to you, it makes me uncomfortable. Not sick to my stomach or nothing, just uncomfortable. I don't visualize what you guys are doing in the privacy of your own home, not only because it's private, but shit, Leonard, I don't like to think about it. I know there isn't anything wrong with it. But I was taught one way all my life, that homos were perverts. I know now a pervert comes in hetero or homo, same as good people, but it still turns my crank backwards a little to know y'all got the same equipment to play with and you're willing to do it with each other."

"How do you think it makes me feel, see you kissin' on some old gal? That ain't natural to me, Hap. It don't matter what's supposed to be natural, my biology tells me one thing, yours tells you another."

"All right. Let's drop that. It's not like we're really in disagreement."

"You know what, Hap?"

"What?"

"I really thought this one was more than just sex. I thought me and Raul had a relationship. I thought me and him were gonna grow old together and come over to your place now and then for fried chicken and maybe borrow money, you ever got any. I really did mean to bring him around. Really. I just wanted to get stabilized. And, of course, I have. I'm by myself again."

"He could come back."

"I doubt it. I think I saw it coming for the last two weeks. We were just too different. I was confusing sex for loving 'cause I hadn't had either in so goddamn long. You know what? He liked *Gilligan's Island.* He wouldn't miss that fucker. Had books on that shit. Photos of the stars. Has a stack of videotapes full of *Gilligan's Island.* He thought Bob Denver was a good actor, and I think he had this thing for the Professor. Raul's big goal in life was to get a copy of the reunion episode."

"You're right," I said. "Mark Raul off your list. He's too dumb to live. Hey, one bright note. My Christmas present. I'm gonna cheer you up when I tell you what I got you. That 'Asleep at the Wheel' album you been wanting."

“The one where they get a bunch of folks together to redo Bob Wills’s stuff?”

“Yep. Got that big-tittied singer you like on it.”

“Dolly Parton.”

“Yep. And it’s got Willie ‘Can’t Pay His Taxes’ Nelson too.”

“No shit?”

“No shit.”

“You said album, but you meant CD, right?”

“Yep.”

“Great. Guess what? That was Raul’s CD player. He took it with him.”

5

That night I slept on Leonards fold-out couch, which had acquired an assortment of potato chips, peanuts, and pretzel crumbs. I guess watching *Gilligan* gives you the munchies.

Leonard was up half the night, going to the bathroom, the kitchen, looking out windows, feeling blue over Raul. I lay there and watched him pad around, and thought about Grovetown. I'd heard about it being stuck in time before Charlie told me. Grovetown was like Vidor, Texas, another, and larger, and more infamous Klan stronghold. Vidor didn't even have a black in its town to hang. It was all white and proud of it. Leonard knew about Grovetown. Had some idea what he was getting into, but if he was overly concerned, neither his words or actions showed it.

I closed my eyes and remembered Florida. I could smell her hair. Feel her thigh on my finger tips. The first time we made love was in this house. In Leonard's bedroom. My God, it hadn't really been that long ago. I knew that hot summer night, when we lay in bed together, even before we made love, that I adored her. And just as surely, I knew she would break my heart. And she had.

She couldn't cope with my being white. Not having a career. Having little to no ambition. A man adrift. She said: "I like someone who gets up in the morning and has a purpose. A real purpose. I have one. I want whoever I love to have one."

And she was right. What I was about was day-to-day survival, and that was it. When I was young, I could look around corners. Now, I did well to see six inches beyond my nose.

Jesus Christ, how in hell, why in hell, do all my romances go wrong?

Next morning, not long after the sun came up and coffee had boiled, Leonard called a couple fellas he knew and asked if they could stay over at his place for a while, watch it to make sure his former neighbors didn't drop by to return the favor to his house.

An hour later, the fellas dropped in with two paper sacks full of clothes and accessories. I hadn't met these guys before. They lived in the neighborhood. They were both black and huge and appeared to be in their mid-thirties. Their heads looked as if they had been boiled and all the hair scraped off. You could have put your fingers in their eye sockets and used their noggins to bowl a few sets.

Their faces were as warm and friendly as a switchblade knife. One of them had an eye with scuz all around it, like the crusty lips of an active volcano. They looked as if on their days off they liked to sit around and wring the necks of puppies, maybe stick coat hangers up cats' asses and toast them over a fire.

I was put in the position of entertaining the fellas while Leonard filled a suitcase. They didn't strike up a discussion with me concerning Melville's flawed masterpiece *Moby-Dick*, nor did they have anything to say about *Billy Budd*.

We mostly sat in silence, said a few things about the weather. The one with the scuzzy eye finally hit a note of interest. He said, "You know, ants come out this time of year if they want to. Our house is full of the little fuckers. Goddamn Christmas ants."

"No shit?" I said. "Christmas ants?"

"Yeah, there's ants in my underwear drawer," said the other one.

"It's 'cause Clinton's underwear ain't clean," said Scum Eye.

"Yeah, well what you been doing in my underwear drawer?" said Clinton. "Sniffin'?"

I looked around for Leonard. Still in the back room. Probably sitting on the bed having a laugh at my expense.

"I'll tell you though," said Clinton. "Them ants are busy little shits. They ate my banana. I left it on the table, and next morning they was all over it." He smiled. "I stuck it in the sink and drowned them. An ant can't swim for shit."

"Leonard," I said. "Man, we got to go."

Leonard came out with his suitcase, and on our way out the door he paused and gave one of the big guys some money, said, "Here's for food. But there's stuff in the pantry. I get back when I get back, if that’s okay with you two.”

“We ain’t doin’ nothin’ anyway,” said Clinton. “Peckerwood we used to work for had a stroke. He can’t do nothin’ now but sit around and look wall-eyed, drip spit on his chin. His wife fired us and everyone else over at the aluminum chair plant. They say it may go out of business ’cause his family don’t want nothing to do with runnin’ it. They’re gonna sell it and whoever buys it will bring in a whole new crew of niggers. That’s if anyone wants it.”

“It wasn’t any kind of job anyway,” said Scum Eye. “We worked there ten years or better and didn’t never get a raise. That peckerwood was so tight when he blinked his asshole turned inside out. I hope all he gets to do rest of his life is sit around in one of them lawn chairs we made, crap his pants and nest in it.”

“They are not only without jobs,” I said to Leonard, “but they have an ant problem at their house.”

“Christmas ants, we call them,” Clinton said. “I mean, they don’t just come Christmas, but we call them that.”

“Well, guys,” Leonard said. “You’re gonna like it here. No ant problem. Christmas or otherwise. Watch TV, hang out, whatever, but make sure those chumps lived next door don’t drop by.”

“You don’t want us to kill ’em, do you?” This from Scum Eye.

“No, Leon,” Leonard said, “but I want you to discourage them. You got to kill ’em, drag ’em in the house. Law likes it that way better. Looks like breaking and entering. More clear-cut as self-defense. Frankly, I don’t think they’ll come around. My house got burned down, they’d know I knew who did it. And they wouldn’t want me to know.”

“I hear that,” said Clinton.

“You guys like *Gilligan’s Island?”* Leonard asked.

“Uh huh,” said Leon, better known to me as Scum Eye. “That’s a pretty funny show. I’d like to fuck that Ginger. I bet she don’t fuck black guys, though.”

“It’s you she wouldn’t fuck,” Leonard said.

Leon and Clinton grinned. Leon said, “Yeah, uh huh. I get it.”

“Anyway,” Leonard said, “I got a stack of *Gilligan’s Island* tapes, you want to see them. They’re on the kitchen table.”

"Raul left a treasure like that?" I said.

"It was in the box I was supposed to mail to him. Couldn't find the toaster this morning, so I opened his goddamn box. He loved that fucking toaster 'cause it could do four slices of bread at once. He liked shit like that. If it could have done six slices of bread, he'd have peed on himself. Anyway, no toaster. He must have took that in the car. But he had most of my spoon drawer in the box, and those tapes."

"That guy gone?" Leon asked.

"Raul?" Leonard said.

"One Clinton bounced around at the store," Leon said. "The other queer. No offense."

"None taken. Yeah, he's gone. He comes back, don't give him a rough time, though. I ain't mad at him. Just tell him I'll be back, if he cares. I don't figure he'll be around though."

"Can we have girls over?" Leon asked, scratching at the scum around his eye.

"As long as it doesn't get out of hand," Leonard said. "I don't want to come home to broken furniture. And guys, use a rubber, okay? And I don't mean share one between you. AIDS is goin' around."

"Using a rubber's like taking a shower in a raincoat," Clinton said. "It ain't no fun."

"Hey, it's your dick," Leonard said. "You're too stupid to take care of it, that's your problem. I hope the women are smarter. I'll call you later."

"You might start my pickup now and then, let it run awhile," I said. "This cold weather, it doesn't get run a bit, it'll freeze up. I like to circulate the antifreeze. If you'd rather just drain the radiator, go ahead. Key is on the kitchen table. Merry Christmas, guys."

Leonard got his suitcase and we went out to his car.

As Leonard was backing out of the driveway, I said, "That was goddamn surreal."

"Yep," Leonard said. "Leon and Clinton, they're André Breton kind of guys. They're proof positive you ought not let people shoot a few baskets with your head. Let's you and me go to

Burger King and have breakfast. I feel expansive."

"Who the fuck are those guys anyway?"

"They tried to beat me up. I whupped those motherfuckers like I was dustin' a rug."

"Both of them!"

"Not at the same time. On different days. They got word I was queer, so they jumped Raul at the Community Store. Didn't really hurt him, but roughed him up. Broke his Dr Pepper bottle. Scrambled a couple of his moon pies. Just took them in their hands and twisted them up inside the plastic wrappers. Really made them hard to eat. I went down to the store after it happened and found one of them—one with the left eye looks like it's got a disease, Leon, and kicked his ass so bad they had to carry him off. Kicked that muscle in the back of his leg so hard it paralyzed it for a while."

"Old Thai boxing trick," I said.

"Yep. Later that day, his brother came over to the house with a baseball bat, started beating on the door. I went out the back way and cracked him over the head with the barrel of my shotgun. Knocked him on his black ass."

"Of course, you didn't hurt him while he was down."

"That wouldn't be right. I just kicked him a little. Until both his eyes closed. They got so they like me now. They want I should teach them some self-defense."

"Jesus," I said.

Couple hours later we were out at my house in the country. I didn't light the heaters, but I made sure the water in the faucets was still dripping, then I threw some clothes together. Leonard had brought his pipe and tobacco with him, and while I packed he filled the pipe and lit it.

"Bring a gun," he said.

"I don't like guns," I said. "Bringing one causes trouble. Guns lead to guns."

"And if the other guy brings one and you don't, it causes you trouble. It leads to you being dead."

"It's all right with you, I'll pass. I thought we were just going to find Florida. I didn't think we were planning a shootout at the O.K. Corral."

"You're a little short on reality sometimes, Hap."

"I guess you're right. I suppose you brought a gun?"

"Shotgun. Broke it down, wrapped it in plastic. Got a couple revolvers and a couple of Winchester thirty-thirtys, not dismantled. Ammunition. It's all in the trunk."

"How about the gyro copter?"

"Trunk."

6

On the way to Grovetown, Leonard put a Hank Williams cassette in the player and we listened to that. I never got to play what I liked. I wanted to bring some cassettes of my own, but Leonard said it was his car, so we'd listen to his music. He didn't care much for what I liked. Sixties rock and roll.

Even Hank Williams couldn't spoil the beauty of the day, however, and the truth of the matter was, I was really starting to like his music, though I wasn't willing to let Leonard know.

It was cold as an Eskimo's ass in an igloo outhouse, but it was clear and bright and the East Texas woods were dark and soothing. The pines, cold or not, held their green, except for the occasional streaks of rust-colored needles, and the oaks, though leafless, were thick and intertwining, like the bones of some unknown species stacked into an elaborate art arrangement.

We passed a gap in the woods where the pulp wooders had been. It looked like a war zone. The trees were gone for a patch of twenty to thirty acres, and there were deep ruts in the red clay, made by truck tires. Mounds of stumps and limbs had been piled up and burned, leaving ash and lumps, and in some cases huge chunks of wood that had not burned up, but had only been kissed black by fire.

One huge oak tree stump, old enough to have dated to the beginning of the century, had taken on the shape of a knotty skull, as if it were all that was left of some prehistoric animal struck by lightning. Clear cutting, gasoline, and kitchen matches had laid the dinosaurs low. Driven by greed and the need for a satellite dish, pulp wooders had turned beauty to shit, wood to paper, which in turn served to make the bills of money that paid the pulpers who slew the gods in the first place. There was sad irony in all that. Somewhere. May saplings sprout from their graves.

Just past mid-day Hank was singing, for about the fifteenth time, “Why don’t you love me like you used to do,” when we reached the outskirts of Grovetown. Here the trees were thick and dark and somber. Low rain clouds had formed, turning the bright cold day gray and sad as a widow’s thoughts. The charcoal-colored clouds hung over the vast forest on either side of the narrow, cracked highway as if they were puffy cotton hats, leaving only a few rays of sunlight to penetrate them like polished hat pins.

I watched the woods speed by, and thought about what was out there. We were on the edge of the Big Thicket. One of the great forests of the United States, and everything opposite of what the TV and movie viewer thinks Texas is about. The pulp wooders and the lumber companies had certainly raped a lot of it, like most of East Texas, but here there was still plenty of it left. For now.

Out there, in the Thicket, there were swampy stretches, creeks and timber so compact a squirrel couldn’t run through it without aid of a machete. The bottoms were brutal. Freezing black slush in the winter, steamy and mosquito-swarmed in the summer, full of fat, poisonous water moccasins, about the most unpleasant snakes in creation.

When I was a child, an uncle of mine, Benny, a man wise to the ways of the woods, had gotten lost in the Thicket for four days. He lived off puddled water and edible roots. He had been one of those contradictory fellas who loved the woods and wildlife, and yet shot everything that wasn’t already stuffed, and if the light were to have glinted off the eye of a taxidermied critter, he might have shot that too. He was such a voracious hunter my dad used him as an example of how I ought not be. It was my father’s contention, and it’s certainly mine, that hunting is not a sport. If the animals could shoot back, then it would be a sport. It is justifiable only for food, and for no other reason. After that, it’s just killing for the sake of putting a lid on what still simmers deep in our primitive hearts.

But my Uncle Benny, a big, laughing man who I liked very much, was out late one summer night hunting coons for their pelts. He followed the sounds of his dogs deep into the Thicket, then the sounds went away, and he found that the foliage overhead was so thick he could see neither moon nor stars.

Benny wore a kind of headlamp when he hunted. I don't remember what the stuff was called, carbide, I think, but there were these pellets you put in the headlamp and lit, and they made a little stinky flame that danced out from the headband and made a light. Lots of hunters used them back then.

This headlamp went out and Benny dropped his flashlight while trying to turn it on, and couldn't find it. He spent hours crawling along the ground, but he couldn't locate the flashlight, and he couldn't relight the lamp because he'd gotten his matches wet by stepping waist deep into a hole full of stagnant water.

He finally fell asleep resting against the base of a tree, and was awakened in the night by something huge crashing through the brush. Benny climbed the tree by feel, damn near putting out his eye on a thorn that was part of a wrist-thick crawling vine that was trying to choke the tree out.

In the morning, after a night of squatting on a limb, he came down and found bear tracks. This was before the black bear had been nearly exterminated from the Thicket. In fact, there were still plenty of them in those days, and wild hogs too.

The tracks circled the tree and there were scratch marks where the bear had risen up on its hind legs, perhaps hoping to bring down a treat from overhead. The bear had missed reaching Uncle Benny by less than a foot.

Benny found his flashlight, but it was useless. He had stepped on it in the night, busting out the bulb. Even though it was morning, he found there was no way to truly see the sun because the limbs tangled together overhead and the leaves and pine needles spread out like camouflaging, tinting the daylight brown and green.

All day, as he trekked blindly about, the mosquitoes rose up and over him in black kamikaze squadrons so compact they looked as if they were sheets of close-weave netting. They feasted so often on the thorn scratch over his eye, that eye eventually closed. His lips swelled up thick and tight and his face ballooned. Everywhere he went he wore those mosquitoes like a coat of chain mail.

As the day slogged on, he discovered he had also gotten into poison ivy, and it was spreading over his body, popping up pustules on his feet and hands and face, and the more he scratched, the more it spread, until even his nuts were covered in the stuff. He used to say: “Poison ivy bumps were so thick, it pushed the hair out of my balls.”

He told me he hurt so bad, was so lost, so scared, so hungry and thirsty, he actually considered putting the rifle in his mouth and ending it all. Later, that wasn’t an option. Crossing through a low-lying area, he discovered what appeared to be a thick covering of leaves was nothing more than slushy swamp, and in the process of grabbing on to the exposed roots of a great willow tree to save himself from drowning, he lost his rifle in the muck.

Eventually he found his way out, but not by true woodcraft. By accident. Or in his words, “By miracle.” Benny came upon a gaunt steer, a Hereford/Long Horn mix. It was staggering and its great head hung almost to the ground. It was covered in crusted mud from its hoofs to its massive horns. It had obviously been mired up somewhere, perhaps trying to escape the mosquitoes.

Uncle Benny watched it, and finally it began to move, slow but steady, and he followed the thorn-torn steer through the thicket, sometimes clinging to its mud- and shit-coated tail. He clung and followed until it arrived at the pasture it had escaped from, through a gap in the barbed wire. Uncle Benny said when that steer finally broke through the briars and limbs and the light came through the trees and showed him the bright green of the pasture, it was like the door to heaven had been opened.

When the steer reached the emerald pasture, it bellowed joyfully, staggered, fell, and never rose. Its back legs and hindquarters were swollen up as if they were made of soaked sponge, and there were wounds that gurgled pus the color of primeval sin and thick as shaving foam.

Uncle Benny figured the steer had gotten into a whole nest of moccasins, or timber rattlers, and they’d struck it repeatedly. Steer might have been out there in the Thicket for a week. The fact that it had survived as long as it had was evidence of the heartiness of the Long Horn strain that ran through it. It died where it fell.

From there Benny made his way to the highway and found his car. His hunting dogs never showed up. He went there for a week and called their names where they had gone in with him, and he drove the back roads searching, but never a sign. To the best of my knowledge, though he continued to hunt from time to time, Benny never went into the deep woods again, and the infected eye gave him trouble all his life, until at the age of sixty-five he had to have it removed and replaced with a cheap glass one.

You don't fuck with the Big Thicket.

Grovetown wasn't much. A few streets, some of them brick, and down on the square an ancient courthouse and jail, a filling station/grocery store, and the Grovetown Cafe, and a lot of antique and thrift shops. There were benches out front of most of the buildings, and you had to figure if it wasn't Christmas Day and most of those places weren't closed there'd be old men sitting there, bundled up, talking, smoking, and almost managing to spit Red Man off the curb.

The filling station/grocery was one of the few places open, and as we drove past, a tall, thirtyish, handsome, pale-faced guy in a gray shirt, heavy coat, and gimme cap stood out by one of the pumps with a water hose, washing down oil and grease in the center of one of the drives. He stared at us as we drove by, looking like a guy who might wash your windshield, check your tires and oil without having to be asked, just like in the old days. Then, on the other hand, looks could be deceiving. Guy like that might piss on your windshield and let the air out of your tires as soon as look at you.

Christ, I was beginning to think like Leonard. Everyone was a scumbag until proven otherwise.

We passed a washateria with a sign painted on the glass. It was faded, but it was defiantly readable. NO COLORED.

Leonard said, "Man, I ain't seen nothing like that since nineteen seventy. Jefferson, Texas, I think it was."

We decided we ought to get a room, least for the night until we could get the lay of the land. There were no motels in Grovetown, but there was one old hotel and a boarding house. We checked both for lodging, but they didn't have rooms for us. They claimed to be closed for Christmas. I found this hard to believe. Hotels and boarding houses don't close for holidays, and as for not having rooms, the Hotel Grovetown was so goddamn vacant of life you could almost hear rats farting behind the wainscoting.

At the boarding house, called the Grovetown Inn, there weren't more than three cars in the parking lot, but when we came in together, asked for a room, the proprietors looked at us like we were animated shit piles asking to lie down free on clean white sheets.

Outside the Grovetown Inn, Leonard filled his pipe, said, "No room at the inn, brother. Think it's that shirt you're wearin' they don't like? Personally, I've always felt blue makes you look a little scary."

We drove around awhile. Leonard said, "Have you noted there's no black section of town around here?"

"Yep. I have."

"They haven't even given us black folk a place out next to the city dump, like usual. Or maybe by a sewage plant or a nuclear reactor. I ain't even seen a black person walking around."

"Maybe it's because of the holidays. I haven't seen that many whites walking around. And guess what else? There aren't any more places to stay. We've seen it all."

"I'm hungry. Cafe's open. Let's get something to eat, then figure on what to do next."

"They'll be glad to see us there, Leonard. Why don't I keep things simple for now, get us a couple of sandwiches to go?"

"Hey, I'll tell you now, I'm not going to anyone's back door or stand in a separate line just because I got a better tan than someone else. Get that straight in your head, Hap."

"I'm just wanting things easy. What worries me about you, is I think you like confrontation too much."

"And what worries me about you, Hap, is you don't."

I pulled over in front of the cafe, started to get out. Leonard put a hand on my arm. "You're right. I'm acting like an asshole."

"No argument."

"We're here to find Florida, not have me prove what a badass I am."

"Still, no argument."

"Get us something. We'll eat in the car. I'll give a civil rights speech later. Provided I can get someone to accompany me on guitar."

"I'll just be a minute."

The Grovetown Cafe was not a place you would mistake for a French restaurant. It was overly warm and the walls were decorated with badly painted ceramic birds and squirrels, and there was some of that really bad hillbilly music you hear from time to time but can't quite believe it. It's not even AM radio pop. It only plays in ancient towns with jukeboxes that have glass cases coated gray by oily hands. It's like generic heavy metal and rap. Who listens to this stuff on purpose? It sounds like some kind of joke. The sharp little notes clung to the air and stuck to my head like prickly pear thorns. They went well with the stench of old grease from the kitchen.

I waded through grease and music and found a stool and sat down and waited. From a back booth a couple of guys stared at me. They were in their thirties, healthy-looking, but they had the attitude of men with "back problems" on workdays. It's a mysterious ailment that seems to descend on a large percentage of the redneck population. I couldn't help but think they were drawing a check from somewhere. Some kind of compensation. Maybe they were watching me nervously because they thought I was an insurance man that had caught them without their back braces.

I figured, at night, after a hard day of smoking cigarettes, swigging coffee, and cussin' the niggers and liberals, they'd buy a couple of six-packs, go home and pass out in front of the TV set after beating the wife and kids, a half-eaten bag of generic-brand potato chips clutched to their chests.

Then again, here I was judging people I didn't even know. I was starting to be just like the people I despised. They were probably a couple of nuclear physicists on vacation, stopping in here to soak up the homey atmosphere.

I had to quit judging. Quit being unfair. And I had to face what I was really worked up about. Knowing I'd probably see Florida and have all the old feelings again. And it was cold, and I didn't like it. And I had fewer future prospects than the smallpox virus.

In final analysis, I had a hard-on for the world and no place to put it.

I noticed one of the physicists had turned in the booth and the other was leaning out on his side, looking not just at me, but past me. I looked where they were looking, and I could see through the plate glass window, between the fly specks, Leonard's car. He was visible behind the wheel, his head back on the seat dozing.

I began to have those prejudgment thoughts again.

I took a deep breath and let it slide. I tried to remember and paraphrase a comforting Bible verse. "Judge not others, lest ye be judged." Something like that. I also remembered a verse my daddy told me. "You end up havin' to hit some sonofabitch, don't just hit him once, and don't just hit to get his attention."

A fiftyish lady who might have been pretty if she'd had enough energy to hold herself straighter and her hair wasn't oily and stuck to her cheeks, came out of the back wiping wet flour on her apron. "What can I get you?"

"Couple hamburgers and large coffees to go. Some potato chips."

"It's early for hamburgers," she said.

"I missed breakfast. Got any fried pies?"

"No. We sell some candy at the register. Peanut patties, Tootsie Rolls, Mounds, Snickers, Milky Way. That's it."

"All right. Couple of peanut patties."

"That nigger out there will want more'n a couple of them patties," said one of the men in the back. "A nigger likes a peanut pattie. Next to what a woman's got, and a watermelon, ain't much they like better."

"And loose shoes," said the other fella. "And a warm place to shit."

"Boys," said the woman, "you watch your language in here."

I looked at them and smiled sadly. I began to understand why so many clichés persist. Too much truth in them. I gave them a real looksee for the first time.

Big motherfuckers. Not physicists. They looked like human bookends for the Adult Western Novel shelf. Both rednecked and stupid. The one talking almost had a mustache, or maybe he just hadn't quite got shaving down yet. I wished, just once in a while, the guys wanted to harass me or whip my ass would be short. Kind of small. Weak even. In business suits. Yankees. That would make things a little more all right.

Better yet, I wished those dudes would just leave me alone. What was it about me that I was the one always stepped in the doo-doo? If I walked ten miles around a cow lot to keep the manure off my shoes, I'd manage to find a fresh heap of dog shit to put my foot in.

"Better give me a couple creams to go with that coffee," I told the lady.

"Nigger working for you?" said the other man. This one was not a bad-looking guy, but he had a tavern tumor that was threatening the buttons on his paisley shirt, and a kind of smirk like he'd been corn-holing your wife and she'd told him to tell you so.

The lady said, "Boys, y'all ought to go hang out somewhere else." Then to me: "I'll just be a minute. You want those well-done, don't you?"

I spoke so only she could hear. "Actually, I'd like them about as quick as I can get them."

She smiled. "They don't mean no harm. They just don't like niggers."

"Ah."

Now I felt better.

I glanced out at Leonard. He was really snoozing. In fact, he might have been hibernating. Great. Here I was with the hippo twins, and the Smartest Nigger in the World was tucked in for the winter.

The boys came over and sat on stools on either side of me.

"I ain't seen you before," said Paisley Shirt.

"Well," I said, "I don't get through here much. Buy you fellas some coffee?"

"Naw," said the other one. "We've had coffee."

"Lots of it," said Paisley Shirt.

"I don't know about you," I said, "but lots of coffee makes me nervous. In fact, maybe I shouldn't have got coffee with my lunch. I've had too much this morning already."

"You look a little nervous," said Paisley Shirt. "Maybe you ought to give up coffee altogether."

"I just might," I said.

"Me and my brother," said Paisley Shirt, "we don't have trouble with coffee. We don't have trouble with beer, wine, or whiskey."

"What about Christmas ants?" I said. "You got Christmas ant trouble, I know two guys you ought to meet."

"Christmas ants?" said Bad Mustache.

The woman called from the back then. Her voice was a little halfhearted, like she was calling a dog she figured had gotten run over. "Y'all go back and sit down, now."

"We're all right, Mama," said Paisley Shirt.

"Mama?" I said.

"Uh huh," said Bad Mustache. "What's this about Christmas ants?"

"Little bastards are serious trouble where I come from," I said. "You think fire ants are hell, you get into some of them Christmas ants, well, those buggers won't never let go."

"I ain't never heard of no Christmas ants," said Paisley Shirt.

"Neither had most anybody else in LaBorde until yesterday," I said. "But you'll read about it in the papers today or tomorrow, see it on the news. They're epidemic there. Brought in from Mexico, they think. In a crate of bananas. Or a shipment of cigars. They're deadly dudes, these Christmas ants."

"Wait a minute," said Bad Mustache. "Is that like them ants in that movie where they take over this plantation and this guy—"

"Charlton Heston," I said.

"Yeah, I guess … you've seen it?"

"Yep," I said. "And that's exactly what I'm talking about. But that was only a picture. They couldn't show it the way it is. I tell you, LaBorde's a mess. I think the loss of life is in the hundreds. Maybe the thousands by now. The guy in the car, Doctor Pine. He's from the government. World's expert on Christmas ants. One reason he's passed out is he's been up all night battling them. He lost."

"A nigger expert?" said Paisley. "There's your goddamn problem."

"I don't know," I said. "He had some good ideas, but the ants were too entrenched. I'll be honest with you. I work for the city there. Water Department. We were the first to catch on to the epidemic. Lots of people don't give us credit. They don't think much of the Water Department, but they don't know the things we see. Alligators. Snakes. Christmas ants. You can't drown those little bastards. The Christmas ants, I mean. And you better not have a banana, or some kind of fruit in your house. They track to the stuff like a pig to corn. Anyway, what I was saying is this. I'm not going back. Dr. Pine out there wants to go back, and he can if he wants, but not me. The ants have gotten too goddamn big for this cowboy."

"They grow?" said Paisley Shirt.

I smiled. "Look, it's not a science-fiction movie. It's not like they're ten feet tall. That's bullshit. They only get about the size of a rat. Some of them do, I mean. Most of them, they're more mouse or mole size."

"Naw," said Bad Mustache. "You're pulling our dicks."

"I wouldn't think of pulling your dick," I said. "Listen here, I wouldn't have believed it either had I not been there. These ants, they don't get that big in their own environment. But they thrive here. No one knew that until this week. What they've discovered, and it's something no one would have suspected, is that the tropical weather was keeping them small. They get a little cold snap, bam, they're big as rodents. It has something to do with the way they eat and the way their metabolism deals with the natural sugars and starches in human flesh."

"Human flesh?" Bad Mustache said.

"Uh huh," I said. "It's not a horror movie where they swarm someone and eat every inch of skin off of them. But they leave bad bites. And they can cause death, and have. Like I said, in the hundreds."

"They bite you to death?" said Bad Mustache.

"I'm a little sketchy on if it's the bite or the poisons in their system that kills humans. They do take a lot of meat with them, though. Actually, you'd have to get Dr. Pine to explain it to you."

"Wow!" said Paisley Shirt.

"Wow, indeed," I said.

"But why do you call them Christmas ants?" Bad Mustache asked.

"Again, you got me. I'm no ant expert. Maybe because they were discovered around Christmastime. That's what I figure."

The lady came out with my hamburgers.

"LaBorde," said Paisley Shirt. "That's not that far from here."

"No it isn't," I said. I got up, went over to the register, and called back to them. "I wouldn't alarm myself. I'd just be alert. Watch the ground. Especially at sunset and sunrise. That's when they like to travel."

The lady took my money at the register. She said, "Those boys are so dumb, I sometimes think maybe my kids were switched at birth, and they gave me these two jackasses. All they know is what they see on the TV."

"Maybe they ought to watch the educational channel. Last night they had a great *National Geographic* special on bears. I tell you, it tantalized me to the point I couldn't sleep afterwards."

"I like a good nature program myself," she said.

I got my change, and started out. Paisley Shirt said, "Hey, you said there were two guys we ought to meet."

"Well," I said, "I meant you would have liked them. They're back in LaBorde. Or were. But, you know … the ants."

"You been jacking with us, ain't you?" said Paisley Shirt.

"There's lots of people who've ignored the facts of scientific research," I said. "All of it to their detriment. Believe what you want, it's nothing to me. It's not my job to educate the masses. I work for the Water Department. But I will say this. I'm proud of that. I don't care what anyone else thinks about the Water Department. I'm proud."

I went out to the car and got in. I shook Leonard. He came around slowly and looked at me. "Man, I sort of passed out."

“Let’s go.”

Leonard started the car as the brothers came out of the cafe, stood on the sidewalk and looked at us. Leonard watched them a moment, backed out and drove off.

“Trouble?” he asked.

“No. But I will say this. It’s not every day you can actually step into a science-fiction episode of *The Andy Griffith Show* by way of *Deliverance.”*

7

We drove out the way we'd come, stopped off at a little roadside park we'd passed. We got out under the pearl gray sky and ate our hamburgers and drank our coffee and rested our elbows on the concrete table. It was cold and the air smelled wet. Blue-jays, bold as priests, came out of the woods and hopped around the table looking for crumbs. I don't think we left too many. We were starved.

"I could do that again," Leonard said. "Even if it did taste as if it was rubbed under someone's armpit first."

"Frankly, short of the meat being kneaded between the cheeks of a fat man's ass, I could have eaten it anyway."

"And how old were those peanut patties? Them peanuts were like gravel."

"The peanut patties aren't nearly as big a problem as the fact we still don't know where we're going to stay. Did you have an urge for two of those, by the way? The peanut patties, I mean?"

"What?"

"Nothing. Buddy, I tell you, the vibes from that town, from that cafe, it's like going back to the middle sixties, when I was marching for civil rights and getting my head cracked. Not only because I was for civil rights, but because I was white and marching for civil rights. You know, I don't know I'm brave enough to do what I did then. It was all going on now, I think I'd hide in the house."

"It is going on now, and you're not hiding in the house. You're back in the shit. You weren't special brave then, Hap. You were young and stupid and overly idealistic. You're still the last two, even if the idealistic part is slightly tainted."

"What amazes me, Leonard, is you're more of an optimist than I am. You even thought your time in Vietnam was well spent. If anyone should be bitching, it should be you. A black guy used up and thrown out. You hadn't gone to war, man, no telling what you'd have made of yourself."

"I don't blame anyone or anything for who I am or what I do. I consider myself just fine, Hap. I make my own choices, my own decisions, I sail my own ship till it crashes. Thing with you, is you actually feel guilty you're not on the cover of *Time* magazine. Deep down, you believe that shit Florida used to tell you about how you weren't ever gonna amount to anything or do anything. You think to be important you got to be some kind of Wall Street stockbroker or Nobel Prize winner. Listen here. You're a good man and my friend, and we're true as we know how to be to what we think is right. I don't know what else there is that matters. All that other shit is just cake decoration."

"Thanks, Leonard."

"That's all right. I didn't mean any of it."

"Now that it's established we're good people and righteous friends, we still don't have a place to stay."

"We might try the black folks. I figure the other side of town is where they hang out. They got to be around, all this field work and lumbering has to be done. They got to be there so white folks can tell them what to do. And, of course, they need a nigger to hang now and then."

"Good thing you showed up, huh?"

Leonard looked at the sky. "You know, this weather is creepy. Last time I saw a sky like this it turned super-cold and full of ice, and bad things happened. I can still feel the pain in my leg now and then. And it was all your fault too."

"I remember. But the clouds look to me more like they're filled with rain. I think we're in for a hell of a soaking."

"We don't find a place, we could just go on back for tonight. Regroup, start over in the next day or two."

"I want to find Florida. It won't be any easier a day or two from now, even if the weather is better. And it could be worse. Seeing Grovetown, I'm a little nervous for her welfare. Florida has to be staying somewhere."

"It's logical that she'll be in the black section."

"Probably, but for protocol's sake, I think a good place to start is the Chief of Police. If she was doing research on this jail hanging, you know she talked to him. We might get something from the Chief that'll save us some steps."

And now, cruising back to Grovetown, eyes closed, listening to the tires humming, I tried to tell myself I wasn't really worried much. Tried to convince myself I didn't know Leonard so well that I could be certain he was worried too and didn't want to say anything to make me more uptight than I was. And maybe I was sensing nothing of the kind from Leonard. He had his own heartaches. Raul was gone.

But Raul wasn't dead.

Jesus. Don't let Florida be dead, and don't let that kind of bullshit get in your thinking, Hap, you jinx, you. Because if she's dead, that makes two, back to back. Then I was thinking about Florida, about her coffee-colored skin, soft as butter, the way she smiled, the white, near perfect teeth, the long smooth legs and the way she whispered to me when we made love. And there were the more primitive thoughts as well; the ones that are as real as any other. The way she took me inside her and moved her ass and made me feel strong and masculine, and loved me until the world went away and I was centered. A nirvana where all past and present and future moments were non-existent.

Shit, that was good. I got home, I had to write that down.

That's right, Hap, clown on out. Try not to think about the fact that you thought things between you and Florida were going to be wonderful and forever. And then she was gone.

But she hadn't married Hanson. I liked to think I was part of the reason. That she loved me still.

Yeah. And now and then, I liked to believe I would live forever too, and that I wouldn't age past where I was now and the meaning of life would soon come to me, and would not disappoint me when I knew it.

Sometimes I feared I knew the meaning of life. Simplicity itself. We're born to propagate, then we die. In my case, or so it seemed, I was merely born to die.

Clear the head, Hap, ole buddy, you loser times two. No bad thoughts today. No letting a heavy gray sky hold you hostage. No memories you can't deal with. A step at a time. Keep an even heartbeat and roll on down the road.

But then I thought of Trudy, my ex-wife, dead now for … my God, what was it?

Four years.

Jesus.

It seemed like yesterday.

It seemed like a thousand years ago.

Blond, long-legged beauty with a smile like an angel and a misguided heart. And it had been winter then too. I nearly lost Leonard then as well, and that too had been my fault.

Okay, Trudy is dead and gone, Hap, I says to my ownself, but you don't know about Florida. You're overreacting. She's all right. You'll find her. If not today, tomorrow. Alive. She may not be happy to see you. Might think you're a meddling sonofabitch, and you are, but when you see her, and she's okay, that's all that will matter.

She's all right, Hap, my man.

She's fine.

Fit as a fiddle.

Ripe as a peach.

A roll of thunder. A crack of lightning.

I opened my eyes and turned and looked at Leonard in the cloud-suffocated light. He looked at me briefly with no expression, his fingers flexed on the steering wheel. He turned back to his driving.

The clouds were black now, with a little spoiled milk in them. They rolled down low and came in over the highway like hell's own tumbleweeds. The windshield turned dark as early evening.

Leonard pulled on the headlights and turned on the wipers as it started to rain.

8

Back in Grovetown, at the Chief of Polices office, a middle-aged lady with a sprayed, bleached blond hairdo high enough to house a colony of African wasps told us Chief Cantuck had gone out to investigate a fire, and she gave us directions. She eyed Leonard as if he might spring on her and rape her at any moment. She had a little aluminum Christmas tree on one corner of her desk and it was surrounded by a city of Christmas cards from well-wishers; she leaned in that direction, as if she might decide to hide behind them.

Back in the car, I said, “You made that lady nervous, Leonard. She thought you were going to try and take her on her desk.”

“Wishful thinking. Actually, I wanted to fuck that hairdo she had, just in case there was something in it needed fucking. That little gap in it, right over her widow’s peak, it reminded me of a butthole.”

“Knowing you like I do,” I said, “I hate it when someone says you aren’t romantic.”

We followed directions, drove out to where the Chief’s car was parked beside the road, along with a rickety fire truck. The rain had temporarily subsided, but the sky was still ripe with it, and it didn’t take a weatherman to see it would come again, and maybe harder.

The Chief, a fat man wearing a straw hat and boots with a khaki pants leg inside one and outside the other, watched the house burn, his hands behind his back. The rain hadn’t slowed this baby down a bit. The firemen were all volunteers in regular clothing with a couple of fire hats and one Scott Pack between them—not that they needed it. They were on or around the truck and had a weak spew of water sputtering from a thick white hose. One of them got a brainstorm, got off the truck, turned on a leaky garden hose and started spewing that through a window that had been blown out by the hot pressure of the fire. He might as well have been pissing on an oil well blaze. Two other guys were eating Hostess Twinkies, one of them managing to chew with a cigarette in one corner of his mouth.

“We seem to have this thing about fire and the law lately,” I said.

“That’s the truth,” Leonard said.

The house, which from the looks of things had never been any great shakes, was a lost cause. I’d had enough experience from Leonard’s fires to know when a house was a goner, and this sonofabitch was a goner.

We got out of the car and walked over to the Chief. He noticed us out of the corner of his left eye. Rain was dripping off the brim of his hat. He had little pop eyes, like a Boston terrier, and his chin went back and low and reminded me of an iguana. He lifted his head slightly as if he was sighting us from a rock. As he did, rain splashed into his left eye and he blinked it out. Black goo, the source being the Red Man package poking out of his shirt pocket, oozed out of the corners of his mouth and slid into wrinkles that served as culverts on either side of his chin. His belly moved when he moved, and sometimes when he didn’t. Like it had a mind of its own and places it wanted to go. Worse though, even if you didn’t want to look, you couldn’t help but notice the bulge in his pants. He’d obviously been ruptured and was in need of a truss. His right leg looked to be sprouting a grapefruit.

Near the grapefruit, riding in a long black holster, was a .44 Western-style revolver. Chief Cantuck appeared to be in his fifties. Maybe older. A face like that, a belly like that, it was hard to tell.

“Who are you?” he said, turning to give us a full view.

“Hap Collins,” I said, and we shook hands.

Leonard stuck out his hand and the Chief hesitated, then took it the way you might take hold of something dead. Leonard grabbed Chief Cantuck’s hand hard and shook briskly. “Leonard Pine, Smartest Nigger in the World.”

“What?” said the Chief.

“It’s just a little joke of his,” I said.

“Well, all right. Look here, what do y’all want? This is law and fire department business. You ain’t supposed to be hanging around here.”

I said, “Lady at your office, with a hair cone on her head, said we’d find you here.”

“Yeah, well, say what you want and get it over with,” Chief Cantuck said. “And I don’t know about you, but I think that cone of hair looks pretty good.”

“Appears you’ve lost this one,” Leonard said, nodding at the house.

“Yeah, guess it does,” said Cantuck. “No big loss. White trash rental. Bill Spray owns it, rents it to anyone with thirty-five dollars a month or any gal wants to grease his rope. One or both of them things, and the place is yours on a monthly basis, long as he don’t have to fix nothing.”

“Guess it wasn’t the sort of joint attracted the Rockefellers,” I said.

“No, it wasn’t. But a couple hundred dollars’ worth of plywood, a few two-by-fours and some tin and cardboard, Bill can throw this buddy up again and start rentin’. Too bad the renters weren’t inside. I’d have liked it all right had they gotten cooked with it. I been called out here half a dozen times by the neighbors. Always fightin’. Big ole fat gal and a couple of men lived here. Those two men fight over that sow like she was goddamn Marilyn Monroe.

“Last time I was in here they had all kinds of pornography strewn about. Them magazines with women with their hands up their holes, or their asses in the air with a carrot jammed in it. Stuff like that. And it wasn’t just pussy magazines. They had’m some sex toys. Them little vibrating plastic dicks with knobs on ’em, like old cucumbers. Look here.”

He pointed to something in the ashes: two large batteries lying in a flesh-colored puddle the shape of a large banana.

“That’s one of them plastic dicks. Just me thinking about that thing being shoved up that old whore’s hole makes me kinda woozy. There’s some Elvis cards, though. I kicked them aside to let them smoke out.”

“Beg pardon?” I said.

"Elvis cards." He walked over a ways and kicked at something. It was a charred deck of playing cards with Elvis's picture on the back.

"The heat gets off of 'em, I'll probably keep those."

"Why?" Leonard asked.

"Elvis is on them."

"Ah," Leonard said.

"It ain't the kind of music you people listen to," Cantuck told him. "My wife, she thinks Elvis is God. She'll like them cards, burned or not. Now what the fuck you want?"

"We're looking for a friend of ours," I said, "and we thought you might know something about her. Her name is Florida Grange."

"Colored gal?" Cantuck said.

"Could be her," Leonard said. "Depends on what color she was."

"You tryin' to be funny?" Cantuck said.

"I didn't say I was the Funniest Nigger in the World, I said I was the Smartest Nigger in the World."

"You're about to be the Most Ass-Whupped Nigger in the World."

Leonard got that look in his eye. The one he gets when he's burning the house next door or administering a serious head beating to some fool who has pushed too far.

"Come on, Leonard," I said. "Shut up, would you?"

Leonard studied Cantuck for a moment, turned and walked back to his car and got inside.

"He's just worried," I said. "You see, she's his sister."

"Yeah?" Cantuck said. "Well, I'll tell you something. I don't give a flying shit if she's his fucking Siamese twin and she left town with his left nut in her pocket. Ain't no nigger gonna be funny on me. And what the fuck you doin' hangin' around with a coon like that? We don't cotton to that shit here. I got nigger friends, but I don't associate with 'em."

"You certainly sound close, you and your nigger friends. Chief, anyone ever tell you guys you might be a little out of step?

Behind the times?”

“Yeah, and we don’t give a flying shit.”

“You’ve heard of civil rights, of course?”

“Yeah, and I uphold them, they got to be upheld. That’s what that gal was here about, some nigger’s civil rights. Ain’t my fault the stupid fuck hung himself.”

“I don’t care about any of that. I just want to know about Florida.”

Cantuck paused, gave me a look I couldn’t quite decipher. He said, “Comely nigger. I’ve always said I’d fuck a nigger, but wouldn’t tell anybody, but that one I’d fuck and maybe brag on it a time or two. She had an ass on her.”

Deep breath, Hap. He’s just a stereotypical ignorant redneck. You’ve known them before. Nothing you say will alter their thinking. Nothing short of death will change them.

“You see,” I said, “they work for me. Leonard and Florida. They’re good workers, and now and then, well, me and her. Shit, Chief, after what you just said, you know what I mean.”

I grinned in what I hoped was a lecherous manner.

Cantuck smiled. “My daddy used to tell me a nigger gal wasn’t good for but one thing, and they were damn good at that. He was Chief here way back, and he dealt with a lot of niggers. Nigger gals paid him a lot of fines in a special manner. If you know what I mean. I take after my old man in that department. I’ll fuck anything that ain’t nailed down and has a hole. In fact, when I was a boy, I tore the ass out of a few chickens putting the dick to ’em. Got so every time my mama found a dead chicken she’d take the belt to me, whether I did it or not. Pigs squealed at night, Mom came in my room and beat me.”

“No wonder you got a strained nut.”

“Yeah. Well, maybe that’s what happened. I do dearly love to fuck … My nut really look bad?”

“Well, I was you, I’d get a truss or something. Shit, man, don’t that hurt?”

“Not if I turn kinda casual like.”

“Not to dismiss a man’s nuts too lightly, Chief, but where is

Florida?”

“Hell, boy, it’s gettin’ cold out here. Let’s you and me go sit in the car and talk.”

I got in on the passenger side. There was a shotgun on a rack between myself and Cantuck. He cranked the car and turned on the heater. On the dash, and stuck all about the car, there was every kind of charity sticker you could imagine. Muscular dystrophy. Diabetes. Cancer.

“You give to all those charities?” I asked. “Or do you just collect stickers?”

“I give,” he said. “A dollar or two here and there. It ain’t like I’m raking in the big bucks here, so I don’t give much, but I give. I think it’s something you ought to do. Christian charity. I had a son had MD. He died of it just last year. Since then, and even before, I can’t stand to see nobody crippled, not even a nigger.”

He sat quietly for a moment, staring at the MD sticker. “That boy of mine,” he said. “Jimmy. He got so bad, only way he could get around was me totin’ him. He was eleven. My youngest. Damn good age for a boy, but for him it was hell. Spittin’ image of me. Good boy. Never did nothing but try and be good. Made good grades until he got so bad he just couldn’t study. His body turned to jelly. Just goddamn jelly.”

“I’m sorry.”

“He was a good boy. He was a good boy right to the end, trying to cheer me up. Trying to smile. He died with me holding his hand. It was so little, I closed mine, you couldn’t even see his. He hadn’t had that shit, hell, he’d gone to college and made something of himself. God bless him.”

“I truly am sorry, Chief.”

“Well, don’t whine about it. You didn’t know him. Wasn’t nothing to you. I shouldn’t even have said anything to you about it … now, this nigger gal.”

“Florida.”

“Yeah, Florida. She came to the jail, asked a few questions, left, and I didn’t see her again, ’cept around town. Over at the filling station getting some gas in that little car of hers.”

“A gray Toyota.”

“That’s the one. Real sporty.”

“That’s all you know about her?”

“That’s it. I heard a few of the boys mention they’d seen her and that she dressed a little too rich, if you know what I mean, but had she been a couple shades paler, they might have taken her to church, and to a little social after.”

I thought of Florida and her dresses. Mostly short. Mostly tight. I thought of the story Charlie told me. I had a sudden red-hot and angry vision of the Chief with an upholstery needle threaded with wire.

“Let me ask a couple of questions that don’t have to do with Florida,” I said. “This guy that hung himself in jail. Why?”

“Who’s to know a nigger’s mind? I wasn’t even around. I was out of town.”

“Lot of hangings in your little jail?”

Chief Cantuck studied me a moment. “You a reporter? The colored gal said she was doing some kind of article. Said she was a lawyer too, though I ain’t sure about that.”

“She was.”

“If she was, then you just shit on yourself, pilgrim. She was a lawyer, then she didn’t work for you, did she?”

“Well, she did law work.”

“I think you’re full of it, buddy.”

I had been feeling superior and condescending to the old man, and he’d been baiting me all along. Dropping sugar in front of me until he got me close enough to whack with the swatter. His tone was different now. A lot less cracker. “You think you’re so smart,” he said. “Well, I got to tell you, you ain’t that smart.”

“I see that,” I said.

He casually slipped the leather trigger guard off his revolver and shifted toward me in the seat, his hand resting on the butt of his pistol. A bead of sweat formed immediately on my upper lip and ran into my mouth.

“Listen here. I knew you and that smartass nigger were full of shit soon as I saw you. Ain’t a word come out of your mouth that’s even kin to the truth. There’s nothing about you boys that fits, so I figure you're trouble. More do-gooders trying to come down here and check on our nigger trouble and make it into something it isn't. I haven't heard one do-gooder ask about the people this nigger killed. The white man this guitar plunker cut up for a few dollars."

"I didn't say anything about his guilt or innocence. I'm just asking about Florida."

"Don't take me for a fool 'cause I got swollen nuts and bad teeth and I eat too much. I'm on the dime much as you are, College Boy."

"Actually, I dropped out. And I'm way past being a boy."

"Well, you should have finished college, boy. Might have learned something. Let me tell you this, Swiftie. That little nigger came snooping around asking questions. She wanted to see if that boy was murdered. She figured the Caucasian Knights was in on it. Let me tell you something. The Knights are ripe in this town, and they're mostly nothing but a bunch of mean bastards, just like the Klan, which is really all they are, but now and then they do a good thing or two. There's folks need killin'."

"Then you're saying the Klan, or these Knights, killed the prisoner?"

"'Course I ain't. But I'm tellin' you this. The Knights take note of meddlers, and they don't worry much about a dead nigger, but they worry about the ones worry about a dead nigger. Understand me?"

"I believe I do. Your hand on that gun, is that some kind of threat?"

"Yeah," he said, taking the gun out of its holster and laying it on his knee. "It could be. And you see, sometimes, you wave one around like this ..." He waved the revolver in my direction and placed it back on his knee, "and you got your mind on something else, a gun can go off, even if you was just showin' it to a fella wanted to see it."

"That would be murder, Chief. My friend in the car wouldn't like that."

"And I wouldn't care. He might have an accident too. You and him both might end up in the ashes of that fire there, and them firemen might be settin' you on fire instead of puttin' you out. I'm not saying they would, but it could happen. I mean, shit, boy, you two look to me to be the type would like them plastic dicks and stuff. You might even have been with the white trash lives here, and say the white trash went out for some beer and left you two in the house, and you were fucking around with some kind of electric dick or something. Started a fire. I even like the idea of us finding them rubber dicks up your butts, you know, just for looks … But however it's played, we come up with a cooked nigger in a house where white trash lives, we could pin damn near anything on the trash lives there.

"As it is, they're gonna be leaving town, just because I'm fed up with them. They don't know it yet, but when I find them, they're gonna be leaving. And right away. It ain't like they're gonna need to pack. And if they don't want to leave, I'm gonna persuade them. I'm hoping I won't have to persuade you and maybe take them down with you to make things look nice and pretty."

"Me either," I said, and looked carefully at the gun on his knee. His fingers flexed against it, making me as nervous as a goat at a barbecue.

"Listen here, Swiftie. There's been folks worried about dead niggers before, and some of them ain't so worried now. About nothing. Get me?"

"You're coming across."

"Let me add something to that. Ain't a Klan member in this town or around it ever been convicted of shit. That sort of line your ducks up, Swiftie?"

"I believe it does."

It had started to rain again. The water ran in such thick rivulets on the windshield I couldn't see out. The car heater was too warm.

"One last thing," Cantuck said. "For the record. That gal. I didn't do a thing to her and have no reason to suspicion anyone I know did. Clear? But I wouldn't put anything past the Knights, and contrary to what you probably think, I found out they did something to someone didn't need it done, I'd come down on them."

"Sure."

"Now, you get in the car with your pet nigger, and you two go back to wherever you come from, where you and him can eat and sleep together, or whatever it is you want to do with niggers. But, fella, don't get in my way again, and don't ever let me hear you mention my balls again. It ain't polite. And lastly, I ain't never fucked a chicken in my life, but I thought it was the sort of thing you'd expect. You fuck with me, Swiftie, you better be thinking two and three moves ahead."

"What about the pigs? Did you fuck them?"

"Get out of the car, Swiftie."

When I closed Leonard's car door, Leonard said, "Learn anything?"

"Yeah, you wouldn't believe the stuff the Chief knows about the political situation in Albania."

"Yeah, but I bet that fucker don't know their major imports and exports."

"That cracker isn't as stupid as we thought, Leonard. Mean. Dangerous. Ignorant. But stupid he isn't. And subtle he isn't. In fact, his very nonsubtle statements about our temporary position in his community were so clearly stated, I'd like you to crank the car right now, and leave."

Leonard looked where I was looking. The firefighters were no longer fighting the fire. They were all turned in our direction, glaring. One of them was chewing a fresh Twinkie and the sticky white innards were covering his mouth like mad dog foam.

"I think maybe they ain't never seen anyone cute as us," Leonard said.

Chief Cantuck got out of his car and walked in our direction, stopped and waited. He had his gun in his hand, held by his side.

"He thinks we're cute too," Leonard said.

"Just start and go," I said.

"I hate being buffaloed," Leonard said. "And I hate a man thinks I don't appreciate Elvis."

"Yeah, but I hate more being dead."

Leonard fumed silently, fired up his junker and started to drive.

Chief Cantuck leaned down and smiled tobacco at us through Leonard’s rain-beaded car window as we went by.

When I looked back over my shoulder I saw him stooped by the remains of the house, working those wet, smoking Elvis cards toward him with a stick.

9

We drove back into town beneath a churning black sky kicked open and brightened now and then by cruel bursts of lightning. By the time we wheeled into downtown Grovetown, Leonard had on a rockin' zydeco tape even I could appreciate. Those dudes were blowing accordion music hot as devil farts through Leonard's cheap speakers, melting down the wires, making me hungry for gumbo.

We stopped at the filling station and I got out and got hold of one of the serve-yourself nozzles. Before I was allowed to put in the gas, Leonard had to finish hearing out a song on the tape player, and since his cheap system didn't play unless the motor was running, I stood outside willing and waiting with my gas nozzle cocked and ready, tapping my boot to the jump of the music.

Acquaintance of mine, Gerald Matter, who used to own a gas station in downtown LaBorde, told me once, you never load in the gas with the car motor running, or you might get a little spark, end up with your ass on the far side of the moon. "Safety first" was Gerald's motto.

'Course, Gerald lost the station for lack of payment back in nineteen seventy-eight, but he hadn't quite gotten the gas and oil business out of his blood. He did him a stretch in prison for trying to rob a filling station in Gilmer with a sharpened butter knife. Fat lady that ran the place came over the counter after him, got him by the throat, and beat the pure-dee dog shit out of him, took his knife away. She then proceeded to carve off part of his head before she could be subdued by a handful of shocked customers waiting on their free "crystal" dish with a fill-up.

Gerald has done his time and he's out now and he might even be a little smarter. But he's grown bashful, wears hats indoors and out to hide what's missing on top of his head, though except for a flap cap he wears now and then, it doesn't do a damn thing for his absent left ear. These days Gerald has abandoned gas and oil and has a little carpet-cleaning business and likes to go to bed early.

While I waited with the nozzle, the tall, pale-faced man we had seen earlier came out in his thick coat with his cap in his hand, picked up on Clifton Chenier calling out “Eh, Petite Fille,” from Leonard’s tape deck, smiled, sang a verse with Clifton, jiggled a little and flop-kneed on out to the car. His long body, pasty face, and gyrations made him look like an albino grasshopper on speed.

He reached the car dancing and grinning, stopped and laughed. “Damn,” he said, “give an accordion to a redneck and all he can do is play ‘Home on the Range’ or some goddamn polka, give it to a coonass and he’ll make the music crawl up your butt and play with your kidneys.”

“That’s right,” Leonard said. He was standing outside the driver’s door, leaning on the rooftop, listening. When the song finished, Leonard cut off the motor, and I started pumping gas.

“How’re y’all,” said the pale-faced man. He had a grin as infectious as syphilis.

“Good,” I said. “Cold and a little damp, but good.”

“Well, accordin’ to the weather report, we’re all gonna get colder and damper. Air is blowing ass over tea kettle down from Canada, churning like pig feet a boilin’, only the air ain’t warm. There’s penguins would faint they knew something like this was comin’.”

“Damn,” I said. “That bad?”

“Let’s just say them suitcases you got in back of your car there better not be filled with Hawaiian shirts and sun hats … hey, speakin’ of pig’s feet boilin’—”

“Were we?” I said.

“Well, I was,” said the man. “I got some pickled ones inside that’re peppered just right. Fifty cents a pig stump. You might like to try ’em. Just got ’em in. Can’t keep ’em, they go so fast. Fellow I know out in the country makes ’em. Them buddies are so spicy, you eat one, you’ll be able to do a push-up with your dick.”

“Maybe I could use some of that,” I said. “I was younger, I woke up and did a push-up with my dick without pickled pig's feet. Now, got to get enough sleep to do it, and then when I try to do it, I need sleep."

"Ain't that the shits?" he said. "Just when you get older and figure out what it's all about, what it's all about you ain't able to do."

"Say, listen," I said. "We're gonna get a couple of cans of oil too, but we're looking for someone. Main reason we stopped in here."

Leonard said, "Lady named Florida Grange."

"Oh, yeah. Nice lady. A looker too. She was around here a few days." He looked at Leonard. "You kin?"

"Nope," Leonard said.

"Boyfriend? Either of you?" He gave me a good hard look. "Though in this town, you better not say you are if you are."

"Nope," I said. "We're not boyfriends."

"She owe you money?"

"Nope."

"Y'all some kinda law?"

"Nope."

"Well then, let me say I tried serious hard and major purposeful to put the make on that little gal, but she wasn't havin' any. I think she has a thing about white guys. And not a good thing."

"Trust me," I said. "She does."

"Ah, so you tried her too?" he said.

"It didn't work out," I said. "You might say I'm an ex-boyfriend. But what we're lookin' for is to help out her current boyfriend who's worried about her. And we want to do it because we're friends of hers too. Sort of. Used to be."

"I see," the man said. "I think."

It grew very dark suddenly, then there was a crack of thunder and a sizzling race of lightning, and right after that it seemed as if a great tidal wave washed over us. The rain came down so hard it nearly knocked us flat.

"Goddamn," said the pale-faced man, putting his cap on.

"There it is. Y'all come on in and we'll talk."

Leonard followed the man inside. I topped off the tank, hung up the gas nozzle, and damn near swam to the door. Inside, the store was warm and the lights were on, and the cold rain and midday darkness outside made the place seem tight and cozy.

The joint was stocked with pretty basic goods. Breads, crackers, a lunch meat cooler housing pressed ham, bologna, olive and liver loaf. There were soft drinks, peanuts, chips, that kind of stuff. Cans of oil, transmission and brake fluids. A rack of John Deere caps. A few straw cowboy hats. A cardboard display of colored plastic combs, and on the wall a dusty calendar over ten years out of date with a gorgeous, big-breasted woman in shorts and a halter top holding a wrench and smiling; the logo above her read January, and above that Snap Tight Tools.

Next to the cash register were two large jars containing yellowish brine water, and by my standards, some rather nasty looking pig's tootsies. Didn't appear to me that before they pickled them little delights they had washed the pig shit out from between the hooves, but maybe that was just a concentration of black pepper and meat gelatin.

There was a homemade oil barrel stove in the middle of the room, and there were lawn chairs and wicker-bottomed chairs pulled all around it. Near a couple chairs were two tobacco-splattered cuspidors, and the floor around them, which was covered with newspaper, was also splattered. Beneath the stove there was a large square of scarred, fire-spotted linoleum, and on it were tufts of dust bunnies, a chewing tobacco wrapper, and something that looked like blue glass or plastic that caught the electric light and pulled it in and winked it back.

There was a small stack of firewood next to the stove and there was a hatchet stuck deep in one of the logs and a gray lizard lay by the hatchet, attempting to trick us into thinking he was nothing more than a wood knot.

At the back of the store was an aluminum Christmas tree covered in lights and colored ornaments. The lights weren't on, and the angel at the top of the tree was too heavy for the little tip, so it leaned to one side, as if it were about to be cast from heaven.

Leonard paid for the gas and bought some oil, and when he got his change back, the pale-faced man said, “Y’all want some coffee?”

“You bet,” Leonard said.

“I got a pot goin’ in back. Sit down.”

We took us a spot by the stove and sat. Leonard eyed the cuspidors and the tobacco wads, said, “Looks of this place, this ole boy talks to everybody, and for some time. He might know something nobody else does.”

“And maybe just the weather report and where to get pig’s feet,” I said.

A moment later the man came back with two cups of coffee. He gave us a cup apiece, disappeared into the back of the store again, came back with a cup for himself and some ragged white towels. He tossed the towels at us. We used them to dry off. The station man sat his cup on the stove and took off his heavy coat and draped it over a chair near the stove, sat in another chair, put his feet up close to the heat.

“Now, you’re lookin’ for this gal?” he asked.

“That’s right,” I said.

“By the way, my name’s Tim Garner.”

“Glad to meet you,” I said, and Leonard and I leaned forward and took turns shaking Tim’s hand and giving our names. When we finished, Tim kicked back again and sipped his coffee.

“What do you mean she’s missing?”

“Last time anyone’s seen her we know about was here,” Leonard said.

“No shit?”

“No shit,” Leonard said. Outside the lightning gave the sky a workout and the flashes went all through the store. The lights faded, and the pickled pig’s feet, for a fleeting instant, looked like strange body parts floating in jars in Dr. Frankenstein’s lab.

“Goddamn,” Tim said when the lights came back. “That was rich … let me see. She was here a few days, but she was having trouble finding a place to stay … you hang out here long enough, you’re gonna discover this ain’t a real opened-minded place.”

"Naw," I said. "Say it ain't true. A homey burg like this."

Tim smiled at me. "Yeah, well, I guess you been talkin' to the Chief, so you know he's a bastard."

"How do you know that?" Leonard asked.

"That he's a bastard, or you been talkin' to him?" Tim said.

"Either," Leonard said.

"I come into town lookin' for someone, first place I'd go is the law. Am I right?"

Leonard nodded.

"And I'll bet old Cantuck sure was glad to see you two running around together. What he thinks, he sees a black and white guy together, is one of them ought to be riding in the back of a pickup with a rake."

"You're right," I said. "He wasn't glad to see us. I got the feeling just us being alive made him nervous. We met the fire department too. Now there's a bunch of regular guys. If you're white, potbellied, and stupid. Seems like they'd bore each other to death. What in the hell can guys like that talk about when they get together?"

"Pussy," Tim said.

"Well, all right," I said. "I can see that."

Tim took hold of the hatchet, lifted the log, and with a flick of his wrist, popped it loose of the hatchet and through the open stove door.

I was going to protest, since the lizard didn't have time to bail out, but Tim's move was so unexpected and so swift there wasn't a chance. The lizard gave a little pop when it went into the blaze, went black and turned to ash on his log; the last animated bit of him was his tail, which curled up and fell off. I decided not to mention it. No use putting an accidental lizard death on someone's head.

"Cantuck's a funny guy," Tim said. "Don't underestimate him. He ain't as stupid as he looks. And for a man with a left nut that looks like a softball in his pocket, he can move pretty fast too. No. He ain't stupid. And he ain't incompetent. Not really. He kinda uses that hick image to get his edge."

“I found that out,” I said, watching the last of the lizard dissolve in the stove. The critter looked like a melted chunk of gummy bears.

“He’s ignorant, but he’s actually fair, and pretty law-abiding,” Tim said. “In an Old Testament sort of way.”

“Wonder how much he abided the law when that black guy hung himself in jail?” I asked.

“That weird sonofabitch had it comin’,” Tim said. “He was a murdering bastard. I prefer he hung himself to the Chief doing it—and I don’t think Cantuck would do it. Couldn’t have. He wasn’t even in town. That Soothe sumbitch was choked and stretched and put in the hole before Cantuck got back.”

“Chief wasn’t here,” Leonard said, “but he could have made arrangements. Being out of town would be a good cover.”

“I reckon,” said Tim, “but I got to tell you true, if that sorry Bobby Joe fuck got a little help from the Chief, anybody, doesn’t bother me a bit. That ole boy was into all kinds of shit. And I mean all kinds. Pretty smooth talker. Could stick his dick up your ass and tell you it was a turd, and you’d believe him.

“He’s lucky he lived long as he did, considering how black folks are thought of here in Grovetown. I suppose he lasted ’cause he was a scary, dangerous bastard. And he could sing a pretty good tune. And there was some legacy to him, being kin to L.C. and all.

“Not that that’s worth a big goddamn around here, but I reckon there’s more than a few whites would hate to admit they enjoyed it when Bobby Joe come to town Saturdays, played over there in front of the courthouse with that ole slide guitar. Fact is, Saturday is normally the day all the blacks come in. Do their shopping, what they got to do. Hang out a little. Very little. Then go home. They got their own ways on the other side of town, and Bobby Joe was smart enough to keep most of his badness over there. Lot of folks here figured if it was just—and you’ll pardon the expression—nigger business, then it wasn’t no business of theirs. Figured too, niggers killing each other, giving each other a hard time, that wasn’t nothing to be concerned with. One less nigger was like one less cockroach.”

“ ’Course,” Leonard said, “cockroaches can’t play basketball.”

“Yeah, the jump shots throw ’em. I’ll tell you about Bobby Joe, kinda guy he was. He raped his own nephew’s wife, then when she told on him and the nephew tried to do something about it, he cut the nephew up to where he near died, went after the woman. Rumor is he made her fuck his German shepherd.”

“Oh, get out of here,” I said.

“I’m tellin’ you the story,” Tim said. “I can’t prove it. Haven’t got photos or nothing, but I believe it. There wasn’t nothing Bobby Joe wouldn’t do short of a law degree.”

“Man has to have some ethics,” Leonard said.

“Our concern here is Florida,” I said. “Only reason we’re interested in Bobby Joe Soothe at all is Florida came down here to investigate things for some kind of article she wants to write about his death.”

“I know about that,” said Tim. “I got that much out of her. We talked a little when we saw each other. She was convinced Bobby Joe was innocent just because he was black and in a white jail.”

“Innocent really hasn’t got anything to do with it,” I said. “Guilty or innocent, you’re supposed to let the State of Texas do the killing, and with a needleful of poison.”

“Yeah, well, we’re back to where we started,” Tim said. “Like I was sayin’, I don’t give a shit what happened to Soothe.”

“Frankly,” Leonard said, “I don’t give a shit, if he had it comin’. I’m not as sweet as Hap. He still has all his Roy Rogers cap guns and stuff. But what we’re concerned with is that Florida was in Grovetown, now she isn’t, and she isn’t home, and we’re nervous.”

“You’re thinking bad business descended?” Tim said.

“We’re thinking it might have, or can yet,” Leonard said. “We hope we’re just old worried grandmas.”

“I don’t know I can help you beyond saying I hope you’re wrong,” Tim said.

“Anything different about her last time you saw her?” Leonard asked.

“Maybe she was a little tired, or nervous, but you’re black and hang out here, you’re gonna get a little nervous. Don’t believe in time travel, just hang around here a week. Better yet, don’t.”

“So,” Leonard said, “you’re saying’ all the white guys in town, except you, were just perched like buzzards waiting to take her down?”

“I suppose you could say that.”

“I don’t doubt this town is backwards as hell,” Leonard said, “but I don’t buy every white guy here is a murderous prick. Is that what you’re trying to tell me? You are, I got to ask, what makes you so special? You ain’t threatening me. You wanted to fuck Florida. You don’t seem like you’re worried that the White Knights of the Asshole will come down on you with a barrel of tar and a basket of chicken feathers for wanting to bury your toad in some black hole, you got the chance.”

“You’re kinda dropping down on me pretty quick, aren’t you, pal?” Tim said.

“Leonard’s motto is ‘Make a New Friend Every Day,’ ”I said.

Tim grinned that infectious grin. “Hey, it’s all right. And you got some points, fella. But let me sorta tick ’em off. First off, my dick ain’t no toad. It’s just as pretty as a little old skinned banana, but a hell of a lot harder. ’Specially after I’ve had some pickled pig’s feet. Pussy ain’t a black hole. If it’s black pussy, white pussy, yellow pussy, or red pussy, any other color, on the inside it’s all pink and it all feels like a hot mink glove on your weener. So now we got that straight.

“Next thing. This town ain’t filled with Klan types. It only needs a diligent few to be members. A few more who won’t participate in their shit, but are behind them, and some others that might be against them, but are afraid to say anything, and for good reason. You don’t believe me, let me tell you, not that long ago they sewed a little ole black gal’s thang together and got away with it.”

“So we heard,” I said.

“They’ve been known to nail black men to trees and work them over with a blowtorch. Burn off their balls. You don’t hear about all that goin’ on, but it does. Maybe not right here in town, but roundabouts. And maybe not recently, but recent enough, and it could get real recent anytime.

“And I can hustle a little black tail if I want. You see, it’s okay a white man wants to get him a dark piece, long as he has a sense of humor about it and thinks of the piece as just nigger pussy. 'Course, this white and black thing, here in Grovetown, it don't work in reverse. Black man wants to get him a white piece, well, that's considered unnatural and punishable by death.

"All that aside, main reason I'm left alone is my daddy. The old sonofabitch is Jackson Truman Brown. I've kept my mother's name. Anyway, Daddy's Grovetown's old-time swingin' dick. He's smooth, dresses in nice suits, can talk that shit, but he's at heart a plantation owner that misses the old days when you could work a black man to death and hang him for fartin'. His daddy's daddy, my great-grandfather, was famous for hanging a black man that looked at great-grandpa's wife a little longer than great-grand thought he should have. But hanging wasn't good enough. When the fella was dead, he propped him on a post out in his fields to use as a scarecrow. Left him there for his black field hands to see till the body rotted away. In other words, he wasn't just scarin' crows. He was scarin' his slaves."

"What is it your daddy does?" I asked.

"He owns Jackson's Christmas Tree Farm and the lumber mill here. Both thriving concerns. Folks from all over Texas and the United States got to have their Christmas trees, I can tell you that. He's got these goddamn fir trees that all grow to look exactly alike. Not native trees, Yankee trees. They've been rebred, or whatever trees do to make more trees, and they can stand the Texas heat and the clay soil better than a native pine. He ships those dudes from here to Kansas City in air-conditioned trucks. And you want to work here in Grovetown, you want him to be happy with you. Because not only does he own the lumber mill and run the Christmas tree farm, he owns a lot of other things, as well as a lot of people. Black and white. Only things in this town he don't own are the cafe and the Chief, and maybe with the Chief it don't matter much. Like I said, he's honest and fair, but he and my old man share a lot of the same views."

"I notice you have an aluminum Christmas tree," Leonard said.

"Sort of speaks volumes, don't it?" Tim said.

"What about your station here?" I asked. "He own that?"

"Goddamn him, he owns that too. Loaned me the money for it —key word here is loaned, not gave, and he expects the payments, or I'll be back at the Christmas tree farm. I hate the bastard, and he knows it, and likes it. What I want most in the world is to get the money to pay him off, be a free man. Fact is, what I want most in the world is money. I admit it. Here I was, son of the richest man in town, and I was always wearing worn-out clothes with patches and carried my lunch in a fucking paper bag. Wouldn't even let me buy a lunch box like the rest of the kids. Thought it built character. What it did was it embarrassed me. I said I got older and got a chance to get money, I'd get it. The whole idea of going around poor, even owning this shitty filling station when I ought to have a good life, all the money he's got, I get itchy. Mad even.

"But I got my edge on him. See, I'm kind of an embarrassment. I actually had a couple years college in something besides business. Anthropology. Though it didn't take. I can tell you a little about North American Indians, you want, but when it comes down to it, what I know is about as useless as tits on a boar hog. Still, I'm his son, and he's insurance for me. I wanted to, I could go over there and set fire to the cafe, and he'd make it so it was understood I was merely tryin' to warm up the place. But he wouldn't drop what I owe him on this station, and I don't pay it, he'll own the station. More coffee, fellas?"

Leonard and I declined. Tim offered us the pig's feet again, at a slightly reduced price, but we declined those as well.

"Let me ask you something," I said. "There anyplace we could rent a room for a few nights in this town?"

"I doubt it," Tim said. "I mean, I don't know."

"You don't know?" Leonard said. "Then let me ask you this. Where did Florida stay?"

Tim smiled, but the smile looked silly this time, not infectious. "Why, out at my mother's place."

10

About noon, we bought some sandwich makings, and Tim called his mother, tried to get us a place to stay. Turned out his mother owned a few trailers she rented out, and one was available.

"I like you fellas and all," Tim said after the phone call, "but way it works, needing money like I do, you pay Mom, and you pay me a little finder's fee."

"What's a little?" Leonard asked.

"Fifty dollars."

"That's a little!" I said.

"It's how much it's gonna be you stay at Mom's trailer park."

Leonard grumbled, paid the fifty in two twenties and a ten.

"Florida pay you a finder's fee?" Leonard asked.

"You betcha," Tim said, folding his money into his wallet. "I never claimed I was a philanthropist."

Tim decided to close up and guide us out to his mom's place. He told us he had planned to stay open Christmas Day, partly out of boredom, and out of the fact he could snag a few extra dollars by being the only place available in town to pick up gas and goods, but the weather being the way it was, that turned out to be a pipe dream.

Still, bad as it was, it had slacked some, and we took the moment to get started. Tim drove an old four-wheel-drive, green, broad wheel-base pickup with gaudy tail flaps. One flap had the silhouette of a naked silver lady on it. The other would have had the same but it was ripped in half, leaving only the lady's head.

We followed in Leonard's heap, and as we drove, Leonard said, "He could have told us up front Florida had been staying with his mother."

"I think he was just being cautious," I said. "Watching out for

Florida. Remember, he was mum until he asked if we were kin, boyfriends, or bill collectors? I think he didn't want to bring shit down on Florida, if he could keep from it. Or maybe he was watching out for his mother. Either way, I think he was being considerate. And remember, he didn't have to tell us dick."

"I don't like the dude."

"Really? He seems all right. Maybe a little too self-consciously folksy, but okay."

"A fifty-dollar finder's fee? I don't give a shit about his childhood money problems. I give a shit about my fifty dollars he's got."

"You are the most suspicious sonofabitch I have ever known, Leonard. He's a little overly money-conscious, and he strikes me as a would-be cock dog, but neither of those things are exactly criminal."

"Yeah, well doesn't he make you feel kind of creepy, him talking all that good ole boy bullshit?"

"Only thing creepy is how easy it is for me to do it too."

"There's some truth."

"Yeah. Well, what about that cockroaches can't play basketball thing?"

"I like that one," Leonard said. "But that aside, if Florida stayed out here, you got to bet this guy was sniffing her ass regular like."

"He may have wanted her, but trust me, my friend, if this gal doesn't want to put up with bullshit, she has a way of dealing with you that'll make you feel knee high to a cricket pretty quick. And maybe it takes a heterosexual to understand what I'm getting at, but this lady, young as she is, pretty as she is, she isn't any babe in the woods. Not about men, anyway. Maybe about other things, but trust me, she's got an A+ in Dealing With Men."

"All right. There's some more truth. I saw Florida drag you around by your ying-yang some, that's for sure."

"I ain't proud of it."

"Nor should you be."

One minute it was gray and damp, the heater humming, keeping us warm, the wipers thumping almost happily, and suddenly the sky went black as night and the rain fell down in silver sheets thick as corrugated tin. The air in the car turned cool and the heater moaned as if dying of pneumonia, the wipers swiped at the rain like a drowning victim trying to tread water.

Got so bad, Tim pulled over to the side of the road and sat in his truck. We pulled up behind him and sat too, waited. It was a full forty-five minutes before the rain subsided enough for us to continue, and as we drove on, slowly, I looked out my side, watched as we crawled past an old gray clapboard building. It was long and low-built and the walls were leaning, and you could tell the floor had long since lost its battle against gravity and was lying flat on the ground, the old support blocks having shifted and sunk. Through one of the windows I could see an unlit Christmas tree tilting to port, and an unlit neon sign over the front door that was impossible to read through the slash and thrash of the rain.

“A black juke joint,” Leonard said.

“Yep,” I said.

We continued at a drag, the water splitting before us and slamming against the bottom of the car, floating us left and right. I began to understand how it must feel to be in a submarine.

Tim’s mother’s place proved to be well outside of Grovetown, down some incredibly muddy roads, deep in some bottom land that made me nervous, weather being the way it was. I didn’t know much about Grovetown, but I knew the dam for Lake Nanonitche was nearby, and not too many years ago it had burst and drowned three people and waterlogged enough property to cause Grovetown and surrounding burgs to become designated as a National Disaster Area.

When we got to the trailer park, I was even more nervous. I’d never seen anything like it. The park consisted of six nasty-ass mobile homes—one a double-wide—standing on stilts damn near twelve feet off the ground with crude wooden stairways leading to their doors.

We parked and sat in Leonard’s car while Tim went up to the double-wide, climbed the stairs and knocked on the door. He went inside and stayed awhile.

When he came out he was under an umbrella with an older woman who was wearing an orange raincoat and matching galoshes. Tim beckoned us to him. We got out in the driving rain and met them at the bottom of the stairs. The woman was sixty-ish, attractive in an "I've been hit by a truck" kind of way.

Tim said, "This is my mother."

"Y'all got money?" she said.

Like son, like mother.

"We can buy lunch and have dessert if the waiters don't wear suits," Leonard said.

Mom studied on that, said, "Come on."

We moved through ankle-deep muddy water behind them, soaked to the bone. The woman walked with her left leg stiff, her left hand in her raincoat pocket. She leaned against Tim as if she was trying to find her sea legs.

We climbed some stairs, the woman managing it with considerable effort, and stood on a platform in front of a trailer door that was all bent up with an aluminum strip peeling off to one side. There was a huge splotch of blackness at the edge of the door where fire had slipped from the inside and kissed the exterior.

Ms. Garner put a key in the door, and when it was unlocked, Tim got hold of the edge with his fingers and tugged at it. It screeched as if alive, then we were in.

It smelled doggy dank and burnt in there. There was a carpet that looked as if it had once lined a pigpen, and the dog odor came from it. The burnt smell came from a portion of the wall next to the door. That part of the wall was absent of paneling and consisted of charred insulation. The "living room" was furnished with one old rickety couch mounted on cinder blocks and a chair with a cushion that dipped almost to the floor. There was one little gas heater and it was missing most of its grates, and the ones it had were busted.

The kitchen was just another part of the same room, and you could see where there had been a grease fire over the stove. The dank carpet and burnt insulation odor that tracked us from the living room blended with the stench of rancid grease coating the stove top. The fridge hummed desperately, like a dying man trying to remember a sentimental tune.

“Well,” Leonard said, “this is nice.”

“Don’t like it, go to hell,” said Ms. Garner. She said that without so much as a change of features.

“So much for the big sell,” Leonard said. “How much is it? Considering we’ll be camping out.”

“Ten dollars a day, pay by the day. Use too much gas or electricity, there’ll be a charge for that. I watch the meters.”

“This place looks like you found it when it floated downriver after a fire and tornado,” Leonard said.

“It wasn’t so bad six months ago,” Ms. Garner said. “Morons moved in here were a bunch of them goddamn holier-than-thou Christians. Ones where the men wear their pants pulled up under the armpits and like green suits with white shoes. Women like to pile their hair on their head and wear ugly dresses.”

“Pentecostal,” I said.

“Morons,” Ms. Garner said.

“Did they live in here with a herd of cows?” Leonard asked.

“You’re a smart one, ain’t you?” Ms. Garner said.

“My dearest friends call me the Smartest Nigger in the World.”

“Yeah. Well, I believe it. What these Christian high-hairs had was a goddamn Chihuahua. One of them little ugly Mexican dogs looks like a shaved rat with a disease. Goddamned lab experiment material is what they are.

“Three men and three women, two kids. I charged ’em twenty dollars a day, there being so many. And they had a whole slew of Bibles and tracts and religious crap. Stupid morons.”

“Calm down, Mom,” Tim said. “You’re gonna strain yourself.”

“Don’t talk to me like I’m constipated,” she said.

“Whatever,” Tim said, and shrugged his shoulders at us.

“Kids gave the dog a bath,” she said, “and get this, they put the goddamn rat in the oven to dry. Turned on the oven and put the rat in there. He got dried up all right. Little turd caught on fire, starting barking—screaming, really. A dog gets hurt enough, it can scream. Heard him all the way over in my trailer. They let him out of the oven just before he was a casserole. He run all over the place. Caught them Bibles and tracts on fire, then that crap caught the wall on fire. I threw them Christians out on their holy butts. They had to tote what was left of that mutt off in a smokin' pail. Looked kind of pathetic, even if it was a Chihuahua. Nothing but that old blackened tail stickin' out of the top of that bucket, like a burned-down lantern wick."

"Yeeech," Leonard said. "I'm just glad it wasn't a real dog."

"Anyway, those irresponsibles burned up their dog and trashed my trailer. What a bunch of dipshits. I hope y'all aren't dipshits."

"No, ma'am," Leonard said. "Least I'm not. But I'll watch Hap for you."

"Yeah, well don't put him in the oven," she said. "And if you've got any more snide remarks about the accommodations here, you can hit the road before we get started. Let me tell you something. I didn't ask to rent to either of you. My son wanted me to help out, way I did that colored gal. I'd rather do without money than put up with shit. You boys got that?"

We said we had it.

She pointed to a dark and exceptionally narrow doorway. "Crapper's right over there. It's slow flush, so don't wipe so severe you cram the bowl with paper. You won't never get it down. Guess that's about it. Want the place or not?"

"We'll stay," I said. "But might I ask, as if I didn't know, why all these trailers are on stilts?"

"About five years ago we had a hell of a rain and a flood. Down here in the bottoms, it comes a good rain, you can catch catfish in the commode. Flood washed the entire park away. Fortunately I was in town. Couple old geezers renting the far end trailer drowned like ants in a ditch."

"That's what I was afraid of," I said.

"That's why I had these trailers put on stilts. These are good solid posts under us."

To prove her point she hopped heavily on her one good leg three or four times. "See there. Doesn't even move."

She pointed at the stove. "Top burners work. Oven don't. Damn dog fire messed it up. You won't want to cook much no-how. Even if you cook on the top burners, stove heats up, it smells like burning Chihuahua. I don’t know about you, but that would set me off my feed.”

“Yeah,” Leonard said. “I think that would bother me too.”

“Come on and I’ll show you the bedroom. And by the way, I don’t want y’all having anybody over. ’Specially gals. This ain’t no brothel.”

“We don’t know anybody to have over,” Leonard said.

“Good. Come on.”

Tim looked at us, tried to grin, but couldn’t quite make it. We followed Momsy into the bedroom. There was a single bed with a mattress that looked pretty dadgum bleak.

“Looks as if someone’s been pissin’ on it nightly,” Leonard said.

“That Chihuahua,” she said. “Sonofabitches would rather bark and piss than fornicate and eat. That’s the thing about ’em. They got no priorities. My sister had one of them little poots, and she used to jack him off once a week ’cause he was tense. Never could figure what was wrong with the sonofabitch lickin’ his noodle like any other respectable dog. Fact is, more men could lick their noodle, the world would be better off. Less mess’n around. Y’all just turn the mattress.”

“I’ll take the couch,” I said.

“We’ll flip for it,” Leonard said.

“Hell, dog pissed on the couch too,” she said.

“Dibs on the bed then,” I said. “I’ll turn the mattress.”

11

Tim helped his mother home, and Leonard and I went into the living room and surveyed our surroundings. “Well, it’s cheap enough,” I said.

“Well, Smartest Peckerwood in the World, what do you expect? She should be getting top dollar for this? Damn, I’m cold.”

We lit the suspicious-looking gas heater in the living room, found one of an equally suspicious nature in the bedroom and lit it. We lit the top cook stove burners as well, and the old lady was right. That rancid grease heated up, that dog in the oven warmed, the place began to smell like a rendering plant.

“I don’t know which is worse,” Leonard said. “Being frozen or stunk to death. Flip for the bed?”

“I already called dibs. Besides, you heard her. Dog pissed on both of them, so what’s the difference?”

“Difference is the couch looks like some kind of torture instrument.”

“I got dibs, man. Bed is mine.”

The door scraped and squeaked, and Tim, dripping water, came inside and shoved the door shut.

“Shit,” he said. “I ain’t seen a rain like this since them old codgers drowned.”

“That’s good to know,” Leonard said. “Give me a little something to think about tonight while I’m trying to sleep.”

“Trailers weren’t on stilts then,” Tim said. He went over and got up close to the little heater. “Brrrrrrrr.”

“Tim,” Leonard asked. “Why didn’t you tell us early on Florida stayed out here at your mother’s park?”

“I don’t know. She seemed like a nice girl. Woman. I didn’t know what you guys were up to. I had to feel you out a little. She couldn’t find a place, and she mentioned it to me, and I told her about here.”

“Didn’t have anything to do with you hoping to drop your anchor in her ocean, did it?” Leonard asked. “You having her out here, I mean? Handy. Kind of indebted to you?”

“I guess it did,” Tim said. “Some. But I was trying to help her too.”

“And pick up fifty dollars,” Leonard said.

“That’s right,” Tim said. “Besides, how indebted is someone gonna feel staying here? This was where she stayed, you know? This trailer … besides, I don’t need any grief, don’t need the law on my back, and I didn’t want to drag Mom into this. She don’t need those Klan creeps on her for helping out blacks. It isn’t like she was trying to be a Good Samaritan, anyway. She’d rent to anybody to make a few bucks.”

“Gee, thanks,” I said.

“You know what I mean,” Tim said. “She wasn’t making any kind of statement renting to Florida. It’s not like she keeps this park up or nothing.”

“No joke?” Leonard said.

“I try to help,” Tim said, “but with the station and all, my own life. Hell, it’s all I can do.”

“You live out here too?” I asked.

“I got a place in back of the store. Once in a while I’ll stay out here. It’s rare Mom’s got any boarders. Place like this mostly caters to a pretty desperate crowd. People come and go quick like. Lot of them are just one-nighters. Some guy renting so he can do the rodeo with some local poke. Right now, ’cept for y’all, and Mom, of course, the park is empty.”

“Not to meddle,” I said.

“Don’t count on it,” Leonard said. “Hap’s got a black belt in meddlin’.”

“Maybe your mom could stay at the store,” I said. “This is pretty, well, bleak, isn’t it?”

“She won’t have it that way,” Tim said. “She wants her own thing. When her and Daddy divorced, she had to go to work in the lumber mill, like one of the other wage slaves. She got caught in some machinery. She lost a leg. Has an artificial one. Her hand … well, it was mashed flat. Looks like a goddamn Mickey Mouse hand. No shit. Mashed flat like a cartoon hand. Only it ain't a cartoon. It's ruined. She's got where she ain't exactly right. Gets worse every year. But she remembers being independent, and she doesn't want to lose that. Sometimes, I think that's all that holds her together, being independent."

"She sounded all right to me," I said. "Ornery. But all right."

"This is one of her good days," Tim said.

"She's damn sure got them Chihuahuas scoped out," Leonard said.

"You can't put much stock in what she says," Tim said. "She'd probably have been less upset if one of the Pentecostals had gotten cooked by the dog."

"I can understand that," Leonard said. "Or maybe that's the Jehovah's Witnesses that bother me with the tracts and stuff, not the Pentecostals. I can't get 'em straight."

"Listen here, guys," Tim said. "I know you two and me ain't buddies or nothing. Just met you. But I got to give a little advice, tell you that messin' around in this town, a black guy and a white guy. It ain't good. If something did happen to Florida, whoever done it might be willing to do it again. This thing with Florida, maybe you ought to forget it. Let the Chief handle it. He's basically fair. Let him do your lookin' for you."

"I'm not sure he'll look that hard," I said.

"All right," Tim said. "But you wake up one morning beside the road with your throat slit and Leonard hanging from a crab apple tree, and his dick cut off and in your mouth, don't say I didn't warn you."

"I don't want my dick in his mouth, cut off or attached," Leonard said.

"You should be so lucky," I said.

"All right, guys," Tim said. "Have it your way."

We gave Tim some rent money for his mother, and he went away. When he was gone, I said, "Guess we shouldn't have jacked with him. He was just concerned about us."

"Hell with him," Leonard said. "Seems to me he's awfully anxious for us to leave matters in the hands of that ruptured cop. I think he’s just worried he might get asked some questions. And hey, Bubba, let me give you some advice. Stay the hell out of everybody’s business.”

“What?”

“Stuff about his mama living at the store with him. That ain’t your problem.”

“You’re the one thinks he’s a money-grubbing untrustworthy sonofabitch. So if he’s a sonofabitch, maybe he hasn’t thought about it.”

“Just keep your mind on askin’ the insulting questions that pertain to Florida, and quit trying to take the world in to raise. I think that ole woman is just the way she wants to be, and that Tim’s just embarrassed by her, and he’s a selfish sonofabitch who’d take coins off her dead eyes to buy rubbers.”

“Could be … man, she’s something, isn’t she. That story she told, about the Chihuahua. The Pentecostals. That’s horrible, don’t you think? Poor dog getting burned up like that.”

“Terrible,” Leonard said, then pursed his lips and smiled a little. “But it’s kinda funny, you don’t know the dog personal like.”

12

We got our suitcases and sandwich makings out of the car, got soaked to the bone again. It had grown so dark outside, it seemed as if it ought to be bedtime.

Inside, we changed into dry clothes and sat on the floor by one of the stoves and made sandwiches of meat and bread and no fixings. We balanced the food on our knees and ate slowly and drank soda pops. Outside, the storm grew stronger and squealed like a pig having its throat cut.

When we finished eating we put the goods in the refrigerator, which was a filthy sucker and had a smell that refused to blend with the burnt dog, burnt wall, and pissed-on carpet. Its aroma was well sorted from the others, and equally overpowering.

The rest of the afternoon we sat by the fire with used paperbacks we had brought, and read. We were sharing some old books written by Michael Moorcock under the name Edward P. Bradbury. They were pastiches of Edgar Rice Burroughs, and they were fast and fun and pretty mindless.

Except for the odor, and the fact that over-forty-year-old bods have a little trouble sitting on the floor for an extended period of time without back aches and the legs going to sleep, it really wasn't, all things considered, too unpleasant. It had been some time since I had just settled in with a book and read, especially books like these, and my mind and emotions were just right to believe them, eager to get away from crack houses, a Chief of Police with swollen balls, and a missing woman I had once loved, and maybe still did a little.

When I was a kid, I read a book like this, I became the main character, and the characters I liked were big and strong and fearless and always got the babe. I thought my life would go that way when I grew up.

It hadn't.

But for a few hours I was away from what my life hadn't been. Away from worry and reality. I was on another planet, fighting monsters with my fine, sharp sword. And I was winning.

The pleasant feeling didn't last. I finally fell out of the book and hit reality. I thought of Florida. I wondered how she was, and feared I already knew. The rain quit being pleasant. It had gone back to making me feel cold and wet and sad.

When I looked up from my book, Leonard was looking at me. He said, "Hungry?"

"Didn't we just eat?"

"About three hours ago."

We ate again, more out of boredom than anything else, then tried to read some more, but I had lost it. So had Leonard. He found a couple of blankets in the bedroom, put one over the couch itself and took the other for cover. He took the old worn cushion off the chair and tried to make a pillow out of it. He stripped down to his shorts and covered up and lay there and blew out his breath, which frosted and made a fast dissolving cloud. He said, "You know, it's kind of funny, Raul not being around. I'd grown accustomed."

"I'm sorry, man."

"Me too. I reckon, thinking on it, I was kind of a jackass."

"That's hard to imagine."

"Ain't it? How do you put up with me?"

"Guess 'cause you put up with me."

"Thing throws me is how we can be so close, and yet I can't put together a relationship. You and me, we been through thick and thin. Been mad at each other. Gotten each other into shit—Naw, now that I think about it, it's you gets me into shit."

"You're probably right," I said.

"But here we are, two guys, friends, one straight and one gay, and we get along better with each other than we do with our chosen sex partners."

"Maybe it's the sex throws a wrench in things. Soon as you start doing the two-bear mambo, like those bears on that special, it falls apart."

"I don't know, those bears looked pretty happy."

"Yeah, but way it works in nature is the male bear loads the female bear with sperm, then he heads out, leaving the female bear to raise cubs by herself."

"That's not nice."

"No, it isn't."

"A little secret, Hap. When two guys fuck, neither of them gets pregnant."

"What I mean is, sex, one way or another, complicates things. I don't know how, but it's always in one way or another the turd in the stew."

"So you want to give it up?"

"I may not have a choice, way things are going, but no, I don't want to give it up. It's been so long for me now, the bear on the *National Geographic* special got the right look in her eye, I'd mount up."

"So, except for determining that you'd fuck a bear, we're no closer to solving the mystery of human and animal relations than we were five minutes ago."

"Maybe our friendship works out okay 'cause when I get tired of your shit, I go to the house till I get over it. I don't feel obligated to be with you, and I don't feel I'm deserting you if I go home. I have no sexual interest in you."

"That's hard to believe, being the fine specimen of gay manhood that I am."

"I know, but it's true. I also know we get sideways with one another, tomorrow, next day, everything's gonna be okay. You'll be there if I need you."

"You know, Hap, you've never sent me a valentine."

"Fuck you."

There was really very little to do with the rest of the day, and I was tired from the night before, so I went to the bedroom and got the remaining two blankets and lay down on the bed, but the odor of dog piss was too overwhelming. I flipped the mattress and there was the smell of Chanel No. 5.

Florida.

My head filled with her. Soft and dark and smart and sexy. I almost coveted the dog pee side. I lay there with the blankets over me, a thin pillow beneath my head, looked at the ceiling, picked out water spots, and listened to Leonard hum Country's Greatest Hits. He did that sometimes when he couldn't sleep, hummed tunes. Maybe that's why Raul left him. That and no respect for *Gilligan's Island*.

Eventually the water spots darkened into one large shadow as the gloomy afternoon became early evening. Leonard's humming became spaced, starting to drift off.

My eyes began to fill with tears then, and I can't honestly say if the tears were for Florida or for me. I had lost her and I wanted her back, and I knew that wasn't going to happen, no matter what. I knew I should think of her and what might have happened to her, harness some new game plan for finding her, but I lay there instead and felt sorry for myself, and was angry, because some part of me was enjoying the sorrow, and maybe, just maybe, there was a bad part of me that barked and howled and said, "See what happens you leave me, baby? You die."

Oh, God, Florida.

Don't be dead.

And then somewhere between all that and the sweet arid overwhelming smell of Chanel No. 5, and Leonard slow-humming "Walkin' the Floor Over You," I dropped off.

The rain and wind beat and lashed the trailer and I could feel Florida beside me, and she was sweet with the scent of Chanel No. 5, and I reached to hold her, but couldn't. She was as insubstantial as the shadows, and then I opened my eyes from the dream, and there she stood at the end of the bed, looking down at me. It was dark in there, but somehow I could see. I could see she was naked. She stood like some kind of harpy, her legs bent, her body leaning forward, her fine breasts swaying down, the nipples taut with the cold. Her hair glistened red with East Texas clay, and her lithe body was slick with it. Chunks of clay clung to her pubic thatch like dirt dauber nests.

Then I realized not all the red was clay. Her head had a split in it, and some of the red that ran from her mound and down the inside of her thigh wasn’t slick clay at all.

I tried to get up but couldn’t. She leaned farther forward and reached for me. I didn’t like the way her eyes looked. They looked cold and lifeless, like those of a fish in an ice chest.

She opened her mouth, and clay fell out. She said, “Hap, you got to help me.”

“I will, Florida. I will. God, we thought you were dead.”

She laughed and clay sprayed from her mouth as if from a nozzle.

Then I came awake, sat bolt upright, and there was Leonard sitting on the edge of the sagging bed. He reached out and touched my shoulder.

“It’s okay, man,” he said. “It’s all right. Get your shit together.”

I sat up in bed and pushed my back to the wall. “Damn,” I said. “I thought I saw Florida.”

“I know. You called her name about a half-dozen times. Woke me up. You all right, buddy?”

“Yeah. What time is it?”

“I don’t know. Not too late.”

“God almighty, I swear, that was as real a dream as I’ve ever had … Leonard, she’s dead, man. She was all covered in clay, like she’d been buried.”

“She’s dead because you saw her dead in a dream? That don’t mean nothing.”

“She’s dead because she is. Way dreams work is they put together what you know. She’s somewhere dead and buried, and you know it.”

“You don’t know nothing.”

“Yeah. Well tell me, what do you think?”

“All right. I think she’s dead. I don’t think she drove up here and just dropped off the face of the earth. No one has seen her in a while. Last stop was here. Not like there’s lots of places to stay in Grovetown, so I don’t think she’s around. It don’t look good, Hap.”

"Yeah."

"Thing is, this is all just how I feel. It isn't worth anything."

"So what now?"

"We came up here to find her, and we will. Dead or alive. First thing to do though, is tomorrow morning, call Hanson or Charlie. See they've heard anything from her. She may be back in LaBorde, and if so, Hanson probably hasn't even told her we're looking for her. He's too busy making up with her, layin' pipe."

"No, Leonard. He wouldn't do that. She's like a daughter to him. Remember."

"Yeah, right. I forgot."

"Damn, isn't this one hell of a special Christmas?"

"Yeah. Merry Christmas. Listen here, Hap. I ain't been sleeping all that good. Cold in there and the sweet aroma of dog whiz is about to make me puke, then you yelling and all, but it's also because I been thinking."

"Careful now. Don't hurt yourself."

"Much as I hate it, we call and Hanson hasn't heard anything, I think we got to go back to the Chief. Officially report Florida missing, set him on the case."

"What would he care?"

"Guy like that, he may already know what happened to her. It's not that I think he'll find her, but he may do something gives us a lead to where she is. Or gives us an idea what happened to her. We want to push him a little. Make him nervous."

"You think he's behind all this? Maybe head of the Knights of the Swollen Left Nut, or whatever they are?"

"I don't know. I'm clutching at farts, but we got to clutch at something. And speaking of that, I'm gonna go clutch at my blankets, and I'm coming back in here, and you and me are gonna share this bed."

"Oh God, Leonard, has my manly physique finally caused your hormones to bust the blood vessels to your brain?"

"No, but I'm cold, and I figure we can share our blankets and some body heat."

"You make me so hot when you talk like that."

“Hap, you tell any of my friends I shared a bed with a heterosexual, even if it was just to keep warm, I’ll kill you. Thing like that got around, it could ruin my reputation. By the way, you wearing perfume?”

“Florida,” I said. “It’s in the mattress.”

“Oh.”

He came back with his blankets and we shared the mattress. Just before he closed his eyes, he said, “Wake me when Santa comes.”

It was warmer that way, Leonard and I sharing. I slept better, deeper. But near morning I awoke from yet another dream.

This time Florida and I had been naked, sitting in lawn chairs, and we were on a little raft made of crude-cut logs, sailing down a dark river on a moonlit night. The moon was high in the sky and bright. When Florida turned to look at me her eyes were full of the moon. Two white orbs slick as wet bone inside dark tunnels. She said, “Come on and love me, Huck, honey.”

Then we were beneath the water, cold and wet and alone. She had her arms around my neck, and she was heavy, and she was dragging me down, down, down to the bottom of the great black river, and no matter how hard I fought, she wouldn’t let go.

I got up, dressed, had a soda pop and a couple slices of lunch meat, and waited for daybreak.

13

By morning the rain had slowed, and when Leonard woke we drove into town for coffee and a real breakfast. We had plans to call Hanson.

Grovetown was starting to stir. Christmas holidays were gone, and stores were open. The cafe was hopping. Tim's filling station had two cars in the drive. One driver, a fat lady wearing a bright field of flowers on a dress constructed of enough material to parachute a Land Rover from a speeding jet, was putting gas in her car, the rain beating down on her blue-haired head with a vengeance.

At the full-service pump, behind the wheel of a gray pickup, an elderly man with a face tight as a sphincter muscle rolled his window down and coughed blue-gray cigar smoke into the rain.

Tim was filling the pickup's tank, had his head bent so that water was running off his cap. Both the fat woman and the elderly man took note of us, just in case we were planning on hijacking their vehicles. Tim looked up, saw us, gave us a wink.

We went inside the store, hung around until Tim was finished. He came in and grinned at us. "Y'all decide you want some of them pickled pig's feet after all?"

"No," I said, "but we'd like to make a call to LaBorde, if you'll let us. I can give you enough money to cover it."

"Long as you pay, you can call goddamn Australia."

Tim showed me the phone behind the counter, and allowed me some privacy. I called Hanson at home first, didn't get him. Tried the cop shop, still didn't find him. I asked for Charlie, and they put him on the line.

"It's me," I said. "Checkin' in. Seein' if Florida showed up."

"Nope," Charlie said, "and that means you haven't found her either."

"It don't look good. She's been here, but she isn't here now. We're gonna look around today, but I don't get the idea the Chief here is much worried what happened to Florida. I think you need to get some real law down here. The Rangers maybe."

"Her not being there doesn't mean anything's happened to her."

"So I keep hearing, but I got some bad vibes."

"Thing occurred to me, was what if she used this trip to go on and leave Hanson for good? You know, an easy way to keep on going. It's possible."

"Yeah. But not likely."

"I wouldn't say that. Little something I found out was she took a lot of money with her."

"What do you mean?"

"I am a paid sleuth for the public, Hap. I called a friend of mine over where Florida banks. She withdrew her savings. Thirty thousand dollars. What you think about that?"

"I don't know. I guess she could have plans to leave, but that's not like Florida. She gets tired of a situation, she just hangs it up. She doesn't sneak. Besides, she has a law practice."

"She let her apartment go too."

"That could mean she got over her rift with Hanson, was planning on moving in with him full-time. As in marriage. But something, whatever happened to her, got in the way."

"I suppose. But I still hold for her just hauling ass on out of Dodge, and right on across the Badlands."

"I hope you're right, Charlie. Anything else shaking?"

"Hanson's gone off. On a drunk, I think. I can't get him at home, hasn't been in the office this morning. It's early, but I don't think he's coming in. Was supposed to. Me and him had some stuff to do."

"What makes you think he's on a drunk?"

"'Cause up until he asked you and Leonard for help, he was on a pretty constant drunk. I don't think he'll clean up his act just 'cause y'all are looking around."

"Not exactly a big vote of confidence from the Lieutenant. But

I’ll tell you something, Charlie. I don’t blame him. Not about the drinking. About the lack of confidence. We’re about as useful here as a spare pecker on a dead hog. We haven’t seen hide nor hair of her, and investigators we are not.”

“I’m covering for Hanson long as I can. But I don’t know. You’re around him enough these days, you kind of get the feeling his brain is coming apart.”

“Alcohol is not noted for making someone smarter.”

“True. I’m gonna give it up myself, soon as it kills me. Thing is, Chief gets wind Hanson’s out, or on a drunk, that’s another load of ammunition he’s got against him. He’ll be lucky to get a night job shaking doors at the Kroger.”

“All this drinking has to do with Florida? Or is the drinking part of the problem with them? That shit he told us the other night sounded a little pat.”

“I think he told you the truth. Stuff he said is how it is. He just left out that the drinking wasn’t making matters better. He drinks ’cause he has problems, and the drink makes him have more problems. He’s got a grown daughter he feels he’s lost too much contact with. An ex-wife he still loves. Kind of an odd relationship with Florida. Bad work conditions. Hemorrhoids and the sauce. Tight as he is these days, you say something don’t quite set with him, he’ll burp a turd and fart his teeth.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I was remembering the lamp he threw at Leonard.”

“I tell him what you’ve told me, I figure he’ll show up down there where you are, ready to throw the town in the street, and to hell with all this checking around shit. Hell, he may not need to be told anything. He sucked enough Rebel Yell this morning, minus the Co-Cola, he could be on his way now.”

“I don’t think Chief Cantuck would take kindly to a black law enforcement officer with an attitude and whiskey on his breath. ’Course, could be interesting. Anything else?”

“Got a minute so I can whine and feel sorry for myself?”

“You bet.”

“I’m not doing all that good either. Wife fussin’ at me all the time. Can’t do nothing right. She’s pissed I can’t fix the garage opener. She's got girlfriends whose husbands can fix anything. Hear her tell it, all them sonofabitches do is go around with a screwdriver and a pair of pliers, turning lawn mowers and garage doors into nuclear weapons. Let's see … I've quit smoking again, so I'm irritable. Wife said no more poontang if I don't quit, and I got to be quit a month before I get a taste."

"That's a goddamn death sentence."

"Yeah, well you haven't been gettin' any for a serious stretch, and you're still kicking, so I reckon I'll survive."

"You through whining?"

"Not yet. Guess what? I lost my shadow picture book. I think my wife hid it. I was just getting a whooping crane down. And you know what else?"

"Hit me."

"They're closing down the goddamn Kmart."

"Naw."

"Yeah, it'll be gone in less than three weeks. Can you figure that?"

I told him I couldn't, we talked a few more seconds, and rang off. Leonard took his turn at the phone, called home, hoping Raul had shown up.

I paid Tim some money for the calls, and Leonard bought a straw cowboy hat to protect his head from the rain.

Out in the car, Leonard said, "Charlie have any news?"

"They haven't heard from Florida. Hanson is a nervous wreck, possibly gone off somewhere on a drunk. Charlie's wife won't give him any and she may have stolen his shadow book, and he's got his panties in a major twist 'cause they're closing down the Kmart. And I told him he ought to get some real law down here."

"They're closing up the Kmart?"

"Tighter than a Republican's wallet."

"You white Democrats, you get on my nerves."

"Yeah, well what I can't stand is a black man doesn't have enough sense to know not to vote Republican. Shit, man. You look like a fuckin' fool in that hat."

"Let's not talk politics, Hap. It upsets your tummy. And I look fine in hats … Did Charlie ask about me?”

“Nope.”

“Well, shit.”

“Raul back?”

“No. But Leon said the *Gilligan* videos are a scream.”

14

We drove across the street to the Chiefs office and went inside. The lady with the wasp nest hairdo was behind her desk. The little Christmas tree was still in place, surrounded by its city of cards. She eyed Leonard as carefully and frightfully as the day before. He smiled at her, slow and suggestful, like he might be thinking about how nice it would be to fondle her hair.

There was a thirtyish officer in a straw cowboy hat and a tan uniform looking in a file cabinet drawer nearby. He pretended not to notice our coming in. Leonard asked the secretary if the Chief was in, and the officer pulled a file from the drawer, slowly turned, pretended he had just noticed us, and smiled.

“Something I can do for you fellas?” he said. “I’m Officer Reynolds.”

He was a big man with a big belly and little pocks on his face. He’d pinched too much acne as a youth. His straw hat was expensive, with a rattlesnake band and a little red feather stuck in it. He had a Western-style revolver almost big as a howitzer in his holster. Three Tootsie Roll Pops stuck out of his shirt pocket next to a pen that, from the stain at the bottom of his pocket, appeared to have exploded. Belly or no belly, he looked like someone you wouldn’t want to mess with, especially if he didn’t like you. He had a face said he didn’t like much of anything, except maybe a Tootsie Roll Pop.

Leonard took off his straw hat, said, “There. I feel smarter already.”

Reynolds grinned. “Hell, I heard about you fellas.”

“Yeah?” Leonard said. “I hope it was good.”

“Oh no,” said Reynolds. “I heard y’all was meddlers.”

“Meddlers?” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “I heard you two limp dicks—sorry, ma’am.”

The lady at the desk turned bright red and began to shuffle papers. Reynolds smiled at her, said, “Why don’t you get some coffee, Charlene?”

Charlene opened her desk drawer, took out a cup that had some kind of cartoon on it, scuttled in one place for a moment, her shoes making a lot of noise, like a poodle with overlong toenails turning in a circle. Finally, she disappeared without a word from the room.

Reynolds turned back to us. He still had that nice smile. “She goes to a lot of church. Words like dick cause her consternation.”

“Ah,” I said.

“Consternation,” Leonard said. “That’s a big word for a police officer, ain’t it?”

“Maybe,” said Officer Reynolds, placing the file on top of the cabinet. “I also have a few nice phrases. Like ‘The nigra died slowly and painfully after a methodical beating.’ ”

“Nigra is one of those words that always bothers me,” Leonard said. “It’s not quite respectful. Like ‘Negro,’ but the talker can’t seem to go all the way and say what he or she really wants to say, which is ‘nigger.’ ”

“I work for law enforcement,” said Reynolds. “I am one third of the Grovetown Police Force. Me, the Chief, and Charlene, we’re not allowed to call you a goddamn shit-eating nigger. That wouldn’t be right. Sir.”

“It’s certainly nice to talk to a public servant,” Leonard said, “but your boss, he does say nigger. We’ve heard him.”

Reynolds didn’t respond. He spent some time checking Leonard out, and Leonard checked him in return.

Reynolds was larger by a head than Leonard with wider shoulders. Big in the belly but hard-looking, with massive arms and tree trunk legs. Leonard isn’t all that big, but he’s got the look. One that tells anyone with half a brain that he can be dangerous. But there was a part of me that knew this Reynolds character was no lightweight either. He had the look too, like a man who had seen the elephant and seen it well, and maybe even put his arm up its ass and pulled its intestines out.

He and Leonard went toe-to-toe, I’d put my money on Leonard.

But maybe because he was a sentimental favorite and I knew I'd help him.

Reynolds put his thick fingers together and pressed and popped them. He leaned against the file cabinet, still smiling, one hand resting on the butt of his revolver. His fingers looked like thick roots, his knuckles like lug bolts. He said: "I hear you two gentlemen are acting like you're some kind of law or something."

"We heard the same thing about y'all," Leonard said.

Reynolds's smile changed just enough to allow his top lip to snarl. "You think I can't arrest you for messing with a sworn-in law officer? You think I won't get tired of this and chunk your ass behind bars?"

"What's the crime?" Leonard said. "Greater wit than your own?"

Reynolds's face showed he had lost his sense of humor, but he never got to let us know how much. A door at the back of the office opened and Chief Cantuck came out. He was hatless and sweaty-looking. His nose was red and highly porous today, like maybe he'd had a little too much Christmas cheer the night before. Way he was sweating, you'd have thought it was a hundred degrees. His belly hadn't gotten any smaller, and neither had his ruptured testicle. He looked as if he might blow a major hose at any moment.

"Chief," Leonard said. "My man. How's it hanging? … Oh, I see."

"They think they're funny," Reynolds said.

"Hey, I've been real quiet," I said. "Leonard's the one talking."

"I've already caught their act," Cantuck said. "It wasn't any better the last time."

"You want me to lock 'em up for a while?" Reynolds said. "Just so they can hone their material?"

"No crime in being an ass," Cantuck said. "Reckon you two are here for some reason other than trying to outwit my officer or make fun of my balls?"

"Both are easy," Leonard said, "but we're here on official business."

"All right," Cantuck said. "I'll play. Come in the office."

As we followed Cantuck, Reynolds said, “By the way, nigger. I’ll remember you.”

Leonard paused, said without the slightest hint of anger, “In case you might forget, I’ll leave my business card with the secretary.”

Cantuck’s office was relatively neat. His wall was covered in photographs of a boy, who from his wasted appearance and resemblance to Cantuck, without a swollen nut, had to be the son he’d told me about.

There was a middle-aged woman in some of the photos with the boy, and she looked plain and worn-out, like her daily job was the Augean Stables.

On Cantuck’s desk were pictures of himself, the boy, and the wife, as well as a plastic container backed by a cardboard frame for donations to MS. It had some change in it, and a couple of bills had been rolled and stuffed inside. On the left-hand side of his desk was a can with a label that suggested you should “Give to the Handicapped,” and on the other side of the desk was a can that pleaded for money for cancer research.

It was very odd, the cans and the cardboard donation container being there. I wondered who had put the money in the cardboard container. The Chief? Reynolds? Charlene? Assorted prisoners? Had Florida dropped in some coins?

Cantuck sat down behind his desk. We took chairs on the other side. Leonard placed his hat on the edge of the desk and used a finger to turn it from time to time.

Cantuck picked a picture of the boy off his desk and held it in his lap and looked at it. He put it back. From the way he moved, I could tell it was an unconscious ritual.

“Your son?” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “What do y’all want?”

“We want to make an official report,” I said. “Concerning Florida Grange. We fear foul play.”

“And, of course, we here in Grovetown are the culprits, just because a lot of us are segregationist?”

“She was here,” I said. “She’s not here now.”

"So, she's shacked up with some buck somewhere. Check out the Southside of town. Ten miles out. That's the colored section."

"We were sort of hoping you'd do that," I said. "It is your job."

Cantuck studied us. He unsnapped his shirt pocket and took out a tightly rolled package of chewing tobacco. He unrolled it, opened it, pinched out a wad, put it in his mouth, started chewing. He chewed slowly, as if activating brain cells.

"You gonna fill out the papers for a missing person?" he said around the tobacco.

"Yeah," I said.

"I doubt you need to," he said.

"You saying we fill it out you won't look?" Leonard asked.

"No. I'm saying I doubt you need to. She'll turn up. My guess is she's oiling some coon's pole out niggertown."

"Careful now," Leonard said. "Words like that, you might hurt my feelings."

"Shit," Cantuck said. "I wouldn't want that. Let me put it to you straight, numb nuts. You fill out a report, that gives me work to do. Well, I don't want work to do. Not when I think it's bullshit work. But no matter what you may think, you fill out that report, I'll look for her. I'll find her if she needs finding. I'm just a small-town cop, and as you both know, not very smart and I got a ruptured turnip. But I got a job here. The law says it includes whites and colored. I don't have nothing against colored. You being an exception, Smartest Nigger in the World … that is how you introduced yourself, isn't it?"

"That's right," Leonard said. "But when it comes out of your mouth, it stinks. My name's Leonard. Leonard Pine."

"What you want … Leonard … is me to respect you because you're black," Cantuck said. "Not because you're worth a shit. You want me to be polite and sweet when all you've done, the both of you, from the first moment I've seen you, is come on with an attitude. An attitude that says: We're better than you. We're smarter than you. We're a couple of hip-hop guys … I believe that's a term they use, isn't it?"

"Close enough," Leonard said. "But not around my house."

"Not once," Cantuck said, "have you treated me with the respect deserving of any human being, or someone of authority.Yet, you expect me to be all sugar and syrup and suck your dick."

"You did sort of threaten us," I said. "You even pulled your gun on me. That seems to have faded from your memory."

"I don't deny it. But you fucked with me, treated me stupid, then wanted me to give you a hand job and smile. I don't think your mamas would be proud of the way you two have conducted yourselves."

To tell the truth, neither did I.

"There was that talk about the fire department and being burned up with white trash and a nigger," I said. "Remember that?"

"I wanted you scared, out of here, before somethin' happened we'd both be sorry for. You two being sorry while it was happening, and me after I heard about it—for about five or ten minutes, anyway. You see, it's not bad enough I got you two pencil dicks, I got the Texas Rangers now."

"Texas Rangers?" I said, and thought I looked pretty innocent. Charlie damn sure wasn't fucking around. He'd gotten on the horn the minute I hung up.

"This nig hung himself here," Cantuck said. "Word's got around it ain't no suicide. Maybe that was your gal, Florida did that, got 'em stirred. Maybe it was you. But about five minutes ago I got the call. They're sending in some Ranger dick to look things over. Show our not-so-smart three-person police force how the horse ate the apple. I don't like it. I don't like you. I wish you were both home. I wish your daddies had pulled out right before comin'. That way, the two of you wouldn't be nothing to me or nobody else."

We sat for a moment. I said, "Can we fill out the missing person report now?"

"When you do, why don't you head back to where you come from. Find someone else to insult and make fun of. I can't help my balls, boys, and I can't help that I believe the Bible insists that blacks and whites not intermingle, outside of work and a few laughs together."

“Shit,” Leonard said, “you and me ain’t been laughing none at all.”

“Bottom line is,” Cantuck said, “when I’m not worked up, I’m not so bad. And I can do my job. You leave, I won’t be worked up. She’s around here, I’ll find her. She’s gone somewhere, I might find that out. Black and white ain’t gonna have anything to do with that.”

We sat in silence for a moment. Cantuck reached down behind his desk, came up with a stained coffee can. He spat a stream of tobacco into it, put the can back. Some of the juice ran over his bottom lip and down his chin. He wiped it away with his sleeve. He looked at his sleeve. “Bad habit,” he said. “Wife hates it. My boy used to call it slime. Let’s get a report for you to fill out. And Smartest Nigger?”

“Yassuh, Massa, Chief,” Leonard said.

“Stay away from Officer Reynolds. He’s not a nice man like me. And don’t forget your hat.”

Cantuck stood up and we stood up with him. Cantuck said, “Before you boys go, would you mind dropping a coin or so in these charities? I try to support them, get others to do likewise.”

We were blank for a moment, then slowly Leonard opened his wallet, took out a dollar bill and rolled it tight and pushed it through the slot of the MD container.

I did the same.

We went into the office where the secretary once again sat behind her desk. The Chief followed us out. Reynolds wasn’t there. Cantuck had Charlene give us a missing person’s report. I filled it out and gave it back.

Cantuck picked it up the moment I laid it down. “All right … Mr. Hap Collins,” he said, reading my name off the report. “Me and this investigation are open for business.”

He went back to his office and closed the door.

Charlene looked at the closed door, looked at Leonard.

“Like the hair,” Leonard told her.

15

When we left Cantuck's office, we saw Officer Reynolds standing in the hallway near the exit, adjusting a plastic rain cover on his straw hat. He turned and looked at us. He carefully withdrew a Tootsie Roll Pop from his shirt pocket, unwrapped it, and tossed the wrapper on the floor. He stuck the pop in his mouth, winked at us, went out into the rain.

I said, "Think you could take him, you had to?"

"I don't know," Leonard said. "I don't know the both of us with clubs could take him. But the trick is, we don't let him know we think that."

"Frankly, I don't think it matters what we think."

"Know what? I sorta think he's cute."

"Oh, shit."

"I'm not kidding, Hap. I like the way he sucks that Tootsie Roll."

"He's a thug."

"I didn't say I liked him. I just wouldn't kick him out of bed for eating crackers. Tootsie Roll Pops either."

"Jesus, Leonard. He wouldn't get in bed with you unless it was to tie you to it and set it on fire."

"Wow. Really think so?"

Leonard chuckled. I picked up the Tootsie Roll wrapper and put it in the trash container by the door. Leonard put on his hat and we went outside.

We got drenched going out to the car. Leonard cranked the engine, turned on the heater.

"I feel kinda bad about Cantuck," I said. "I wanted us to push him, see if he knew more than he was letting on, but I feel kinda mean-spirited."

“Hell,” Leonard said. “I did all the pushing.”

“Making fun of a man’s balls is pretty low, you know?”

“I admit I feel a little bit like a horse’s ass myself. All those pictures of his kid, weird shit with the charities. I feel sorry for him. What did you tell me the boy died of?”

“Muscular dystrophy.”

“Yeah, well, just because he loved his son and likes charities, doesn’t mean he isn’t a worthless dick.”

I could feel my wet jacket sticking to Leonard’s upholstery. The heater was slow to work. My stomach grumbled from hunger and need of coffee.

I said, “I hate to sound like you, but just because he’s a dick doesn’t mean he’s a real villain.”

“Jesus,” Leonard said, “you’re right. I’m starting to sound like a knee-jerk liberal asshole. I been around you too long.”

“When I was growing up, Leonard—”

“Oh, Christ, another parable.”

“Listen. My dad had the worst rhetoric you ever heard. He could get so worked up over ‘the niggers,’ he would vibrate.”

“I’ve known people in my family to be the same way about whites.”

“Yeah, but you know, one time I went down to my dad’s garage, and there were a bunch of little black kids there, laughing, and my dad was giving them five-dollar bills. Apiece. It wasn’t like we had lots of money, and when the kids were gone, I said, ‘Dad, what are you doing?,’ and he said, ‘I was afraid they might be hungry.’

“Dad hated the black race, but liked them as individuals. He hated some as individuals too, but you get my point.”

“I do.”

“I’m not defending his racism. I detest it. I think that’s one reason I hate it so much, my old man being that way, and otherwise being just the kind of man I wanted to be.”

“Just because your old man was a good man, does that mean Cantuck is? It’s hard to believe he’d go out of his way to worry about some black girl that might have gotten killed.”

“You knew my daddy, it would be hard to believe he would give five dollars apiece to a handful of black kids too.”

“We’re not dealing with your daddy, though. This Cantuck, we know nothing about him. Say he wouldn’t do anything to hurt Florida, he’s still convinced she’s out shacking up. Blacks are all a bunch of animals to him. He figures all we want to do is eat and fuck.”

“That’s all I want to do.”

“Maybe that’s all anyone wants to do. As for the Chief, he might not swerve to hit an animal, but he still knows he’s dodging one. And when it comes to blacks, well, he might not go out of his way to do one harm, but he wouldn’t expect anything of them but the most basic of animal behavior. Like being shacked up somewhere.”

“So, we don’t know any more than we knew when we went in.”

“We know he’s got an officer that isn’t a nice person. Even Cantuck says so. And I know this. I’m one hungry sonofabitch. I say we go over to the cafe and get breakfast.”

“You know how that’ll go.”

“We came here to be maggots in the shit. Squirm around, see if we can find what we want. What better way to stir the shit than to jump right in.”

“I like the more casual approach. One where I don’t have to get doo-doo on me.”

“You sit here and be casual. I’m hungry, I’m wet, and I’m cold. The cafe is bound to be warm, and they’ve got coffee. I’ll bring you some.”

“We really ought to go over to the black section of town. Ask around there.”

“We will.”

“What’s wrong with now?”

“You’re stalling, Hap.”

“Just as long as I can.”

Leonard cut the engine, put his hand on the door handle, turned and looked at me.

“Oh, all right,” I said. “What’s a few stitches among friends?”

16

Leonard was right. The cafe was warm. It was also crowded. The brothers who I had warned about the ants were there, and their mother, of course. There were also a lot of burly types, and old men. The blue-haired woman I had seen at Tim's filling station was also there. She was sitting with an elderly man who, from the look on his face, appeared to be dealing with some sort of digestion problem.

I could see a gray-haired black cook through the order window at the back. He had on a white cook's hat, a stained white shirt, and lots of sweat. He hadn't been working Christmas Day when I was here. He didn't wave as we came in. Neither did anyone else. The mother of the sweet boys who I had spoken with on Christmas smiled at me, the sort you give someone you know probably has a short time to live. Or maybe she just loved me and my little friend.

The cook looked at Leonard, shook his head, went to furiously scraping at something out of our sight.

We went over to a couple of stools at the end of the counter, sat down in front of a rack holding salt and pepper shakers, a bottle of ketchup and a bottle of Tabasco sauce.

There was a plump middle-aged man sitting next to Leonard. He was smoking a cigar. He blew out smoke, rolled up the newspaper he was reading, put it under his arm, picked up his coffee cup, found a seat beside another man in a booth at the back.

"Did I fart?" Leonard said.

The smiling woman came over. She looked nervous. "Would you gentlemen like something to go?"

This, of course, was the better idea, and I'll be honest, I was scared, all those fuckers looking at us, licking their chops, but I'd seen too many cowboy movies, and a cowboy doesn't run.

Of course, a movie cowboy usually has a stand-in.

“No,” I said. “We’d like something to stay. I want flapjacks and eggs and biscuits and coffee. My buddy here will have the same.”

“I will?” Leonard asked.

“You will,” I said.

Leonard tipped his hat at the lady. “I will,” he said.

The woman looked at us sadly and went away.

The brothers came over and stood by me, one on either side. The one with the bad mustache smiled, said, “There ain’t no Christmas ants, are there?”

“No, son, guess there aren’t,” I said.

“You lied to us?”

“Yes, I did.”

“That was a good one,” Bad Mustache said. He grinned at me, then he and his brother moved to the rear of the cafe and took a booth together.

The door opened, let in the cold wind. We turned toward a voice saying: “You boys passing through?”

The voice belonged to a man in a gray waterproof topcoat and an expensive gray cowboy hat over which was attached a clear plastic rain cover. He eased off the topcoat, shook the rain from it onto the floor, hung it on a peg by the door, put his hat on another peg.

He looked to be in his sixties. He was the only man in the place wearing a suit. It was a nice, dark gray suit, expensive in a J.C. Penney’s best sort of way. He had gray hair, perfectly combed, not mussed by his hat. It was held in place with enough hair spray to make an evangelist proud. He wore a bright red tie. It was tacked with a gold horseshoe to a crisp white shirt. He had on gray lizard-skin cowboy boots. He had a muscular build, with a slight paunch. His skin was very pale. He looked very proud of himself.

On one side of Gray Suit was a rather sizable gentleman who looked as if he could snap a baseball bat over his knee. I affectionately thought of him as Bear.

On the other side of Gray Suit was an even larger gentleman with enormous shoulders, a big belly, and a very wide ass. He looked as if he'd enjoy jerking a knot in a gorilla's dick on his worst day. I affectionately dubbed him Elephant.

"What'd you say?" Leonard asked Gray Suit.

Gray Suit grinned. He had a very precious deep dimple in his right cheek. I think he liked that dimple. I think he thought it got him lots of pussy. I wished I had a dimple. I wished I had all my hair. I wished the gray in my hair looked as cool as the gray in his hair. I wished I'd stayed home. I wouldn't have minded some pussy either.

Gray Suit kept right on smiling. "I said, are you two passing through?"

Before we could answer, he went over to a booth, and the men sitting there got up casually, with their plates and coffee, and found another seat. Gray Suit slid in against the wall. Bear sat in the seat beside him. Elephant took a seat across the table from Bear. The rain outside came down hard and consistent. Good sleeping weather.

Leonard said, "Naw, we ain't passing through. Actually, we was sorta thinking of moving here."

"And for what reason?" Gray Suit said.

"We were thinking of opening up a little Afro-American Cultural Center. That's a black thing, see. Hap here would be working for me."

"I does right," I said, "sometimes, Mr. Leonard, he lets me takes off a little early on Friday afternoon and he give me a fifty-cent tip."

Gray Suit smiled, said to the lady behind the counter, "Maude. I'd like some coffee. The boys here would like some too. Keep it coming."

Maude gave Gray Suit a look that could have raised tumors. Gray Suit acted as if he hadn't noticed. He turned his attention back to Leonard, said: "You know, when I was a little boy, right here in Grovetown, we used to have traveling minstrel shows." He paused and looked at Leonard. "You know what those are, boy?"

"I ain't wearing no knee pants," Leonard said. "Don't call me boy. Don’t call my friend here boy neither.”

“All right,” Gray Suit said. “Man. Isn’t that what you people prefer? Man?”

“Man’s nice,” Leonard said. “Man sound good to you, Hap?”

“I like it,” I said. “Even if I’m not a ‘you people.’ ”

“When I was a little boy,” Gray Suit started, then paused to poke a cigarette into his mouth. Bear whisked out a little box of kitchen matches, struck one on the bottom of his shoe, offered it to Gray Suit. Gray Suit held Bear’s hand, touched the match to his cigarette, puffed. Bear dropped the match on the floor.

Maude said, “Pick that up.”

No one picked up the match. No one seemed to notice she’d spoken.

“What I remember fondly,” Gray Suit continued, “was white folks doing colored minstrel shows. They wore blackface. Shoe polish. Big white lips. They did some jokes. And they were real funny. You know,” he pointed the cigarette at Leonard, “you remind me of them minstrel folks, but you’re not in blackface. Least I don’t think so. And you know what? I think you’re real funny. That makes me nostalgic. I like that. I like having you here. I didn’t realize how much I’d missed being around funny niggers. And what I got here is not just some white man in blackface playing nigger, I got the real thing. I got me a genuine, born-of-black-hole nigger.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Maude said, coming out from behind the counter with a pot of coffee. She put the pot on their table. “You’re in my place, don’t talk like that.”

“It’s all right, Maude,” Gray Suit said. “It’s just men talkin’. Ain’t that right, nigger?”

Leonard didn’t answer. He just tipped back his straw hat, sat there, patient.

Gray Suit turned his coffee cup upright and poured coffee. Maude rubbed her hands together, clasped her fingers, pulled, let go and went back behind the counter. I could hear her breathing behind us. Nervous, short breaths; kind I’d have been breathing had I not been holding my breath.

“I tell you, buck,” Gray Suit said, “you look to me like someone who was bred of good stock. You know, that's why there's so many of your people can play basketball and football well. We white folks bred you. Got the biggest dumbest nigger bucks we could find, put them with some big ole black mammy could take about a ten-inch dick big around as a man's wrist, and that ole buck, well, he was the kind would mount a cow if our grandaddies told him to—and most likely if they didn't—and he'd bang that black bitch till she couldn't take no more. Then maybe our granddaddies would have a pony or a jackass do her, just to get a little spice in the stock. And through all that planning, down through generations of nigger kennelin', we ended up with solid, strong-lookin' niggers like yourself. And just as an added note, I got to tell you, I've always been partial to a nigger in a straw hat."

Most everyone in the place laughed. Even the blue-haired lady laughed. When the laughter died—

"Mama said don't talk that way in here!"

I turned and looked. It was Bad Mustache. His bubba was beside him. They were out of their booth, standing. The other brother said, "That's enough! Mama said that's enough."

"Billy, you and Caliber just relax," Bear said. "No one wants you hurt. Y'all sit down and have some coffee."

Billy and Caliber didn't move.

Leonard said, "Well, that certainly explains some things about us black folk, don't it?"

"Oh yeah," said Gray Suit, and he laughed a little, and the others laughed.

When the laughter slowed, Leonard said, "You know, every one of us, when you think about it, just missed about this much," Leonard held up his hand and made a C with his thumb and forefinger, "being a turd. Every one of us. I mean, there's only about this much space between one hole and the other. And we all missed the shithole by this much." Leonard lowered his hand, looked at Gray Suit and smiled, "Except you, mister. You made it. Your mama shit a turd, put a suit on it, and named it you."

Gray Suit turned red as a sun-ripe tomato. Bear started out of the booth then, but before he could shoot the distance, a blast of cold air blew through the cafe, and Officer Reynolds came in with it. He was sucking another Tootsie Roll Pop.

Everything stopped. Reynolds looked around. He eyed Bear, halfway out of the booth. Bear slid back into his place. Gray Suit raised up so Reynolds could see him, said, “Willie, it’s me.”

Reynolds pulled the Tootsie Roll Pop from his mouth, held it, said, “Yes sir.” He turned to the woman behind the counter, said, “Maude, you got that breakfast?” He looked right at us. “To go?”

Maude glanced around, as if on the lookout for a miracle, sighed, went to the kitchen, came back with a greasy brown sack. She gave it to Reynolds.

Reynolds said, “Certainly glad I didn’t see no unpleasantness here. Wouldn’t want that. Chief wouldn’t want that. I seen something like that, didn’t do anything about it, he’d fire me. I don’t like the idea of being fired. I like my little check. But, say I leave, how the hell am I gonna stop something gets going?” He looked at Leonard. “Any idea how I could do that?”

“There was,” Leonard said, “you’d find a way around it.”

Officer Reynolds smiled, put his Tootsie Roll Pop back in his mouth, went out with another blast of cold December air.

Bear stood up, arms crossed on his chest. Elephant stood up, opened and closed his hands—very large hands, and leathery. Probably got that way from strangling children. He was maybe six-six, and his shoulders were even wider than I first thought. So was his ass; even front on, you could tell that hunk of meat was enormous.

“You boys don’t get in no fights now,” Maude said. “This here is my cafe, and I don’t want no fights. They were just leaving.” She leaned over the counter, touched me on the shoulder. “You were just leaving, right?”

I was agreeable to this, but before I could say anything, Gray Suit said, “That’s right, they were just leaving, but not under their own power.”

“This ain’t no cowboy movie saloon,” said Maude. “This is my place.”

“Mama said that’s enough.” It was Caliber. He and Billy were easing slowly to the front of the cafe. No one was paying them much attention, however. They were watching to see if Leonard and I were going to shit our pants. I don't know about Leonard, but I felt a rumble in my tummy.

I began to grope for a graceful way out. Even a not so graceful one, but Leonard, as is often the case, closed the door.

"Before we get on with the butt-whippin'," he said, sliding slowly off his stool, turning his body slightly to the side. "I got one question for the big guy." Leonard gestured to Elephant. "Man, tell me true. Is that your ass following you around, or are you pullin' a trailer?"

17

Elephant was a step closer than Bear, and no sooner had Leonard finished his remark than he stepped with his right foot and threw a hot haymaker at Leonard's head. It was such a wide and uncalculated blow, Leonard could have eaten a plate of eggs and biscuits and half a cup of coffee before it got there.

Leonard stepped in and blocked with his left hand and hit Elephant on his left temple with the edge of his right hand; hit him hard enough Elephant's greasy black hair flew up like a frightened monkey springing for cover.

Before the hair settled, Leonard captured Elephant's punching arm, swung under it, pushed against the big bastard's elbow and drove his head forward into the lunch counter, smacking Elephant's noggin into it with a noise akin to the crack of doom.

Leonard grabbed Elephant's hair, jerked his head up, brought it down into the counter again, let him go. What was left of Elephant's face smashed into a bar stool. Some of his cheek turned red and greasy and slid to the right of the stool while the rest of him fell left. I tell you, it was enough to make me lose my breakfast, had I eaten any.

All of this took no time at all.

Bear was on me then. I had already reached back and got hold of the ketchup bottle, and I swung it. It was still in the rack with the salt and pepper and Tabasco, and the bottle and the rack caught Bear alongside the head solid enough the ketchup exploded. Wads of red went all over Bear and across the cafe and onto Gray Suit's coat.

Gray Suit said, "Goddamn!"

The world froze. We were like prehistoric flies in amber, but one look at the fine citizens of Grovetown, and I could sense a sort of fire building inside them. Nothing like a nigger smacking a white man to stir a bunch of crackers, and a white man taking a black man's side didn't cheer them much either. The first was like being made to eat shit. The second was like making them eat it and smile.

I dropped what was left of the ketchup bottle and the rack. It hit the floor with a sound so sharp we all jumped. Then things went still again. I couldn't take it anymore. I said, "Well, you assholes gonna do it, or what?"

"Don't y'all do it," Caliber said. "You leave 'em be. You do it, you're gonna pay damages. You're gonna pay lawsuits."

Gray Suit said, "Git 'em! Kill the sonsabitches!"

And the mass of them came unstuck in time and space, rushed fast and hard, and I swung an elbow and saw someone's teeth fly, then I got hit on the right side of the jaw and a floating rib ceased to float, and I got my fingers in one guy's face and raked his eyes, side-kicked his knee out from under him, then someone was on my back and I was swinging my elbows, trying to throw him, but someone had me around the waist, and I couldn't get the torque, and out of the corner of my eye I saw Leonard dot a fat fucker's eyes with a rapid left, right, then kick another fatty between the legs solid enough to lift him. He back-elbowed an old guy, who spat his tobacco onto the back of Leonards head, then Leonard was swarmed. He went down beneath a pile of writhing, punching bodies, his teeth clamped on some dude's ear, his hat beneath another's feet.

I saw Caliber launch a punch at someone, but he caught a solid one to the side of the head and went down. I saw Billy grabbing men and jerking them away from me and Leonard, but it was like trying to bail out the ocean. Gray Suit was standing up in the booth looking down on the action like Xerxes watching the last defenders of Thermopylae go down. He had a fresh unlit cigarette in his mouth.

Bodies were pressing me so tight I was using nothing but elbows, leg stomps, head-butts, and knees, but it was useless. I started falling. I was being hit so hard and often my face felt as if it were exploding. I came down hard on my back, and above me were thrashing legs and bleeding, hateful faces; the fat guys, the old men, the blue-haired lady.

Their fists and shoes tumbled down on me like an avalanche.

My balls took a few shots. I wondered if Chief Cantuck and I might be able to get matching trusses. Maybe he could wear his nut to the right, I could wear mine to the left. We could walk side by side. Kind of a balance thing.

The lights of the cafe went dark, then bright again, but I was seeing them through a sheen of blood, and it was my blood.

Too much pain.

My last vision before darkness was the blue-haired hag's shoe coming at me, accurately aimed at my head.

When I awoke, I was in great pain and I was wet and getting wetter and I was shaking from the cold. I realized too I had pissed myself and there was vomit on the front of my shirt and jacket. I was up against an alley wall, out back of the cafe most likely, and it was raining hard, and my mouth tasted of copper and one of my eyes was nearly swollen shut. One of my teeth felt loose. My kidneys hurt. My ribs hurt. It hurt to breathe. It hurt to think. I feared if I moved too rapidly an arm or a leg might fall off.

I could hear grunting and I turned my head, carefully, just to make sure it didn't bowl a strike. The alley was full of people from the cafe, and the alley was full of rain.

Two fat guys, one with a couple of black eyes, the other with a wide split in his lip, had a mostly unconscious Leonard held up between them. His knees were bent and his legs were flared out behind him, the tops of his boots dragged the ground. His head was about the size of a medicine ball, and his lips and nose and eyes blended together in a knobby topography of swollen flesh. His breath steamed from his mouth and turned into little white clouds that faded to nothing.

The blue-haired lady was in front of him. She said, "Hold him up better."

She tried to kick Leonard in the balls, but the alley was wet, and she slipped and fell on her ass. The crowd moved toward the woman, and two men pulled her to her feet. When the crowd moved, I saw that Billy and Caliber were lying in the alley too. They looked to have taken a pretty good beating. Their mother was between them. Her hair was plastered to her head like seaweed to a rock. She was screaming her boys were hurt and wouldn't somebody do something, but nobody did. She squatted next to Billy and held his head in her lap, screamed, "Stop it! Stop it! Now! Stop it!"

Billy's hand came up and touched her hair. He said something, not very loud, then his hand went down again. He got the hand under him and pushed to a sitting position and scooted his back against the alley wall. He didn't look as if he cared much about what was happening now, long as it wasn't happening to him.

Maude rose suddenly, pushed through the crowd and went inside the cafe.

The blue-haired lady had a solid stance now. She kicked Leonard firm in the nuts with a football style kick. Leonard let out a burst of air, it puffed white and went wide and far, like a blast from a dragon. He sagged between the two men even more. The old lady said: "Niggers is what's wrong with this country."

I tried to get up, but couldn't. I fell over on my side and watched the alley wall lean at me. I turned my head toward Leonard, saw that Blue Hair had been replaced by Gray Suit. The rain had pushed his evangelist do apart and it had fallen into his face. I noticed, pushed down like that, he had been covering a half-dollar-sized bald spot at the back of his head. Good. I was glad he had a bald spot. I really didn't like this guy.

He had ketchup on his suit and the rain had spread it into rusty patches all over his jacket. His white shirt looked as if it were spotted with blood. He said, "Hold him," and the two guys picked Leonard up higher and held him firm, and Gray Suit began to work on him. Pounding him in the stomach, once in the jaw, but that hurt Gray Suit's hand. He jerked it back, said "Damn," and kicked Leonard in the shin. Then the leg. Leonard's bad leg.

Gray Suit reached in his pants pocket and got out a large pocketknife, pinched a blade open.

I tried to crawl toward Leonard, but I wasn't making any time at all. I felt like a slug nailed to the ground. I felt like I was in a car and it had skidded off the road, and everything had gone slow motion, and I could see a telephone pole coming through the windshield and there wasn't a thing I could do about it.

Gray Suit said, "Way you tame a nigger … way you make 'em good, is just like you do a rambunctious stallion. You got to severely lower their testosterone level. All that ball juice just leads a nigger to trouble."

The men in the crowd laughed. One came forward, got hold of Leonard's zipper and pulled it down, reached in his pants and pulled out Leonard's equipment.

"No," I said. "Don't," but my words sounded like coughs.

Gray Suit turned, looked at me. He showed me that pretty dimple. It looked so deep now you'd have thought it ought to have a winch and bucket perched over it. He said, "Well, the nigger lover's come around. I cut this nigger's boo-doodles off, I'm gonna put 'em in your pocket, boy."

Gray Suit came forward and grabbed Leonard's testicles and lifted them and reached with the knife, and a gunshot split the air.

It was Maude. She had a pistol in one hand, a Winchester in the other, tucked under her armpit.

"You ain't gonna do this. Not in my place. Not out back of my place." Maude fired a shot with the revolver and made a trash can jump. She pointed the revolver and the rifle at Gray Suit, who still held Leonard's balls and the knife. She said, "Jackson Brown, you cut that nigger, you touch one of my boys, you come for me or that fella on the ground over there, any of you make a move to do that kinda business, I'm gonna blow what little brains you got out of the back of your head. And I'll do it too. Don't think I won't. Now all you cretins get on your horses and ride."

Gray Suit said, "You're gonna bring yourself some serious grief, Maude."

"You don't own my place yet, Jackson. You don't threaten me. You hear? Let go of that nigger's rocks."

So this was Tim's father. Jackson Truman Brown, the Lord of Grovetown. Standing in a wet alley with a pocketknife in one hand, Leonard's balls in the other.

Gently, the Lord unhanded Leonard's gonads, folded up his knife and put it away. Way he did it, you'd have thought he just used it to clean his fingernails. The two fatties dropped Leonard on his face. He hit so hard he cut a fart, then lay still.

A siren whooped once, went quiet. I turned to see the Chief's car at the mouth of the alley. Officer Reynolds was driving. He got out of the car and strolled up the alley, sucking his last Tootsie Roll Pop. “That’s enough,” he said. “All y’all go home.”

“Draighten and Ray are on the floor in the restaurant,” one of the fatties said. “These fellas hurt ’em bad.”

“Yeah,” Reynolds said. “Well, haul ’em off. Get ’em a doctor, they need it. I want all y’all out of here. Now.”

“Officer,” Jackson Brown said, “you don’t want to get too carried away.”

Officer Reynolds studied Brown for a few seconds. His face took on a pleasant look. “You know how it is, Mr. Brown. Think about it a minute. The position I’m in.”

Brown took the minute offered and considered. “There’ll be another time,” he said.

“That may be,” Officer Reynolds said. “Maude, put them guns up before you shoot yourself or wound that nigger. We wouldn’t want something to happen to that nigger. Niggers are special, you ought to know that. Government protects ’em, like some kind of goddamn endangered species.” He looked at me. “And nigger lovers are special too. Damn precious, in fact.”

Maude lowered the guns. Caliber limped over and took the Winchester from her, then the revolver. Billy turned so he could use the wall to get up, clawed his way to his feet. He and Caliber looked rough. But not as rough as Leonard. I figured I didn’t look too pretty myself.

The crowd began to break up. Brown looked at me, creased his dimple, said, “You boys weren’t tough as you thought, were you?”

It took me a couple of deep breaths to say it: “Could be. But all I can say for you is, you certainly handled Leonard’s nuts like a natural.”

Brown glared, turned, paused long enough to look Maude over good, nodded at her, then went through the back door of the cafe and out of sight. The others had already gone, and now there was only Maude, her sons, me, Leonard, and good ole Officer Reynolds.

“That nigger don’t look so smart now,” Reynolds said. “Neither do you. You want to say something smart?” I was on my knees, using my hands for support. Officer Reynolds came and stood over me. “I said, you want to say something smart?”

“No,” I said.

“Good. Now, get your nigger. Put his dick back in his drawers, zip him up, then you and him get out of Grovetown, and when you get home, find you some pretty stationery, purple or pink would be nice, and write me a thank-you card for not letting them folks kill you. Write Maude one too. And you keep your nigger and your nigger-lovin’ ass out of Grovetown, Texas. Only thing I regret in all this is not gettin’ to try your nigger. I think he might have thought he could take me. I’d like to have shown him he couldn’t.”

Officer Reynolds went down the alley, opened his car door and turned. “Billy. Caliber. Y’all see them guns get put up.”

“Yes sir,” Caliber said.

I lay down, slowly, the side of my face resting against the freezing, wet alley floor. My face was so hot from injury, it actually felt good. The rain felt good. My eyes, heavy as stones, began to close.

I heard Officer Reynolds drive away.

18

The oaks and pines and hickory trees that grew close to the road were dark with rain. Visible through the boughs, when there was any visibility at all, was a grim, gray sky. The sound of windshield wipers beating back and forth, the vibration of tires on cement, seemed at first to be the rhythm of striking fists and feet on flesh.

For an instant, I thought I was in the midst of another beating. I hurt so bad, I figured I couldn't distinguish the pain of the old beating from the new.

It took me a moment to realize I was in a car, an old blue Ford Fairlane, and that it was not night but late morning, and that the beating was over, and not long over. My face was turned toward the door and my forehead was resting on the rain-beaded passenger glass of the front seat. I could feel cold air leaking in around the window and hitting my feverish face, and it felt good. I smelled like dried urine.

I had no idea who was driving and for an instant I didn't care.I sort of thought I was on my way to the river bottoms where a rusty transmission would be tied around my feet, and I would be sent down to inspect the river mud for about three minutes, then it would all be over. A year from now, maybe two, some fisherman would snag his line on what was left of me, pull up my rotting head, call in the law, and dental records would reveal I had six cavities, was dead, and that I was Hap Collins.

When I felt strong enough to flip a whole loaf of bread over by myself without verbal encouragement, I turned my head and saw the driver.

It was the cook from the cafe. He wasn't wearing his white hat, but he still had on his stained white shirt. He said, "You might as well go on and sleep. You took a hell of a beating."

"Yeah," I said. "You should have seen the other guy."

"I seen them other guys, and compared to you two, they look pretty good."

"That's what I was afraid of."

"Then again, Draighten and Ray don't look so good. You gave them two a righteous ass-whuppin'. Bopped some eyes and mouths and noses on them others too. Hadn't been so many of 'em, so crowded, I think you and your friend might have done some serious whup-ass. 'Course, I only sort of saw it in passin'. I went out the back when things got goin' good, went over to the antique shop, told 'em to call the Chief, say there was a ruckus. That's how come ole Officer showed up."

"Thanks."

"'Course, Officer might not be who you want to show up. He got connections with the Klan."

"As does Jackson Brown?"

"Yep. They tied at the hip. Mr. Jackson, he's the Grand Cyclops or some such shit for that bunch. They don't call themselves Klan exactly, but that's what they are. Ole Officer, he kinda in a spot. Even for Grovetown, he got to play by some rules. You best be glad all this didn't happen out in the woods somewhere."

"I hear that."

"Did, ants be eatin' your ass right now. In town, Officer got to keep the Chief happy some. Chief not someone gonna invite me over to his house to supper, but I reckon he's good enough, it come down to business. He ain't gonna stand by let something like that happen on purpose."

"That's good to hear. Thanks again."

"Don't give too big a thanks. Tore the cafe up too bad, I'd have lost my job. There by the skin of my teeth anyway. Cafe ain't like a McDonald's chain, you know? It loses money couple, three weeks in a row, it's gone. Damages could make it gone quicker."

"What about Leonard? Man that was with me?"

"Back seat. Now, you talk about a beatin', he took it. You boys lucky you in pretty good shape."

"Rose field work. Cheap food. No sex. Makes you strong."

"My name's Bacon, by the way."

“Bacon?”

“Yeah, like in slices of.”

“Your mama named you Bacon?”

“My daddy. He always liked bacon, so he named me Bacon. I don’t think he liked me near good as bacon, though. Least not the way I remember it.”

I managed to turn and look in the back seat. Leonard was stretched out there, lying on his back, and he looked awful. His face appeared to be the end result of a radiation experiment. Had I not expected him, I don’t know I would have recognized him. His smashed straw hat lay over his crotch.

“He needs a doctor,” I said.

“Gonna get one. Wouldn’t no white town doctor gonna look at him. Not after they find out Mr. Jackson Brown was the one wanted y’all beat. Reason he got that hat with him like that, wasn’t no one wanted to put his dick in his pants.”

“That’ll slay him. He thinks his dick is his best feature.”

“Caliber, he got him two sticks and tried to do it, but he couldn’t do nothing but pick it up and move it left and right. Couldn’t get it to go inside the pants, and he wasn’t gonna touch it. Me neither. So we put that hat over him.”

“Very innovative. He’s lucky he’s still got a dick. That Brown fella didn’t mind touching it. Or cutting it.”

“I don’t think he really gonna cut it off. He knows how far he can push, and he can’t push that far. Not in town. Not all them witnesses, even if most of them deny they saw anything happen. They know someone got to pay. And if it’s somethin’ that bad, a ball-cuttin’ downtown, they only gonna lie so far.”

“In other words, they won’t go to the pen for Jackson Brown?”

“That’s right. But way it stands now, Chief ain’t gonna do nothin’ to that Mr. Jackson, even he wants to. Mrs. Rainforth—”

“Is that Maude?”

“Uh huh. She gonna say what happened, and her boys gonna say, but all them other people, they ain’t gonna say, ’cause they was in on it. Them two y’all whupped up bad. They’ll take the fall for all that ruckus. ’Cause that’s what they’re paid for.”

"Where are we going, and how come?"

"You goin' to my place, least for a bit. And the reason how come is Mrs. Rainforth done paid me to do it. Said I should take you home and take care of you awhile. She's paying me some extra."

"So this isn't out of the kindness of your heart?"

"I ain't got nothing against you. I think what happened was a shame, but I wasn't gettin' paid, and wasn't gettin' Mrs. Rainforth's blessing on this, you'd still be out there in that alley. 'Sides, my place only a little better than the alley."

"And how come Mrs. Rainforth is doin' this?"

"White ladies are hard to figure. She don't like Mr. Jackson, for one. He owns most everything in town, wants to own the cafe, and she won't sell, and on top of that, him and her husband, Bud, they hated each other. He's dead now, but Mr. Jackson, he ain't one to forget, and Mrs. Rainforth, she ain't neither. It's not she's suddenly grown to like niggers, but then she don't exactly hate nobody neither. She don't like that kinda business come down on you two."

"What about you? She like you?"

"Shit, boy. I'm the cook. I been there so long she don't think about me one way or the other. I'm like furniture and … Wheeee! I tell you, mister … Who are you anyway?"

"Hap. Hap Collins."

"I tell you, Mister Hap. We got to get you out of them piss-pants. You makin' my eyes burn."

19

There's no other way to describe Bacon's home other than to say it was a real shithole. It was down in a wash and the yard was full of water. Decorating the place like yard art was a worn-out washing machine, the lid up, the drum overflowing with beer cans. Near that, like a dead companion, a refrigerator lay on its side with the door off; its interior was nasty black with moss and grime and an abandoned bird's nest.

Out to the side of the house I could see some kind of heavy machinery and a truck under a weathered tarp. There was just enough visible that I could tell that, but not enough to identify the machinery or the make of the truck.

Bacon coasted slowly through the water, drove right up to the front porch, which sagged a little and dripped water. Worse yet, it looked like the porch was holding the house up. The house looked to have been made mostly of plywood and suspicious two-by-fours pried off a burned-out building. The roof was primarily tin and the rest was tar paper and the water ran off it in great gushes.

Bacon got out, waded to the front porch, which drooped beneath his steps, and opened the front door. He went inside for a moment, came back, opened my door, said, "You gonna have to help me with watermelon head here, Mr. Hap."

"I'm an injured man," I said. "Couldn't you carry me in and leave him here?"

Bacon grinned. "You sore. You banged, but you're all right enough. They spent their steam on your buddy."

"Thank God," I said. "They could have hurt me."

I eased out of the car into ankle-deep water. I felt as if someone had wrapped me in razor wire and set me on fire with a blowtorch. I found I couldn't completely straighten up. Bacon opened the back door, got Leonard under the arms and pulled him forward, out of the car. “Get his feet,” Bacon said.

“I just hope that damn hat don’t fall off his dick,” I said.

It was painful, but we got Leonard inside, carried him into one of the three small rooms—a bedroom. It was actually pretty cozy in there, considering there was no heat, and it looked a hell of a lot better than the exterior. One corner of the room sported a commode and a bathtub right out in the open. Half the room had carpet in it that might have once been beige, but was now greasy brown with a flecking of black spots that wasn’t design.

“The decor,” Bacon said, “is late slave or early nigger.”

I saw what Bacon had done when he went inside. He’d gotten a paint-splattered drop cloth and put it over the bed, and we put Leonard on top of that. There was a little heater in the corner of the room, and Bacon lit that while I took off Leonard’s shoes. Bacon got a couple of army blankets out from under the bed and laid them over Leonard without removing the hat from Leonard’s crotch.

We went back to the living room. It was small with a shelf of dust-covered knickknacks, a well-worn couch, a large space heater, and a coffee table bearing an ancient television set festooned with foil-covered rabbit ears. Bacon saw me looking at it. He said, “I didn’t have to eat regular, I’d get me a satellite dish.”

“Quit running yourself down,” I said. “I hurt too much to feel sorry for you.”

“You think I’m running myself down, then you full of shit. Don’t sit on the couch there till you get out of them piss-clothes.”

“What am I gonna do, sit around in the nude?”

Bacon disappeared into the bedroom, came out with a pair of khaki pants, some dry black socks, and a plaid shirt.

“You gonna have to let it all hang. I ain’t got no clean underwear.”

I went to the bedroom, moving slow, bent over like Quasimodo, and took off my clothes. There was a full-length mirror leaning against the wall, and I looked at myself in that. My face was swollen, there was dried blood on my upper lip and over my eyes, knots the size of Ping-Pong balls swelled out of my forehead, and there were great black-and-blue bumps and bruises all over my body. Even my balls were swollen and blue. I had to hold them with the palm of my hand to keep them from hurting as I stepped into the tub and cleaned myself. It was a painful ordeal. The hot water was slow to come and cooled quickly.

I put my pants and shirt in the tub with me, ran water over them, twisted the water out best I could, draped them over the faucets. The water that ran out of the tub didn't go down a drain, it went straight to the ground. I could feel the cool air whistling up under the house, blowing through the tub's drain. It was a simple approach to plumbing. Easy. Efficient. And a bad idea.

I got out and dried on a suspicious-looking towel and put on the clothes Bacon had given me. The pants were too long, so I cuffed them. The shirt was big and loose and felt good on my damaged body.

I went over to the commode to take a leak. The pot's interior was dark with urine stains. It looked as if the last time it was clean was when it came out of the box. I pissed, and the piss was full of blood.

I'd had it happen before. It does that, you take good shots to the kidneys, but it was always scary to see.

I flushed, wondered if the contents of the toilet went straight to the dirt below the house along with that of the tub, then picked up my socks and shoes, stopped by the bed and looked at Leonard.

It was all I could do not to cry, he looked so bad. I touched him gently on the shoulder, went to the living room. I sat on the couch, put the socks and shoes beside it. I said, "What about this doctor?"

"He gonna be here," Bacon said. "Mrs. Rainforth called him. Told him we was comin'. He live on the far side of here. Probably be a few minutes. If the rain's worse on his side, he's flooded out, who knows?"

The third room was a kitchen, but it was a room only by definition of containing a butane stove, a refrigerator, a sink, a table with chairs, and a large lard bucket that collected water dripping from a hole in the ceiling. There was a window over the sink, but a big square of warped ply board had been nailed over that. Bacon lit the greasy cook stove and the space heater, and the house, small as it was, began to warm.

Bacon said, “You gonna be here just a little bit, then I’m gonna run you off. I don’t want no trouble with them Ku Kluxers. You want some coffee?”

“Might as well. Jesus, I don’t know when I been hurt this bad and was still able to stand. I mean, I been hurt worse, but not in this way.”

I was thinking about being shot. That had been damn serious, and scary too. Leonard had been hit worse, and he almost lost a leg. But those times were not times I liked to think about often.I had a feeling this little escapade wasn’t going to be one of my top ten on memory lane either.

“You think you hurt now, give it a couple hours, tomorrow morning,” Bacon said. “You be stiff as a young bull’s dick, only not as happy. You know that was all a setup don’t you?”

“Back at the cafe?”

“Uh huh. They layin’ for you and the other’n. Mr. Hat Over His Dick.”

“Leonard,” I said.

“They just waiting for you to be where they want you, and I guess the cafe got as good as they could get. I think Mr. Jackson, him not liking Mrs. Rainforth had somethin’ to do with it too. He don’t go to the cafe. Never. Not even for coffee. Reckon he figured he was gonna shit off the papers, he oughta do it someone else’s place. Someplace where there was plenty of folks behind him. They don’t show a little support, they could lose jobs. ’Sides, I think they really liked beatin’ on y’all.”

“They did seem jovial. I would have thought he’d have picked a more private spot.”

“He might have. But I figure, right now, he just want to run you off ’cause you askin’ too many questions. He like to sport a little for the town too, keep showin’ ’em who’s boss. Show the law don’t worry him none.”

I lay down on the couch very carefully. It was damned uncomfortable and smelled musty. I turned my head and saw the shelf of dust-covered knickknacks. I said, “You don’t look like a man likes knickknacks."

"Can't live without them. I had my way, I'd have a room with them and nothing else. Especially they was ceramics of little kitties or ducks.… Them's my wife's."

"Where is she?"

"Dead."

"Hell, I'm sorry."

"I ain't. I been meaning to sack up that shit of hers for years,throw it out, but I just ain't had the time. Ain't got no milk, want some sugar in yours?"

"Just black," I said.

"Way I like my women," he said. He brought the coffee in, said, "Sit up, man, I got to have some room. 'Sides, I got a program to watch. I like the noon news. I like to know who's killin' who."

"I'm injured here."

"Sit up anyway."

I managed myself to a sitting position, slid down to the far end of the couch and took the coffee he was offering me. "Thanks," I said.

"Don't make nothing of it. I was gonna fix me some anyway."

Bacon turned on the television, adjusted the rabbit ears for a while, did everything with them except tie them in a knot, but he didn't get a picture. Just snow.

"Shit," he said, and turned off the set. "Guess we got to talk."

"Do you think Jackson Brown did it? Hung the fella in the jail?"

"Bobby Joe? If ever anybody needed hangin', it was that sonofabitch."

"He's certainly popular around here. I haven't talked to anyone liked him."

"Nothing to like. I enjoyed puttin' him down."

"Come again."

"I buried that fool. Dug the hole for him, anyway. I do backhoe work, I'm asked. Make a little on the side, digging ditches, sewer lines, and graves. Gotta stay on top of stuff, you gonna make ends meet."

Now I knew what kind of machinery was under the tarp.

"Well, do you think Brown did it?"

"He may not have done it himself, but he probably behind it, 'cause I don't think Bobby Joe hung himself. I think he con that white sonofabitch down here with that music business, thinking he gonna get big money out of him, then Bobby Joe got drunk, and didn't think it through, decided to go for the short change. Just killed him for what he had in his wallet. Bobby Joe like that. Mean as ass rash. He might just thought it would be funny to see that peckerwood squirm. You know how they found that white man?"

"No."

"Hung by his heels from a tree with his throat cut."

"Damn. Taking another angle on the subject, thing we came here for, Bacon, reason we ended up takin' this beatin', is we're trying to find a woman."

"What man ain't?"

"A certain woman. Named Florida. Good-lookin' young black woman, came here not long back? You saw her, you'd remember her."

"That black fox? Shoot, she here fifteen minutes, everyone knew it. Every hard dick in niggertown was after her, and the peckerwoods was watchin' too. I was still able to trot, I'd have been after her."

"She was interested in the Soothe case. She was here to look into it. Do you know what happened to her?"

"She a fool. Come down this side of town talking about how she wanted to maintain Bobby Joe Soothe's legacy, like he had one. It was ole L.C. had the legacy. Bobby Joe could pick a guitar some, but he was a scum hole, and a scum hole don't deserve no legacy, 'sides that hole I dug for 'm. If'n he'd a takin' up preachin', he'd have been the perfect villain. As was, he once cut up his nephew."

"I heard that story."

"Hear about the German shepherd?"

“Yeah.”

“Well, that ain’t true. That ole dog was part collie.”

“I don’t suppose you caught the dog’s name?”

“Ralph. Tell you another one. Bobby Joe, he goin’ to one of the joints, and he stepped in some cat shit by the door. Fella owns the joint, he got all kinds of cats. Don’t really take good care of ’em none. Just lets ’em run wild. Throws a little food out the back, and well, them cats ain’t spayed, and next to a rat and rabbit, ain’t nothing likes to fuck better’n a cat. So they always makin’ baby cats. Cat shit all over that place. Bobby Joe, he did his drinkin’ there ’cause everyone was scared of him, and he liked that. He liked to go a place where people was afraid of him. Made him feel like a big dick. Anyways, he steps in this cat shit, and you know what he does?”

“I can’t even begin to guess.”

“He goes in and gets him a beer mug, and he scoops up some cat crap with it, then he comes in and makes the owner buy himself a beer. You know, take money out of his own pocket and put it in the register.”

“Least he gets the money back,” I said.

“That’s right. Who says life ain’t fair. Well, Bobby Joe makes this owner, Tiny Joe Timpson, called that ’cause he’s big as a bear standing on a block of wood, makes this guy pour that beer on top of the cat shit, and drink it. And Bobby Joe, he ain’t no big guy. Ain’t no midget, but ain’t no big guy either. That Tiny, he done killed six folks this year. Caught two of em breakin’ in the place, killed two others ’cause he was fuckin’ around with their wives and they caught on, and done killed two women. One of ’em ’cause she got mad Tiny was keepin’ her husband down at the bar all hours of the night. She complained and words got tossed, then Tiny shot her. Called it self-defense. Cantuck, he looked into it, but wasn’t no one contradicted Tiny. Said she tried to kill him with a beer mug.”

“What about the other woman?”

“She was asleep in the driveway, and he backed over her.”

“She pass out there?”

“Yeah, right after Tiny hit her in the head with a Coke bottle.”

“Cantuck didn’t do nothing?”

“He tried, but black folks, they keep things to themselves, and the white folks, they let ’em. But you can see the kind of guy Tiny is, and this Bobby Joe, he makes Tiny drink this beer with the cat shit in it.”

“Man, I don’t think that’ll catch on.”

“Tiny made sure it didn’t. Next day, he got his shotgun, and he shot all them cats, and when he run out of shells he beat the rest of ’em to death. He wouldn’t even hang a picture of a cat in his place now. That cat shit, it’s always right there in the back of his throat.”

“I wasn’t under the impression Florida was here to find out about his legacy. She was planning to write some kind of article on him.”

“Heard some of the guys say somethin’ about that, but I don’t know about it. She liked to hang over at the roadhouse, talk to people about Bobby Joe like he was some kind of star. She wanted to buy his guitar, music tapes, stuff like that. She had the money for it and she told anyone would listen to her she did. Them boys over there, they was tellin’ her all that shit about how L.C. and Bobby Joe sold their souls to the devil at the crossroads and drank the devil’s piss and such to play guitar, and she was eatin’ it up.”

“I don’t understand why she’d talk to just anyone about buying Soothe’s stuff.”

“’Cause she couldn’t find none of L.C.’s or Bobby Joe’s stuff on her own, and his relatives didn’t have nothin’ of his, didn’t want nothing to do with him. They were scared of him. Hell, he used to rape his own sister. They say a female dog run across the yard, he’d chase it down, fuck it and kill it. They wasn’t no sorrier sonofabitch than Bobby Joe. He born bad, man. All that legacy stuff started ’cause Bobby Joe did a little playin’ around Tyler, and someone on some magazine or paper or somethin’ interviewed him, and he told all these stories about how he had L.C.’s stuff, and he talked that voodoo jive, said he had some unpublished songs L.C. had written out, and he had a couple songs on tape was recorded way back but never put on record.”

“Did he?”

“Not that I know of. Not that anyone I know knew of.”

“You’re sayin’ Florida was fishing?”

“And she was offering money for information. Lots of money. Them madhouse lizards, about half of ’em ain’t worth a shit. They’d tell her anything she want to hear they think they might make’m a dollar or get ’em some pussy. And it piss me off when anyone try to make somethin’ special out of that nigger. He was sorry, just plain sorry. He meet that white boy at a roadhouse here. I seen ’em there. I was drinking a beer and watching ’em, and ole Bobby Joe had that white boy eating out his hand. Talkin’ that music shit, playing like he some kind of jive nigger, and that ole white boy, he just shakin’ his head like he was talkin’ to some kind of god. He was talkin’ to the devil, that’s who he was talkin’ to. They left together in that white boy’s car, and wasn’t more’n a couple hours after that, they found that peckerwood with his throat cut, hanging from a tree just off the highway, right by the goddamn road led up to Bobby Joe’s house. Bobby Joe smart in one way, but in another he just a drunk field hand with a bad temper. He didn’t think no farther than the length of his dick or the deep of his thirst. That’s the way he was, and that’s all there was to it.

“All that voodoo shit didn’t do him no good when that Officer Reynolds show up. After ole Officer find out about that dead white boy, he went over to the roadhouse, asked around, and me and some others told him we’d seen Bobby Joe and the white boy together, seen ’em leave together, and when ole shitass Officer kick Bobby Joe’s door off the hinges, there’s that drunk fuck sittin’ at the table with that peckerwood’s watch and wallet, countin’ the money. Bobby Joe tried to fight that big cop with his guitar, and Officer just tore that all to hell, then ole Officer stomped the stuffin’ out Bobby Joe, opened that boy’s mouth, made him bite the edge of the table, then slammed him in the back of the head with his forearm, knocked out all of his front teeth.”

“I believe that’s police brutality.”

“Way the law works here. You don’t fuck with the white law. ’Course, Bobby Joe had it comin’. Law or anyone couldn’t have done nothin’ to that jackass would have bothered me.”

“How do you know it happened like that?”

“Filipine told me.”

“Filipine?”

“That’s what we call fella lives down the road here. His mama black, but his father was one of them Filipinos. He went with Officer to show him where Bobby Joe lived. He probably didn’t have no choice but to go. Didn’t want to go, ole Officer would have kicked his ass up around his ears.”

I thought about all that, realized suddenly why Florida had withdrawn her money from the bank. She was a woman with a plan. A bigger one than I had first thought. She saw herself not only as some sort of crusader, but as someone who was going to preserve a heritage, and maybe get some notoriety in the process. She had envisioned Bobby Joe as some kind of Robert Johnson. Magazine articles. A book. TV movies. That would be her approach. Florida was one ambitious rascal. She’d most likely given up her apartment with plans to live here, near her subject matter.

I heard a car splashing through the water outside and became, to put it mildly, tense.

Bacon got up, went to the window, pulled back the curtain and looked out. “Doctor,” he said.

The doctor came in wet and old, bald-headed and grumpy. The black skin on his forehead was deeply wrinkled, the wrinkles sagged like worn-out Venetian blinds. The water beaded on his gray slicker like blisters on a rhino’s hide. He had a bag in his hand, not a little black bag, but a big red plastic bag, as if he’d just come from shopping at a toy store. He sat the bag down, took off the slicker and dropped it on the floor and the water pooled beneath it.

“What the fuck you doin’ to my floor?” Bacon asked.

The doctor looked the place over, then looked at Bacon. “Say what?”

“Yeah, well, all right,” Bacon said.

The doctor picked up his bag, and Bacon led him back to where Leonard lay. A moment later Bacon came from the bedroom and shut the door, said, “He always was a dickhead. But he’s a good doctor. Only lost a few dogs he's worked on, and they'd been hit real bad by cars. He do all right with horses too. He's had a lot of cats die on him, but I never did give a shit about the outcome of cats."

"He's a veterinarian?"

"He do a little side work, it comes up. Only real black doctor lives fifty miles away, and I'll tell you now, in this rain, this being Grovetown, he wouldn't have come."

"Great. A vet."

Twenty minutes went by and the doctor came out of the bedroom with his big red plastic bag and sighed. "How bad is he?" I asked.

"Looks hell of a lot worse than he is. Took a good beatin', but folks doin' it didn't do too special a job, all things considered. He's a tough sonofabitch, and he'll be all right. I worked on a hog like that once. Some kids climbed in a pen with a bunch of hogs, took baseball bats to 'em, but this old boar took a good beatin', got one of the kids down and ate part of his face 'fore the kid could get out of the pen."

"So he'll be all right?"

"Not tomorrow, but he'll heal. Don't seem to have no real internal injuries, which surprises me."

"He knows something about covering up, going with the flow," I said. "Experience."

"I put his dick in his pants, by the way."

"That's good," Bacon said. "Me and him wouldn't do it."

"I wore gloves," the doctor said. "Well, let me look you over, whitey. Take off them duds."

I could hardly rise off the couch. In fact, I couldn't. Bacon got hold of me and lifted me up. He smelled of fried foods and sweat. My muscles ached deeply and I felt ill to my stomach. Standing was the most painful thing I'd ever done next to paying taxes. I gingerly unbuttoned my shirt and the doctor helped me take it off. My skin had turned purple and black and green where I had taken shots from fists and feet. The lump on the side of my head hurt the worst.

The doctor poked and prodded, felt and looked. He said, "That one there, that’s a shoe caught you.”

“Reckon so,” I said. “Can’t say as I was takin’ notes.”

“Take off your pants.”

I did. My balls were the color of plums going to rot and were doubled in size.

“You better get you some underwear,” the doctor said. “These dudes swinging will make you see elephants.”

“I hear that,” I said. “They aren’t ruined are they?”

“No. They’ll heal. Ought to get you some Epsom salts, put it in the tub with hot water and soak for an hour or so every day.” He looked at my head. “This is really the worse shot you got. You have any memory loss?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Ha. Ha,” the doc said. Nobody had a sense of humor anymore.

“Bacon, you watch him. He shows trouble remembering, repeating of phrases, then … well, I don’t know. Give him a couple of aspirins, keep him awake.”

“Shit, man, he ain’t my problem. I don’t even know this guy.He go to sleep and die, it ain’t my fault. He die, it won’t be on my head. I’ll sleep like a lawyer. It wasn’t me got him into this. Him and ole Swole Head in there is the one’s crapped in their nest, not me.”

“Well, that’s between you and him,” said the doc. “He ain’t none of my problem neither.”

“Sure I am,” I said. “You’re a man of medicine.”

“Just counts on animals. Someone found I was checkin’ on you, they’d take my license. ’Sides, you seem all right to me.” He poked me in the ribs with his finger. “That hurt?”

“Hell yeah.”

“Good. I’m through. You gonna live. Just stay out of trouble for a while. I tell you, both you boys, you the luckiest fellas I’ve seen. Ain’t neither one of you look like much, but you’re both tough as a roadhouse steak. The one in there, his head wasn’t like that before the beatin’ was it?”

“No.”

“Then he’s tough, not just ugly. Y’all be all right. That’s sixty dollars apiece."

"Apiece?" I said. "What do you charge dogs?"

"I don't charge them nothin', but their owners pay me sixty dollars apiece for a lookover like this."

"We get anything for pain?"

"My sympathies and Bacon's aspirin. I can't be dolin' out medicine. I'm a vet."

"Hell," I said, and gave him some of the money Charlie had given me.

About ten P.M. the rain slacked. I hadn't moved much from my position on the couch, and that had been a mistake. I was very stiff now. Bacon fixed some fried egg sandwiches and finally got the TV to work. He found an old black-and-white movie about gangsters, interspersed with long stupid commercials, and we watched it. When we finished the sandwiches, Bacon said, "You want some whiskey? I likes a little jolt or two before bedtime."

"I gave up drinking anything but nonalcoholic beer."

"You a drunk?"

"Nope. Just felt it wasn't healthy."

"I'm gonna take me a little jolt. All that pain and such, you might want you a little."

"Oh, all right, what the hell, just a shot."

He poured us both some in plastic glasses and gave me a handful of aspirin. I took the aspirin and we sipped and watched the movie. I finished off my whiskey and began to nod. The gangsters were taking another gangster for a ride when I lost track of the plot. Next thing I knew it was morning.

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I tried to get up and go pee, but it wasn't as easy as I would have hoped. It was a job just to get my legs over the side of the couch.

I saw Bacon in the kitchen, sleeping on a cot with a blanket pulled over him. I finally got up and old-man-stepped to the bedroom/bathroom, pissed and checked on Leonard. He opened his eyes and looked at me.

"I got to go," he said.

I pulled back the covers, discovered he had been dressed by the doctor in some of Bacon's old clothes. Helping him took about twenty minutes from bed to toilet. I wasn't all that brisk myself. Leonard took a leak and looked in the mirror. "Oh, my God," he said. "I look like the Elephant Man." I led him back to bed. We were doing better, it only took ten minutes to get back.

"I feel awful," he said. "Where are we?"

I filled him in.

"Bacon? His name is Bacon?"

"Yeah, and he's grumpy. The doctor, you remember him?"

"Not really."

"He was grumpy too. And he's a vet, not a real doctor."

"That figures."

"Everybody is grumpy in Grovetown. I want to go home."

"Me too. Hap?"

"Yeah."

"This Bacon, he can't hear me, can he?"

"No."

"Then I got to tell you, just between you and me, I was really scared. I mean really. I don't know I could face any of them guys again. I'd wet myself."

"You already have."

"Oh yeah."

"And I forgot to tell you, you cut a big fart when you fell down in the alley. I was really embarrassed for you. And they messed up your hat too."

"I looked good in that hat."

"No, you didn't."

"I been whipped before, but not like that," Leonard said. "I've never been humiliated that way. I've strapped three and four fuckers at a time. So have you. Like the assholes next door. The crack house. I whipped them like they were nothing."

"In this case, we were vastly outnumbered, the space was small, we did not have the element of surprise, we're older today than we were yesterday, and to be just goddamn honest, Leonard, those bastards, young and old and female, were about as tough and determined as any I've fought, and they came on like a tidal wave. Under the circumstances we did pretty good, and the fact that we're mostly bushed and stove up and not broken and killed is due to the fact that we have some manly skills in the art of self-defense."

"I figure we just lucked out."

"Actually, me too."

"I really want to go home. For the first time, I really want to give up. Why'd you have to tell me about the fart and the dick part? The pissin' on myself was bad enough."

"I didn't think you'd want it coming from someone else. And besides, misery loves company."

"We were certainly cocky before all this, weren't we?"

"You were. I wasn't."

"Now I don't know if I want to shit or wind my watch."

We sat for a while, not saying anything. I said, "You hear the joke about the lonesome cowpokes."

"Ah, Hap, not now."

"Just to cheer you up."

"You can't tell a joke for shit, Hap."

"You see, there was this cowboy town, and this guy rides in—"

"Hap, please."

"—and he goes to the bar, and he has a few drinks—"

"You're going to do this anyway, aren't you?"

"—and after he gets pretty lubricated, he says to the bartender, 'Where are all the gals? Hell, I ain't had a woman in six months.' "

"Is this going to be sexist?"

"Probably."

"Well, all right, go ahead, even if it's the wrong sex for me."

"We can change it to a gay cowboy. The line is now, 'I ain't had a man's ass in six months.' We have to take for granted that this is sort of a progressive cowboy bar, okay?"

"Just get it over with."

"So, the bartender says, 'Hell, there ain't no gals … guys.' You know, Leonard, for this one to work it has to be gals."

"Okay. Whatever."

"The bartender says, 'There ain't no gals, but we got something we do for that little problem.' Cowboy says, 'Yeah, what's that?' And the bartender says, 'Show 'em, boys.' So the boys take the cowboy out back of the saloon, and there's this watermelon patch."

"I see this coming."

"No you don't. They take him over to the fence and he looks at the watermelons growing there, says, 'I don't get it,' and one of the cowboys says, 'We just cut us a plug out of one of these melons, and on a hot night like this, we fuck it, and it feels damn good.' "

"This is disgusting, Hap. Go on."

"So the cowboy, he's, to put it mildly, shocked, but as we have established he hasn't had any in six months, so he climbs over the fence, looks around, sees him a fine-lookin' melon, one of those striped rattlesnake melons, and damn if he don't actually feel a little something for it. A stirrin'. He picks it up, takes out his pocketknife, starts to cut him out a plug, when suddenly all the cowboys gasp and fall back. He turns, looks at them. Says, 'Hey, what's wrong?'

" 'Why stranger,' one of 'em says, 'you're playin' with fire. That's Johnny Ringo's girl.' "

A long moment of silence, then Leonard sighed. "Oh God. It's worse than I thought. That's tasteless. Which is okay. But it's not funny."

"Is too."

"No, it isn't. Hap?"

"Yeah."

"You know what?"

"Yeah. One way or the other, we got to finish what we started."

Leonard wasn't much fun. He hadn't liked my joke and fell asleep while I was talking to him. I went back to the living room. Bacon was up. He had put the cot away. He was wearing boxer shorts with flowers on them, a stained T-shirt, and old brown slippers. He was standing by the stove. He said, "Want a scrambled egg, somethin'?"

"Egg is fine."

"How about two and some biscuits?"

"All right."

I went into the kitchen and sat at the table. It was warm in the kitchen. Bacon had slept with the oven lit and the oven door open. He took a can of biscuits out of the fridge and whacked it on the edge of the counter, plucked the biscuits out and snapped them into a greased pan. He paused to scratch his ass, went back to his business. I tried to keep an eye on which biscuits he handled after the ass scratching, so I could locate them in the pan.

He put the pan in the oven, closed the door, went to cracking eggs. "You feel any better?"

"A mite. More than I ever expected."

"You're lucky the couple guys knew how to really throw punches were the ones y'all took out right at first. They can do some damage, them two. See 'em again, won't be so easy. They weren't expecting all that Jap stuff."

"Korean, actually. Hapkido."

"All the same to me. See 'em again, they gonna come on hard, if they don't shoot you."

"I don't want to see them again. I want to go home."

"There's an idea. You damn sure ain't stayin' here. You look well enough to me to stay somewheres else, and I wish you would. I don't want no more troubles than I got."

Bacon cracked eggs in a bowl, poured some milk from a carton into the bowl and started whipping them up. He poured the results in a lightly oiled frying pan, stirred them as they cooked.

A moment later the food was on plates. He pulled the biscuits out of the oven, sat the pan on the counter. "Your buddy want to eat?"

"I'd appreciate it if you'd make the trip to go ask him."

"You don't move them muscles, much as they hurt, you're just gonna get stiffer'n shit."

I sighed, made my way to the bedroom. Leonard was asleep. By the time I got back Bacon was through eating. Half the biscuits were gone. There wasn't any margarine left for the biscuits, just a greasy wrapper, and the eggs on my plate were cool.

I eyed the biscuit pan. Two of the biscuits were the ones Bacon had handled after scratching his ass. I ate the others, and the eggs.

"What happened on the movie last night?" I asked. "I fell asleep."

"These two guys, they got roughed up, so they decide to go back and do the guys in did it to 'em. They got killed."

"Did not," I said.

"You're right. They went home and lived happily ever after, and the guy they was stayin' with 'fore they did got him some peace and goddamn quiet and died with a hard-on."

"Did not."

"I got to go to work. There's Epsom salts by the tub, you want to soak."

"Bacon?"

"Yeah."

“Thanks for letting me sleep on the couch, taking the cot and all.”

“Don’t keep expectin’ it. I didn’t get paid that much. I don’t reckon no one knows where you are right now, but give it a few days, it’ll get out. Word always gets out.”

I got out my wallet and gave Bacon a twenty. I said, “For food.”

“Thanks,” he said.

“I’d appreciate it if you’d get some vanilla cookies. Leonard likes vanilla cookies a lot.”

“Vanilla cookies,” Bacon said, and left for work.

21

Around five o’clock that afternoon the rain stopped. I was at the window looking at the sky, the dark line of trees below it and the highway beyond the water-covered yard. The sky looked strange. All red and swollen, as if it were bleeding behind transparent skin. The highway was red with sunlight and glistened like a fresh-licked strawberry freeze pop. As I watched, a car splashed into view, turned off the highway onto where the drive would have been had it not been covered by water.

It was Bacon’s old wreck. Two cars pulled in behind him. I felt my innards churn, then saw one of the cars was Leonard’s and Tim was driving. The windshield had been knocked out on the passenger’s side and black plastic had been stretched across it and held there with gray tape. The driver’s side still had glass, but it was fractured and webbed.

The other car was the Chief’s car, and Cantuck was by himself. Bacon got out with a grocery sack in his arms, stood by his car in the ankle-deep water with his head hung, as if he had just been forced to give all the dogs at the pound a blow job; then write a favorable report on it.

I let the curtain drop, went to check on Leonard. He was awake. I propped him up, told him who was out there, then we heard the front door open. I went into the living room, leaving the bedroom door wide so Leonard could look out and hear.

Tim managed to come inside first. He looked tired and vacant-eyed. He needed a shave. He didn’t quite look at me. He sort of smiled out of the corner of his mouth. I figured I wasn’t much to look at.

Bacon eased inside carrying his dripping shoes and socks in one hand, the grocery sack in the other. He sat the sack on the television, reached inside, got out a bag of vanilla cookies, tossed them at me. “Little goin’-away present.”

I caught the cookies, let them dangle by my side.

Cantuck was standing in the open doorway, carefully scraping mud off his boots with the bottom of the door frame. He finished and closed the door. His right cheek was stuffed with chewing tobacco and his ruptured nut looked extra lumpy today, as if it might burst open at any moment giving birth to deformed twins. When he spoke, flecks of dark tobacco juice jumped from his mouth and onto his lips.

"Where's the Smartest Nigger in the World?"

"In the bedroom. Right now, he's the Most Swole Up Nigger in the World."

Cantuck didn't look in the direction of the open bedroom door. He said to me, "You boys know a fella named Charlie? Cop in LaBorde?"

"Charlie Blank?" I said.

"That's the boy," Cantuck said. "He called up the office. Said to tell you boys to come on home. Said to say a fella you know, a colored cop named Marvin Hanson was in a coma."

"A coma?"

"Got drunk, wrecked his car on the way here last night. Got caught in the rainstorm, run off the road and didn't have on a seat belt. Hit a tree. Jolt shot him through the windshield, bounced his coconut off a limb after he went through a barbed wire fence."

"Oh shit," Leonard said.

"This Charlie, he said you'd want to know, and to tell you to come home. I told him I'd pack your bags for you. And I have."

"We went by the trailer and got your stuff," Tim said. He stood with his hands in his pockets, as if he might reach down far enough to find a crawl space into which to pull himself. "Leonard's car, the window's busted out of it."

"I saw," I said.

"Goddammit," Leonard said.

"Don't know who did it," Tim said. "They cut up the upholstery too, broke the tape player and all the tapes."

"Hank Williams too?" Leonard asked.

"I don't know," Tim said, looking toward the bedroom. "I reckon. They put all the pieces in the glove box. They slashed all your tires. I replaced them. Bill's in the glove box with the tapes. I know it's a bad time, but I got to remind you, I need my money."

"You'll get it," I said. "How bad is Hanson?"

"A coma's bad," Cantuck said. "You know all I know."

"How'd you know we were here?" I asked.

"I told them," Tim said.

"And how did you know?" I said.

"Maude told me. I went over to apologize for the way my father acted. Or rather to distance myself from the old bastard. Got a little carpenter work too, fixing what y'all wrecked. I can use the money. I said I was a friend, she told me how bad you two were hurt, where you were. I told the Chief, offered to bring out your car."

"Great," I said. "And I guess Officer Reynolds knows where we are too?"

"No," Cantuck said. "I didn't tell him. There's places where me and him don't see eye-to-eye."

"Only because he's taller," I said.

Cantuck grinned at me. "You really don't know me, son. Not even a bit. Hey, Bacon, where can I spit this shit?"

Bacon disappeared into the kitchen. I heard him scrounging around in the garbage. I sat down on the couch. I was past standing up. Bacon came back with an empty corn can. Cantuck took it, spat a cancerous wad of chewing tobacco into it, sat the can on top of the television next to Bacon's grocery sack.

Bacon said, "You was gonna have to leave anyway, Mister Hap."

"Before you head out," Chief Cantuck said, "let me give you a little report.… Bacon, got any coffee?"

"Yes sir."

"Make us some."

"Yes sir."

I watched sadly as the old black man shuffled into the kitchen.

He had gained ten years and lost twenty points off his IQ the moment Cantuck arrived.

The Chief took hold of a rickety chair, straddled it carefully, adjusted his nut, said: “On this gal.”

“Florida,” I said.

“Yeah, well, you boys may be right. I think maybe she might be in trouble. Or beyond it.”

“No shit,” Leonard called out.

“There’s stuff don’t add up,” Cantuck said. “Tim, give me that spit can.”

Tim, with a scrunched face, picked the can off the television set and handed it to Cantuck by holding it with thumb and forefinger. Cantuck put the can in front of him on the chair, peeled back his coat, pulled a pack of Beech-Nut from his shirt pocket. He carefully unfolded the pack and opened it. The smell of the tobacco was fresh and sweet, like syrup on pancakes. Too bad it didn’t taste that way.

Cantuck poked tobacco into his mouth as if packing a cannon. He worked his mouth a little, wiped spittle on his sleeve and said, “There’s some kind of tie-in in all this. Bobby Joe’s death, this Florida gal missing.”

“So we’re not quite the assholes you thought,” I said.

“No, you’re assholes all right,” Cantuck said, “you’re just a little smarter than I expected.”

I could hear Leonard moving in bed, trying to find a better listening position.

“This mornin’ a Texas Ranger came down with the County Sheriff, Tad Griffin. They had a fella with ’em. Some kind of coroner, or dead body expert, whatever them sonofabitches are.”

“Forensics,” Tim said.

“That’s it,” Cantuck said. “They come to dig up that dead nigra. Bobby Joe. Wanted to see if he’d hung himself or someone hung him. They got ways of tellin’. Did you know that?”

“All I know I get from the movies,” I said.

“They look at the marks on his neck, the strangle marks, and they can somehow tell if he did it himself or had help. Or so they claim. I'm not sure they really know shit."

Cantuck paused, poked two fingers into his mouth to line his chewing tobacco up right, then wiped the fingers on his pants.

"I'll bite," I said. "Was he hung, or did he commit suicide?"

"Don't know," Cantuck said.

"When will you know?" I said.

"No idea, because they didn't find the body," Cantuck said.

"What?"

"I put him down," Bacon said. "You was there."

"I know," Cantuck said. "Went out there, dug where he was supposed to be, and he wasn't there. Wasn't nothing there, unless you want to count earthworms. Big old bastards. Make good fishing bait."

"You're sure he was in the coffin to begin with?" I asked.

"He was there," Cantuck said. "I went out and supervised the burial. Bobby Joe's family wouldn't have nothing to do with him. Thought he had the taint of the devil on him. Was a voodoo person, they said. I was at the undertaker's when they closed him up in his box, and I was there with a Baptist reverend when they put him down in the colored pauper's field. Bacon dug the original hole. I watched him dig it."

"Colored?" Leonard called out. "You can't be consistent, can you, Chief? Are we niggers, colored, or nigras?"

"Take your pick," Cantuck said.

"Just as long as you don't use a term like People of Color," Leonard said.

"Don't worry," Cantuck said. "I won't."

"You mean someone stole the body?" I said.

"Unless it turned into a worm and crawled off. Coffin, body. Gone. Bobby Joe wasn't embalmed 'cause wasn't nobody paying for it, so whoever took the body had'm a pretty ripe job."

"Any ideas who might have stolen it?" I asked.

"Few," Cantuck said, changing his tobacco to the opposite cheek. "Could be kids fuckin' around, some of that Satanist shit."

"Oh, come on, Chief," I said.

“Didn’t say it was,” Cantuck said. “Said it could be. It could be other things. Folks might not want him buried out there near a loved one.”

“I know one family was real upset about it,” Bacon said. “They was upset enough, they could have moved him.”

“Who would that be?” I asked. “Mrs. Bella Burk’s folks,” Bacon said.

Cantuck nodded, picked up from there. “They come to me about it. Wasn’t nothing I could do. Burks didn’t want Bobby Joe laid down near their mama on account of him into black magic, not being baptized and all. Her people covered her grave with crucifixes, charms. They may have decided that wasn’t enough, dug him up and disposed of the body. They did, I wouldn’t hold it against them.”

“And if they didn’t,” I said, “what’s that leave?”

“What you might suspect,” Cantuck said. “What you been thinking all along. Someone got rid of the body so there’s no evidence Bobby Joe didn’t commit suicide. If he didn’t.”

“That’s the case,” I said, “him not committing suicide, someone might think your office could be involved. He didn’t hang himself, that points a finger at you, doesn’t it?”

“It do,” Cantuck said. “In fact, they’re thinkin’ along that line right now. Sheriff and Ranger told me that right out. Frankly, I’m startin’ to think that boy was hung.”

“While you were away, of course,” I said.

“Yeah, while I was away. I was there, he wouldn’t have been hung. He might have lived to have gotten the needle, but I wouldn’t allowed nothing like that. I keep tellin’ you that.”

“That’s right,” I said. “I thought I’d heard it before.”

“Man does a crime like that, sets it up way Bobby Joe did, had that stupid Yankee come down here with money to buy stuff didn’t exist … Well, the Yankee was stupid, but his only crime was being stupid, and legally, that ain’t no crime. Bobby Joe could have had that Yankee’s money without killin’ anyone. Could have conned that city fuck and come out good, but Bobby Joe thought it was too much fun to kill him. Maybe ’cause he was white. Maybe ’cause Bobby Joe was drunk. Maybe ’cause he just wanted to."

"Sounds more like it," Tim said.

"But there wasn't no excuse to gut him like a hog, do him the way he did," Cantuck said. "Even if he was a Yankee. I got nothin' but contempt for Bobby Joe."

"You and everybody else," Tim said.

"But," Cantuck continued, "he was in my jail, and I put a prisoner in my jail, he's supposed to be safe. People work for me are supposed to make sure he's safe. They don't, and I find out they didn't, then I'm gonna want to see they get a trip to the death house, get that needleful of shit in the dead man's place. I don't allow that kind of shit."

"Does Reynolds know you don't allow that kind of shit?" I said.

"I reminded him this mornin' after that body come up missin', and I told him if he had his fingers in any of this, well, I was gonna see they got cut off."

"How'd he take that?" I asked.

Cantuck paused. "Nervous. I thought he looked a little nervous when we went out to the gravesite, for that matter. And damn relieved when the body wasn't there."

"So, you think Reynolds was surprised it wasn't there?" I said.

"I don't think nothing."

"Meaning, he didn't move the body," Leonard said.

"Meaning nothing," Cantuck said. "I'm sayin' he looked nervous, then relieved. That could mean somethin', and it could mean diggin' up corpses don't give him a hard-on. Then, knowing he wasn't going to have to see a dead body after all, it cheered him up. I'll tell you, seeing a body don't give me no hard-on neither, so I can understand that. Fact is, ain't nothin' gives me a hard-on anymore."

"Not even chickens?" I said.

"Not even chickens," Cantuck said. "But I don't know, I look at them little pin feathers around a chicken's butthole long enough, maybe I'd heat up."

"Still," I said, "you're suspicious, aren't you?"

"Maybe."

“You went far enough to talk to Reynolds about it,” I said.

“I did it to see if the water rippled or splashed. It might have rippled a little, but it didn’t splash. Then again, Reynolds ain’t easy to read, and if I had my druthers I wouldn’t work with him. ’Sides, he’s fuckin’ my secretary, and she’s a married woman. I don’t like a man workin’ on a married, and I don’t much care the woman don’t mind givin’ it up. She’s got kids and a good husband. I had concrete evidence I’d fire ’em. And her a big churchgoer. You say shit, she acts like you just gave her a mouthful, and I know she’s fuckin’ that big sonofabitch every goddamn chance she gets. Can’t prove it, but I know it.”

“You sound jealous,” Tim said.

“I am a little. I don’t feel good about that, but I guess I am. I’ve thought about her some myself. I’d like to get my fingers in that hairdo. But I’m a married man, and a married man ain’t supposed to do stuff like that, so I don’t. Bible said it was okay to go around pokin’ any hole you wanted, I might look at it different, but it don’t say that.”

“Nice of you to tell us all about your office problems,” I said. “Come in here and shit all over your deputy.”

“Yeah,” Leonard yelled. “That’s damn white of you.”

“Can’t help myself,” Cantuck said. “I just plain don’t like Reynolds. I don’t like my secretary either.”

“You don’t like them, fire them,” I said.

“Not that easy. Charlene needs the job. She’s got them kids. And Reynolds, I didn’t hire him in the first place. Town pushed him on me. Actually, Brown pushed him on me through the Mayor. That’s the way politics are played, so I ended up taking him on. He’s good enough at what he does, but he ain’t all that fair about things. He’s crafty, but he lets personal get in the way.”

“You think Brown has Reynolds in his pocket?” I asked.

“Not his front pocket, right next to his dick, but his hip pocket maybe. Mainly Reynolds is just Reynolds. He does what he wants ’cause he wants to, and a lot of what he wants ain’t all that good.”

“Certainly nice of you to drop by and tell us all this, Chief,” I said. “Why?”

Cantuck considered a moment. He laid his hands on the back of the chair and leaned back. As he did, a shaft of red sunlight poked through the curtain and landed on his left eye. He jerked his head from the light and leaned forward again, said, “Reckon I should have taken this colored gal’s missin’ more serious.”

“And maybe you want us to feel so warm toward you we’ll go home and forget all this mess. Just leave it to you. Trust you to do what’s right.”

“Could be,” Cantuck said.

Bacon brought coffee in, two cups at a time. One for himself. He stood by the television and sipped his.

“What about all those guys jumped us?” I asked.

“Your word against theirs,” Cantuck said. “Draighten and Ray say they got into it with you two on their own. Claim there wasn’t no one else involved but them, and it was just y’all caused the ruckus.”

“You believe that?” I said.

“Don’t matter what I believe. We get through sortin’ it all out, it’ll come down to you two fought them two, and it’ll be your word, and Maude’s and her boys against all them other folks who saw it and say it didn’t happen way you say it did.”

“What if we press charges?”

“They’ll press charges back.”

“So what’s next?”

“We put your asses in your car and send you home.”

22

Leonard and I decided to wear our own clothes. Tim went out to Leonard's car and brought in our suitcases, then asked Bacon to drive him home. Bacon left with Tim, and I went into the bedroom and closed the door and changed clothes and helped Leonard dress. While I held him under the arm and he painfully slipped into his pants, he said, "You think the Chief is telling it the way it is?"

"I don't know," I said. I helped Leonard sit on the side of the bed, then folded up the clothes Bacon had given us and placed them on a chair.

I helped him into a shirt. He buttoned it slowly. He didn't look at me when he said, "I'm glad we're going home."

"Me too."

"There was a time when I thought I couldn't be broken, but I don't know now. I hear a sound, I get tense. I hear it twice, I damn near shit myself. I think it's that bunch coming down on me, all of them, and I figure right now, if I was solid and sound and they came, I might just ball up like a baby and let them have me."

"You wouldn't, Leonard. It's not in you."

"I wouldn't have thought that just a day or so ago, but I think now I've just been lucky."

"No one survives all you've been through and calls themselves lucky. Your problem is you've lost your boyfriend, taken a damn good beating, and everybody saw your dick. Not to mention you cut a fart and pissed on yourself."

"Thanks for reminding me."

"Trust me. You'll get over it."

"You comin' back here, Hap?"

"Come on, Leonard, let's go."

"Hap?"

"I don't know."

The Chief and I loaded Leonard into the back seat of the car with a blanket we borrowed from Bacon, and as a last thought, the Chief gave us his thermos. I took it inside and the Chief came in behind me. I poured what was left of Bacon's coffee into the thermos.

I said, "You wouldn't happen to have some sandwiches, would you, Chief?"

"You boys hit the road, and don't come back," he said. "You were fortunate this time. I see you again, and you get to stay at the jail a while. Like maybe till I retire."

"Been nice visiting your little town, Chief."

I took the thermos and went out to the car, the Chief walking behind me.

The sky was dark again. All the red had bled out. The Chief said, "You start now, you won't get home late, and you might beat the storm. It's coming, but it'll be at your back, you don't fuck around. You've got a full tank of gas, courtesy of me, and you got hot coffee and I don't want the thermos back. I don't want anything that'll have to do with me seeing you again. Comprende?"

"But we will get a Christmas card from you next year, won't we?"

"Sit out by the mailbox and wait on it. And, son, Happy New Year."

I opened the car door and tossed the thermos inside. A pillow had been laid across the ripped-up driver's seat, and I put my ass on that and started the car and turned on the lights.

As I backed out of the drive, the Chief lifted his fingers and waved bye-bye.

I drove until I reached the highway, then pulled over beside the road.

"What's up?" Leonard said.

"One minute," I said.

I got out and paused to look at the sky. It was dark all over, but behind us there was a greater wad of blackness, like soot-stained cotton, and it was balling and twisting and tumbling our way. The wind was cold and wet and smelled of lightning.

I opened the trunk of the car, got a handgun and the strapped Winchester and made sure they were loaded, brought them around, laid them in the front seat as I climbed behind the wheel.

“Thought you didn’t like guns,” Leonard said.

“Today, I’m trying to be more open and friendly toward them.”

“Let me have one for back here,” he said. “As a pacifier.”

I gave him the revolver and he put it in his waistband. I patted the stock of the Winchester on the seat beside me, said, “Good boy. Stay. Good boy.”

As I drove, the sky grew black as the bottom of an ancient outhouse. The trees alongside the highway became little more than an outline and appeared to be sketched from charcoal. The storm behind us was rolling faster than I was, and I could feel it as it descended on us like a heavy, alien cloud. Rain splashed the windshield and the tires began to sing in the water; a nasty little song that hinted of blown tires, skidding machinery, and twisting metal.

It had been hard enough to see with the cracked windshield, but now, with the rain coming down the way it was, it was damn near impossible. I slowed, leaned forward, tried to make out the yellow line so I could hold the car steady. I really should have pulled over, but I didn’t want to. Not until I had us and Grovetown many miles apart.

Another few miles and I glanced in the rearview mirror and saw lights. Then behind those lights, others. The lights were moving toward us pretty fast, much too fast for common sense in weather like this.

I watched the lights in the rearview mirror when I wasn’t struggling to hold Leonard’s junker on the road, and they were closing with a determined pace. I felt my bowels weaken, then the car was filled with the light. A big dark pickup was riding right on our bumper, so close, at a glance you might have thought I was towing it. The truck fell back, charged forward, fell back, broke around us and passed.

I glanced at the truck as it went around me. It was big and black and souped-up and rode on oversized tires that splattered the water on the highway with power and grace. You got the feeling that goddamn truck could ride on the surface of a lake. The windows were tinted and it had grown quite dark, so I couldn't see anyone inside. The pickup glided around us quickly, then way ahead, and I watched as its taillights bounced out of sight.

I glanced in the rearview mirror, saw the other set of lights moving forward, and there were lights behind those lights. I looked at Leonard. He was lying on his side, looking at me. He said, "Trouble?"

"I don't know."

I dipped Leonard's junker down into a drop in the road and a fog thick as the wool on a sheep's back clouded over the windshield. I inched forward and out of the rise, and at the top of it the fog thinned, and directly in front of me, pulled crossways across the highway, was the big black pickup, the lights poking toward the woods and a marshy pond festooned with dried weeds and cattails. There wasn't even a half lane between the nose of the truck and the marsh.

Behind me one set of lights rushed forward like a falling pair of meteors, rode my bumper. The other set filled the passing lane.

I wasn't going backwards, and I couldn't go forward. I thought about ramming the truck, but figured I tried that I'd move the truck all right, but what was left of me and Leonard wouldn't have been enough to pack a gnat's ass.

I decided I had only one avenue, and that was to swing wide left in front of one set of lights, try and race around the pickup, glance a blow off of it, get back on some free and straight highway.

Temporary fix. I managed that, then I could gun Leonard's junker all the way up to sixty, if the radiator didn't blow out through the hood or the tires didn't pop. That would keep us ahead of that souped-up truck for almost ten seconds.

One cliff at a time.

"Hang on, buddy!" I yelled at Leonard, and tried to put my foot through the floor. The car didn't exactly leap, but it surged a little. I saw the driver's-side door open on the pickup and a man wearing a white sheetlike outfit and a hood stepped onto the highway. He had a shotgun in his hands and he lifted it at me.

I jerked the wheel to the left as the air exploded with a sound like thunder, but it was shotgun thunder. Pellets tore through the black plastic side of the windshield and carried it away. I heard Leonard cuss and I cussed, then I was going around the front end of the truck, hitting gravel. There was a noise like a cherry bomb going off, and less than a second later I knew the left front tire had blown. The car made a weave, and I tried to turn in the direction of the skid, but couldn't figure out which way it was skidding, then—

—we were airborne. Went way up and out toward the marsh and the car hit the water and the water parted and came up high and washed through the windshield and cattails leaped out and away and the car rode up as if it might coast the water, then went down again, dipped its nose slightly forward. Water lapped through the windshield, over the dash and sloshed my legs.

Leonard said, "Go for it, Hap. Get out of here."

I climbed over the back seat and grabbed Leonard, tried to open a door. Couldn't. Water pressure.

"Let me go, Hap."

The car dipped forward again and more water came in, and Leonard said, "On second thought, drag my ass out of here."

"We're going through the windshield," I said.

Leonard helped all he could, and I got him tugged over the seat, into the front seat, which was half filled with water. I got hold of the rifle, which had fallen onto the floorboard, and used it to knock out what was left of the flimsy windshield, flung the strap over my head and shoulder as the car took a nosedive.

I got Leonard by the coat collar, pulled him straight through the windshield, and we went down, down into that cold, dark murk, and for a moment I couldn't figure if I was trying to break the surface or diving for the bottom, then realized the truth, pushed off from the car with my feet and changed direction, fought the tug of the sinking car.

I pulled at Leonard, but couldn't get much movement. He was too heavy and not able to do much. I actually considered letting him go, then tightened my grip and decided it was both or nothing. The darkness above me bloomed with light, and I broke the surface, yanked Leonard up behind me.

Leonard's head from the mouth up was all that came out of the water, and he bobbed like a cork. We gasped for air. The rain pounded on us. It was still dark, darker than before, in fact, jet as night and the air had a stench to it. Rotting vegetation, fish, mud. It was a strong, almost overwhelming reek activated by the blowing wind and the rain.

I readjusted my grip on Leonard, started to swim toward shore, then there was a crack and the water jumped like a frog leaping.

I glanced at the highway, the source of the lights, realized the lights were the headlamps of the pickup and the two cars that had been behind us. They had parked in such a way to use their head beams as spotlights. I realized too that someone had just tried to clip me with a thirty-ought-six.

There were several white-gowned and hooded shapes near the lights, and they had rifles pointed at us. Then that damn shotgun roared and the water popped all around us and a pellet went into my cheek, and almost simultaneously the sinking car created a delayed suction, and we were pulled back down into the depths.

23

Only I hadn't realized the depths weren't that deep.

We hadn't dropped far below the water when my feet hit the back of the car, which was nose down in the muddy bottom. I pushed off and swam laterally, got into a tangle of weeds and vines, panicked, nearly lost the rifle, floundered and split the surface.

As I bobbed above the water, gasping at the cold, throat-searing air, clinging to Leonard, I decided if I was gonna die I wanted a bullet in the head, not water in my lungs. Even though I was a decent enough swimmer, the idea of drowning terrified me, and it seemed nearly drowning was something that happened to me on a regular basis. Leonard once said if there was two feet of water within a hundred miles of me I'd find some way to fall nose forward into it. And probably take him with me.

We had come up in a thicket of dried weeds and cattails, and nobody had ventilated our skulls. It was starting to rain harder, and the rain came down in chilled pills and moved the water around us. I could see the car lights through the weeds, and they were hazy from the rain, and I could see the hooded assholes moving down close to the bank, looking around, chattering like squirrels. I realized they couldn't see us, at least for the moment.

They were fanning out to our left and right, around the marshy pond, and the pond wasn't all that big. I knew pretty soon they'd spot us, and when they did, it would be as easy for them as shooting decoy ducks.

My cheek stung where the pellet had gone in, and I was already a mess to begin with. My legs hurt from treading and I was so cold, my balls felt as if they had crawled up inside me for warmth.

But one good thing, I wasn't thinking nearly as much about all the pain the beating had given me. I was too concerned with freezing, drowning, not getting my head scattered like a rotten pumpkin. Just like they say, every cloud has a silver lining.

Leonard looked weak as a pup with distemper. He couldn't really tread. I was holding him up and it was about to do me in. I tightened my grip on his collar, pushed backwards with my legs, silently as possible, backstroked and dragged Leonard with me. It was a hard go, and I was swallowing that foul water and I almost decided to lose the rifle to make going easier, then thought better of it.

The weeds around me parted and rustled and I heard a voice out near the highway, then there were a couple of shots. They popped next to Leonard's head, and I looked at him. He was all right, just spitting water.

"Hang in there, buddy," I said. "They can't see us, just the weeds moving. They're taking pot shots."

He shook his head a little, cocked an eyebrow. "Ain't this somethin' for the scrapbook?"

I kicked on back, and pretty soon my feet were touching the bottom. I pushed up, rolled over and scuttled onto shore behind a blind of weeds and cane and cattails, dragging Leonard with me. When I had him on shore, I found I couldn't make my hand let go of his jacket; it was cold and cramped. I had to use my other hand to free it, work the fingers, press my thumb into the center of my palm and squeeze, try to bring my paw back to life.

I took a gander at Leonard. He lay on his back, shivering. He turned his head toward me. His teeth chattered. He said, "Hap, that goddamn Cantuck. He set this up. He sold us down the shit river. And I'm mad. Real mad."

I reached out, patted his shoulder. I thought that's right, Leonard. Get mad. Real goddamn mad, 'cause right now, that's all we got.

"Still got the revolver?" I asked.

He pushed his wet coat aside and lifted his shirt. The revolver was still in his waistband. He pulled it free and poured water out of the barrel.

"All right," I said. I looked behind us, trying to take in our position. The roots of great willows and oaks grew down from the bank behind us and wound their way into the water and knotted near our feet. Some of the roots were wrist-thick, and some of the thicker ones came down from where the bank was higher than where we lay. Above all this, falling down on the water like a blot of ink, was the great darkness of the woods. I was glad for that, but not ecstatic. Darkness cannot deflect bullets. A shotgun can clean out darkness as easy as light.

Out through the weeds I could see their car lights. Shadows, like goblins, moved in front of the lights. To our left I could hear someone tromping along the marshy water's edge, someone about as sneaky as a bull rhino on its way to mate.

Leonard very softly said, "Use the rifle. You know how you can shoot, Hap. I know you don't want to hurt nobody, but you know how you can shoot."

I squatted and hooked Leonard under the arms and got back in the water with him, pulled him toward where the roots were thickest. When I got him there, I whispered, "I can't pull you on shore far enough, get you hid in time for them not to see us. I go by myself, I can make it faster and I can get their attention and pull them away from here. Stay hid. No arguments."

"Hap. Use the rifle."

I shoved Leonard through a split in the roots, and the roots and the muddy overhang and the darkness from the trees and the blackness of his skin concealed him well.

We squeezed hands and I pushed away from him, scooped mud from the marshy bottom and rubbed it on my face and the backs of my hands as I went. I got hold of roots and pulled myself out of the water, crouched and tried to go along the edge of the bank quietly where there were some reeds and trees for camouflage.

But I wasn't as quiet as I hoped. I sloshed as I moved and my shoes made sucking sounds. I slung the rifle off my shoulder, backed into the woods about even of where Leonard hid in the roots just below the bank. I got positioned just as around a row of high reeds came a big bulky shape in a muddy white outfit and hood. The goblin was armed with a shotgun.

I thought, if you're trying to be sneaky, you dumb sonofabitch, you need to lose that Kluxer suit. It stands out like a white tent in a bombing raid.

He came along crouched. As he neared I felt sick and weak and scared. I could have shot him in the head effortless. He wasn't expecting me to have a gun, and he didn't know where I was. Maybe he thought I had drowned or was somewhere in the water. Maybe he thought he found me, killing me would be easy as stomping an ant on a piece of stale bread.

I waited on him, keeping an eye and ear out for others and not seeing or hearing them. When he was alongside me, I stepped out from the shadows of the trees quick-like and brought the Winchester stock around and hit him hard as I could in the side of the head. He had seen me move a second sooner than I hoped, so he reacted enough that the blow was a glancing blow and didn't knock him out, but it was still a good hit and he lost his peaked hood. It flew into the water, and in that instant, even in the dark, I could see it was the big bastard from the cafe that I had called Bear. Ray, his name was.

He stumbled toward the bank and the mud crumbled beneath his big feet, and one leg went off the edge of the bank so hard the other leg was forced to bend quickly to try to hold his weight. It couldn't. I heard his knee snap. The big bastard screamed, fell into the water, still clutching the shotgun. He floundered and splashed and started to yell, but suddenly the yell was cut, and I knew he had fallen near Leonard and Leonard had reached out and got him. Probably had that goddamn choke hold on him he did so well. Leonard could go either way with it. He wanted, he could end your life by strangling you, or he could use another version, shut off the blood supply to the brain. You'd be out quick that way and not wake up too soon, if ever, and you'd never know you'd been got, because it didn't take any strength to make either choke work, just skill and determination.

I slipped back into the woods and went along the trees, clinging to the shadows. The lights through the reeds and cattails seemed to die at the trees, and when I looked back at the marsh the lights made the water look dark blue, as if it had been dyed, and the rain moved the blue and it was oddly mesmerizing and beautiful.

I found an oak with a fork in it, slung the rifle over my shoulder, climbed up and eased onto a big limb that went way out to where I had a good clear look at the marsh and the highway beyond. The leaves were all gone off the oak, but the limb was thick and there were two big limbs jutting out from it like a Y and there were some little limbs too, and I figured they'd hide me pretty good if someone wasn't expecting me to be ten feet up.

I hooked my legs around the big branch and rested an elbow in the Y and sighted down the barrel. I knew even in the dark, if I wanted to, I could shoot clean across the marsh and give a frog a hemorrhoidectomy. No brag. Just fact.

There was one hooded figure over by the truck, waiting, using the rifle to lean on. He was probably there to make sure someone didn't come along and run the hell over the cars and the truck. I slung water out of the rifle barrel, hoped it would still shoot, then lined his head up in the sights. I figured I splattered his brains all over the place, the rest of them, wherever they were, might opt to head to the house, but I couldn't do it. It would have been an easy shot for me, but I couldn't do it.

Then I saw lights on the highway and the hooded man by the truck turned and looked in that direction, and I wondered, what you gonna do now, Bubba? How you gonna move the truck and two cars? How you going to explain this? Then, I thought, oh shit, he might not explain anything. He might just start shooting. He might decide not to leave witnesses.

The car came into view and slowed, and I could see now that it was Chief Cantuck's patrol car, and I thought, you double-talkin', big-balled sonofabitch. You set us up. You got us on the road, then you had us followed out, knowing our old wreck wasn't going to make much time. Had us followed because we were on to the fact that you hung that guy in jail or had it done, and you didn't want us to spread the word. That's why we hadn't been charged. That's why the snow job.

Cantuck stopped the car and got out. Across the marsh, floating on the night air, I heard him say: "You might as well go on and throw that rifle down, Leroy. I know who you are and know them other two cars, and I ain't gonna let you go on with things."

"It's a nigger," Leroy said, "an out-of-town nigger. And he's got that nigger lover with him."

"Put the gun down," Cantuck said, and I saw his hand go to where his holster hung.

I thought, now wait a minute, what's this? Then I saw to the left of the pond one of the Kluxers was sneaking around some reeds, and he squatted with his rifle across his knees, thinking he was hid. I saw to the right of the marsh that another Kluxer, or whatever those bastards called themselves, was easing up on that side. He slid into the woods behind a tree. I knew as soon as I saw him, even under that wet sheet, that it was Elephant. He was big and had an ass that poked out behind like … well, what Leonard had said. Like he was pulling a trailer.

"Throw down the gun," I heard Cantuck say.

The man at the truck said, "Can't do that, Chief. Can't go back with you. None of us can."

"I think you oughta," Cantuck said, and at that same moment the man by the truck used the toe of his shoe to kick the stock of the rifle up, tried to catch and pull it under his arm for action, like he'd seen in some cowboy movie, but Cantuck had seen the same movie. He drew his pistol and shot Leroy through the head and I thought I saw a shadow jump across the front of Leroy's hood but realized it was blood, then Leroy was down, on his back, his heels pushing at the highway, pushing so hard he went up under the truck about a foot and lay still, legs spread, knees up, as if accepting a lover.

Another shot cut through the night, and I realized too late it was the man at the left of the pond. He stood up and fired and the shot hit the outside driver's mirror on Cantuck's car and glass leaped from it and Cantuck let out a yell and jerked his head so hard his hat flew off. He stumbled back, grabbed his eye and fell down. The Kluxer fired again, hit the back of the car, near where Cantuck lay writhing, holding his eye.

I repositioned the rifle, sighted the shooter, and fired. My shot hit where I meant for it to hit. The peaked hood. It ripped it off his head, knocked it back and away.

The de-hooded shooter couldn't quite place where my shot had come from. He shuffled left and right, and across the pond I heard Elephant yell, "Goddamn, Kevin, you shot Cantuck."

Kevin, a middle-aged dark-haired man, was crouched, twisting left and right, trying to locate me. He said, "Shut up. That last shot was at me.”

Elephant yelled, “What?”

“Shut up,” Kevin yelled back, and I got a bead on the stock of his rifle, fired, knocked the gun back into him. He dove for the dirt and I put up a line of fire around him, snapping three shots near his head, making the dirt fly. He lay facedown, the rifle in one outstretched hand, the rain pounding down on him. He didn’t look like he had any intention of moving.

While I was so engaged, Elephant came up from his side and located me. He fired a shot that shattered the limb I was resting my rifle on, and though the slug missed me, the sudden impact caused me to lose my balance and fall out of the tree. As I hit, the Winchester bounced away from me and fell into the wet leaves.

I was going to make for it when I heard the cocking of a rifle, looked around, saw Elephant standing just inside the line of trees. He had me in his sights. The hood was wetly plastered to his face, and I could see the outline of his nose and mouth beneath the material, clinging to him like wet baking dough.

He reached up and swept the hood off his head. He was grinning at me. “You nigger-lovin’ piece of shit. I’m sending you to the devil.”

I was still on one knee, waiting for the end, when suddenly there was a roar and a flash of red light. Elephant seemed to take a football kick at the sky with his right leg, only the leg was twisted funny and it went out longer than a leg ought to. The kick pulled his ass out from under him, and he came down with a scream that made my spine knot up.

Behind him, lying on the shore, looking as if he had just crawled through hell with the lights off, was Leonard. He was lying on the ground, holding Bear’s shotgun.

I ran over to where Elephant was screaming and got hold of his rifle. I nodded at Leonard, said, “Stay low,” moved back into the woods, out of the line of fire, scouted for Kevin. He wasn’t where he had been. I glanced across the marsh, saw him making for one of the cars.

I got a little higher ground, and watched him run. He got in one of the cars and backed it around quickly. I jerked up Elephant’s rifle, took out one of the headlights, but Kevin kept turning about. I fired and took out a tire, but he kept going, blubbering along the wet highway on the rim.

I collected my Winchester and went to examine Elephant. His right leg was all but gone, cut off at the knee except for a few strings of muscle and flesh. He was screaming and howling like a dog with ground glass in his belly.

I went past him, on down to Leonard. Leonard was starting to lose his grip, slide back into the water. I tugged him to higher ground, said, “Where’s the other one?”

“If he didn’t drown,” Leonard said, “he’s still down there stuck between roots. I choked him out. Bound him up with my belt.”

I took Elephant’s rifle and the shotgun and tossed them in the water near the bank. I slung the Winchester off my shoulder.

“I wanted to kill him, Hap, but I didn’t because I knew it would disappoint you. Same with the other fuck.”

“Killed either one of them, you’d have been justified,” I said. “And to hell with me being disappointed. Cantuck’s here. He’s been hit.”

“I heard,” Leonard said. “Guess I was wrong about him.”

I left Leonard on the bank with the Winchester, went back to Elephant. I got hold of the white sheet he was wearing, pulled it over his head while he screamed and cussed me. I said, “You can let me tie up this leg, what’s left of it, or you can try and give me shit and bleed to death.”

He didn’t answer, just screamed and groaned, but he lay back and I used the sheet to tie off his leg above the wound. The sheet turned red immediately.

I went back to Leonard. Leonard said, “How is he?”

“You may have killed him anyway,” I said. “He’s bleeding like a leaky water hose. I got to get to Cantuck’s radio, call in some help.”

“I don’t think he’s got any help back where he’s from,” Leonard said.

“Then we’ve got to do different.”

I went down in the water and found Bear, his arms bound behind his back with a belt that was looped around a root. He had slipped down into the marsh so far it was washing under his nose. He was still unconscious. I unfastened the belt, got hold of him and pulled him out of there. On shore, I ripped off his white tunic, tore it up, tied his arms behind his back, bent his legs up and tied them to his wrists.

Leonard grunted and groaned as I helped him to his feet. But his sounds were pretty well muffled by Elephant screaming and rolling about in the wet leaves. He hadn't stopped that for a moment.

Leonard nodded toward Elephant. "He Draighten or Ray?"

"Can't say as I care," I said.

Elephant stopped rolling. Just lay there, shivering, holding his hands above his chest like a dog lying on its back with its paws up.

We started for the highway.

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When we finally made it to Cantuck, he was on his feet. He was leaning against the side of his car, his gun in one hand, his other hand over his eye. Blood was running from under his palm, through his fingers, and the rain was washing it away as fast as it came. Still, the blood had managed to stain his khaki jacket and had dripped onto his pants.

He said, “I got glass in my eye.”

“We’re going for a doctor,” I said.

“Go to LaBorde,” he said. “You don’t want to go back way we come. There’s no hospital fifty miles beyond Grovetown.”

“There’s an asshole in a bad way out there in the woods,” I said. “He doesn’t get a doctor soon, he’ll die. He’s one of the guys jumped us in the cafe. One with a big ass. There’s another one out there tied.”

“Draighten,” Cantuck said, then sagged to his knees and began to pant.

“Hang in, Cantuck.”

I opened the back door of the car, assisted Leonard inside, got Cantuck up and helped him. He was wobbly and heavy, and I was so weak from injuries, the swimming, the fighting, that now, with the adrenaline gone, I was feeling more sore than ever and sick to my stomach.

I put Cantuck in the front passenger seat, stumbled to the pickup, got hold of the dead man Cantuck called Leroy, boosted him on my shoulder, thumped him into the bed of his truck.

The keys were in the pickup. I started it, backed it off the highway, tossed the keys underneath it, staggered to the car they’d left. The keys weren’t in it, but it was unlocked. I put it in neutral, went to the rear, gathered my resources, pushed it toward the marsh. It nose-dived into the edge of the water where it was shallow and stuck its tail in the air.

I climbed into Cantuck's car, felt so weak suddenly I had to put my head on the steering wheel, let it rest there for a moment. I said, "Chief, you got to call help for those bastards."

I removed the microphone from the rack and gave it to Cantuck. He mumbled through a call to a LaBorde emergency crew, gave them the location.

I couldn't wait for them to arrive. I was too sick and scared that the bastard who had driven away on the bad tire would come back, or reinforcements would arrive. Cantuck was bad off with that glass in his eye, and Leonard had gone deathly quiet. I looked back at him. His eyes were closed. He was breathing badly.

I cranked the car, flipped on the heater, pulled on the lights, took a deep breath, pulled onto the highway. The rain was still coming down and the sky was black as midnight, but Cantuck's motor was better than Leonard's had been, and so were the tires, and that was some kind of comfort.

I wondered about Draighten and Ray, but I didn't wonder too much. I couldn't. It wasn't my fault. I didn't want any of this to go the way it had, but there wasn't any undoing it. I told myself if it bothers you don't think about it. Think about the road, the yellow line in the headlights. Hold this thing in the lane and don't pass out. You pass out, it's all over. Hold on, and don't pass out.

Cantuck fumbled the microphone into place, leaned back with his hand still over his eye. In the green light from the dash his face was streaked with blood and some of the blood had dried and it looked like a big birthmark.

"The eye's gone black," Cantuck said.

"It's all right," I said, as if it really were.

The rain pummeled so hard the wipers were near useless. My breath was dry and hot and my body jerked with nervous tension.

And so it went, the seconds crawling along, me looking through that windshield at the rain and the stormy darkness, watching and listening to those pathetic wipers working so hard and doing so little.

Rain on the windshield. Rain on the glass.

When I awoke, I felt as if I were still behind the wheel of Cantuck's car, but I was in bed and three weeks had gone by. It was still raining and had pretty much rained the full three weeks. Lakes were swollen, rivers were overflowing, some areas were flooded out, and the news said the dam near Grovetown looked ready to go.

I was lying in bed looking at the window glass, watching rain bead onto it, beginning to realize that's what I was doing and that's why there were no windshield wipers; I was lying in bed, shaking off the last bad vibes of a dream.

It wasn't the first time I'd dreamed I was in Cantuck's car. Ever since that night, especially that first of two nights in the hospital, I'd had a series of dreams and none of them were very comforting. For a time, before all this Grovetown business, I was having a recurring dream about screwing this beautiful Mexican woman I had seen in a magazine. I guess I was dreaming about her then to get Florida out of my head. I had animated her in my mind and made her ravenous for my root. I was such a stud in my dreams she couldn't get enough. I liked the way she screamed and grunted and called me baby in that sweet high Spanish. Even if in the end she was nothing more than a paper memory in my head, a pillow in my arms.

But after the stuff in Grovetown that dream went away and I couldn't call it up any more than I could whistle down a 747 and cause it to light on a high line. If I tried to call it up the Mexican lovely would not stay static. She went to pieces like fog. In her place I had the other dreams.

One was of Florida wandering about. She was a cross between a zombie and a ghost. I was always walking along a highway, a road, or in the woods, and I'd see her up ahead, not looking at me, just crossing in front of me, wearing one of her short dresses with high heels, going into the cover of the trees, and I'd run after her. Only when I got to where she had gone into the woods she wasn't there, and I couldn't find her.

I dreamed too of the marsh that night, and of Draighten screaming and his leg all gone to pieces. I found out a short time later he had died before the emergency crew made it. Bled to death. He deserved what he got, but I couldn't get him out of my mind. Somewhere he had people who loved him and he'd loved them back and he'd had plans and thoughts just like everyone else. Meaner thoughts, but thoughts.

Had Leonard not shot him, I'd have been the one six feet down in the ground and Draighten would be lying in bed, maybe watching a little wrestling on television or pulling his pud. It was something strange to consider.

The part about him being alive and wanting to watch wrestling. Not the part about him pulling his pud. I tried not to think about that; it was too horrible to visualize.

I was thinking about pulling my pud, when the rain picked up and I began to feel cold, even under my blankets. I got out of bed, pulled a robe over my naked self, picked up the .38 revolver from the nightstand where I kept it all the time now, and made for the bathroom.

I brushed my teeth, looked at the wound the shotgun pellet had given my cheek. It wasn't much. It was healing nicely, but it looked as if it would leave a small puckered scar. The doctor had put medicine on it and a Band-Aid, and I'd been doctoring it at home, but I had begun to suspect a stitch had been needed.

Then again, wasn't like it was going to ruin my native good looks. If I'd had any, that crowd at the Grovetown Cafe had rearranged them. I did look better than a week ago, though. Both eyes seemed to be lined up—sort of—and the bruises had changed from the color of eggplant to a sort of raw spinach green.

I picked the gun off the sink, toted it with me around the house while I lit the butane heaters, then fixed myself a little breakfast of cereal and coffee and sat at the kitchen table with my friend the .38 snub-nose revolver and stared out the window at the rain coming down. My yard looked a lot like Bacon's yard, without the refrigerator and the washer. There was a dead squirrel out there, though, and I'd been thinking about moving it. Another week or two, however, I figured it'd be pretty much dissolved. I thought I could hold out.

My days had been like this for two weeks. A little coffee and cereal in the morning, the dead squirrel watch, worrying about how I was going to pay my hospital bills, then a morning movie if I could find one worth watching. All this hinged, of course, on how often I was asked to come in and see the cops. They insisted I drop by for talks.

They held meetings in LaBorde, since it was the county seat, and the law was a Texas Ranger and some detectives from somewhere, and then Charlie, who was kind of a moderator. I even saw Cantuck a few times, going out as I came in, a big swathe of gauze over his eye, always wearing a cheap black suit that offered plenty of room for his balls. He'd smile and say, "Hap," but keep right on walking. I even saw Jackson Brown once. He was dressed in a bright blue suit, a white cowboy hat with a beaded band, and shiny black cowboy boots. We passed right by each other. He was walking with a thin, attractive woman with tall blond hair and an empty look to her eyes. He smiled at me as he passed, said, "Tell the nigger Jackson says hey."

It was tempting to see if I could turn his head completely around on his neck, but I didn't. I just walked on.

The cops liked to talk. They liked for me to talk. They loved hearing my story. Separately, they talked to Leonard too. They liked his story. We told it so much, I thought maybe we ought to work out a dance routine, so if we ever told it together, maybe we could do a few steps in concert.

But for now the cops seemed through with me. I had gone a few days without seeing their smiling faces, and I wanted it to stay that way. Without them, I could maintain my mind-numbing routine.

After the movie every morning there was lunch, usually a sandwich, or more cereal and coffee, then I'd go out on the front porch bundled up in a coat with my revolver and sit in my glider and listen to the rain until the cold got too much. Then it was back inside where I'd strip off and get under the covers again, and with my revolver on the nightstand, I'd crack open the book I was currently reading.

As I sat that morning with breakfast, I kept thinking in time I wouldn't feel the need to carry the gun with me everywhere I went, to sleep with it nearby, feeling greater comfort in it than I might a woman. But that beating I had taken with Leonard, and that night at the marsh with the Kluxers, had changed me and I wasn't sure there was any going back. I wasn't sure I could be Hap Collins the way Hap Collins used to be. I was still him, but I wasn't him, and I didn't know who I was or who else to be.

I thought about giving Leonard a call, but feared Raul would answer the phone. I'd heard he'd come back, and for some reason I didn't like the little sonofabitch anymore, though I wasn't sure I'd liked him in the first place. Fact was, all told, I had spent little more than an hour with him, so my opinion was bullshit anyway.

I was jealous. I had been Leonard's friend longer than Raul had been his lover, and when they split up and Leonard and I got together again and went to Grovetown, even with all that had happened, at least we'd had each other, and it was like old times. There had been that special warmth between us, that understanding, that lack of explaining, and now Raul was back and I had a robe to wear, a gun to tote, and my dick to jerk. I wished with all the blackness of my heart right then that Raul was forcing Leonard to watch the *Gilligan's Island* reunion episode, which I understood he'd finally acquired. I wondered whose dick he'd sucked to get it.

Goddamn, Hap, don't think like that. That's homophobic. That's evil. Just not nice.

No, hell, it isn't any of those things but the last. It's not nice. You're just mad so you're thinking mean and you better not keep thinking that way or you will be mean.

Why in hell had Raul come back anyway? I asked myself, and self answered: Because he heard Leonard was hurt and needed him, and he came back and things were all right now in their relationship. They were close again, and that was good.

Sure. Sure it was. It was good. Liver was good, if you closed your eyes and rinsed your mouth and ate ice cream afterwards.

Shit, don't think like that, Hap. You're being an asshole. Leonard's got his right to happiness, even if his boyfriend is as shallow as a saucer and likes *Gilligan's Island.* Who are you to stand in the way of Leonard's love life? Friendship isn't about that. It's about being happy your friend is happy. That's the true nature of friendship.

I sat and wondered if I could think of any more folksy homilies, but nothing came to me.

Me and my gun got us a cup of coffee and went into the living room and turned on the television and surfed the channels until we found an Audie Murphy Western.

The movie was coming to the end when I heard a car, got hold of the gun and took a timid peek out the window.

It was Charlie driving up. He got out, wearing a beige belted raincoat and a porkpie hat with a plastic cover on it. He was holding a black umbrella over his head, tiptoeing toward my door through puddles of water like a schoolgirl trying not to get her stockings wet.

I cut the television, stuffed the gun beneath a couch cushion, hoped Charlie would have good news about Hanson. Hell, good news about anything.

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I opened the door before he was on the porch. He smiled at me, closed the umbrella, leaned it against the porch wall and shook hands with me. “I see the squirrel’s still hanging around.”

“Yeah,” I said. “He likes it here. I call him Bob. He calls me Mr. Collins.”

Charlie took off his hat, removed the cover and draped it over the handle of the umbrella. He put his hat back on, took off the raincoat and stretched it over my glider. All of this was done very slow and precise.

When he came inside he tossed his hat on the couch, took off his cheap sports coat, hung it over the back of a chair, sat down beside his hat and smiled in that pleasant manner he has, loosened his threadbare tie, crossed his legs, wiggled a Kmart shoe.

“Are those shoes real plastic, Charlie?”

“You betcha. I don’t stand for imitations.”

“And that hat, isn’t that like Mike Hammer wears?”

“I certainly hope so.”

“Want some coffee?”

“You betcha.”

I fixed us both a cup, sat back in my chair and stretched my feet out.

“Christ, Hap,” Charlie said. “Put on some drawers, or cross your legs different. I don’t want to look at your balls.”

“That’s not why you came out?”

“Come on, man.”

I went and pulled on some faded jeans, but kept the robe on. I came back, recovered my coffee. Charlie was in the kitchen, pouring himself another cup. He went through the cabinets and found the bag of vanilla cookies I keep on hand for Leonard. He opened them, brought them into the living room, put the bag on the couch next to his hat and began eating the cookies.

“Want one?” he asked.

“Only if you’re sure you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.”

He held the bag out and I took one, dunked it in my coffee and ate it. Charlie said, “Nobody eats these with as much pleasure as Leonard.”

“You’re right.”

“I like to watch him eat them,” Charlie said. “He gets that look that cartoon dog used to get when he was given a dog biscuit. You know, the one hugged himself and floated up and then floated down, he was so happy. What was that fuckin’ dog on? *Quickdraw McGraw?”*

“I think so,” I said. “How’s Hanson, Charlie?”

“Same.”

“I think I’ll go by and see him.”

“Go by, or don’t. He won’t know one way or another. You come in there butt-naked with a feather up your ass, or dressed in your Sunday Go to Meetin’s, it’s all the same to him.”

“What do the doctors say now?”

“Not much more than before, only they’re less optimistic.”

“I didn’t know they were ever optimistic.”

“You hear them now, you’ll think before they were goddamn foolish with optimism.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. Shit. Another week, they think he can go home. Might as well, he can hold down a bed there good as he can at the hospital. They’ll send some tubes and pee-bags with him when he goes. Maybe, on good days, he can be used for a doorstop. Just roll him up to the door to hold it open.”

“Who’ll take care of him?”

“He’s going home to Rachel.”

“His ex-wife?”

"Yeah. Go figure. It was her idea. She and her daughter are gonna take care of him."

"I thought Rachel had a boyfriend or something."

Charlie made a patting motion at his shirt pocket, like he was looking for cigarettes, didn't find any, put his hand back in the vanilla cookie bag and pulled out a wafer. He waved it at me, said, "Did. And the boyfriend wasn't keen on the idea, but she sent him packing. Believe that? Hanson and Rachel. They haven't lived together since I don't know when, and now she's gonna take him home and empty his pee and make sure he's got gruel in his food tubes, washrag his balls and wipe his ass. I don't get it."

"Me neither. Must be the daughter's influence."

"Maybe so. Tell you something else, Kmart is all but gone. Another week, won't be nothing there but an empty building and the parking lot."

"So, that's why you came. You want to hold a little memorial service or something?"

"What I come to say is you and Leonard are in pretty good shape."

"We going to court?"

"Only to testify against folks. I don't think you'll get much backlash. It'd just make those fuckers look stupid. Ray Pierce, one you call Bear, he finally broke down and named Kevin Reiley as the other Klan man, which is of course who Cantuck said it was all the time. You know, I don't think that Cantuck is such a bad guy, you get to know him."

"Good. What about Brown? Pierce name him?"

"No. There was enough business there for us to bring him in for questioning, but we didn't nail him. And I wanted to, believe me. He's a smug sonofabitch. White trash with money and a business degree. They're like roaches, guys like that. They're hard to get rid of, hard to kill …oh, and Pierce didn't name that officer—"

"Reynolds."

"—yeah, him. He didn't name him either. He claims they did it on their own. One of them supposedly saw your car go by when you took the Grovetown turnoff toward LaBorde. He told the others, they got their sheets and came after you."

"So, there's nothing to prove anybody else had anything to do with what happened?"

"That's right."

"I don't believe it. I got a feeling that whole nest of Klan assholes knew where we'd be, and not by seeing us go in that direction. I think Brown was involved, and those boys aren't talking 'cause he's paying them not to talk, and maybe he's giving them a little something to worry about besides jail. Like what might happen to their families."

"There's nothing to prove you were set up, is what I'm saying. But the Klan not only found you and Leonard, they found that black fella helped y'all out. He got his the next night."

"Oh no, Bacon? I hadn't heard."

"I didn't think you needed to before. You were dealing with enough. Handful of Klan members went out to his house and jumped him. Tarred and feathered him, locked him in his car trunk, drove him down to the river bottoms, tossed the keys and left him there. He'd have died of exposure if the trunk had been any good, but it wasn't and he was able to kick it loose, hot-wire the car and get out of there. They say he was hurt pretty bad. He was in a hospital over in Longview couple days."

"Ah, hell. He was scared to death they were going to catch up with him on account of us, and they did. How'd the Klan find out?"

Charlie shrugged. "Maybe Cantuck can tell you, or the Ranger on the case. I don't know they know. Can't say. Damn, I wish I had a cigarette. I think about smoking now and then, you know, sneaking one, but my wife, she smells it on me. I don't care I do it outside in a high wind, little gets on my jacket, in my hair. She smells it."

"And no pussy."

"Yeah. I been thinking about striking up a relationship with the cat. Is that some kind of incest or something?"

"Bestiality."

"Well, I tell you, I'm tired of whackin' off. Funny thing is, you know you're not gonna get any, it's all you think about. Pussy. Pussy. Pussy. When I used to get it now and then, not knowing when, but figurin' I would, I didn't whack off near as much. You whack off a lot?"

"Just once or twice a day. Would you like to know about my bowel movements?"

"Naw, I was just interested if you whack off. Some of the guys at the station, they think it's odd if you whack off. They all say they quit that shit when they were fifteen, or when they started gettin' pussy."

"Everybody whacks off. I don't care what they say, they whack off. Maybe if they're poking someone every night they don't, but when they're not, they whack off. But on a less serious note, about me and Leonard not going to court. You sure? We're okay?"

"Looks like it. I can't guarantee anything. Not really. But Cantuck spoke for you again, said you and Leonard didn't have any choice but to do what you did, tells how you saved him, drove the car through a storm, all that shit. You know the story. Same one he's been telling. You'll talk some more to the law, but I figure you're all right."

"That's good. How's Cantuck?"

"Well, his eye didn't grow back. He's still blind, and he's got a patch. He looks like a pirate turned pig farmer turned smalltown cop. He's taking it well enough, I guess. Oh, you or Leonard will have to pay a little fine for having those guns you used. Hidden weapons. I talked to the Highway boys. They agreed to let the rest of the guns in Leonard's trunk get lost so it wouldn't look like you were loaded up and spoiling for a fight. That damn near caused you trouble, all them guns, but Cantuck stood up for you again. He can talk a pretty good line of shit, he wants to. Even if he does refer to Leonard as 'a good nigra.' "

"That's high praise from Cantuck," I said. "Will Leonard get his guns back?"

"Don't try to skin your rabbit and keep it as a pet too, Hap. They agreed to lose 'em, not oil 'em and give 'em back to you with ammunition. Be glad you're not paying big fines and doing a little time. This is serious shit, killing a fella."

"Leonard didn't mean for Draighten to die. He had, he'd have shot his head off from the start. It's not that he gave a shit, frankly, but he didn’t kill him outright ’cause he didn’t want to hurt my feelings. In the long run, it was self-defense, plain and simple.”

“That’s why you’re not doing time, you and him. This is Texas, after all. And you did save an officer of the law from being killed, and you got him to safety and a doctor. Shit, Hap, you and Leonard, you’re goddamn heroes.”

“I’m so glad.”

“I finish up here, I’m going to drive over and tell Leonard how things are.”

“You could call him from here.”

“Yeah, but it’s an excuse to see him. And I thought you might want to go.”

“I don’t know.”

“You and his boyfriend don’t get along, do you?”

“I think it’s me that doesn’t get along.”

“It was that way with me and Florida. I liked her, but the moment she and Hanson got together, well, things weren’t so good between me and Marve. She had a way of looking at him out of the corner of her eye, making him nervous. I tried real hard not to say shit or fuck or talk about my wife not giving me pussy when I was around her, but I don’t think I could ever do right.”

“Some women are just born spoilsports.”

“Hell, I don’t know. Marve might feel … might have felt that way about my wife and just didn’t say nothin’. Hard to say. Relationships are funny stuff. I tell you though, I took a peek up Florida’s dress a few times. Couldn’t help myself. She was something else.”

“I think maybe it was your cultured manners got on her nerves, Charlie. She just hadn’t been around so much class before.”

“There you go. You got any cigarettes? Cigars? Pipe? I might even chew, you got some Beech-Nut or somethin’.”

“Nope. I gave my pipe up. Now I do a cigar couple times a year. This isn’t one of those times, so I don’t have any. Besides, you don’t need it. You’re doing good. You smoke, you won’t get any from the wife."

"Yeah, okay."

"Do a few shadow figures, keep your mind occupied."

"I do shadows pretty good now, but I've had to quit for a while. I got strained fingers."

"Get out of here."

"No, really. Kind of a carpal tunnel thing from twistin' my hands and fingers around."

I finished off my coffee, asked what I had to ask. "Since we were speaking of Florida in the past tense …"

"I guess I shouldn't talk that way about her. About looking up her dress and all, not getting along with her. I know how you feel about her, Hap. And she was Hanson's lady and all. I shouldn't talk like that."

"She was here right now, I'd try to look up her dress too. She wore dresses designed for that, and I think she knew it. She'd never admit it, but she knew it."

Charlie nodded. "We don't know anything we didn't know before. Ranger went in there, checked around some, and knows what we know. She was there, then wasn't. Evidence is thin."

"What about the juke joints? No one had anything to say there?"

"Sure, they did. We think of some things, Hap. You see, we do this for a living."

"I didn't mean to offend you."

"I've kept up with this case, even though it isn't mine. Know what I'm sayin'?"

"Sure."

"Florida went in there, tried to see this Soothe as some kind of martyr, and what he was was an asshole. No one disagrees on that. His own folks didn't have nothing to do with him. Everybody was glad he got dead and wasn't nothing more to worry about. Those recordings, the songs written down. That was just his line of shit. No one believes there were any recordings, written songs. None of that stuff. So no one much cared what happened to the guy. Except Florida. And I figure her trying to find out about what happened to Soothe, she maybe put her nose where it didn't belong, and got it pinched. But good. Same stuff you and Leonard think. Nothing new."

"Well, someone cared about Soothe. Or was worried about him. His body was stolen."

"Ranger, Highway boys, think it was voodoo shit."

"Voodoo is primarily charm stuff, mixed with a little Christianity. East Texas cops love to think devil worshippers or movie-style voodoo business is going on in the backwoods. It makes them feel their job is a little more important, less boring if they're dealing with El Diablo."

"Yeah, I see that. I could use a little voodoo now and then. This old-fashioned crime, drugs, spouse abuse, good ole boy murders are wearing me out. As for Soothe, all I know is the body's gone and there's no evidence where it might be. Florida, she was sure this Cantuck had Soothe murdered. A racist thing. I don't think that stands up so good. I think Cantuck done that, he wouldn't have been trying to keep you from getting killed. This Officer Reynolds, I don't know nothin' about him."

"He's some piece of work is what he is, but I can't prove he did anything. He might not be any worse than Cantuck, who seems to be all right on some days. I sort of like it better like the old movies, where you could tell who the villain was because they wore black and twirled their mustache. What's never been explained to me, Charlie, is how Cantuck knew me and Leonard were in trouble."

"Instinct."

"Saying he had a hot flash sheet-heads were trying to kill us, so he saddled up Trigger and came after us?"

"Way he tells it, he packed you up, sent you on your way, got to feeling guilty 'cause the two of you weren't in that good a shape, decided he ought to make you park Leonard's junker and take you into LaBorde. So, he went to catch up with you. I believe him. I think he's a fart on the surface, but underneath he smells a little better, just sometimes he's got to settle down long enough for the sweetness to surface."

"So right in the middle of a rerun of *The Beverly Hillbillies* he decided he was an asshole and ought to come out and check on us?”

“He never got home. Drove to the office, got to thinking about it from there, came after you.”

“And in the meantime, Big Butt Draighten and his buddies just happened to spot us and come after us?”

“Yeah.”

“Kind of coincidental, isn’t it?”

“Life’s full of ’em, but I don’t see this as coincidence. Those shitters saw you, followed you out, and Cantuck, not being a bad guy, got to feeling like a turd, came to check on you. Everything comes together. It’s not that wild.”

“What about Bacon?”

“Like I said, I don’t know. But them finding out Bacon helped you might not be that hard. People see things, people talk.”

Charlie went into the kitchen to fill his coffee cup. He stood at the counter and drank it. I went in there and sat at the kitchen table with my empty cup. He got the coffee pot and poured me what was left.

“Going with me to Leonard’s?” he asked.

“Not this time,” I said. “I’ll call him later. Maybe I’ll drive over there.”

“Sure. You know, he’s healing up fast. Moving around pretty good. ’Cept for his leg. You should go by and see him.”

“I will.”

Charlie sipped the last of his coffee, put the cup in the sink, said, “Sometimes, under stress, guys close as skin and bone can feel a kind of, I don’t know, postpartum-style depression.”

“Neither Leonard nor I have recently given birth, Charlie.”

“Postpartum Scary Event Syndrome.”

“What?”

“I just made that up. Say something bad happens to a couple guys and they survive it, and these guys are real close, and danger makes them even closer. Am I goin’ too fast?”

“I think I can manage, if I concentrate real hard.”

“This scary business is over, these two guys, they kind of divorce each other, find reasons not to be together, blame each other, outside sources, 'cause when the two them get together, they connect with a bad memory."

"You trying to say something about me and Leonard, Charlie?"

"I'm sayin' maybe you and Leonard have seen something in each other or yourselves you didn't know was there. It's like them movie star marriages."

"Now there's a jump."

"Woman marries some guy wants to be an actor, big star. She knows him when he's down and out, crying at night 'cause he can't make it in the industry, or maybe he can't get a hard-on he's so depressed. She knows he cuts big ones in the toilet and fills their little two-room apartment with shit stink, and they can't even afford the goddamn matches that need to be struck to burn out the smell. Then, this guy, who wipes his butt just like everyone else, he hits the big time. Feels he's got to get rid of the old wife on account of she knew him when he wasn't quite so glamorous. Now he's got the big house and a shit ter in a room about the size of the old apartment, got some blowers, de-stinkers, whatever that stuff is, and he's able to separate himself from some of the human problems. Stays hard all the time 'cause he's got nothing but big-tittied young blondes coming in and out of his bed trying to see who best can grease his sausage. Everyone tells him he's wonderful, a goddamn god. So he don't want someone around who's seen him at his worst, his most human, knows what he knows—that he ain't no god. He's just a regular guy and no better than anyone else."

"I've known Leonard for years, and I know his shit stinks. I've been with him through thick and thin and neither one of us has hit the big time, so we don't have to worry about that angle. I'm just worn down, that's all. I don't feel like visiting. Fact is, I'm sort of waiting on you to leave."

"Sure you haven't got some kind of tobacco?"

"I'm sure."

Charlie nodded, scratched his temple, looked at some dandruff under his fingernail, wiped it on his pants and leaned against the sink. "Let me see now," he said. "I had some kind of point. Oh yeah. Thing is, instead of the big time, two of you thought you were invincible.”

“I never said that I was invincible.”

“No, but you thought it. Leonard did anyway, and I think you thought he was invincible on some level. Could take anything and come out on top. And when the two of you are together, well, you’re like the biggest dogs in the junkyard. But you ain’t. You’re just two dogs and there’s always someone bigger, smarter, and meaner.”

“I owe you for this session?”

“First session’s free. Maybe you’ve seen little shadows, chinks in your and Leonard’s armor, and you don’t like it. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. No one is anything better than human. Just some humans are better humans than others, but the best humans are still just human. In the end, we all end up like that squirrel out there.”

“Save it for the Rotary, man.”

“Sometimes you got to look shadows in the eye, or see if they’ve got eyes. You don’t, they flutter around you from then on.”

“You’re hittin’ all over the place, and isn’t any of it on target.”

“Keep a gun around at night, Hap? I don’t mean in the house, I mean close by. You do that, man? Something you’re constantly aware of, this gun?”

“Hell no. Why would I?”

“It’s just I saw one stuffed under the couch cushion. You got to not get in such a hurry, you hide somethin’, Hap. Got to take your time and do it right.”

“You don’t know everything, Charlie.”

“Yeah, you’re right, I’m an asshole. I know this though, you throw a shovelful of dirt over that squirrel, when the rain stops and the wind’s blowin’, he won’t stink so much.”

There was a sudden hard wave of rain. It washed over the house in a torrent, sounded goddamn spooky. Charlie looked at the ceiling, as if he might actually see the rain pounding the roof, said, “God, it keeps coming and no end in sight. Think this rain’ll ever stop?”

I shook my head. “No, Charlie. I don’t.”

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I didn't call Leonard after Charlie left. I didn't call him all that day, and didn't call him the next either. I sat with my gun and went through my routine. I thought about what Charlie had said and got real mad, then realized he was closer to the truth than I wanted to believe.

It wasn't Raul that was between me and Leonard, it was us. We had not only recognized that we were not invincible, we had experienced real fear, and we each knew the other was frightened. It wasn't the first time. We've always been honest about being scared, but this time it was beyond fear in the normal way. It was helplessness. Not being anywhere near in control.

Goddamn Charlie and his Kmart shoes and his shadow fingers and his wife who wouldn't give him pussy. Goddamn everything about that sonofabitch.

Four mornings after Charlie came to visit, I went into the kitchen, purposely without my gun, took the phone off the wall, sat down at the table with it and dialed Leonard's number.

Raul answered. I asked for Leonard.

"Hap," Leonard said when he came on the line. "Good to hear from you, man."

"Have you been as fucked up as me?"

"I don't know how fucked up you've been, but I've been fucked up. Come over for lunch."

"I been wanting to see you, but … I haven't been … you know?"

"Yeah. Come over."

I heard Raul say in the background, "We got plans, Lenny. Remember?"

"Come on over," Leonard said.

Eleven that morning, the rain still coming down, the sky atwist with savage storm, I got all the money I had in the cookie jar—about fifty dollars—and left out of there with my revolver stuffed in the glove box of my truck. I drove to town and the hospital, went in without my revolver, found where Hanson was. I rode the elevator up, pushed open the door to his room.

It smelled bad in there. That creepy hospital smell that's somewhere between disinfectant, illness, and that funky food they serve. The two days I had been in had been bad enough, but poor Hanson. Jesus.

Hanson was hooked up like a spaceman, bristling with tubes and wires. His bed was cranked up slightly toward a television that was going, and on the other side of the bed, sitting in a chair, was a young black woman. She was lean and attractive, looked to be in her late twenties. I assumed she was his daughter, JoAnna. She lifted her head, gave a little smile.

"Hello," she said. Her voice was soft, but it had a little gravel in it. I didn't know if that was the nature of her voice, or the nature of her mood. I went on in and introduced myself. She half stood, reached across the bed, shook my hand and gave her name and relation. She was, as I thought, JoAnna.

Hanson had his eyes closed and was breathing heavily. He didn't know I was there, or that the TV was going, or that ducks quacked and dogs barked. His head was bandaged thickly and he'd lost a lot of weight and looked easily twenty years older. Had I not known it was Hanson, I wouldn't have recognized him.

"How is he?" I asked. It was stupid, but I just didn't know anything else to say.

"Not good. We're taking him home though."

"That ought to help."

"Yeah."

"I was here … this way, I'd want to go home."

"Yeah."

"He leaving soon?"

"Tomorrow. If the doctor says okay. They can't do anything for him here. I think they want him out, make room for another patient. I guess they're right. He's not going to get better, someone else might."

"Well, you never know. Some people, they get in a bad way like this, they come out of it. He's tough. He could do it."

"Yeah. I guess."

I looked at the television. It was a *Gunsmoke* rerun. An old one, when Dennis Weaver played Chester. I kept looking at it, 'cause I couldn't look at Hanson, and JoAnna's face, so sad, so brave, made me ache. Not just for Hanson, but for myself, Leonard, everybody.

"You live in LaBorde?" I asked.

"Tyler."

"What do you do there?"

"Teach school."

"Yeah, well, you take care."

"Sure. Thanks for coming in, Mr. Collins."

I looked at the television. "I've seen this one."

"Yeah. I never watched Westerns. Daddy loved them."

"Yeah, well, me too. You take care, now."

"I will."

"You need anything I can help with, you tell Charlie and he'll get in touch with me. Hap Collins."

"Yes sir."

"Just Hap."

"Okay, Hap."

"Bye."

"Bye."

Yeah, call ole Hap, he was sure a helper, a big fixer. I went out of there and along the hall and the smell of the hospital was stronger than ever.

I drove over to Leonard's. The crack house had not been replaced. It was just a black spot splattered by rain.

I knocked on the door and Leonard answered. He was wearing a heavy coat and his face was puffy and marked with bruises and some stitches the vet should have put in but wouldn't, but the LaBorde doctor had.

He looked better though. He walked pretty well. He said, "You ole bastard," and threw open the screen and we hugged. We hugged hard and long, patting each other on the back.

"I've missed you," he said.

"Man, I feel like a fruit, hugging a fruit."

Leonard laughed. "Come in, buddy."

I came in. Raul looked at me, tried to smile, but he wasn't glad to see me. He was also wearing a coat, which surprised me. The house was warm. Leonard didn't pay Raul any mind. He said, "I'm cooking out back, come on."

"In the rain?"

"Nope. Come on. Leave your coat on."

Leonard limped a little as he went. I followed through the kitchen, onto the back porch, or where it used to be. There was a big screened-in porch now with a concrete floor. The rain was blasting on the roof and some of it was blowing through the screen. It was cold out there. In the middle of the porch was a cooker and it was smoking with hamburgers and hot dogs.

"This is nice," I said. "I didn't know this was here."

"I started it before we went to Grovetown, before all this goddamn rain started. You spent the night here, I meant to show it to you. But my mind wasn't on it and you didn't go out the back way, so it never got mentioned. What do you think? Needs some touches yet, but I like it. It'll be nice in the summer. Wire's thick enough to keep the big bugs out. Skeeters'll get in though. They can get through anything."

"That's the truth. What about the two guys with the bowling ball heads?"

"Clinton and Leon. Guess they're all right. They were here while I was in the hospital. Those fellas are all right, provided you don't have to spend more than thirty minutes at a stretch with them."

"So no trouble while you were gone."

“Leon sat on the commode and it fell through the floor with him. I talked to him on the phone at the hospital. He and Clinton got some lumber and fixed the flooring. It was old and rotten under there. Only complaint Leon had was that when he fell through the commode overturned and he got shit on him.”

Raul came out. He had his hands in his pockets and looked cold. He said, “I told Leonard this wasn’t cookout weather, even on the porch, but he wouldn’t listen. You don’t listen to me, do you, Lenny?”

“Nope,” Leonard said, and smiled.

“He doesn’t listen to anybody but you, Hap. He listens to you.”

“Raul,” Leonard warned.

“Oh yeah, I don’t want to embarrass you in front of Hap. Anybody but him.”

“Let’s don’t start,” Leonard said.

Raul turned and went back inside.

I said, “I shouldn’t have come.”

“Yeah, you should. Here, help me carry this stuff in.”

We ate in the kitchen. Raul joined us, but he wasn’t exactly talky. When Leonard paused to go to the facilities, I said, “Raul, I didn’t mean to cause trouble.”

“I know,” he said. “It’s not you. It’s me and him. It’s lots of things.”

Leonard came back. He said to me: “I think I know why you came, Hap.”

“I missed you.”

“Besides that. We’re going back to Grovetown, aren’t we?”

“I’ve got to. I can’t keep doing like I’m doing. I’m sleeping with a goddamn revolver, Leonard. You know me. Does that sound like me?”

“I sleep with a shotgun nearby.”

“But that sounds like you.”

Leonard studied my face for a moment, said, “I cry at night. I just break down crying. Does that sound like me?”

"Are vanilla cookies involved?" I said. "I can see you crying over cookies. By the way, Charlie ate the ones I keep at the house for you."

"That shit," Leonard said. "He was over here the other day, and I thought I smelled vanilla cookies on his breath. He said he'd just come from your place."

A little time floated by. Leonard said, "I get these dreams too. Mostly about that crowd of people, kickin' and hittin' on me."

"Me too," I said. "And some others."

"I wake up, I think I'm still there," Leonard said.

"I tell him to let it go," Raul said. "But he won't. I know he can't forget what happened, but he won't let go that he's done something wrong. I don't get it."

"I don't think I've done anything wrong," Leonard said. "I just don't like feeling like I'm feeling. It's like my guts have been ripped out. What's wrong is I can't just let it lay."

"It's over with," Raul said. "You did all you could. You've got this tough-guy image. It's out of date. We fags, we don't have to do that. It's not in our makeup."

"What's in my makeup is in my makeup," Leonard said. "I'm a man. I got balls. So do you. I like balls. I like your balls, but I'm still a man and I got to feel like a man. Maybe I'm some kind of anomaly or something. I don't know. I don't get it. But I like a man acts like a man without thinking it's being a bully. I can't explain it to him, Hap. Can you?"

"You know I can't," I said.

"Saying I'm too stupid to understand?" Raul said.

"No," I said. "It's just a way of living your life, and I personally don't know it's better than any other, it's just all we know."

"I don't get it," Raul said. "Why all this macho?"

"When I say act like a man," Leonard said, "I mean act honorably and with courage. Macho has been turned into a bad word by turds who act like beasts, not men."

"You acted with honor and courage," Raul said. "Look where it got you. There's nothing left for you to do. You're not cops. Or heroes. You're just a couple of fellas, and Lenny, you're my fella. I want to know you're here so I can hold you nights. Is that so wrong?"

"No," Leonard said. "But I got to go back. I turn my head now, every time someone looks tough or calls me nigger, or queer, I'm gonna turn my head. Get so I'll turn my head if I think a mechanic's bill's too high. I ain't no worm."

"I don't get it," Raul said. "Really, I don't."

"I know," Leonard said. "Sometimes, I think it's just me and Hap gets it. Maybe Charlie. And Hanson. Bless him."

"I want to go tomorrow," I said. "I don't want to plan way ahead. I want to do it quick."

"I'll be ready," Leonard said.

"We have plans for tomorrow," Raul said. He looked at me. "We had plans today."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Don't say you're sorry, Hap," Leonard said. "Listen here, Raul. I'll make it up to you. But plans to go and do something, and me and Hap doing this, it's different. It's important. It's not just made-up shit."

"That's nice," Raul said.

"You know what I mean," Leonard said.

"No, I don't," Raul said.

"Yeah," Leonard said. "Guess you don't. Hap, come by and get me tomorrow morning."

"You go, and I'll leave for good," Raul said. "You got to decide if this stupid honor of yours—and him—are more important than me."

"It's got nothing to do with what's the most important," Leonard said.

"You go, I'll go, and this time I won't come back. I don't care they hurt you real bad, I won't come back. They kill you, I won't be there to see you buried. You go, I'm gone."

Leonard turned and studied Raul. I hated it when Leonard looked that way. It was damn scary, and considering the look was intensified by swelling, bruises, and stitches, well, I just didn't like it.

“All right,” Leonard said. “I’ve known you for a short time, Raul. I like you. I like fuckin’ you. I hate your taste in movies, TV, and books. You got good taste in men, and that’s it. I might even love you, but I know I love Hap, and me and him ain’t even fuckin’, and if that isn’t real love, I don’t know what is.”

“Very poetic,” Raul said.

“I been living with who I am and what I believe longer than I’ve lived with you, much longer than you’ve ever given thought to who you are. You might be somebody deep down—”

“Leonard,” I said.

“Shut up, Hap. You might be somebody deep down, Raul, but all you want to see in yourself and me and anyone else is surface. Me and Hap, we got history and we got connection. You can make of that what you want. And let me tell you somethin’. You hit the door this time, you damn well better not come back. I get killed, I wouldn’t want you at my funeral. You’re there, I’d want Hap to throw you out.”

“He’ll be dead too,” Raul said. “You’ll both be dead.”

Raul got up and left the room. It was awfully quiet for about twenty seconds. Eventually, we could hear Raul moving about in the other room.

“What’s that noise?” I asked.

“The ironing board. He gets upset, he sets it up, irons clothes.”

We sat for another twenty seconds or so. The clock in the kitchen ticked loudly. The ironing board squeaked louder and louder. Leonard said, “Think maybe we could have a double funeral, and Charlie could throw him out?”

“Sorry, man. I think he’ll get over it.”

“He will or he won’t, but you don’t be sorry, Hap.”

I got up. I pulled on my coat. “This is going to sound funny, Leonard. But is everything okay between us?”

“It always has been.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Bright and early,” Leonard said.

27

Next morning, on the way to Leonard's, I tried to remember the first time I'd seen Florida, tried to figure if I was still in love with her, or just had my feelings hurt because she chose Hanson over me. Had I lost a love or a battle? Both?

Was I searching for her by going back to Grovetown, or searching for something of myself? Both?

I just loved it when I got all Zen and shit.

I pulled up in Leonard's drive, got out in the rain and went to the door. He opened it before I could knock. He had a twelve-gauge shotgun with him, a backpack and a sleeping bag bound up in a waterproof wrapper.

"Good to see you still got a bazooka left," I said.

"I got another one in the house, and a handgun in my coat pocket, you want it."

"I brought my snub-nose. I don't like that I brought it, but I did. I get away from it too long these days, it's like I left my dick in the other room."

"You see, your manhood is tied up in your weapons, Hap. The revolver is a phallic symbol for your repressed manhood. Your impotence."

"For the first time in my life, I believe that."

We loaded his stuff in the back of the pickup. I had my stuff there too and had fixed a tarp over it to keep out the rain. By the time we had Leonard's stuff under there, we were both soaked.

Leonard slid his shotgun into the gun rack above the seat; a baseball bat already resided in the top slot. It was a bat I'd taken off a thug once who thought he was going to break my knees, but he forgot to quit talking before he started hitting, so I'd taken it away from him, broken his nose, and kept the bat. I usually kept it in the house, but I was glad to have it now. It made me feel slightly more comfortable. Leonard's shotgun added to the comfort, as did the snub-nose in the glove box and the truck's heater.

I backed out and we started up the street. I said, "Raul all right?"

"Well, we didn't sing 'The Sound of Music' together in the shower this morning, so I don't think we're all that rosy. We've really done that, you know?"

"Showered together?"

"That and sang 'The Sound of Music.' We do it quite well, actually."

"Raul still leaving?"

"I don't know. I don't want him to. I told him if he did, to call the bowling ball head brothers to watch the place. Hell, I can't figure Raul. He's all mopey and shit. Today is the anniversary of when we met, and he wanted us to go out to dinner, go to a movie, do some serious fucking. I wanted us to do that too, but I didn't want it getting in the way of me killing somebody."

"Easy, now."

"I'm gonna do what I gotta do."

"I'm not sure we got to do that."

"Let me say this, Hap, then I'll shut up. I meant what I said yesterday. We got to do this thing because of who we are, or who we want to keep being. Whatever degree it takes, we got to go to that degree. You believe that?"

"I'm not going to kill anyone. On purpose. I'm going to find out about Florida, and if I can hook Brown up with that, and what happened to us, that'll make me extra happy."

"I don't think we can undo a beating, Hap. But I got to go back there and face that town. Find Florida. Someone gets in the way of either, I might have to put a hole in them. And by the way, I packed us a nice sack lunch for later. It's in my pack."

"Bullets and lunch," I said. "You think of everything."

"Bottom line is this, Bubba. It's you and me. Anything and everything else fucks up, it's you and me. We're gonna see each other through this, do what we got to do if the sun comes up or don't. And that's the long and the short of it."

"That's the truth," I said.

"Still," he said, "I hope Raul don't leave."

I don't remember much about the drive that morning, just the rain and the scenery being a blurry yellow line in front of my face, a few twists of dried forests, glimpses of swollen creeks and ponds. We drove by where we had gone off in the marsh, and the both of us looked, our heads turning in that direction at the same time. The marsh had expanded. The water was coming over the highway and the woods were swollen with it.

Leonard said, "They pulled my car out of there."

"I know."

"Guess what?"

"It won't run."

"The insurance ain't given me but two hundred dollars for it. Guess they think I can stick that up my ass and drive around on it."

"Personally, I don't think it's much of a loss. It was about one notch above a ten-speed, and that's because it had a roof on it."

A few more miles down the road we started kicking around game plans for what we were going to do when we got to Grovetown, but the plans didn't amount to anything. It consisted primarily of eating the sack lunch Leonard had brought.

Leonard and I were about as far from sleuths as you could get. We didn't know much besides instinct, and so far that had gotten our asses whipped, got us half drowned, shot at, in trouble with the law, and Leonard had screwed up his relationship with Raul, and we still hadn't found Florida.

We ended up driving out to see Bacon. The yard was missing some of its beer cans—washed away most likely—and the house was still a shithole, but someone had helped it along by kicking out one of the porch posts. The porch roof leaned to one side like a rake's hat. NIGGER had been spray-painted in big black letters underneath one of the windows and the window was knocked out and cardboard had been put in its place. The cardboard had taken in so much rain it was puffy and bent back and you could see into the house, and what you saw was darkness. Out to the side, the tarp had been torn off the backhoe by either wind or maliciousness. The machine was a faded yellow and it looked as if it hadn't been cleaned since used last. It was on a wheeled platform attached to an ancient but powerful-looking gray Dodge truck.

We went up on the porch, shook the rain off like dogs, and knocked. After a while a curtain moved, then the door cracked open. There was a new chain across the door. Bright and shiny. Sticking above it was a double-barrel shotgun and the shadow of a face.

"Get the hell out of here," Bacon said.

"It's us," I said.

"I know who the hell it is. Get on."

"We just want to ask a few questions."

"Not of me. Get on out of here, or I'm gonna blow your ass off. It wasn't for you, I'd be all right."

"Just a moment of your time," Leonard said. "Then we'll leave."

"I've given you all the time you're gonna get."

"It's important," I said.

"It was important last time, and look where it got me."

"Come on, Bacon," Leonard said. "Just a moment."

The door slammed. The chain rattled. The door was flung open and we went inside. Water was pouring from the kitchen roof into a big pan on the floor and the pan was full and the water was running over, running over the swollen linoleum. Wind was blowing rain through the gaps in the window with the cardboard over it, and it had been going on so long a few of the floorboards were warped.

Bacon stood in the middle of the room in his jockey shorts. He had the shotgun in his right hand and he had both arms flung wide. His scalded skin drooped over a sagging rib cage. His flesh was splotched from forehead to foot with great pink patches of rawness. It looked as if big chunks of hide had been pulled off by squid suckers.

“That tar took my meat off,” he said. “You hear me! They tarred me ’cause I helped y’all. They meant for me to die. I ain’t safe, now. You come around, I sure ain’t safe.”

“Jesus, Bacon,” I said. “I’m so sorry.”

“That’s you white folk. You’re always so sorry. So goddamn sorry. Jesus, Bacon, I’m sorry. So sorry. Well, that helps, Mr. Hap. I’m all right now.”

“Let’s go,” I said.

“Not yet,” Leonard said. “I’m sorry what happened to you, Bacon. I don’t feel so good myself, and it was whites did it to me, but Hap ain’t one of ’em.”

“He’s the one got me hurt,” Bacon said. He threw the shotgun on the couch, sat down carefully. You could actually hear the skin crack when he sat. Blood beaded around some of the splotches and began to run.

Bacon’s voice was venomous. “Every time I move, feel my skin crack, I think of Mr. Hap, here. I had to soak in kerosene to get that tar and feathers off. It peeled, took skin with it. Both my nuts, they’re solid pink. They’re ripped right down to the meat. Ain’t a place on them ain’t scalded by tar, burned by kerosene. I ain’t slept a whole night since it happened on account of the pain and knowing they’re comin’ back to finish me, ’cause they will. I know they will. I’m gonna have to move off somewhere. I can’t stay here. I don’t know where to go, but I can’t stay here … y’all go on.”

“In a moment,” Leonard said.

“You ain’t nothing but an Uncle Tom, nigger-fella,” Bacon said.

“It’s a good thing you’re old and splotched like a hound,” Leonard said, “or I’d have to fix your teeth.”

“Yeah, threaten me ’cause you can whip me. You couldn’t whip all them others.”

I heard Leonard take a deep breath, blow it out slowly through his nose.

I said, “It’s all right, Leonard. Let’s go.”

“Not yet,” Leonard said. “Bacon, they came after you day after some of them came after us. Like you, we were lucky. We want to get even. We want to find who put them up to this, and we want to find out what happened to Florida."

"Fuck Florida!" Bacon yelled and half came off the couch and screamed with pain. "Oh, God," he said, and collapsed into the worn-out cushions. "That bitch, she showed up in town, she upset the balance. Things was bad before she come, but we all knew how things was played. She come around, shakin' that pretty ass, she got things messed up. She's as much to blame for what happened to me as Mr. Hap."

We gave Bacon a moment to stew in his rancor. We listened to water pound the roof of the house, listened to it run onto the floor in the kitchen, listened to it blow past the cardboard patching in the window. Leonard said, "We're gonna do this with or without you, but we're gonna do it, and you might help us do it better. Did you recognize any of the men took you out of here, tarred and feathered you?"

"No."

"Come on, Bacon," Leonard said.

"No! I said NO! Are you deaf?"

"Just tell me if this is right," Leonard said. "You left here ahead of us, went into town, came home, and next night they came out and got you."

Bacon didn't say anything, but he didn't argue either.

"They came out and got you 'cause someone let on we were here, that you helped us," Leonard said. "Who?"

"I don't know," Bacon said. "Cantuck, maybe. It could have been him. I don't think so, but it could have been. Maybe Mrs. Rainforth, she could have said something wrong. Mr. Tim might have. It ain't no tellin'. Please go. Please. They see you here …"

"They're not gonna see us," Leonard said.

"They gonna find out," Bacon said. "Somehow, they'll find out. They found out last time, didn't they?"

"Sorry, Bacon," I said. "Really."

"Yeah," he said. "Okay. You're sorry. Just go on, now."

It was strange and painful driving into Grovetown. It's impossible to describe the feelings that went through me as we came to the city-limits sign, and soon to the square. The square was fairly deep in water. You could pass through it, but the water was swift and it made me nervous. Once, when I was younger, I was following a pickup truck out of a hayfield where I had been working, and we'd had to stop working because a tremendous and unbelievable rain had fallen out of the sky. It was like someone had dumped an ocean on East Texas. But I was with my boss, who had given me a ride to the field, and he was taking me home, and we got behind this pickup, and we came to a bridge and the water was just too much for the hard dry ground., It had been too hot for too long, and when it finally did rain, it wasn't absorbed. It was swelling, and water was already over the bridge, though it wasn't deep. I think had we come to the bridge first, we would have tried to drive over it too, but the pickup in front of us tried it. The water hit the pickup like a battering ram, carried it into the bridge railing and the railing broke and the truck went over.

There was nothing we could do. One instant man and truck were there, the next they were gone. The water carried the truck away and under, and it was three days later when the water went down that they found him. He was still in the truck, what was left of a cigar clamped between his teeth. That's how fast he'd gone over and drowned.

It had taught me a lesson about the power of water, and I had respected it ever since. I knew what it could do, and I was haunted by it. By the deeps. By the shallows. By water.

Across the way I could see the Grovetown Cafe. Water was lapping over the curbing, threatening to enter the place. In my head I could see inside it and I could visualize all those angry people, falling down on us like cut timbers.

We decided to start at Cantuck's office, but we couldn't get to it. The water was too high over there to park. We parked at Tim's filling station, and walked over. I tell you, outside of the truck I was a nervous wreck. I knew it wasn't wise, especially going into Cantuck's office, but I wouldn't go without the snub-nose and Leonard wouldn't go without his pistol. We hid them in our coats.

Water was seeping under the door and into the lobby when we arrived. The carpet smelled like a damp sheepdog. We were both breathing harder than either of us really should have been. Perspiration was boiling out from under my arms almost as fast as the rain was coming down. Leonard's limp was more pronounced. He had gotten the original injury saving my life, and he'd healed up good, having only occasional trouble with it, but the beating we had taken had done his leg some bad business again, reactivated the old pain.

"You all right?" I asked.

"Unless you want to have a sack race, I'm all right."

The secretary had taken down her Christmas cards and tree. She wasn't glad to see us. Reynolds was out, which was, of course, a major disappointment.

Cantuck must have heard us come in, because he came to the door of his office with a jaw full of chewing tobacco. He looked a lot less friendly than when I used to see him leaving the police station in LaBorde.

"All right," he said. "Come in."

We went into his office. Cantuck sat down, picked his spit can off the desk and pushed his chew into it with his tongue.

"We just thought we'd drop in and say hi," Leonard said, taking a chair. When he sat, water pooled beneath him.

Cantuck sighed. He rolled his one good eye to the left, then the right, perhaps looking for sanctuary. I got a dollar out of my wallet and forced it into one of the cans on his desk. He eyed that, said, "You're not thinking you're softening me up with that, are you?"

I sat down. Cantuck said, "If ever there were a couple of idiots, it's you two."

"But we're your idiots," I said.

Cantuck rubbed the back of his neck and ran a hand through his hair. "You know, you could cause some problems showin' up here. I could have you run out of town. I could lock you up."

"But you wouldn't do that," I said. "Because we're your idiots."

"Don't think 'cause you got me to a hospital I owe you some favors," Cantuck said.

"We'd never capitalize on a thing like that," Leonard said. "But we did save your life."

"I'd have been all right," Cantuck said.

"You'd have bled to death," Leonard said.

"You didn't do shit," Cantuck said. "You were in the back seat, passed out."

"Hap saved us both," Leonard said. "So you owe him."

Cantuck clasped his hands together, leaned his elbows on his desk, pushed his face against his hands. He said, "What is it you want? You want to know Brown is guilty? I can't tell you. Being how he's the Exalted Cyclops of the Klan here—or whatever they're calling themselves these days—I figure he had to have known something. No one's pinning him to it because he wasn't there, and the boys are keeping the Klan pledge of silence. Now you know what I know, unless you don't know we're having some serious bad weather here and I think I'm going to send everyone home, along with myself, before we drown."

"What about Reynolds?" I said. "He involved?"

"He's a worthless piece of shit," Cantuck said, "and I figure he'll get my job. Brown starts enough grassroots unrest, makes people feel their jobs at the lumber mill, the Christmas tree farm are in jeopardy, the Mayor might see his way to appoint Reynolds. I don't know. Maybe I want that. I'm tired of all this shit. I got one eye, a swollen nut, and more grief than I need. I been thinking about opening an antique store."

"Lots of guys with one eye and a swollen nut do that," Leonard said.

Cantuck actually grinned at him.

"We don't want any trouble," I said. "We just think we might find a lead somewhere. Something to help us figure what happened to Florida."

"Oh yeah?" Cantuck said. "Couple of detectives, just like on the TV, huh? Seen some *Matlock*, have you? A few *Perry Mason* reruns. That's good, and it's good of you two to offer your vast experience in our hour of need. Way I've seen you guys operate, I don't think you could find your dick with both hands, let alone figure out who did what to who and why."

"I just want who," I said. "I don't give a damn about why."

"And that's why you'll never figure the who," Cantuck said. "It's the why that counts."

“The why in this case is damn easy,” I said. “A black man killed a white man and a black woman started messing with it.”

The Chief’s door opened then. I turned in my chair. It was Reynolds. He had a plastic hat cover over his hat and the water beaded on it like balls of Vaseline. From his feet to his knees was soaked. “Well,” he said. “My little buddies.”

Leonard stood up as if to confront Reynolds.

“Man, you look rough,” Reynolds said. “What happened? Get beat up in a cafe?”

“Don’t think because a roomful of people whipped my ass, you can,” Leonard said.

“I don’t have to think nothing,” Reynolds said.

“Get started on me,” Leonard said, “hope you brought yourself a sack lunch, ’cause you gonna be here all night.”

Reynolds finally decided to notice me. “What about you, shithead? You want me after I finish him?”

“Naw,” I said. “Actually, just seeing how tough you are is making my bowels loose. Besides, Leonard gets through with you, what’s left for me?”

“That’s enough,” Cantuck said.

“Chief,” Leonard said. “All I ask is you give us fifteen minutes. Anywhere you say. Me and him, assholes and elbows.”

“You heard me,” Cantuck said, “put the brakes on.” He stood up from his desk and leaned his hands on it. “Reynolds. You still work for me, and you knock on my fuckin’ door, you want to come in. And, I’ll tell you another little thing … close the door.”

Reynolds, who was still holding the knob in his hand, gently closed it. Cantuck said, “Quit fuckin’ my secretary. She has a family.”

Reynolds turned beet red. “Chief, I—”

“Just shut up,” Cantuck said. “Now what the fuck did you want anyway?”

“Charlene told me they was in here,” Reynolds said. “I wanted to know why.”

“They come to donate a dollar to one of my charity cans,” Cantuck said. “Now pack your ass on out of here. I thought it was your business, I'd leave you a note or somethin'. Go on."

Reynolds went out and started to close the door. Cantuck said, "Tell Charlene to go on home. And you go on too—but not with her. And just in case you might feel you want to talk to someone about these boys being here. Someone like Brown. Don't do it. Something happens to these pieces of shit, it might make me feel bad on account of they put money in my charity cans. Are you readin' me here, son?"

"Chief—"

"The answer's 'yes sir,' " Cantuck said.

"Yes sir," Reynolds said.

"Now go on," Cantuck said. "Day's too bad to hang out here. Word is the dam's leakin' like a goddamn sieve. Next thing you know, we'll be digging bass out of our asses. Now get."

Reynolds went out and closed the door.

"You really don't like him, do you, Chief," Leonard said.

"Nope, I don't."

I said, "Thanks, Chief."

"Don't thank me," he said. "I don't want you here neither."

"You say that," Leonard said, "but you don't mean it."

"Oh yes I do," Cantuck said.

"This sort of rejection from authority figures," Leonard said, "it's exactly what makes a fellow go bad. I read that in a book somewheres."

28

Cantuck told us to go home, but he didn't make it an official order, so we waded over to Tim's station and went inside. He was sitting behind the counter with his feet up. When he saw us come in, his eyebrows went up.

"Sort of thought I'd seen the last of you two," he said.

"You almost did," I said. I looked at the pig's feet in the jar on the counter. It looked like the same pig's feet as before. I said, "Thought you sold lots of those?"

"I lied," Tim said. "I try to sell them to the out-of-towners. What do you boys want? I mean, is this safe for you?"

"Can we sit?" Leonard asked.

"Sure," Tim said. "Go ahead. I'll get us a little coffee."

He went and got the coffee. Leonard and I sat in the same chairs we had sat in before and Tim's long coat hung on the same chair where it had hung before. I put my hand in my pocket and fondled my .38, lovingly. We listened to the rain on the roof.

When I felt sure no one was about to charge through the door in a white sheet, I looked around the store, at the new pile of wood beside the stove—without a lizard this time—the crap under the barrel stove, the shiny blue something there, the dust bunnies, and the tobacco wrapper.

Everything seemed just the way it had that Christmas we had come into Grovetown, except the aluminum Christmas tree was gone. It was hard to believe it had been nearly a month. A bit of wind rustled through the place as Tim came in with coffee. It blew dust bunnies across the floor and into the corners.

When we had our coffee and Tim was seated, Leonard said, "You think your dad was behind what was done to us?"

Tim thought a moment. "Maybe he didn't have it done, but the ones done it done it cause he wanted it done. I bet on that. But why are you guys back?”

“We’re stupid,” I said.

“I believe that,” Tim said.

“What about Reynolds?” Leonard said. “He behind any of this?”

“Christ, boys, I don’t know. Why the third degree?”

“Sorry,” Leonard said. “We’re just a little down on our social skills today.”

“And nervous,” I said.

“I bet,” Tim said. “Hell, boys, I’m glad enough to see you, but I think you ought to leave this to out-of-town law if you’re thinking of doing something yourself.”

“We don’t know what we’re thinking,” I said. “We still haven’t found Florida.”

“She could still be okay,” Tim said. “Run off somewhere for some reason we haven’t got a clue. And I tell you, I’m thinking of leaving out of here myself, for a while. That old Grovetown dam, they say it’s pretty creaky, all this rain. It’s got more water in it now than last time, and when it broke that time it was bad news. I want Mama out of where she is, but I haven’t been able to budge her. That dam breaks, her trailer park’ll be the first place to get it. There’s already places out there under four or five feet of water just from the seepage. Half the town has left already. Won’t come back until the rain stops or the water goes down.”

“That’s to our advantage,” I said.

“You two are fools,” Tim said. “This time, someone might succeed at what they tried last time.”

“And you don’t want to be in the middle of it?” Leonard said.

“Damn right,” Tim said. “You heard what they did to Bacon.”

“Yeah,” I said. “But if it’s your father behind all this, you said yourself you’ve got immunity.”

“And what if it isn’t my father?” Tim said. “Guys, I’m sorry you got beat up. I’m sorry you got run off the road and nearly killed, but you came out all right. The guys involved confessed. Maybe they’ll get scared and pin my father to it in time. But why do you want to meddle anymore?”

“You’re about the only one here who has really befriended us,” I said. “Maude and her boys a little. Cantuck in his own fashion. But you know these people. You might can tell us something can help. I feel there’s an equation we haven’t added up. I think we look at the factors just right, we ought to be able to get a total. Know what I’m saying?”

“No,” Tim said.

“Florida comes here because she thinks Soothe was murdered,” I said. “She wants to prove the Chief and the town are a bunch of bigots. She wants to buy this stuff the Yankee wanted to buy from Soothe and got killed over. Stuff that might or might not exist. She asks around. Talks to you. Gets a place to stay out at your mother’s, then disappears. Her car disappears. Her belongings disappear.”

“That’s what makes me think she may have just driven off,” Tim said.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “Doesn’t fit who she was. People can sometimes do crazy things, but by now we’d have heard from her. Something’s happened to her.”

“You can’t be certain,” Tim said.

“I’ve thought every angle. It looked to me at first that Cantuck might have something to do with her missing, but in light of the way things have gone, that doesn’t fit as well as it first did. Reynolds is possible. He and your father could have been in cahoots. They could have hung Soothe. Perhaps Florida somehow found out, so they got rid of her. That sound far-fetched?”

“I guess not,” Tim said. “I wouldn’t put anything past my old man. Not after the way he’s treated my mother and me. I tell you, him with all that money, and me with nothing. And owing him to boot. It gets my goat. And I hate to mention it, boys, but you owe me for some tires.”

“Oh, yeah,” Leonard said. “You take a check?”

“I don’t like to.”

“Can you wait then?”

“I’ll take the check.”

Leonard wrote it out. Tim took it and put it in his wallet. “There now,” he said. “That’s all taken care of. You were saying … what was it?”

"He was about to say, then we show up," Leonard said, "not only are we a nigger and a nigger lover, but we're treading on dangerous ground. Same ground Florida was on."

"So," Tim said. "What can I do?"

"What we want," I said, "is for you to let us talk to your mother. You know, set it up with her. Maybe there's something she knows that didn't seem important at the time, but is now. Perhaps Florida left her clothes in the trailer and your mother took them."

"She's not a thief," Tim said.

"He didn't say that," Leonard said. "What he wants is any bit of evidence we can find. If your mother has the clothes, then that could point to Florida being abducted, killed. Might be something in her clothes that'll give us a lead. If we could find her car. Just something to start with. Anything."

"Hell," I said. "We don't know what we want, Tim. We just want it. Understand?"

"Here's what I'll do," Tim said. "I'll ask her she knows anything. I'll call out there. I want to talk her into leaving anyway, all this water risin', but that's all I'll do. My mother is not a well woman, and I don't want you two giving her grief. Got me?"

"Fair enough," I said.

Tim went in the back and we sat by the stove and waited. Five minutes later he returned.

"She won't leave," he said, "and she doesn't know anything. She said Florida was there, then she wasn't, and she never saw her again. And she didn't leave any clothes."

We bought some gas and soft drinks from Tim. I even bought one of the pig's feet. We went out and sat in the truck. The rain rattled on the roof and flooded over the windshield so thick it was like we were underwater.

"What now?" I said.

"This hasn't worked out quite like I thought," Leonard said. "I figure I pissed Raul off for nothing. It's too wet to do a goddamn thing. No place to stay. We've got less ideas than we did before we came the first time. And that check I wrote Tim is hot, I don't get some money to cover it. Boy, he is one tight sonofabitch."

"You're right," I said. "On all accounts."

"I missed out on an anniversary dinner and Raul's ass for this, and I tell you, I ain't happy."

"Maybe you could find someone to beat up."

"Yeah. Things could get better. What would cheer me up real good is getting to hit that Reynolds fucker."

"He'll hit back. I guarantee it."

"That is a drawback. Want to eat this sack lunch?"

"I been thinking about it ever since we left your house."

We got the sack lunch and ate it. I tried to eat the pig's foot too. It smelled rank and it was like eating a piece of soggy, vinegar-soaked rubber. I rolled down the window and spat a few times, then wrapped the pig's foot up in a paper sack, double-bagged it with another.

"Maybe you ought to wrap that sack in chains," Leonard said. "Drive a stake through it so when you throw it out, it ain't gonna come back."

"What now?" I said.

"We've been avoiding the cafe," Leonard said. "Might as well go there and get a cup of coffee, warm up."

We walked over, getting drenched, the water sloshing almost to our knees. I felt sick to my stomach thinking of going into that place, but with our guns in our coat pockets we were a lot braver.

The cafe was locked. There was a sign on the inside of the glass door that said CLOSED DUE TO HIGH WATER.

We got in the truck and sat for a while. "Well, we were ready to go in there and face the devil," I said. "And had it been open, we would have too. I'm proud of us."

"Me too," Leonard said. "On the other hand, I'm kinda glad it wasn't open."

"Me too."

"Know what, Hap? We're gonna have to go back to LaBorde. Get our shit together better, have a real plan. I hate to admit it, but I couldn't wait to get here today, and now we're here, and I don't know what for. Maybe if it wasn't rainin'. Or we had a place to stay. As it is we're just running around like chickens with our heads cut off. I'm wet. I'm cold. No one is here I can be mad at, and Cantuck won't let me and Reynolds play."

"I was thinking the same thing. And feeling stupid about jumping up like a big dog, and then here we are and there's nothing for us to do."

We left Grovetown, started the way we'd come, but the weather was so bad we had to creep along at thirty miles an hour, and when we came to the marsh where Leonard's car had gone in, the marsh was over the road.

We turned around, headed back to Grovetown, then took the highway that ran out by Bacon's place, hoping to find a long way to LaBorde.

We edged along slowly. The water was starting to seep out of the woods and onto the road. The sky was a light show, and the wind was so strong it was hard to hold the truck in a lane. We passed Bacon's place, went on out a ways, finally came to a rise on the highway, and when we looked down we could see darkness, and the darkness was water.

I thought about turning back, but the rain was so severe I chose not to. Even with the lights on bright, I couldn't see much beyond the length of the truck hood, only enough to recognize a swell of water across the highway below. The truck was vibrating in the wind.

Off to our right was a short gravel road that went up a hill higher than the highway, and we took it. After a little ways, we were able to make out it was a cemetery road, and we drove inside the place and parked under a great oak near an old tomb that was swelling out of the ground, threatening to fall.

The rain pounded us so hard I thought it would come through the pickup roof, and the lightning was like luminous varicose veins across the sky. It cracked and hissed and made the darkness go daylight for full seconds at a time. I feared the tree would attract it, as trees do, so I backed out from under and tried to find a clear spot. I finally settled on a place between a row of tombstones, killed the engine, and we sat there and looked at their gray shapes through the rain, and though I've never been one to be bothered by cemeteries, I was feeling pretty blue and pretty spooky right then. Being out in the open like that made me feel worse. The tree had felt safe, though logically, I knew it was the worst place we could be in a storm. Except maybe a mobile home. Storms, especially tornadoes, dearly loved a mobile home.

"Sometimes," Leonard said, "I think when I die I'd like to end up in a place like this."

"I donated my body to science," I said. "Got it marked on my driver's license. But I don't know. I may take it off next time. Stuff I used to think was silly ain't so silly anymore. I mean, you're dead, you're dead, but it means a little something to know your name might get read off a tombstone someday. Otherwise, it's like you never lived."

"'Course, giving someone your liver or eyes and them living because of you, that's quite a legacy," Leonard said.

"Then you ought to donate yourself too."

"No, I mean it's a legacy for you. Me, I want to be buried."

We sat there for about twenty minutes, not saying anything, the interior of the truck growing colder, and then I said, "You know, I just realized, first time I met Florida was at a cemetery. I been trying to remember first time I saw her, and it finally came to me."

"My uncle's funeral."

"Yeah. I don't know why I couldn't remember that. A thing like that, think you wouldn't forget."

"Cold is making my leg ache like a sonofabitch, Hap. We got enough gas to run the heater some?"

I fired up the engine and cranked the heater on high, said, "The cemetery here. It's given me an idea. Something that's been building in my subconscious all along. We been going about this all wrong."

"I could have told you that."

"We started out right, but now we're going wrong. We came to Grovetown trying to follow what Florida would have done, but we quit doing that. We did it a little, but we quit. We started trying to figure who killed her, instead of thinking like she would think."

"And how would she think?"

“She’d go first to see Cantuck. Maybe talk to Reynolds.”

“We did that.”

“She’d go to the road houses, talk to people knew Soothe, saw him and this Yankee together. She’d talk to Soothe’s relatives.”

“Chief, Rangers, you name it, they’ve done that, Hap. I mean, we might ask something they didn’t ask ’cause we know Florida better than them, but I don’t put lots of stock in it. Ultimately, we’re just amateurs, and we ain’t worth a damn at it. Earnest. But stupid.”

“I’ll buy that. But there’s another thing she’d do. She’d go see Soothe’s grave.”

“Why?”

“Think a minute.”

Leonard did just that. He said, “All right, I thought about it and I don’t get it. She might want to see where he was buried, but I don’t see that matters much as far as finding her goes.”

“I think she might have thought she ought to move Soothe.”

“Dig him up?”

“If Florida was here to do an investigation, was convinced Soothe was murdered, she might get to thinking someone like Reynolds, or whoever, might figure an inquiry by outside authorities could result from her snooping around, doing an article, and the outside authorities would come in and want Soothe exhumed—”

“To see if he hung himself, or was hung?”

“Yep. So she dug up the body to keep it out of the hands of anyone who might spoil it, want to destroy autopsy evidence that could prove Soothe was murdered.”

“She did dig him up, where’d she put him, Hap? And another thing, Florida, petite as she was, wasn’t all that suited for grave digging.”

“She didn’t like getting dirty either. However, she wasn’t above using her feminine charms when it suited her needs. What she would need was a horny sap who thought doing a favor might get him a little stinky on his dinky, even if all Florida really planned to give him was her heartfelt thanks. Get my drift?”

“Well, I’ll be goddamned. You mean—”

“Yep.”

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We sat there about an hour, until the rain slacked, then we started for Grovetown. When we got there the water was running wild and deep through the streets, and we had to park up by an antique shop and wade to Tim's station.

The water pushed at us so hard it was difficult to stand, but we made it. The station was locked up. We went around to the back and beat on the door there, and after a moment Tim opened up. He didn't look that thrilled to see us. He told us to go around front, and closed the door.

He let us into the store. The room was still warm, but the heater was down to coals. We went over and sat by it anyway. I checked out the junk under the stove again. It was becoming my focus point, especially that little blue object.

Tim said, "I've closed up for the day. Weather isn't giving me any work. Unless I can do something for you guys right away, I think I'm gonna pack a few things, go out to Mom's see if I can get her to come with me, head out till all this passes. I'm not wanting to be rude, but—"

"Tim," I said, "you took Florida out to Soothe's grave, didn't you?"

"What?" he said.

I knew I was taking a hell of a flier, but the more I thought about it, considering what I knew of Florida, how she thought, I figured it was as good a flyer as I might ever take.

"She wanted to move Soothe to another place, didn't she? She asked you to take her out there and help her do it."

"Why would she do that?"

I told him what I thought. He said, "That's ridiculous," but he had a look on his face like we'd just caught him jacking off to a grainy photo of a shaved dog butt.

"You took her out there, and you helped move the body. All we want is you to show us where."

Tim studied the floor. He said, "If she did want it moved, and say I did help her, and showed you where the body is, what difference would it make now? All the time he's been in the ground, I don't know they could tell much."

"Not for us to say," Leonard said. "Forensic people can do pretty amazing things."

"And how would that help you find Florida anyway?" Tim asked. "That's what you're after, isn't it? Florida? Not this Soothe thing."

I knew I had hit pay dirt. I tried not to stare directly at Tim, lest I unnerve him. I focused on the blue object under the stove when I spoke.

"I'm not trying to say you did anything wrong, though Texas frowns on bodies being moved around after they're in the ground. But if Florida had you help move the body, and then someone, Reynolds, your father, lackeys, went out there to steal and destroy Soothe's corpse because they thought there might be an autopsy, and the body wasn't there, they might figure since Florida was asking around about Soothe, trying to prove he was murdered, well, they could put one and one together, decide she moved the body. They might not figure on you, but they'd think of her."

"Then," Leonard said, "they kidnapped her, made her tell where it was."

"Considering the boys around Grovetown can be real persuasive," I said, "I think she told, showed them where it was. And if she did, and the body was in a place where they didn't think it would be found, wouldn't cause them a problem, they left it. And they left Florida with it. That's logical. If the body wasn't in a good place, they took it off somewhere in the bottoms where it wouldn't be discovered, and probably took Florida with it."

"If it's the first thing," Leonard said, "we can find Soothe, and maybe Florida. If it's the second thing, then we … well, we don't have plans. We're taking it a step at a time."

"I don't know," Tim said.

“We do it this way,” I said. “Me and Leonard, we’ll figure a way to make it look like we put it together. We won’t involve you. I promise you that. You don’t help, we got to talk to Cantuck.”

“Why didn’t you do that anyway?” Tim asked.

“Because you and your mother befriended Florida,” I said. “Because we don’t want to tie you to stuff we don’t have to.”

“And Florida was our friend,” Leonard said. “Something happens to a friend and you can do something about it, you ought to.”

“But the weather,” Tim said. “That’s right out there by the dam, and that baby is startin’ to pop.”

“It floods,” I said, “that grave may be worse off than it is now. If both of them are out there, the sooner we get to them, better the forensic evidence. And the sooner we get some kind of knowledge of what happened to Florida, even if it’s bad, the better.”

“Dirt’s soft out there,” Tim said, “but with all this water, it could be a mess.”

“We’ll chance it,” Leonard said.

Tim went in the back room and put on boots, pulled on his heavy coat hanging by the stove, then we went out to the big garage and Tim loaded some shovels in his pickup along with a big tarp in case we found Soothe, or Soothe and Florida, then he drove us through the water and up the hill to my truck. Leonard and I followed Tim. We went out the highway where Bacon lived. I hoped the place we were going wasn’t beyond that great hill, ’cause if it was we might not make it, and tomorrow Tim might forget he knew anything. I felt the whole situation was fragile, needed to be pushed now.

We came to the road that led out to his mother’s, and though it was covered with water, we took it. The water was not deep over the road, but I was nervous as the proverbial long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. I kept thinking about that pickup I’d seen wash over the bridge.

We went down the road a ways, then took a worse road, but it went uphill some and the water disappeared. It was really a high hill for East Texas, and when we got to the top, Tim stopped and we pulled up alongside him. Down below us we could see the road was blocked by water over a narrow wooden bridge. The sky was growing dark again. The rain was coming down harder, and it was so cold the heater in the pickup sounded as if it were crying.

Leonard rolled down his window, and Tim his. Yelling across from truck to truck was difficult, the rain was coming down so hard it drowned out our voices.

“I’m afraid to drive across,” Tim said.

“Me too,” I said. “How far is it?”

“On the other side of the bridge, up the hill and down. To the right. It’s the paupers’ graveyard.”

“I thought that’s where he was in the first place?” Leonard said.

“And still is,” Tim said. “I didn’t want to do this, but now I’ve thought on it, I think we ought to. Get it over with. We can leave the trucks here. I don’t think traffic is going to be a problem today.”

When we all had a shovel and I had the rolled-up tarp under my arm and Tim had a flashlight, we started down the hill. We hadn’t gone a few steps before Leonard began to limp as if his leg were made of wood. He was using the shovel to help him along. I said, “Hold up. You that bad off, brother?”

“I’m a little stiff is all,” Leonard said, shivering in the cold rain.

“It’s not that far,” Tim said.

“Going across that bridge on that leg, I don’t know,” I said. Leonard’s leg was so swollen it looked like ground meat pumped into a sausage casing.

“Guess all the wear and tear, the weather, it’s not doing me any good,” Leonard said. “But I don’t like being a weak sister.”

“Go to the truck,” I said. “Me and Tim will take care of it.”

“I can make it,” Leonard said.

“It’s not really that far,” Tim said.

“Go on to the truck,” I told Leonard. “As a favor to me.”

Leonard nodded. “I guess I ought to. I don’t like digging anyway. Watch that water." He limped away, tossed the shovel into the bed of Tim's truck, then got in my truck on the passenger side. Through the blurry haze of the rain on the windshield, I saw him lift a hand and wave.

Tim and I went down the hill and into the water, hanging on to the bridge railing as we went. The force of the water was terrific, and I felt tremendous panic. I lost the tarp from under my arm and the water whisked it away.

We inched our way across the bridge, and on the other side the water was barely across the road. We walked along more quickly now, and up a hill, and when we came down on the other side I could see the graveyard off to the right, about halfway down the hill, the stones and markers sloping toward the Big Thicket. Definitely a pauper's graveyard.

There was a barbed wire fence around it and an open gate, and we went through there and Tim took the lead. He led me over to where Soothe's grave was, tapped it with his shovel. The grave was covered in colored glass and the cheap gravestone that stated his name, birthdate, and death was wrapped in colored beads. There was a little dolls head in front of the stone with melted wax on top of it where a candle had burned down. Part of the doll's head had melted, and wax had run down over the painted eye.

"Empty," Tim said. "All this shit was put here after we dug the grave up officially. Me, Cantuck, Reynolds, and the Ranger. You wouldn't believe how hard it was for me to act surprised when we opened it."

"Why all this stuff?"

"Voodoo," Tim said. "It's to keep Soothe in the ground." He strolled over to the grave next to Soothes, stuck his shovel into the dirt at its base. "Old Mrs. Burk has company."

"You put Soothe in there with her?"

"Florida's idea," he said. "Just temporary. Way the weather's been, washing the place and all, no one could tell we'd done anything when they dug up Soothe's spot."

"Clever," I said. "Let's do it."

Grave digging is not nearly as easy as you might think. It's backbreaking, and next to picking corn out of pig shit with tweezers it's the most boring thing in the world. I tried to focus on things other than my injuries, my sore muscles.

I tried not to think about Florida possibly being down there, and I began to hope I was wrong. If she was dead, I wasn't sure I wanted to find her now. I tried not to think about her being forced to bring those Klan idiots out here, show them where Soothe was buried. I tried not to think about what they did to her afterwards, before they put her down here with Soothe and Mrs. Burk.

As we dug, the water ran down the hill and tried to fill the grave. We could hear the woods crackling as the water ran over the dried branches and leaves, and in the distance I could hear a roaring, which I figured was the rush of the creek swelling. But we kept digging, slogging into the mud, and after about an hour my shovel hit something hard. We scraped it clean. A coffin. Wood.

I stood there on top of it, not knowing exactly what to do next. Tim said, "Mrs. Burk, she's under that box."

I had a sudden uncomfortable thought. I said, "What if Florida told the Klan folks you helped do this? You think your father will have you done in?"

I looked at Tim. He shrugged. "If she'd told, and they were going to do something, I reckon they would have done it already. Let's widen the grave a bit."

"It's wide enough. Let's pop the lid."

"Let's widen it so we can pull it out. I think we got to pull it out, don't you? You lost the tarp, so we have to somehow get the coffin up the hill."

We started digging again, widening the grave. That nasty snake of my subconscious began to work at me again. It was trying to tell me something, as it often did.

Tim climbed out of the grave. He got the big flashlight he had carried with him, turned it on, tilted it at the edge of the grave so that it shone down on the coffin. It had grown nearly dark as midnight in the time we had been digging. Water was nearly to my knees, and rising.

"Why don't you pop the lid now," he said. "Use your shovel."

I looked up at Tim. He was standing above me, leaning on his shovel, one hand in his pocket. The rain was so thick, it seemed to be a sheath around him. Lightning sawed across the sky in bright, crooked explosions.

“All right,” I said.

I took the tip of my shovel, started forcing it under the lid of the cheap coffin. It wasn’t really an official coffin, which would have taken tools to open. It was one of those cheap kind they called pressed wood, which was essentially high-caliber cardboard. It was already starting to come apart due to all the rain since Soothe had been buried. Then reburied.

It popped free, and the stench from it was horrible. Lying on top of what had to be Soothe, though there wasn’t much of him to recognize—bones and skin stretched over a skull so tight it looked like a stocking mask—there was another badly decomposed body. The features were basically gone and the hair was patchy. Flesh hung from the skull like chunks of dried glue and above the right eye socket the forehead was pushed in. The rain splashed on it, made the flesh loosen and it slid off the bone as if it were alive and seeking shelter.

In spite of the damage, I recognized the short blue dress the corpse wore, and there was one blue earring dangling from a rotting lobe, and in that instant, I knew I had been a sap all along. I knew what that blue thing under Tim’s stove was suddenly, and I knew why Tim wanted the grave widened.

It had to accommodate me. Then Leonard.

I dropped the shovel, reached for the gun in my coat pocket, tried to turn, but didn’t make it. Tim hit me across the back of the head with his shovel, knocked me against the grave wall.

My head was splitting. I assumed I had only been out for seconds, because when I came to Tim was stepping into the grave, a foot on Florida’s corpse. He reached the pistol that had fallen from my hand out of the coffin and pointed it at me. I was too dazed to do anything. There were just enough brain cells cooking to know I ought to be doing something and wasn’t.

I was standing up, lodged between the coffin and the wall of the grave. There hadn’t been room to fall down. Tim was squatting in the coffin now, still pointing my gun at me. If that wasn’t enough, he pulled a little automatic from his coat pocket with his empty hand, aimed it at me too.

Two-Gun Tim.

“It’s nothing personal,” he said. “I didn’t want to kill you and Leonard, but I got to now. I kept thinking you’d just go off. I mean, I like you. I liked Florida. It was just one of those things. You knew though. Right there a while ago. You knew. How?”

It took me a second to make my mouth work, but I wanted every second I could buy. “Her earring is missing. I realized it’s under your stove, at the store.”

“Thanks for telling me,” Tim said. “I’ll get rid of it. Me and her, we struggled. I figure it got caught in my coat, and when I hung it up to dry, the earring fell out, rolled under the stove.”

“You stupid sonofabitch.”

“Hey, look who’s on the end of the gun, pal. Ain’t me.”

“You’re the one told the Klan me and Leonard were going home.”

“You just kept pushing, Hap. I thought maybe after that beating you took, that would fix you. But hearing you talk to Cantuck … I don’t know. I wasn’t so sure, and I had to be. And I didn’t mean for Bacon to get it. I made an anonymous phone call to Draighten, told him where you two would be. I said you’d be coming from Bacon’s place. Everyone knows Bacon.”

“Why would you do this?”

“I think I need to get this over with, Hap. I don’t dislike you, it’s hard enough to do, but I got to do it.”

“I don’t think it’s that hard for you, buddy.”

“Oh, you don’t know. It’s not easy for me at all. I don’t like killing.”

“But you get by.”

“What I want you to do is step out of the grave. I want you to get out right now, get on your knees up at the edge.”

I thought about that. I realized he didn’t want to shoot me in case Leonard might hear the shot. Which in this rain wasn’t likely, but I decided not to mention that. He wanted me at the edge of the grave on my knees so he could bean me with the shovel again. Bean me on the head, then roll me in between the edge of the coffin and the grave wall. The other side would fit Leonard.

"I don't think I want to climb out," I said.

"Then I shoot you here."

"Why would you kill Florida?"

"The money. That's it. I liked Florida. Really. But she talked too much. I knew she carried her savings somewhere in her car, and I got to thinking about it. She drove out here behind me and I moved the body like she wanted, and I didn't really have it planned, but I knew then I could kill her, take the money, and no one would ever know. I needed that money, Hap, and everything was right for it. Grovetown wasn't going to get too worked up about a missing black girl. Maybe Cantuck. But he ain't Sherlock Holmes, you know. It was quite a bit of money she had. And not hid all that well either. Taped under the seat. All that money and she was going to buy some stupid recording with it."

"Heaven forbid someone spend their own money the way they want."

"I didn't like the way she wanted to use me, neither. Try and make me think she might bed me, but I knew she wouldn't. I put Florida in the coffin with Soothe, put them on top of Burk.

"I drove Florida's car down the road there, off to a fishing spot I used to use. There's swampy water there so goddamn deep it might go to the center of the earth. I pushed the car off in it, walked back and drove out."

"Just for money? You killed her for that?"

"I fucked her too. I figured she was gonna die, wasn't any use in that pussy going to waste. I wouldn't have hurt her, had some fun with her, had I not meant to kill her. It's just … I was gonna do her in, might as well get some pleasure from her. It wasn't that good by the way. Fight like she did, it isn't that good."

Greed. Tim had killed that wonderful, beautiful woman for money and sex. I'd assigned everything that had happened to bigotry, but it was greed and lust. Two sins much older, and as basic as the instinctive mating of those two *National Geographic* bears. I felt like an idiot. I felt angry. I felt as if my heart would explode.

“Come on, Hap, get out of the hole.”

“If you’re gonna bang me with that shovel,” I said, “I’d rather take the bullet.”

“I do that, Leonard hears the shot, he might drive off, then folks would come here to investigate, figure things out. I got to get you both, Hap. You might as well come on and let me do it. I can kill you with one blow if you’re out of the grave. I can make it quick. After I got some from Florida, that’s what I did. One blow with a rock.”

In the grave, lodged like I was, I didn’t have a chance in a million. But the other way, maybe …

“You don’t come out,” Tim said, “I’ll chance shooting you. I don’t think Leonard can hear anyway, but I got an idea he did hear it, he’d know it was a gunshot, and it’ll be tidier this way.”

“All right, but promise me you’ll do it right. Hard and quick. Same for Leonard.”

“I’ll have to shoot Leonard, most likely. He won’t expect it, though, and I’ll do it up close. Right in the temple, okay?”

I thought, if you get that close, and Leonard has an inkling what you’re going to do, he’s going to snap your arm off at the elbow and use it to swab out your asshole. I thought, Leonard, old buddy, I go down, please don’t fall for this bastard. Don’t fall for it.

Tim put the automatic in his pocket and kept my revolver. He said, “Get up tight against the grave wall.”

I did. He climbed out carefully, keeping an eye on me. He got the flashlight and held it on my face, blinding me. The light bobbed low and came back up. I couldn’t make out what he was doing behind the light, but I had an idea. He was slipping the revolver into his pocket, picking up the shovel.

I put a foot inside the coffin, between Florida’s stick legs, prepared to reach for the edge of the grave. I figured soon as I did that, that’s when Tim would strike. He’d get me before I got out, right in the head, then all he had to do was make sure I was pushed down between the coffin and the dirt, go up and talk to Leonard. He wouldn’t have to worry about the noise of the gun then. One snap and it was all over.

In the split second before I raised my hands to take hold of the edge of the grave, I thought about trying to snatch up the shovel I dropped, but knew that wouldn't work. I wasn't quick enough for that. Not quick enough to get hold of it, come out of the grave and hit him with it.

I took hold of the edge of the grave with both hands, then the flashlight dropped, and I heard the whistling of the shovel being swung. I threw my hands up in a wide X pattern and twisted my head to the side as the shovel came down and hit my wrists and pain exploded in me, but I had twisted my body so that it carried the power of the blow to the side, and with a quick turn of my arms, I wrenched the shovel free, dropped it, seized the sides of the grave, pulled myself up into a crouch.

The flashlight still lay on the ground, and there was a dark shape behind it, and I dove for it, was rewarded by my arms encircling Tim's neck.

I dropped my grasp from his neck to his sides, pinned his arms against him just as he reached into his coat pockets to get hold of the guns. I used my right knee to strike him in the side of the leg, on the pressure point there. He sagged and I butted him in the face, and he went down. I was all over him then, but the water flowing under us made us slide and we went backwards into the grave. We hit the coffin and the sides blew out, and the bodies beneath us leaped up. I felt a bony arm clasp my face, blocking my vision, filling my head with the stink of rotting meat. I don't know if it was me or Tim that screamed, but one of us did.

The rest of the coffin came apart beneath us, and we rolled in a wreck of bones and flesh. I came up on top, driving straight punches into Tim's face, and they were good punches, but I'd forgotten about the shovel I'd left in the grave, and Tim got hold of it, and though he didn't have room to swing it, he popped it forward, banging me between the eyes with the handle, then he was on top of me, trying to strangle me. I thrashed amidst the wreckage of Soothe and Florida, brought the sides of my hands down hard behind his elbows, pushed in. He couldn't hold the choke. I was gaining control. In another second I was going to turn him over and be on top, and he knew it. He shoved to his feet, leaped for the edge of the grave.

I managed to grab his leg. He kicked back reflexively. It was a lucky shot to the jaw. In the instant I was dealing with the pain he got out of the grave. I got it together pretty quick, went after him, stumbling over the flashlight as I went. The light spun toward him, showed him in its glow, then rolled away, but not before I saw he had pulled the automatic from his coat pocket.

Then there was a sound, like a stick snapping, and Tim did a little trick with his legs, as if he were trying to bury his heels in the earth, then he sagged and fell on his side, did a few kicks that carried him around in a semicircle, then he stopped moving. I could hear his breathing. It was hard and heavy.

“Hap. You okay?”

Leonard grew out of the darkness, limped toward me. He was holding his pistol. I answered, “Just barely.”

“I got to thinking about things,” Leonard said. “He went from not wanting to cooperate to being awfully anxious to cooperate. He wanted me to come even when you didn’t. I got to wondering why he was so eager to get us down here. I’d have been here sooner, but the leg isn’t working so well.”

“I’m just glad you came … shit!” I glanced where Tim had been lying. He was no longer there.

Leonard wheeled with the gun and I got hold of the flashlight. I shined it about the graveyard. Tim, walking as if he were imitating the scarecrow in the Oz movie, was making bad time toward the far side of the graveyard, toward the woods. He got to the barbed wire fence, fell against it and stuck there, his upper body bending over it, as if he were trying to fold in half. Then I heard a loud cracking, a roar, like the sound of a freight train magnified by ten. In the glow of the flashlight I saw a tall silver mass of flying needles coming out of the forest. Pines snapped and crackled into toothpicks. Great oaks screamed as they were pulled from the ground.

The mass of silver needles was a great wall of water. Before I could say, “I’ll be a sonofabitch,” the wall came down on us like a thousand pianos falling, and the great gray mountain of wetness pushed Leonard and me together and carried us away.

We held to each other and the water carried us high up, then under, and I couldn’t breathe, and it was the marsh all over again, only worse, because the power of the water was so awesome there was no fighting back, no swimming. It churned us up and carried us through the heights of trees. We clung to each other and breathed again. Then it was down once more into choking darkness and confusion. A moment later, we were on top of the water again, coughing, and the next thing I knew I was hung in a tree, my body slamming against the tree trunk. There was a great weight tearing at my right shoulder, and I realized it was because I was holding on to Leonard and the water was jerking at him and trying to take him and my shoulder with it.

"Let go, Hap, you stubborn sonofabitch!"

I could see Leonard's shape now, at the end of my arm, and the bastard let go of my hand, but I held his wrist and gritted my teeth. It was like the marsh, and I hadn't let go and we had made it, and I wouldn't let go this time.

"Let go!" Leonard said, "or it'll take us both!"

"Then it will," I said.

I heard Leonard laugh. A choked water laugh. A crazy laugh. Then he snapped his wrist loose of my fingers and the dark churning water pulled him from me, washed him away.

30

A few hours before morning a hot gold corkscrew of lightning hit the top of a pine across the way and knocked it in half and caught it on fire. The rain sizzled in the flames and the tree burned out quickly and the fiery limbs that fell off of it were consumed by the flooding waters.

Then the rain stopped and the clouds split open like cotton candy being torn by greedy fingers and the wind blew their remnants away. A great gold moon rose high up and was visible through the summit of the trees—a pocked Happy Face against black velvet. I looked at the stars and thought first of my father, pointing out the shapes in the heavens, then of Florida and how we had once made love in her car and lay on her car hood afterwards looking at the stars, feeling as if they were near and belonged to us.

In time the moonlight and starlight brightened even more and I spied a strange configuration in a massive oak, as if nature had made an image of the crucified Christ out of debris and put Heaven's spotlights on it. I watched it for a long time, uneasy with it, then nodded some, thinking of Leonard.

Dawn came rosy, as if it had never rained, and the moon was dissolved by sunlight and the sun itself was a bleeding red boil that did little to warm the chilled air. The water below me had dropped ten feet, but it was still a rush of mud and wreckage. A bloated cow was wedged between a pine and a sweet gum, and with the water no longer rushing, I could hear flies working the carcass, getting their breakfast. I ached all over. I was freezing. My coat and clothes crinkled and popped with ice when I moved. Ice fell out of my hair.

I tried to stretch, get positioned on the limb some way I wouldn't ache, but that wasn't possible. Nothing was comfortable. But as I moved I could see the shape in the oak clearly.

It was Florida. Her corpse, mostly devoid of flesh now, her left leg missing from the knee down, was hung up in the oak amidst a wad of limbs and vines and shattered lumber. Her stick arms were spread wide and her skull was tilted down on the neck bones, held together by peeling strips of flesh and muscle. Hungry crows were so thick on top of her skull, flapping their wings, pecking at her flesh, they looked like windblown black hair. One arm was raised slightly higher than the other, and the skeletal hand pointed to the sky.

I closed my eyes, but in time I was drawn to look again, and after an hour or so I felt so strange and disconnected with reality her corpse was no longer horrifying; it was like part of the decor.

By midday I was hungry and freezing and feverish, beginning to feel as if I was going to fall because I couldn't keep my grip anymore. My hands were like claws. My calves and thighs ached with cramps. When I stood up on the limb to shake my legs out, I could hardly keep my balance. Something was moving and rattling in my chest, and its name was pneumonia.

The sun bled out its redness and turned yellow and rose in the sky like a bright balloon full of helium, but still it gave no heat.The air was as cold as an Arctic seal's nose and there was a slight wind blowing, and that made matters worse, turned the air colder and carried the stench from Florida's corpse and that of the bloated cow—which I named Flossy—to me as a reminder of how I would soon end up.

A few mobile homes floated by, mostly in pieces. A couple of rooftops drifted into view later on. I thought I might drop down on one of the roofs as it floated by, ride it out. And I think I was weak enough and stupid enough right then that that's exactly what I would have done, but the roof I had in mind hit a mass of trees, went apart, was washed away as splintered lumber.

I had become a little delirious with fever. Sometimes I dreamed I was still holding Leonard's wrist, and I was about to pull him into the tree with me, then I'd realize where I was and what had happened, and I'd go weak and wonder how it would be to drop from my limb and let the water have me.

After a time, I heard the helicopter. At first I thought the chopping sound was in my head, but finally I looked, and high up like a dragonfly, was a National Guard helicopter.

Then it was low, skimming over the trees, beating furiously, rattling the dry limbs of winter, making me colder. My coat was so soaked in water, so caked with ice, speedy movement was difficult, but I did my best to stand on my limb and wave an arm.

The helicopter passed over, started climbing. As I watched the copter soar up and away, I felt as if the world were falling out from under me. I slowly sat down. Then the copter turned back, dropped low.

It hovered over the tree where Florida's corpse was wedged, and I realized they had spotted her, not me. I waved and screamed and jumped up and down on my limb like an excited monkey. The copter moved slowly in my direction, a few yards above my tree and beat the air. A rope with a life basket was lowered out of its door.

They couldn't get too close because of the limbs, and I couldn't get far enough out to get hold of the basket. I tore off my coat and tossed it, inched my way out on the limb, heard it crack, but kept going. The basket was six feet away and the limb was starting to sag, and I knew this was it. Die dog or eat the hatchet. I bent my knees, got a little spring like a diver about to do a double somersault, and leaped into space.

My legs didn't carry me as far as I thought they might, but I got hold of the basket, barely, and it tilted and swung and I clung. They hauled up slowly, me swinging in the air, my fingers weakening by the second. And just when I thought I couldn't hold anymore, they pulled me inside and threw a blanket around my shoulders and shoved a cup of hot soup into my bloodless hands.

"Man," said the young, uniformed Guardsman who gave me the soup, "you are one lucky sonofabitch. We been all over. We haven't found but three or four people. That flood, it took the world. You Hap Collins?"

"Yeah. How did you—"

"Fella we found, said you were out there. Wouldn't let us give up. Said he'd throw himself out of the copter, we didn't keep looking. I don't think he has the strength to roll over, but we kept looking. We saw that body in the tree, then you."

I wasn't paying attention to the Guardsman anymore. I took a better look around the chopper. I had been so preoccupied with getting inside, then with the soup, I hadn't noticed that there were three other rescued civilians inside, lying under blankets. One of them rolled over slowly and looked at me and smiled, if you could call lifting your upper lip slightly a smile. It was Leonard.

"That's the guy," Guardsman said.

"Yeah," I said. "I know that sonofabitch."

The Guardsman pulled me over by Leonard and draped a blanket around my shoulders and gave me more soup. The Guardsman said, "We haven't got a doctor on board, but we'll have you to one soon."

"Thanks," I said.

I looked at Leonard. He was trying to sit up. I set the soup down and got him under the arms and pulled him up against the wall. "Throw yourself out, huh?" I said.

"Just bullshit." His voice was like crackling cellophane.

"Want some of my soup?"

"Long as I don't drink on the side where your mouth's been."

The rain stopped the day after the flood and it hasn't come a big rain since. The flood was the worst in East Texas history. Grovetown was almost wiped off the map and was designated a Disaster Area.

Leonard and I felt like warmed-over dog shit for about three months after it all. We were both pretty much broke, having gone through our savings and owing doctor bills.

Raul didn't run off while Leonard was in Grovetown. He had a change of heart, stayed home and waited. Leonard is looking for work. I go over there most Sundays to have dinner. I still don't like Raul much.

Florida's corpse was recovered and buried in the LaBorde cemetery. I was too sick to go to the funeral. Now that spring has come, there's a hill across from my house where beautiful wildflowers grow. I pick them from time to time, drive out to the cemetery in the car Charlie loaned me, and put them on Florida's grave.

Last week I started back doing odd jobs, and at the end of the week I nailed work driving a tractor, getting the ground in shape for a sweet potato crop for Mr. Swinger. It's not good work and it doesn't pay much, and it won't last long, but it has a hypnotic quality and keeps me from thinking too much. I get so I see only the field in front of me, hear the hum of the tractor, have to think just enough to do what needs to be done.

Sometimes, though, I can't help but consider it all. I heard through Charlie that Bacon was washed away with the flood, and his body has never been found. Mrs. Garner drowned too, but they found her body way down in the Thicket, the remains of that double-wide on top of her. Tim's body was located wrapped tight in barbed wire, like a metal mummy. They didn't find him all that far from his mother.

Hanson's the same. I went to Tyler to see him a couple of times, but he didn't know me and the family hardly does. I didn't go back. I couldn't see it made a difference. Charlie, on the other hand, goes there often, holds Hanson's hand and talks to him. He thinks Hanson's doing better. But he's the only one that does.

Not so long ago, Leonard and I, like gluttons for punishment, drove over to Grovetown. I was looking for Cantuck, but couldn't find him and couldn't find anyone knew anything about him. Fact was, I could hardly find anyone at all. The place is like a soggy ghost town. Half the buildings are a wreck and stink of mud and fish. Tim's filling station, except for the pumps, is just a patch of filthy concrete with dead bass on it.

We stopped by the cafe to tell Mrs. Rainforth thanks for saving our lives and Leonard's balls, for having Bacon look after us. The cafe had stood the flood pretty well, but it was closed. There was a realty sign on the door. I put my hands against the glass and looked inside. Water damage. Everything gone. I don't know where she and her boys went.

Week ago, I was sitting at home swigging a Diet Coke, trying to read an old paperback, when the telephone rang.

It was Cantuck.

"How are you, boy?" he said.

"Good enough," I said. "I'm breathing. I didn't know for sure you were. I came looking for you."

"Me and the wife got out just ahead of the flood. Lost every goddamn thing we owned. Been livin' with my sister over in

Brownsboro. We got us a mobile home now. Moved it in next to where our house used to be. We get the 'lectricity hooked up this week, and the shitter, then things can start gettin' back to normal and I can try and get down to business. Runnin' an office from Brownsboro hasn't been worth a flying fuck in a tornado."

"I presume, by business, you mean you're still Chief?"

"Yeah. Kinda what I'm callin' about. I thought you ought to know. Might involve you again in court, little later down the road. Kevin and Ray, they decided jail wasn't all that fun. They're trying to make some deal, shorter sentences. They named Reynolds. Said he let them in the jail, them and some others, and together they killed that nigger. Kevin said Reynolds swung on Soothe's legs till he choked. Rangers picked his ass up yesterday."

"What about Brown?"

"Nope. They may come through on him later, or Reynolds might. But I don't know. One rat at a time, son. One rat at a time. How's the colored boy … how's Leonard?"

"He's all right. Getting along."

"Good. Glad to hear it. You know what?"

"What?"

"They dug a bullet out of Tim's body."

I paused for an instant. "No shit?"

"Looks like someone killed him. Could be, we ran some tests on that slug, we might could figure out whose gun fired it."

"That a fact?"

"Yep. But dammit, way things been goin', the flood and all, me not having a place to keep stuff good, damn thing got lost. Can you believe that?"

"With you at the helm, it's hard to accept."

"Just plain disappeared. Never happened to me before. Makes me look bad, since I was the one ended up with the bullet, but these things happen. It won't happen again, but it happened this time."

I tried not to sigh. "Well, you can't blame yourself too much."

"Nope, I can't."

"Guess it can't be proved who killed Florida either?"

"No, but you know, I got this feeling, down deep. Just a feeling mind you, that justice has been served."

"Me too."

"Listen here, y'all come back this way, and it might be best if you don't, but if you do, we get the 'lectricity and the shitter in, come see me. My wife cooks a mean meat loaf, provided there's enough oatmeal to stretch it."

"Isn't that violating your religious rules?"

"Oatmeal in the meat loaf?"

"Blacks and whites."

"Well, you can be too strict, I reckon. Take care, Hap."

"One thing. Anyone ever find any music, recordings, stuff like that Soothe could have had?"

"Nothing. 'Course, if a fella found something valuable like that hidden in Florida's car. Say she got her hands on them somehow and didn't tell no one, and this stuff was still in good enough shape, a fella could hang on to it, and in time, he could come up with it like it was found another way, couldn't he?"

I let a few seconds pass. I thought about asking how Florida might have finally come by those recordings. I thought about lots of other questions no one could answer. When I finally spoke, what I said was, "But would a man that found something like that —knowing he ought to turn it over to the authorities—do something like that?"

"I think he might. And what would those recordings have to do with the authorities? Think about it."

"Even so, would it be wise for a fella to tell other people?"

"No. But he might do it anyway. If who he told was someone he thought wouldn't mind if they popped up later and the money from them went to a pet charity."

"Like muscular dystrophy."

"Yep."

"I'll be damned," I said.

We were quiet again. Maybe for a full half minute. Then Cantuck said, "Oh, we found your pickup. You don't want it back."

“Cantuck?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

“You take care, boy.”

I went to bed then, without my gun. I thought I was doing better. But for the first time in months, it began to rain. It was a gentle spring rain, and I didn’t like it. It woke me up. It used to help me sleep, now it makes me nervous. Twice as nervous if I should hear thunder or see lightning.

It’s a week later and it’s still raining. Nothing serious. Just a steady, easy spring rain, but I still can’t sleep. I wake up every night and pad to the kitchen window for a look out back. There’s only the woods out there, but I can’t sleep. I sit up and drink coffee till morning, watch the late movies. Sometimes I play the L.C. Soothe boxed set I borrowed from Leonard. I play it and think about how this man, long dead, got this whole thing started.

Might as well. I go back to bed, I lay there and wait for the floodwaters to come hurtling down with Florida at the crest, pinned to the top of a wave like a Christmas tree ornament for the devil.

Just lay there and listen to the beating of my heart, counting the seconds gone from my life, anticipating less of the same.

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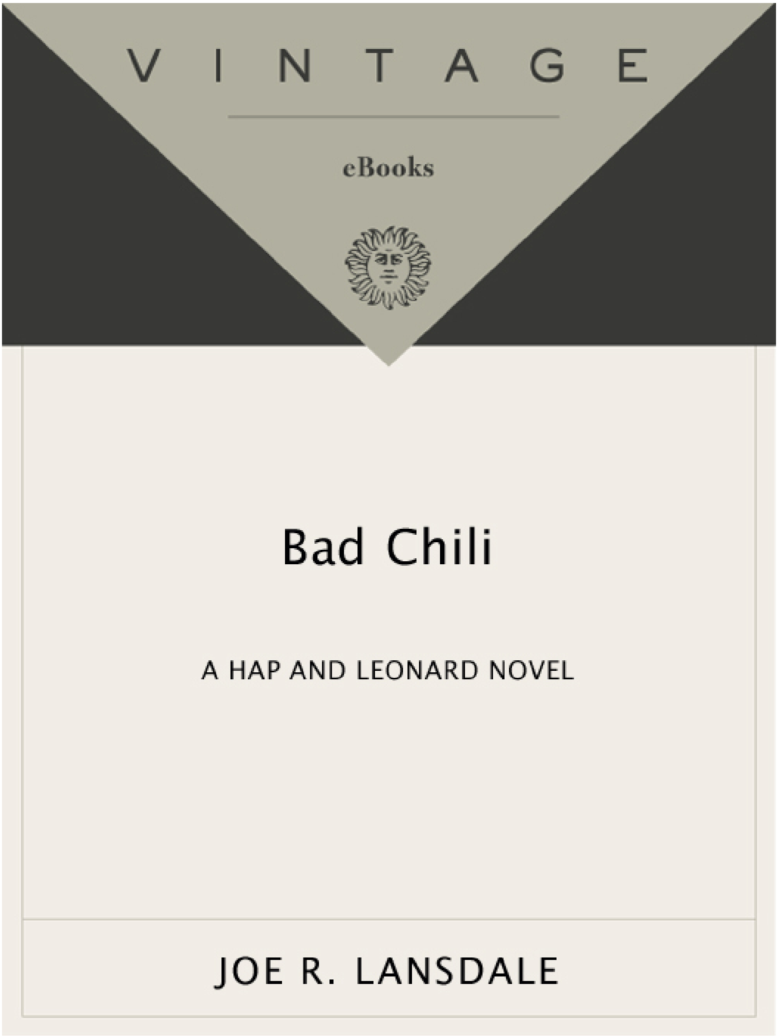

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www.joerlansdale.com

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Joe R. Lansdale

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This one’s for my brother, Andrew Vachss, warrior.

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Life’s like a bowl of chili in a strange cafe. Sometimes it’s pretty tasty and spicy. Other times, it tastes like shit.

—Jim Bob Luke

1

It was mid-April when I got home from the offshore rig and discovered my good friend Leonard Pine had lost his job bouncing drunks at the Hot Cat Club because, in a moment of anger, when he had a bad ass on the ground out back of the place, he'd flopped his tool and pissed on the rowdy's head.

Since a large percentage of the club was outside watching Leonard pop this would-be troublemaker like a Ping-Pong ball, and since Leonard hadn't been discreet enough to turn to a less visible angle when he decided to water the punk's head, the management was inclined to believe Leonard had overreacted.

Leonard couldn't see this. In fact, he thought it was good business. He told management if word of this got around, potential troublemakers would be sayin', "You Start some shit at the Hot Cat Club, you get that mean queer nigger on your ass, and he'll piss on your head."

Leonard, taking into account the general homophobia and racism of the local population, considered this a deterrent possibly even more effective than the death penalty. The management disagreed, said they hated to do it, but they had to let him go.

That wasn't enough of a heartbreak, about this same time Leonard lost his true love, Raul, again, and was in the mood to tell me about it. We drove out to a friend's pasture in Leonard's latest wreck, an ancient white Rambler with a loose spring under the passenger's ass, set up some cans on a rotting log and took pot shots at them with a revolver while we talked beneath a bright blue, cloudless sky.

Way it happened was Leonard knocked a row of cans down with a few good shots, and as we walked over to put them up again, he was beginning to tell me how he and Raul had been arguing a lot—which was nothing new—and how Raul had walked out. This was not new either. But this time Raul hadn't come back. That was new.

Few days later Leonard discovered Raul had taken up with a leather-clad fella with a beard and a Harley, and had been seen riding around LaBorde on the back of the bike, pushed up tight against Leather Boy. So tight, Leonard said, “He must have had his dick up the fucker’s ass.”

We had one revolver between us, and as Leonard talked, he handed the revolver to me and I started to load it. I had placed four shells in the chambers when out of the woods, bounding as if on a Pogo stick, came a frenzied squirrel.

Let me tell you, if you have never seen an agitated squirrel you have seen very little, nor have you heard much, because the sound of an angry squirrel is not to be forgotten. It is high-pitched and shrill enough to twist your jockeys up your crack.

For a moment, Leonard and I were frozen with amazement, stunned by the shrieking. Both of us have been in and around the woods all our lives, and as a youngster I had hunted squirrel and our family had fried and stewed and eaten them with poke salad and mustard greens on many occasions, but in all my born days, and I’m sure in Leonard’s, we had never seen anything quite like this.

I suddenly wondered if my taste in meat had been passed down through generations of squirrels by word of mouth, and here, finally, was old Beebo come to avenge the death of a relative. That rascal was bouncing four feet high at a leap, and after about four leaps it was totally clear of the woods and was springing directly toward us.

We broke and ran. The squirrel, however, was not a quitter. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw that it was in fact gaining on us, and Leonard’s cussing was having absolutely no effect, other than to perhaps further enrage the animal, who might have had Baptist leanings.

We made the car just ahead of the squirrel, but we didn’t make the doors. We jumped onto the hood and then the roof of the car, which was, of course, useless. The squirrel sprang to the hood effortlessly and, with a chatter and a spray of froth, leaped onto the roof and directly at me.

Leonard rescued me. He swatted it aside with the back of his hand, knocked it twisting to the ground, where it did a kind of dance on two legs, regained its footing, then began to run hysterically about in a circle. A heartbeat later it broke the circle and charged the car again.

I opened up on the fucker. Three shots in quick succession, but the way it was moving—all those battlefield tactics, zigzagging and whatnot—I succeeded only in throwing up some pasture dirt.

Next moment, the squirrel regained the hood and the roof, and the little bastard made clear I had been his intended all along. It latched onto my right forearm with its teeth and it didn't let go, and let me tell you, squirrels have some serious goddamn teeth. It may not be lion or tiger stuff, but when they latch on to you the difference seems minimal.

I was off the roof of the car and running, the squirrel hanging on to my arm as if it were a dog tick. I swatted it with the revolver and it still wouldn't let go. I held it out at arm's length and shot it through the chest, but it wasn't going to let a little thing like a bullet make it give in. I ran about the pasture hopping and jerking my arm, and after what seemed an eternity the squirrel finally lost its hold, taking flesh with it. It hit the ground and rolled, and even with a bullet hole in its small chest, it began to chase me willy-nilly about the pasture, bleeding and chattering all over the place.

I wheeled and tried to fire again, but the revolver was empty. I threw it at the squirrel and missed. I ran every which way but the squirrel was not deterred. It came leaping and biting at my ass as I darted, bobbed, and weaved, and surely would have overtaken me had not Leonard run over the disgruntled critter with his car. Another thirty seconds and my lungs would have burst and the squirrel's intended plans for me would have been moot.

I first realized what had happened when Leonard hit his horn, and I looked over my shoulder to see the squirrel get his. It was a nasty thing, this squirrel destruction. The car banged the squirrel as it leaped, making it a kind of temporary hood ornament. When the squirrel hit the dirt, Leonard slammed on the brakes, backed up, took sight of the injured beast and ran over it, then reversed over it, got out, found a stick and poked at the parts of the squirrel that were sticking out from under the tire. The damn thing was still alive and shrieking. Leonard had to finish it with the stick and his boot heel.

On the way to the doctor, me dripping blood all over the Rambler, Leonard said, “I was wondering, Hap. Did you know that squirrel? And if so, could it have been something you said?”

2

“Rabid would be my guess,” said Dr. Sylavan.

“Oh shit,” I said.

“That about puts it into perspective. Rabies is making a big comeback these days. The woods are thick with foam-mouthed critters.”

Me and the doc were in one of his examining rooms and I was sitting on the examining table, and he had just finished sewing up my arm and fastening a bandage around it. He was a sloppy-looking silver-haired man in his sixties, wearing a blood-specked white smock (my blood), rubber gloves, and an expression like someone waiting for a brain transplant. This expression was misleading.

Sylvan put his foot on the trash-can lid lever and pressed. The lid came up, and very carefully he removed his gloves and dropped them into the can and let the lid close. He washed his hands in the sink, fumbled inside his smock, got out a cigarette and lit it.

“Isn’t that bad for your health?” I said.

“Yeah,” said Dr. Sylvan, “but I do it anyway.”

“In your examination room?”

“It’s my examination room.”

“But that seems like a bad idea. Patients will smell it.”

“I spray a little Lysol around.”

“You sure the squirrel had rabies? Could he have just been pissed off about something?”

“Was he frothing at the mouth?”

“Either that or he had been eating whipped cream.”

“And you said he was running about in an erratic manner?”

“I don’t know it was so erratic. He came right for me. He seemed to have a mission."

"You ever seen a squirrel do this before?"

"Well, no."

"Did he leave a note? Some indication that it might not have been rabies?"

"That's funny, Doc."

"Rabies. That's what it is. You bring the squirrel's head in?"

"It's not in my pocket or anything. Leonard threw the squirrel, still attached to its head, into the trunk of the car. He thought it might be rabid too."

"Then you're the only one that doesn't think so."

"I don't want to think so."

"What we need to do is cut off the squirrel's head, send it to a lab in Austin, let them do some research, see it's rabid or not. In the meantime, you could go to the house and wait for symptoms. But I don't think that's a good idea. Let me tell you a little story, and let me warn you up front that this one doesn't have a happy ending. My mother told me this story. In the twenties, when she was a girl, a boy she knew got bit by a raccoon. Kid was playing in the woods, some such thing. I don't remember exactly. Doesn't matter. He got bit by this raccoon. He got sick. He couldn't eat, and he couldn't drink water. He wanted water, but his body couldn't take it. The doctor couldn't do a thing for him. They didn't have the medicine for rabies we have now. The boy got worse. They ended up tying him to a bed and waiting for him to die, and it was not a pretty thing. Think about it. Watching your son suffer from something like this, and it just goes on and on. Kid got so he didn't know anybody. Laid there and messed on and wet himself, bit and snapped at them like a wild animal. Chewed off his tongue. The father finally smothered him with a pillow and everybody in the family knew it and didn't say a goddamn word."

"Why are you tellin' me this?"

"Because you have been bitten by a rabid animal, and beginning right now we have to start shots. Rabies is pumping through your system, and believe me, it will not be denied. Way I see it in my head is all these little microscopic rabid dogs foaming and snapping at the air, dog-paddling through your bloodstream, heading for the brain, where they intend to devour it."

"That's a very interesting picture, Doc."

"I came up with that when I was a kid and was told the rabies story. First I imagined raccoons, but since I was always hearing about dogs being the carriers, it changed to dogs."

"What kind of dogs?"

"I don't know. Brown ones. We haven't got time to fuck around here, Hap. Bottom line is we don't start shots, you go the same way as the kid, only maybe without the pillow. Right to life, all that."

"All right. You got me convinced. You take rabies shots in the stomach, don't you?"

"Not anymore. That's changed. In fact, it isn't so bad. But this is serious, my man, and we don't want to make too light of it."

"Couldn't we wait until we get the results off the squirrel head? I hate shots."

"I just gave you one."

"Yeah, and I didn't like it."

"You'd have liked it less, me sewing up that wound without deadener. Listen up, Hap. We wait until the results come back, it'll be too late. You'll be running around on all fours and bouncing and biting the air. Trust me on this. I'm a doctor. I'll make arrangements at the hospital."

"Can't we do it here?"

"I could, but they also have what I need there. And since I know you don't have any money and I'd like to get paid, you go to the hospital I can get something out of your insurance. You do have insurance?"

"Yeah. I even overlap a bit. I've got insurance from the offshore work that'll be good for a while, and I have a kind of penny-ante insurance that I've been managing to pay for the last few years. I don't know it'll do much."

"Most of this shit insurance, which is what I figure you have, does better you go to the hospital. So give the information to my secretary when you go out, and if it's anything we're familiar with, we may be able to get policy information right away. If not, it'll take a while. I want to check Leonard over too, see if he got scratched or bit. He might have and not even know it. He's got a bite, you'll both go to the hospital. Step on out and tell him to step on in."

"Doc, if we got to send the squirrel's head in for dissecting, and I'm going to take the shots before we get results, why bother?"

"Could be an epidemic. Squirrels aren't usually the carriers. Raccoons, foxes—they're the main culprits. But somehow it may have gotten into the squirrel population. People ought to know. Step on out and send Leonard in. We got to get this show on the road. Oh, before you go, here's a trash bag. Get the squirrel and put it in the bag and leave it behind the reception desk. I'll have someone pick it up."

I gave the insurance information to the receptionist, borrowed Leonard's car keys, got old Beebo out of the trunk and bagged him and put him in a cooler they had behind the desk. Then I sat in the waiting room and tried to read a nature magazine, but at the moment I wasn't feeling all that kindly toward nature.

I wasn't feeling all that kindly toward the brat that was waiting there either. His mother, a harried woman in lace-up shoes designed by the Inquisition, a long black dress, and a Pentecostal hairdo—which was a mound of brown hair tied up in a bun that looked as if it had been baked into place to contain an alien life form—was pretending to be asleep in a waiting-room chair.

Couldn't say as I blamed her. This kid, who had torn up three magazines and drank out of all the paper cups at the water cooler and stuck his gum on the doorknob leading out of the office, wasn't someone you wanted to look at much.

He was about eleven, and spent a lot of time scratching his red head as if it were full of lice. He had a nose that ran like an open faucet, and he was eyeing me with an intense look that reminded me of the squirrel's expression just before it clamped its teeth on my arm. I wanted to ignore him, but I feared if I looked away he might spring.

He asked me some questions about this and that and I tried to answer politely, and in such a way as not to encourage conversation, but the kid had a knack of turning a nod into an invitation. He told me, without my asking, that he didn't go to school, and that his parents taught him at home, and would continue to do so until LaBorde "built a Christian school."

"A Christian school?" I said.

"You know," said the boy, "one without niggers and atheists."

"What about nigger atheists?" Leonard said, coming into the waiting room.

The kid eyed Leonard's black skin as if he were trying to decide if it were real or paint. "Them's the worst kind," the kid said.

The Pentecostal mother opened one eye, then closed it quickly.

"How would you like me to kick your nasty little ass?" Leonard said.

"That's child abuse," said the little boy. "And you used a naughty word."

"Yep," Leonard said.

The boy studied Leonard a moment, fled to a chair next to his mother, sat there and glared at us. His mother seemed not to be breathing.

"Come on, Hap," Leonard said. "I'm clean. Or as the doc said, no little dogs swimming through my blood. I'll run you over to the hospital. Hey, you, you little shit—"

"What?" I said.

"Not you," Leonard said. "Red on the head! You, kid! Get that goddamn gum off the doorknob. Now."

The kid sidled over to the knob, peeled off the gum, put it into his mouth, slid back into the chair beside his mother. If he had been a cobra, he'd have spat venom at us. Leonard and I went out.

As Leonard drove, I said, "You got to feel sorry for a kid like that. Raised with those kind of attitudes."

Leonard didn't say anything.

"I mean, he's off to a bad start. He doesn't know any better. You talkin' to him like that, that's a little much, don't you think?"

"I don't feel sorry for him," Leonard said. "I really was going to kick his nasty ass. I'm kinda hopin' his mama brought him there to be put to sleep, like a sick cat."

"That's not very nice," I said.

"No," Leonard said. "No, it isn't."

3

At the hospital they did some routine tests and put me in a cold room wearing what they referred to as hospital gown, which is pretty ludicrous. There you are sitting in the cold wearing a paper-thin sheet split up the back with your ass hanging out, and they call it a gown. You'd think they thought it ought to go with heels, maybe a nice hairdo and a brooch, a dinner invitation.

Leonard sat in the room with me. He said, "You have the ugliest goddamn ass I've ever seen."

"Well, you've seen a few."

"That's right, so my opinion is worth something."

"Not to me. And besides, it's so bad, why's the doctor always want to put his finger up it?"

"Probably lost his high school ring last time he poked around in there. I figure he pokes a little deeper, he might find an old boyfriend's rubber."

"That's your game," I said. "Dig in your ass, reckon they'll find dog hairs."

We joshed around with that kind of adolescent bullshit for a while, then Leonard started trying to tell me about him and Raul again. About that time, Doc Sylvan came in and Leonard went out.

"That insurance you got," Doc Sylvan said. "We're familiar with it. I made some calls to be sure. Sucks."

"Which policy sucks?"

"Both of them. The oil rig policy will pay more in the long run, but it's the short run that's a bitch. The other policy seriously sucks the dog turd. You see, this is what they call outpatient business. You know, give you a shot, then you go home. Come back for an examination, another shot. You go home. But, if you go home, the policy has a five-hundred-dollar deductible."

"It's going to cost that much?"

"Time I get through, it may cost more. It's not that it actually cost that much, but doing the shots here at the hospital makes it more expensive. And being a small city hospital, well, that gilds the lily."

"Then why didn't we do it at your office?"

"I told you why. Listen, what we're gonna do is we're gonna check you in for a few days here at the Medical Hilton."

"Won't that be more expensive?"

"Certainly. A lot more, but you do that, the offshore policy will pay eighty percent. The other policy will pay a bit."

"The one that sucks the dog turd?"

"Right."

"You mean to tell me the policy won't pay I go to the house, but it will pay I stay in the hospital and it'll cost more?"

"Now you got it figured. Between the two policies you come out only owing a few hundred bucks' deductible. Policies might even overlap so you come out ahead, but I doubt it. You'll owe something. It's the way of the insurance and medical professions."

"I think I'm being snookered a bit so you can make some extra insurance money, that's what I think."

"Considering you owe me a few past-due bills for a number of things, maybe you can live with that."

"How long have I got to be in the hospital?"

"Way the policy works—"

"The offshore or the dog turd?"

"Both … I'd say seven or eight days."

"Ah, hell. You're kiddin'?"

"No, I'm not. You see, you take a shot now. Then you take one in seven days. That should be enough time to make sure the policy covers things. Those policies, way they're written, you almost have to be standing on your head and get hit by lightning while trying to pick your nose with a pop bottle up your ass for them to pay. You got to get a better kind of policy, Hap. You know, a real one."

"I get some real money, I'll do that."

"Anyway. One shot now. One in seven days, and one in twenty-one to twenty-eight days. You got a little option on the last shot. But not much. Thing about rabies, you miss those shots, you can kiss your ass good-bye."

"I go to the hospital, I got to wear this damn gown all the time?"

"You play the game, you suit out."

A hospital is dangerous to your health. All kinds of disease floats around in there. First day I came down with a cold. Worse than the cold was the boredom. Man, was it boring. And I had to lie there with this needle and glucose tube in my arm and there wasn't a damn reason for it, but they did it anyway, and the food they fed me explained why someone had written in blue ink above the commode lever in my room's toilet: FLUSH TWICE, IT'S A LONG WAY TO THE CAFETERIA.

So I spent my time lying there, a little mad actually, 'cause my best buddy in the whole goddamn world hadn't come by once. I hadn't seen him since he stepped out of the room that day Doc Sylvan came in. I phoned his house repeatedly, but no answer, and he didn't have an answering machine, so I couldn't leave a message. The only connection I had to the outside world was the TV set and Charlie Blank.

The TV bit the moose. There were only a few channels and they all seemed tuned to the same stuff, or at least the same sort of stuff. I'd seen enough talk shows involving stupid relationships to last me a lifetime. I could have told those people quick-like why they were having so much trouble with their lives and their relationships. They were dumb shits and proud of it.

I had known people just like them all my life, just because you couldn't avoid them. They were like shit, always turning up on your shoes. I wouldn't have given those happily-stupid-by-choice-assholes the time of day, much less want to hear what they had to say on television.

And if that wasn't enough, at night I had to put up with this political show starring a fat guy in a ritzy suit who spent an hour talking to an audience as mean-spirited and narrow-minded as he was. It was a great setup. He liked to show clips from political speeches, then criticize them out of context. And his audience, with the sum of their intellect added together, multiplied by three, it still left them—in defiance of mathematics—collectively halfwits.

I was getting desperate. I longed for something as awful as a Jerry Lewis movie to watch, or maybe an infomercial on makeup.

First evening I was in the hospital, Charlie Blank came in to see me. He had been promoted to lieutenant. Wasn't that the chief liked Charlie so much he wanted to move him up, but the old corrupt bastard was happy he was rid of Lt. Marvin Hanson, and someone had to get the job, and Charlie, who was also a good honest cop, was next in line, and probably in the chief's mind a better trade, if for no other reasons than he was an unknown quantity, and was, more important, white.

Hanson and his car had met a tree at high speed on a wet highway and he was now in a coma over at his ex-wife's house, doing an impression of a rutabaga. Just lying there, being fed by tubes and getting his ass wiped by his ex, shrinking up slowly, flickering an eyelid now and then, moving just enough to give the ex-wife and Charlie encouragement he was going to come out of it and ask for a ham sandwich and an update on pork belly futures.

I figured Hanson came out of it, you might as well plant him in the dirt and hope he grew. Chances were, he awoke, it would be as if he had never been. The world would be new to him. Amazing and beyond his comprehension. If he learned to play a passable game of checkers against himself without cheating and knew better than to shit in the kitchen sink it would be a feat of Olympian proportions.

Charlie was wearing his brown Mike Hammer hat, as I called it. Porkpie, I guess it's really called, and he had on a blue silk Hawaiian shirt decorated with brightly colored palm trees, parrots, and hula girls. He wore his usual cheap brown suit coat, black plastic Kmart shoes, and his deadpan look. I tell you, there's nothing better to view from a hospital bed than a Hawaiian shirt flashing out at you from between the lapels of a cheap suit coat, a porkpie resting on top of it all like a rusty bird feeder. He was also carrying a white grease-stained paper bag and another one, brown, minus the grease.

"I hear you had some squirrel trouble," Charlie said.

"Some," I said.

"Looks like he gave you hell."

"Yeah. You oughta see *him.*"

"We're checkin' now to see the squirrel had an accomplice. You know, a spotter from the woods. We hope to make an arrest before the week's out. A few other squirrels or blue jays talk, a possum comes in with a word, we might have the bastard's partner by nightfall."

"Hey, make fun. But this mad-squirrel business, it isn't a light thing. Let me show you where he bit me. Look at that. There's four stitches there."

"I've had worse."

"From a squirrel?"

"No. You got me there …. You sound funny."

"I have a cold."

Charlie opened one of the bags and pushed it toward me. It contained a hamburger, french fries, and a malt. "I've spent a day or two in the hospital," Charlie said, "so I thought you might want this—unless they've suddenly started hiring French chefs."

"Oh, God," I said, pulling out my sliding table and placing the food on it. "I never thought I'd look forward to a McDonald's meal."

"Stay in here a bit," Charlie said, "you get so the idea of eatin' out of trash cans is kind of appealing. By the way, I kept the Spider Man toy comes with it."

"You're welcome to it."

"You say that now, but you see it, you'll want it."

"Then don't let me see it."

Charlie put the other sack on the bed and took off his hat and hung it on the back of the guest chair.

"What's in the other bag?" I asked.

"Books. A magazine."

"Whatcha got?"

He took out a magazine titled *Boobs and Butts*, tossed it at me.

"Oh, great," I said.

"What's the matter? Read that one?"

"Yeah. Right."

"Well, at least you ain't sharin' the room. You can whack off without anyone seein' you."

"You can take this back," I said. "I got enough on my mind without thinking about what I'm not gettin' and haven't been gettin' for a long time."

"Hey, I'm married and I'm not gettin' it. Wife still wants me to quit smokin' before she'll give me the business, so to speak. I'm tryin' to quit, but I haven't beat it yet. I smoke three or four cigs a day now, but she knows. She's got like this second sense. She smells smoke, her pussy closes up. So when she ain't lookin', I read the magazines. Stay in the bathroom a lot. Run the shower. Wife thinks I am one clean sonofabitch, but I'm in there whacking off."

"Perhaps you should try and develop something more than just a sexual relationship, Charlie. You could meld with her mind, her emotions. Really attempt to understand what makes the both of you human beings. Appreciate her more as a woman, less as a sex object."

"Yeah, well, that's all right, but I still want to fuck her."

"I hear that."

"You know, I don't get it. My wife, she's into like saying the right thing. You know. I'm not supposed to say *pussy* 'cause it's degrading. I call her a pussy, I can see that's degrading. There's some women I think are cunts, you know. Some guys that are dicks. I mean, you can have a cunt and not be a cunt, and you can have a cunt and be one. But I don't get Amy's reasoning. I say I want some pussy, I'm sayin' I want some lovin', I'm not calling her a pussy, I'm callin' her pussy a pussy. And like, you know, that's as good a slang for what's down there as dick or cock is for what we got in our drawers. Someone called me a dick, I might get mad, but Amy told me she wanted a little dick, the reading is different, don't you think?"

"When it comes to women, I don't know which way to go. So you're askin' the wrong boy. I haven't got anything against women or men in general. I just think some of them are assholes."

"There you go. You just said *assholes.* Can you say that, or does that like go on your cosmic record?"

"Reckon it depends on who's keepin' score."

"Yeah, that's another trip, ain't it. All this religious business. Christians think you got to do good 'cause you want to go to heaven, but if you do good 'cause you want to do good and don't believe in that shit, then they figure it's the slow oven for you anyway. They like a god that's a bully, makes you want to do good 'cause he's gonna rough you up. Life is just one big mess after another, ain't it?"

"It's funny how sex can make one philosophical, isn't it, Charlie."

"I'll say, and while we're being philosophical, that magazine you got there, let me tell you, there's a redhead in there would make you write a hot check and rob a filling station pretty damn quick."

"Skip the details." I put the magazine on the bed table. "What are the books?"

Charlie took out a Harlequin romance and put it on top of the magazine.

"You're kiddin'?"

"Hey, my wife tossed it out. She reads 'em by the handfuls. I don't have a lot of money, you know. I made do with what I could get my hands on. Millions of readers can't be wrong. I did nab you this one, however."

He handed me a paperback western.

"We'll, one out of three isn't bad," I said.

"Got it at a garage sale. There's a few pages torn out, but it reads pretty good."

"You see Leonard?"

"Nope. Not in a while. I thought he'd be up here nesting in a chair."

"Hasn't even come by. He's been having boyfriend problems. I figure that has something to do with it."

"Raul?"

"Yeah."

"Leonard doesn't have patience with that boy. Raul is all right."

"I don't like him. I get this feeling there isn't much to him, and what there is to him isn't much."

"It's a friend thing, you know. Hard to understand the girls or boys a friend picks. They all seem wrong. I was the same way with Hanson. Though I got to say, this ex-wife of his, Rachel, he shouldn't have lost her. She's all right, way she's takin' care of him. And she's a looker too."

"I don't get it, Charlie. They been divorced for years. He throws his head through a windshield, bounces it off a tree, and suddenly she's puttin' a pee tube in his shank and feeding him processed green beans."

"She ain't feedin' him shit. He gets his food through a tube. And maybe that ain't such a bad marriage. She don't have to put up with his bullshit, nor he with hers. He may be luckier than everybody. He don't put up with no bullshit at all. And he gets his dick handled more than I do, and I'm awake. But I was talkin' about you and Leonard. Close as you guys are, I think you're kinda jealous of the time Raul steals from you and him. It's almost like a marriage thing without the fuckin'. Well, actually, my marriage seems to be pretty much without the fuckin'. Still, you need a woman, Hap. Even like, you know, the local poke."

"Oh, that's an elevated view. Very modern, Charlie."

"I'm just sayin', a little goomba, it goes a long ways. Kinda gets the fluid out from behind the eyes, straightens the back. Maybe clears the complexion."

"My complexion is just fine."

"Hey, give it time. It'll go. Way things been goin' at my house, I'm noticin' not only some bumps, but I got a wart or two on my hand."

"It's the whackin' off."

"Damn. You might be right."

"How's the eyesight?"

"A little squinty, now that you mention it."

"Can I ask you a favor?"

"You can ask anything you want. I don't know I'll do it, but you can ask."

"Will you check on Leonard for me? See he's okay?"

"Hey, he's all right. You said yourself, boyfriend problems. I bet him and Raul are back together. They do this stuff all the time. They probably been stretchin' each other's assholes, or whatever it is they do, and that's why he hasn't been by."

"Anyone ever tell you that your ability to understand human relationships is unsurpassed?"

"Hear it all the time."

"Thing with Leonard is, I still don't think everything is all right. This isn't just some spat. It's more than just hurt feelings. Leonard took this breakup hard. And Raul's got himself a boyfriend."

"Uh-oh."

"Motorcycle guy, wears a beard and leathers. I don't know a lot about it. Leonard was trying to tell me when the squirrel got after us. Then, having to stay in here because of the insurance, and him not coming by, we haven't talked. He really wanted to talk. I mean, he's seriously frustrated. Other day in the doctor's office he threatened to kick this little brat kid's nasty ass."

"From what I've seen in the cop business, there's some kids' nasty asses I'd like to kick."

"This wasn't a juvenile. This was a kid-style kid."

"Advantage there is you don't have to lift your foot so high."

"He called the kid a little shit."

"My dad called me that a few times. And he was right."

"Seriously, Charlie. Will you check?"

"Yeah. Yeah. All right."

4

Second day I was there I didn’t hear from Leonard or Charlie. I lay there and read the Harlequin romance and found it better than I thought. Then I read the western and found it worse than I had hoped, though I liked to pretend those missing four pages would have made it magic.

Between bouts with the paperbacks and poking at the bad meals, I spent a lot of time lying on my side looking out the window and sniffling with my cold. The window had become more interesting than the television. I learned to identify certain pigeons that roosted on the windowsill, and I named all of them. Original stuff like Tom, Dick, and Harry. Fred and George, Sally Ann, Mildred and Bruce. I called the little piles of shit they left on the ledge Leonard.

Beyond my window ledge and the pigeons, I could see a lower blacktop roof and a puddle of water that had collected there, probably from a week ago. I liked the way the sun hit it and made a rainbow in the puddle.

As night fell and the pigeons went away, I could see only the black roof and the moon reflected in the puddle, like an anemic prowler’s face looking up at me from the darkness. And as time passed the moon gave way to a veil of clouds and turned the sky black, and a spring rain began to splatter on the glass.

About midnight, I closed my eyes and listened to the rain, hoping it would lull me to sleep, but it didn’t. I opened my eyes as someone entered the room. I turned to see in the darkness a young slim woman in white. A nurse. She came over quietly and turned on the light beside the bed.

“Still awake, huh?”

“Yeah,” I said.

I saw now that she was not so young, just slim and pretty, her hair a little too red, her face strong with experience, her lips soft with what we Harlequin romance readers like to call promise. She had legs that would have made the pope abuse himself in the Vatican toilet and maybe not feel too bad about it.

“I need to take your temp,” she said.

“I haven’t seen you before.”

“I come on at ten-thirty. I work the late shift. I been off a few days. My name is Brett. Open your mouth.”

As she leaned forward to put the thermometer in my mouth, I could smell the sweetness of her perfume, see the swell of her breasts against her uniform. I guess it had been too long, because just the smell and sight of her gave me an erection. I lay there embarrassed, glad I was covered by a sheet and blanket. I felt kind of sleazy and satisfied at the same time. It’s a boy thing.

After a few moments she reached for the thermometer and gave my nostrils another treat. She examined the thermometer, shook it, and smiled.

“Well, that looks okay. No fever. According to your chart, you’re due another shot in the morning. Says you were bitten by a rabid animal.”

“A squirrel.”

She smiled. She had a beautiful smile. It was almost a night light. “No shit?”

“Well,” I said, “it was a big squirrel.” She laughed.

I said, “Do you think you could take this glucose business, or whatever this is, out of my arm? I don’t need it. I’m just here for shots, and the insurance won’t cover it I do it as an outpatient.”

“Honey,” she said, “I’ve been there myself, but I can’t take anything out of your arm, not even a knife. Not without permission. But, you know, it could come loose.”

She reached down and pulled loose the tape that held the needle in my arm. She pulled the needle out and smiled at me again.

“Oops, little sucker slipped out,” she said.

“Good to see someone that likes their job,” I said.

“Oh, I hate this crap,” she said, and sounded like it.

“Really?”

“No, I’m lyin’. Sweetie, there ain’t nothin’ I like better than pourin’ shit out of bedpans. Unless it’s givin’ an enema or puttin’ a catheter in some ole boy’s dick.”

That made me blush, but she certainly didn’t seem embarrassed. Cussing seemed to be her life.

“You seem happy enough,” I said.

“It’s smile or die, darlin’.”

“Then why do you do this?”

“’Cause I’m divorced and the landlord won’t fuck me for the rent.”

I laughed and she laughed.

She said, “You didn’t tell me your name.”

“Hap. Hap Collins.”

“I’ll see you, Hap Collins.”

“I certainly hope so, Brett.”

“I might even get to give you your shot.”

“Oh boy.”

“In the ass, if you’re lucky.”

“Double oh-boy.”

She turned off the light, and I watched her crisp white uniform move through the darkness. Then she was gone and I was left again with the rain, the scent of her perfume, my thoughts and the absence of her smile.

As for thoughts, my ass was my major concern. So far the shots, one deadener and one rabies, had been given to me in my arm, but what if she did give it to me in the ass? Leonard had made fun of my ass. Suppose he was right? What if I had the ugliest ass in the world? What if it and my bald spot were both shiny and white beneath the glare of the hospital light? I mean, I rolled over and she got a look at my ass and the bald spot on top of my head, would she bolt? Or would she think they were sort of coordinated, like the correct pants with the correct hat?

I went to the bathroom and combed my hair, but I still had a bald spot. I wasn’t silly enough to try and comb hair over it from the side. I mean, boy, does that look natural. It was sort of like wearing a sign that screamed I’M NOT ONLY BALD, BUT LOOK

HOW STUPID I AM. Besides, my hair was cut too short to do much with it anyway. I wondered if my insurance covered hair transplants.

I went back to bed and did a few buttock-tightening exercises, but just a few. Hell, I had five days before Brett might give me my second rabies shot. I didn't want to overdo it.

I listened to the rain for a time, then rolled over, turned on the light, and tried the phone. Leonard's number rang and rang, but he didn't answer.

I lay on my back and thought about Leonard for a while, wondered where in hell he might be. When I wore out that line of mental inquiry, I started thinking about Brett. I wondered where she lived and how she lived and if she needed a middle-aged man in her life, about my size and disposition, with an ugly ass and a bald spot.

Probably not.

I even thought about the *Boobs and Butts* magazine in the drawer, but I had such a strong constitution I didn't turn on the light and take it out for a look ….

Well, just a brief one.

I finally drifted off, but the sound of hospital business jarred me awake all night. In spite of what one might think, the hospital is not a place to rest. Someone is always coming in to look in on you, or take your temperature, or someone is laughing or crying in the hall, or banging stuff around. I awoke feeling as if I had climbed Mt. Everest and fallen off, only to be discovered by an abominable snowman and taken home to his cave to be his love puppy.

I had my breakfast, which was a little better than having to chase it down myself on all fours and eat it raw. After breakfast I saw Brett again, briefly, long enough for her to take my temperature. I was going to try and talk her out of her phone number, but she seemed considerably more businesslike this morning, harried. Maybe it was the bald spot. I just smiled and spoke politely. She finished and went away, left me with her perfume again. I asked an orderly her last name, but he didn't know it.

I waited for Brett to come back, but she didn’t show. A nurse with a face like a callused fist that had been punched through glass came in instead and insisted I have the glucose put back in my arm. I insisted it not go.

She went away in a huff and threatened to tell my doctor. I half expected Sylvan to show up, ready to paddle me.

Couple hours later another nurse came in. She was about Brett’s size, and even reminded me of her a little—without the charm, the foul mouth, and the red hair. She looked like a younger, calmer brunette sister.

I said, “You’re going to try and make me put that thing in my arm, it isn’t going to work.”

She laughed at me. “I came in to tell you Brett likes you.”

“Wow,” I said. “I feel like I’m in high school again. Next thing you know, we’ll be using you to pass notes.”

“She didn’t tell me to tell you, I just wanted you to know. She’s a friend of mine. She told me she was interested in you. She could use someone in her life. Someone that isn’t a crud. You aren’t a crud, are you, Mr. Collins?”

“Gee, I don’t think so. What’s your name?”

“Ella Maine.”

“Thanks, Ella.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Did she tell you what she likes about me?”

“Your sense of humor.”

“Not my eyes? My noble chin? My dazzling smile? My throbbing pectorals?”

“Your sense of humor.”

“That beats nothing,” I said.

“Mr. Collins?”

“Yep.”

“Treat her right.”

“She gives me half the chance, I will.”

“Don’t tell her I spoke to you. It might embarrass her.”

“I don’t think she embarrasses that easy.”

Ella laughed. “Now that you mention it, neither do I.”

A few minutes after Ella departed, Charlie Blank came in. He had an expression on his face like a man who had just been told he was going to have to swallow and pass a bowling ball, then bowl a strike with it. He didn’t ask to look at my ass.

“Leonard?” I asked. “He okay?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know?”

“I mean I don’t know. I went by his place this morning. Knocked. He didn’t answer. Seein’ how you been callin’, not gettin’ him, I got a little nervous. I picked the lock and went in, but he wasn’t there. I looked to see anyone had stuffed him in the closets or tried to cut him up in the bathtub. No Leonard. Not even a cut-up one. The bed hadn’t been slept in, though he really ought to wash those sheets. Nothing looked out of place, but where the fuck is he? Tight as you guys are, it’s not like Leonard to go off without at least tellin’ you.”

“You think it’s foul play? That what you’re sayin’?”

“I ain’t sayin’ it’s nothin’. But …”

“But what?”

“I’m not finished here. Give me some room. That biker. One with Raul. You got a better description than you gave me?”

“I’ve never seen him. I gave you the description Leonard gave me.”

“That description included him being alive and having a head, didn’t it?”

“Say what?”

“Last night, out on Old Pine Road. Couple of motorists, alias two kids parked by the side of the road doin’ the hole-punch boogie, found a biker. His Harley had slammed into a tree, but that wasn’t what did him in. What set him back was a shotgun blast to the head. They’re gonna be pickin’ up teeth and head fragments for a few days to come. They might even find a jawbone over in Louisiana.”

“Damn.”

“Leonard owns a shotgun.”

"Now wait just a goddamn minute, Charlie. You know Leonard."

"Yeah. That's why I'm worried. Listen here, Hap. Leonard, he's a little hot-tempered. You can't deny that."

"He's not that hot-tempered."

"Yeah, he is. Especially lately. What about this stuff with Raul and Raul's boyfriend, who, I might note, is a biker? Am I right?"

"Yeah. But …"

"And you know why Leonard lost his job at the Hot Cat Club?"

"He pissed on a guy's head."

"That's excessive even for Leonard."

"He was making a point."

"Uh-huh. What you said about Leonard sayin' he was going to kick that kid's ass. Remember that?"

"I don't think he really meant it. Not really."

"That shows some temper, don't it? And you haven't heard a word from him. Any of that seem right to you, partner? And this biker, it was a twelve-gauge made him the headless horseman. And like I said, Leonard owns a twelve-gauge pump."

"So does every other Texan. Leonard also owns rifles, handguns, a collection of silverware, and a TV set. Hell, so do I. So do you."

"I haven't pissed on anyone's head, nor have I threatened to kick a kid's ass."

"Ah-hah! But you sympathized."

"I was kidding."

"So was Leonard."

"You weren't so sure."

"You don't even know it's the same biker."

"True. But after I went by Leonard's, didn't find him, heard about this biker, I went back and looked in Leonard's closet. Twelve-gauge wasn't there. You and I both know that twelve-gauge isn't one he takes out much. Got it from his uncle, who got it from his father, or some such thing. Uncle gave it to Leonard when he was a kid. You've heard him talk about it. It's an heirloom. It goes so far back it isn't registered. Guy's going to do something like kill a lover or a lover's boyfriend, he might want to do it with a weapon that's special to him."

"I thought you were Leonard's friend."

"I am, Hap. That's why I'm worried."

"I can't believe you came to me with this bullshit. Leonard didn't kill anybody. Not like that, anyway. Hell, you know that."

"There's more. Last night, biker bar on the outside of town. The Blazing Wheel. Heard of it? Only biker bar we got. Well, some black dude with a bad attitude went in there and whupped the shit out of a biker with a broom handle. It was one serious ass whuppin'. And when the other bikers started to light down on this black dude, he knocked a couple knots on their heads and pulled a pistol. Then, when they followed him out to the car, he jerked a twelve-gauge off his car seat and pointed it at them. Shot the neon out of the Blazing Wheel sign and shot up some bikes. It looked like a fuckin' demolition derby out there. This biker, one got the dog shit beat out of him—guess what?"

"It's the dead guy?"

"Guess what else?"

"What?"

"This black guy did the damage, he was driving a Rambler. How many guys you know got the acorns to go in a biker bar like that and start trouble, carry a gun? How many black guys you know drive an old Rambler? How many whites you know drive a Rambler? Who the fuck do you know wants to drive a Rambler? That alone takes balls."

"I don't think Leonard likes the Rambler," I said. "He got it cheap."

"Yeah. Well, add this shotgun stuff in with the other stuff. The boyfriend business, Leonard not being home. It kinda adds up big-time nasty, don't it?"

"What about Raul? Any word there?"

"Zip. Which don't look good neither."

"Any charges filed against Leonard?"

"Not yet. I'm the only one that's put any of this together.

Incorrectly, I hope."

I got out of bed and started for the closet.

"What are you doin'?" Charlie said.

"Keep what you think might be to yourself, will you, Charlie?"

"I'm an officer of the law, Hap. I can't—You're not goin' anywhere. It'll fuck up your insurance if you leave."

"I got to find Leonard. I got a better chance than anyone else. All you got to do is not tie things together just yet. Give me a little time. This way Leonard isn't forced into hiding if he didn't do this business."

"Didn't do it, he won't need to hide."

"State he's in, he might think he needs to. But I can tell you now, he didn't do this. Well, he probably did beat the hell out of that guy and shoot up the bar. And he probably drove that Rambler with a sense of pride. That's his style. But ambushin' some guy. Blowin' off his head like that. That's not his style."

"There's one other thing."

"What?"

"A Rambler, formerly white, before it was gutted by fire, was found in a pasture off Highway Fifty-nine."

"Was it Bill Duffin's pasture?"

"It was. And if I remember right, wasn't that the pasture where the squirrel jumped you? We're gettin' lots of coincidences here. Black guy knockin' knots on a biker guy's head, shootin' a twelve-gauge, drivin' a Rambler."

"Then I've really got no choice," I said. "I have to leave."

I slipped on my pants without underwear, pulled the gown over my head and tossed it on the bed. I put on my T-shirt.

"All I'm asking, Charlie, is you give me some space here. Okay?"

"Hap, I've done you guys a lot of favors. But—"

"Do us one more."

"You see how it looks. He went in there, lost his temper, knotted up a biker's melon, ran off in the Rambler, bikers chased him down. He shot the guy off the bike from the car. Then the others overtook him, burned the car to slow down identification … then … well, I don't think they took Leonard out to dinner."

I pulled my socks and shoes from the closet. I said, "They didn't find a body, so I'm going to figure on Leonard being alive. He isn't indestructible, but he isn't any pushover either. Did they find a shotgun and a revolver in the car?"

"No, but so what? Bikers could have taken that before they burned it. Why not? Good shotgun and a revolver. They'd want it."

"Maybe. But I'm thinking he got away, and he's out there somewhere, needing help."

"Hap, man, say he is alive … I'm crazy about the guy. Leonard, me and him are tight. But we're talkin' murder here. I don't never get that tight with nobody. Hear what I'm sayin'?"

"Sounds like self-defense to me."

"What? He goes in and beats a guy up and the guy goes after him and Leonard kills him. Biker wasn't armed, Hap."

"You say the Rambler was found in Duffin's pasture. That isn't near where the biker was killed, is it?"

"So they chased him. He tried to dart into the pasture and hide. They caught him. It stands to reason."

"He certainly ran them a merry chase from Old Pine Road all the way out to Duffin's pasture."

"Yeah. All right. That's a point. But it could have happened way I said."

"Bikers say they saw Leonard shoot this guy? Anyone say that?"

"No. They just say they chased him. But a lot of questions haven't been asked yet. They caught up and killed him, they ain't gonna admit it right away. For all we know, they're tannin' his hide somewhere, gonna make him into a rug."

"He's already tanned. I don't want much time, Charlie. Leonard did this, you can have him. It's not like he's going to go on a murder spree. And if he is dead, what's the rush, huh?"

It was Charlie's turn to consider. "All right. Twenty-four hours, then I got to let my cat out of the bag. And in the meantime, I got to start seein' there's more in the bag than just one cat. Investigation might bring something forward I can't hold back. Things can develop. A cat can have kittens. Understand?"

"Yeah," I said. "Fully. And Charlie. Thanks."

I sat down in the guest chair and put on my socks and shoes. I checked my wallet. Yep. Still had my two dollars and a couple of large uncashed checks from offshore work.

The nurse who had threatened to tell my doctor I was a bad boy came in just as I was starting out.

"Mr. Collins, what do you think you're doing?" she said.

"Don't worry, I'm not checking out. I'm going for a morning constitutional. I'll be back in time for my next shot."

"You can't do that," she said. "That's five days from now."

"Hide in the bushes and watch," I said, and went out.

A moment later I came back in. Charlie was listening to the nurse fuss about my departure. He was nodding and saying nothing. They both turned to look at me.

"Charlie," I said, "I know this messes up my exit, but you think you could give me a ride? To the house. I forgot I don't have my truck here."

5

Charlie drove me home and let me out. He didn't have much to say on the way over, but as I started walking toward the house he called out through his open window, "Just a little bit, Hap, then I got to bring Leonard in for questioning."

"Yeah. I know. What time is it?"

He told me.

I said, "Twenty-four hours. From right now. Okay?"

"Okay," he said. "But I mean twenty-four hours. Not twenty-five. And if something new comes up, deal's off."

I nodded at him, and he drove away. I got my key and walked up on the porch feeling ill. Partly it was the cold I had, along with a bit of fear about leaving the hospital like that, knowing I still had shots to take, and thinking about the doc's story about the boy who died tied to a bed, biting at the air.

I tried not to worry too much. I had five days before the next shot, and nearly two weeks after that before the last. But I had to wonder what I had been so all fired excited about.

Now I was out of the hospital and at the house, I didn't have a clue what I was supposed to do next. I felt as if I had tried to play a scene from *Hamlet* during a grade-school production of *Red Riding Hood.* It had been a dramatic moment, but it was inappropriate. It sure didn't add up to anything that could help Leonard.

As I went into the house the smell of mildew and dust hit me like a blow. I had been gone for months, and since I had returned to East Texas, I hadn't even been home. I had gone off with Leonard to shoot cans and talk. Things had gone downhill from there.

I felt a combination of pleasure and dread as I entered. Dread, because my place is essentially a shit hole. Much in need of repair. There's also the fact that the contents of my house spoke of, if not a miserable existence, certainly a lame one. I still had aluminum-foil-covered rabbit ears for my TV. Not even a roof antenna or a satellite dish.

The happy feeling that wrestled with the dread was due to the fact that I was home, free of the offshore drilling job where I had for months served as a heavy oiler, which is a glorified title for an idiot who pours oil onto machinery. I hated the work and vowed never to do it again. I also vowed, for the umpteenth time, to change my life. To find something better, to finally prepare for the future. Which, considering half my life was over, might not be a bad idea. Perhaps, if I had real plans, I could begin to think of my glass as half full, instead of half empty. Or half empty with a bug in the bottom.

I left the front door open, threw up the windows and let some fresh air into the living room. The air was rich with spring and I could smell the scents from the woods.

I went to the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, knowing full well there was nothing there, but it was something to do. I closed the fridge, found the cookie jar and looked inside.

There were a few cookies—the vanilla ones I stocked for Leonard—but the ants liked them too and they had been there first.

I used a long spoon to break up the cookies, poured the crumbs and ants into the sink, turned the water on them and watched them swirl down the drain.

Fuckers couldn't swim for shit.

I found a can of coffee, opened it, got a pot going, then discovered a tin of sardines. I used the key on the can to peel back the lid, got a fork, sat at the table and ate the fish, wishing I had crackers.

I poured a cup of coffee and sipped it while I walked around the living room thinking. That was when I noticed there were footprints in the dust in front of my bedroom door. I turned and looked about. The footprints led from one of the windows I had opened, and they were overlapped with my footprints, but they definitely were not mine. I realized that when I had opened this particular window, the one with the footprints below it, it had not been locked.

That hadn’t struck me as odd then, as I’m not always wise about remembering to lock my windows, but when I examined the window more closely I saw the lock had been busted. Someone had forced something under the frame and prized it up.

I felt strange suddenly, realized there was a bad smell coming from under the bedroom door. I had sniffed it earlier and had attributed it to dust and mildew, but now that I was closer I could really smell it, and it was not dust or mildew. Closer I got to the bedroom door, stronger it became.

I walked quietly back to the kitchen, set my coffee cup on the drain board, got a butcher knife out of the utensil drawer, and crept toward the bedroom. I inhaled a deep, sour breath and turned the knob slowly, expecting to be jumped at any moment.

I slid into the bedroom. It was hot in there. Dust swirled in circles. The midday light flowed through the curtains like a rush of yellow toxin. The window glass that peeked out between the curtain slits was filmed with cataracts of dust and fly guts. The window screens were layered with pollen.

Dead roaches and other desiccated insects lay on the windowsills with their legs poking at the air. The carpet was still brown, though it had originally started out a kind of bright rust color. Sunlight and lack of proper shoe cleaning had brought it to its present dried-shit hue.

My dresser was in its spot. The old-fashioned poster bed was still the same—except for the fact that there was someone lying on it, under a sheet, their head covered. This someone had stained through the sheet and turned it black. Their feet were sticking out at the bottom and were housed in black Roper boots, and the soles of the Ropers were gummy with some sort of black mess that might have been dried cow shit; it was evident the stench was coming from the boots and the body.

I took a deep breath, didn’t like the taste of it, eased around to the head of the bed, took hold of the sheet and lifted it.

Leonard, the twelve-gauge beside him, a revolver in his waistband, his face sweaty, scratched, dirty, and unshaven, cracked one eye, said in sticky voice, “Howdy.”

“You piece of shit,” I said.

He opened both eyes, though not wide, said, “No. Actually pieces of shit are all over me, but I'm still just me. What you got that knife for?"

"What the hell are you, nuts? You've got cow shit all over my bed."

"Actually, it's pig shit, and it's a cold manure. Did you know that? It doesn't work as well for fertilizer because it doesn't heat up the same. Don't try and compost it. Just doesn't do right. Just a tidbit of information I thought you might like. I'm full of stuff like that."

"You're full of what's all over you. Get out of my bed."

"Do I have to? I'm really tired. I've been, to say the least, a little busy."

"I thought you might be dead."

"Disappointed?"

"A little. I can't believe you didn't take off your fuckin' shoes and clothes before you got in my bed. I do that to you, get shit on your bed?"

"I don't even remember having on shoes and clothes, Hap. You didn't bring home anything to eat, did you? I couldn't find nothing but ants and sardines, and I don't eat either ants or sardines, though I think I'd prefer the ants to the sardines. Goddamn ants ate my cookies."

"Those were *my* cookies."

"Yeah, but I know you keep them for me." Leonard swiveled to a sitting position on the bed. "Is that coffee I smell?"

"All I smell is shit," I said.

"That's because you're not used to it yet."

"What in hell has been goin' on?"

"I'm just too pooped to pop right now. I need some food, some coffee, and a blood transfusion."

"You're injured?"

"I've got a cut or two, but nothing serious."

I had plenty of questions but decided for the moment it was hopeless. Leonard was too goony, hungry, and stinky to be around. I said, "Get off your ass and take a shower. I'll run to town and get some food. You and I have some serious talking to do. And throw those clothes away. Wear some of my stuff."

"I think not. None of your underwear's got designs or colors, or, for that matter, room enough for my equipment."

"I sure hate you aren't going to have colored underwear. You got a date?"

"Not anymore."

"Raul?"

"It's a nightmare."

"Leonard, you are in some serious shit."

"Serious pig shit."

"Look. Take a shower. I'll be back shortly. But I do have one question." I nodded at the twelve-gauge. "You haven't shot anyone lately, have you?"

"No, but I've certainly wanted to."

"Never mind right now. Listen up. Don't answer the phone. Don't answer the door. Don't go anywhere and don't shoot anybody. And don't piss on anyone either."

"I'll do my best."

6

When Leonard went into the bathroom, I took the sheets off the bed, folded them together, toted them to the trash can out back, and stuffed them inside. I got my keys and climbed in my truck.

The truck I loved had been lost in a flood in Grovetown, Texas, and my latest ride was a blue, ′79 Datsun pickup with a rust hole in the side. I didn't love the Datsun, but at least I didn't have to push it up hills. While I was offshore Leonard had made a point to come out and start it and drive it a bit to keep it running, and it hummed like a sewing machine.

I hummed it into LaBorde, cashed my checks, put some money in the bank, pocketed the rest, bought some groceries and cold medicine, got some food at Taco Bell, and drove back to the house.

When I got home the place had aired considerably, and Leonard, wearing my blue jean shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a pair of my black jeans, was seated at the kitchen table with his legs crossed, wiggling one bare foot. He was drinking a cup of coffee. He looked a hell of a lot better than when I left him.

"You look like a black man again, instead of a gray man."

"Well, I feel like an asshole. Hope you brought plenty to eat. I'm starved. Say, aren't you supposed to be in the hospital? I mean, now that I notice, you don't look so good yourself."

"I got a cold."

"You got out of the hospital for me, didn't you, Hap?"

I told him what Charlie had told me. I told him about leaving the hospital. I told him Charlie was giving me a bit of time to sort things out.

"Goddamn," Leonard said. "This has turned into one serious fiasco."

"Thing is, it hasn't gotten out of hand yet. Charlie's keeping the connection between you and this biker's murder to himself. But that won't last. He'll have to say something eventually, and who's to say someone else won't put it together? Once the connection is established, you better have a damn good idea what's clickin', and it better be plain as day."

"I don't know exactly what is clickin'."

"Did you kill the biker?"

"I told you I didn't shoot anybody. I didn't even know the sonofabitch was dead until just now. You think I'd kill someone and not tell you?"

"I had to ask."

"All right. You've asked."

Leonard looked pouty for a moment or two. I said, "Start by tellin' me what happened. You didn't just decide to roll in pig shit, did you?"

"No. That was sort of a natural by-product of my adventure. And believe me, without you it just wasn't the same. We're like the Hardy Boys, you know."

"No. I'm a Hardy Boy, and you're Nancy Drew."

"I'll let that slide. Hap, when we were at the hospital, and I went out of the waiting room, I didn't really plan to go anywhere. But the Doc was taking his time, and I thought, well, I'll step out, get something to eat for us and come back. But it didn't work that way. I drove off and couldn't get Raul off my mind. The boy drives me crazy."

"Aren't we a little old for this kind of infatuation? All this huffin'-and-puffin' shit?"

"I guess, but I got to thinking about him and drove out to the house. I thought he might be there. Had his fling with the biker, and maybe it was over and he'd come back. Wild thoughts, but that's what I was thinking. Thing was, I didn't know how I'd feel about him coming back if he did, but I wanted to see him again. It's that simple. Little bastard had my nose open."

"Want to open your nose, you should try pig shit. I have a cold, and that opened my nose right up. That mess on the carpet, you're cleaning that."

Leonard nodded. "What say we eat first, then go out on the back porch and talk?”

We finished the Taco Bell food, and I opened a can of tuna and a jar of mayonnaise, whipped a tablespoon of mayonnaise with the tuna and put it on bread. Leonard ate the sandwich and then another. When he finished, I made another pot of coffee and we went outside with cups of it.

The back porch wasn’t much. It was close to giving up the ghost. The boards were gray and fiercely weathered, but the view out there wasn’t bad. There was the dark East Texas woods, topped by the sky, which was a peculiar blue this day, made all the more beautiful by the golden brightness of the sun; the clouds flowed across it like lilies cast upon a great and tranquil ocean. Off to the right was a creek. You could hear the water gurgling, like a happy woman humming. There was a slight breeze. Outside you couldn’t smell the mildew, dust, and pig shit. Leonard talked.

“Stuff I was gonna tell you about me and Raul, it don’t seem like much now. Not after what’s happened. All I can say is things were falling apart. I guess I knew they would in time. We were just too different. He was a little too young for me, from another world really. Wanted someone didn’t like guns and boxing and martial arts. Someone more refined.”

“I hear the word *refined*, Leonard, I think of you.”

“You bet. But we weren’t doing so good, and he got so he wasn’t coming home like he should, and here I was staying up nights watching Dave Letterman and John Wayne movies, and he’d come in tired and cranky and short on explanation. Hell, I guess I knew he was fuckin’ around. But I love the guy, you know, so it blinds you. I thought maybe I was just being stupid jealous. Thought the trouble we were having was a stage we were goin’ through. I believed his shit about he was working—”

“Working?”

“Yeah. He finished hairdressin’ school. Kind of elite business. He was gettin’ into this deal they got now where the rich folks have the hairdresser come around to their place to do the work. Big money in that. Kind of like hiring a bartender for the night. Or maid service.”

“I didn’t know Raul knew a comb from a scissor.”

“It was a short course. Three months. He took it while you were out helping exploit the earth of its natural resources."

"Go on. You were sayin' …"

"Well, things were tense, and the next-door neighbors were still pissed I'd burned their crack house down, and from time to time some of that bunch would come by late at night, throw things at the house, even took a shot at it once. They fucked with our mail. I finally had to have the address temporarily changed. Had my mail sent out to my old place. It was just one thing after another. But after I found out where those shits are now living, I went over and explained to a couple of people that any more crap happened around my house, even if I didn't know it was them that was responsible, even if I thought it might be them, I'd frown on it tremendously. Well, they knew I meant business—I mean, hell, I done burned their crack house down three times now. So things started cooling. But it was just one more aggravation to make things more tense with Raul. Maybe it was gettin' to him too, making him act crazy. Anyway, he wasn't home much. He was hangin' out in LaBorde Park, which is where lots of gays meet, and I didn't like that much 'cause that sounded suspicious, him roamin' around out there. It's not just a pickup spot, it's where those guys got beat up. You know, four or five just last year."

"One this year," I said. "That's the place the preacher carries the sign, isn't it?"

" 'Gay Equals AIDS Equals Death.' "

"That's the one."

"Yeah. That's the place. So I thought him being there all hours wasn't such a good idea. 'Specially him having all the fighting skills of a dirty sock. And worse yet, all these friends of his, they're classic queers. All that swishin' shit. Obvious targets."

"Do I detect a little prejudice toward other homosexuals, my friend? Those without weight-lifter arms and the ability to sight down a rifle?"

"I'm just sayin' Raul's with them, and since they're like flashin' neon, and they're in a bad place, it's just not smart. It shouldn't matter, but it does. So don't give me that liberal bullshit, Hap. I'm not up for it.

"So I'm worried, and I tell Raul I am, but he ignores me, and by the time I find out he's not only hanging out at the park, but he's screwin' Harley Greaseballs, it's too late. He's done run off with him. Can you reckon on that? I'm too macho for him, so he runs off with a guy looks like he wiped a couple old transmissions with his hair. I asked around at the park, found out where the biker guy hung out, found out his name was Horse McNee and that he was a closet fag."

"Horse?"

"It was a nickname. As in hung like a horse."

"Who told you this?"

"Another faggot. I kinda know him through Raul. Fusses like an old woman. But you know, you want some dirt, this guy seems to have it. He's been around for years. An old queen. Fact is, they call him Queen Mary. He's got a younger friend everyone calls Princess Mary. Princess likes to hang around bus stations hoping for a lube job. I can't stand him. But that's beside the point. This Queen Mary, he's always hitting' on me, and everyone else. I wouldn't fuck him if we were both wearing bags over our heads and I was using your dick. Hell, I wouldn't fuck him if we were double baggin' and using your dick with a rubber on. But I admit I played up to him a little—"

"You prick-teased?"

"Just a little. Anywho, I got the info, decided to drive out to the biker bar."

"With a shotgun, a revolver, and a broom handle?"

"You heard about that?"

"Yeah. And it doesn't sound like you. Not that I haven't seen you go off, but this seems radical even for your charming self."

"I know. Romance. Lust. Whatever, it fucks you up. I'm thinkin' I can go out there and Raul will be with Horse Dick, and I can talk him into coming back. And, to be blunt, I wanted to whip the guy's ass stole my boyfriend."

"It's not the guy's fault Raul's playin' around."

"Yeah. But I don't care. I'm wantin' to whip him anyway. Maybe I'm thinkin' I thrash Horse Ass—"

"Horse Dick."

"Whatever. I think if I thrash him, Raul won't think he's so hot. I mean, he doesn't want a macho queer, so he runs off with a greasy macho queer? You got to think Raul protests too much. So, I got my companions, the twelve-gauge shotgun and the thirty-eight snub-nose revolver, and went out there. As for the broom handle, well, I keep that under my car seat as a kind of attitude adjuster. I figured I had to be seriously prepared. As you recall, you and me learned us a little lesson last year."

"Yep. No matter how tough you are, you can't whip a bunch of guys at one time if they want to whip you bad enough. And if they whip you damn good and dead solid, it hurts like a sonofabitch."

"That's the lesson. Not only is the Blazing Wheel a biker bar, it's a seriously Caucasian bar. Dixie flag. The whole works. You're not even gonna find James Brown on the jukebox in this joint. Charlie Pride wouldn't be welcome. And here I am, a nigger with an attitude and a stick. A very solid stick, I might add. And I see this guy I've seen with Raul, and I walk over to him, holding this damn honkie knocker by my side—"

"Honkie knocker?"

"Sorry. Slipped out. No offense intended … And I say, "I'm Leonard Pine, and you've been fuckin' with my boyfriend."

"That's original."

"Wish I'd thought the line over better, but that's what came out. Horse Dick threw a right cross at my head, and I drilled his arm on the inside with my stick, went to knockin' apples on his head. That first noggin shot I hit him so hard I bet his fuckin' dog back home shit a turd in the shape of a praying Jesus. All this happened quick-like, and these guys decided they were gonna skin me for knockin' their buddy, so I pull my pistol, shoot a hole in the floor and scare them back. I go out to the car and they follow."

"And you pull the twelve-gauge and shoot out the neon sign and blow up some bikes."

"You heard about that?"

"Same place I got the news about the shotgun, the broom handle, and the revolver. Charlie."

“That goddamn Charlie is one knowledgeable sonofabitch, ain’t he?”

“That he is.”

“So I went away from there, and a few of these guys followed, but I lost them. Or thought I did. I decided Duffin’s pasture was a good place to hide. I pulled in, killed the lights, parked, and sat. I think, all right, I’ve lost them. I start to relax. I have a bag of cookies in the car there, and I’m eatin’ them, and I glance in the rearview mirror, and what do I see?”

“An old gentleman and eight tiny reindeer.”

“The biker fucks. I wasn’t slick as I thought. They’d seen me turn in, left their bikes down the road somewhere, and were sneakin’ up on my highly attractive shiny black ass.”

“But you were sneakier.”

“I slid to the other side of the car, opened the door and slipped into the grass, draggin’ my twelve-gauge with me. I crawled along for a bit, then got up and ran. Them sonofabitches seen me. They let out a whoop, and the race was on. I went into the woods. I looped wide and doubled back and got down in the creek and saw them crossin’ down a ways, goin’ up on the bank. I went down the creek about a mile and came up in the woods, and goddamned if some of them hadn’t wandered up right where I come out. Asswipes had me surrounded.”

“So they scalped you and ate you.”

“I crawled right between those fuckers, and they didn’t hear nor see me, so I kept on crawlin’.”

“Isn’t this story attributed to Daniel Boone?”

“You know Webb’s hog farm?”

“Yeah. And I see this comin’.”

“I crawled up to the edge of the farm, through the slats of one of the hog pens. They say hogs shit in one corner of the pen, but someone forgot to tell these fuckin’ hogs that, or Webb needs to get his ass out there with a shovel more, ’cause I can seriously testify that this entire pen had the intense aroma of pig shit gone bad and then made worse.

“I was in this swill, lookin’ out, and I seen the bikers trottin’ along the side of the farm there. I knew they hadn’t seen me, but they were close enough I could have smelled them, if I hadn't had my nose full of pig shit. You know what I did, Hap?"

"Is this question rhetorical?"

"No."

"You eased into the pig shit and hid."

"You ought to be on fuckin' *Jeopardy!*, Hap. That's exactly what I did. I slid myself into that muck so there wasn't nothing but my head and arms and that twelve-gauge stickin' out. I made up my mind they came for me I was gonna' start blowin' kneecaps off. But when they got downwind of that pig shit, they began to cuss and head back into the woods."

"It takes a real man to lay down in pig shit and not complain," I said.

"I fought off a couple of amorous pigs, climbed through the fence, made the road, but stayed more in the woods. After a while, I heard their bikes and hunched down in the underbrush and watched them drive by. I waited a few minutes, thought about going back for my car, decided they'd expect that and might have a guard there. I crossed the road, went across Murdoch's old pasture, crossed into the woods behind your house, jimmied a window with a tire iron out of your truck, and climbed inside. I was plumb tuckered out. I lay in your bed there all the mornin' and the day until you showed up and woke me."

"Just like Goldilocks and the three bears."

"Well, yeah."

"What about my tire iron?"

"It's under the porch. Damn, Hap, you're supposed to show me some sympathy. Fuck your tire iron."

"You brought this on yourself, man. And you fucked up my sheets. And you damn well better not have lost my tire iron."

"If it makes you feel better, I've got hog shit in my twelve-gauge."

"I'm tryin' to figure on this thing, Leonard, and it isn't adding up so good. Horse Dick lost his head out by Old Pine Road. That isn't anywhere near the Duffin pasture. But all these bikers were chasin' you and he wasn't. Seems to me, I was Horse Dick, and it was my noggin with the bumps on it, I'd have been leading the pack. But he went off in another direction and got himself shot."

"Maybe he got confused. Those were some serious adjustments I made on his punkin. I hit him so hard I may have even changed his past, but I didn't kill him."

"Oh, by the way," I said, "you know your Rambler? They burned that mother to the ground."

"Crap! You enjoyed telling me that, didn't you? You've always hated that car, and this from a man with a Datsun pickup."

"I think you ought to turn yourself in, Leonard. Not just because you drove a Rambler, but because Charlie will make sure the right thing is done."

"I'm not sure there's much Charlie can do."

"Once we start shooting holes in what at first seems obvious, we can clear you. You don't turn yourself in, they can say you're runnin' and hidin' because you're guilty."

Leonard shook his head. "I don't know what the hell to do. I'm damned if I do, and damned if I don't."

I heard the phone ringing in the house. I said, "I'll answer that while you clean the hog shit off my floor and carpet."

"Do I have to?"

"Damn straight. And don't just wipe the surface. You use some cleanser and de-stinker. It's all under the kitchen sink."

"De-stinker?" Leonard said.

It was Doc Sylvan on the phone.

"Are you out of your mind?" he asked.

"I'm not sure one way or the other."

"I can believe that. You have to have those shots, Hap, or you will die."

"Come on, Doc, I got five days before the next one."

"What about the insurance problem? You forgot about that?"

"Can't you fudge a little? I had to leave the hospital. It wasn't by choice, but I had to."

"Why?"

"I haven't done laundry in days."

"You went home to do laundry!"

"I had some bills to pay."

"Why don't you just say you needed to wash your hair?"

"Well, it does need it."

"Hap, listen here. You come back to the hospital tonight and stay, and I'll work something out. But you got to be there tonight. I can rig something for you being out of the room a while. Say I had you over at the office for tests, but that's as far as I go. Doing something like that, getting caught, I could lose my license, and I don't think you make enough to support us both."

"Not in the style to which you are accustomed. Fact is, I don't make enough to support *me.* In any kind of style."

"You be in the hospital tonight, and I promise I will have you out of there within two days, and still make the insurance work. It'll take some finagling, but I'll do it. Just to get you out of my hair."

"Got you."

"I will be by the hospital at eight-thirty tonight, Hap. Be there. In bed."

"In one of those little gowns?"

"You bet."

"Shall I wear a little perfume?"

"Please do."

"I think you just want to see me naked, Doc."

"It's all I think about."

Leonard came in with a scrub brush full of hog shit, a pail of stinky water, and a couple of towels.

"These towels weren't the good stuff, were they?" he asked.

"Not anymore."

"They have holes in them."

"Yeah, and the bad towels have more holes in them. You clean the mess up?"

"Yeah."

We went out back and Leonard dumped the water on the ground and used the water hose to clean the brush and towels. He hung the towels on my clothesline. He said, “I’ve been hesitating to ask. But what about Raul? Charlie know anything about him?”

I shook my head.

Leonard said, “That worries me. I hope he’s all right.”

Leonard’s voice would have sounded calm to anyone who didn’t know him, but I caught the tremolo there. He was not only worried, he was scared. Maybe not for himself, but certainly for Raul.

“He’s probably all right,” I said.

“Maybe you could check around. Just to see. It’s not like I can go out and look for him.”

“I wouldn’t know where to start, Leonard. He may have run off back to Houston. He’s done that before, right?”

Leonard nodded.

“I figure him and Horse Dick had a fight,” I said, “and he went away, then you stepped into the picture a day late and a dollar short and got your ass in a crack with all this business. Right now, way I see it, and you better believe me on this, Raul is the least of your worries.”

“I guess you’re right,” Leonard said. “Just forget it.”

7

But that wasn't the end of Leonard's wheedling about Raul. He worked on me for an hour, and since nothing else was shaking and our time was ticking away, I decided if I could locate Raul I could find out better what this was all about. Raul might have some idea who would want to kill his new boyfriend, and if he did, that could lead to placing Leonard in the clear.

I also decided that if I was going to start looking, I had best do it before the net was put out for Leonard. For all I knew, some cop other than Charlie had already put two and two together and they were seining for my buddy at this very moment. Even Charlie, if put in the wrong position, might have to break his promise to me and cast the net himself.

I left Leonard with a glass of milk, a bag of vanilla cookies, and a sad expression, drove into town and over to his place. I thought if I was Raul, I might go to Leonard's place to hide. It wouldn't be smart, since the cops were bound to look there, but if I was Raul and had all the street savvy of a broken knickknack, that might be what I'd do.

On the way, I tried to figure Raul for the part of Horse Dick's murderer, but that didn't play. Raul didn't have the temperament to step on a slug, let alone aim a shotgun at someone and blow off their head. Not even in self-defense could I imagine Raul doing such a thing.

But where the hell was he?

When I got to Leonard's house the day had turned off a little warm, but not uncomfortable. A light breeze was blowing and the blue sky was as clear as the Virgin Mary's conscience. All the lily-white clouds had blown away, or sunk into the sky, and it seemed like a day when you shouldn't have a care in the world.

I got out my key to the house and went inside. Raul was nowhere in sight. But the house didn't look like Charlie had described it to me. It had been turned inside out.

The living room couch had been pulled out into a bed, and the thin mattress had been tossed on the floor. The stereo was turned over and the back was ripped off the television set. In the bedroom the dresser mirror was broken, and the mattress had been cut apart and the cotton stuffing strewn about like the guts of a cloud. The closet door was thrown wide. Leonard’s shotguns and rifles lay on the floor, and everything in the closet from clothes to coats to ammunition to income tax records were heaped to one side.

In all the rooms the drawers had been dumped, books pulled onto the floors, and in the kitchen the flour, sugar, baking soda, stuff like that, were strewn about or were in the sink. In the bathroom the ceramic lid to the back of the toilet had been dropped and broken on the floor and someone had been pawing about in the plumbing.

I checked the back door. It had been jimmied, the lock snapped free by a crowbar, or some similar instrument. I pushed it open, stepped onto the screened-in porch Leonard had rebuilt, examined the aluminum-framed screen door that led outside. I was surprised to discover it was locked.

I went down the steps and looked around. The rain from the other night had left the ground soft and there were footprints in the mud. Big goddamn shoe prints. Bastard must have worn a size fourteen. The tracks were leading away from the house, not to it. I followed them into the woods, and from there I lost them. I was a fair tracker, but I wasn’t the Deerslayer.

Still, I took a flyer and went on through the woods a piece, over to where the foliage gave way to a muddy country road, and started up again on the other side. I walked out to the edge of the road just as an old pollen-coated brown pickup with two young men in it clattered by. They waved at me and I waved back.

I walked onto the road and looked around. It was a dirt road, so there were plenty of tracks, of course. Nothing odd about that. I walked along a piece and found a tire-smashed armadillo and a flattened copperhead, and finally took note of what I determined were the marks of motorcycle tires. Normally, that wouldn’t mean much, but they ran off the side of the road, and I discovered where they trailed red mud across the grass and into the woods. The bike had been pushed, because there were shoe tracks alongside the tire marks. The same big shoe tracks.

It didn't take an Einstein to figure someone had driven off the road, pushed their bike into concealment, made their way on foot through the woods and into Leonard's house. The tracks got lost in the thick leaves, so I went on through the woods and back to Leonard's house and looked out back carefully until I found where the footprints exited the woods and came up on the south side of the back porch. I hadn't seen these tracks earlier.

Whoever had entered the house had entered here, probably that way instead of through the screen door to stay down and out of view.

They had cut the screen loose at the bottom of the porch with wire cutters, pushed the screen up, slid under and inside. Then they'd jimmied the back door, and gone in. I assumed they had been quick and silent and purposeful about their task, entered at night, and taken their time ransacking the joint. Gone out the way they'd come in.

I decided I was thirsty, went inside the house and opened the refrigerator. The ice trays had been emptied on the floor and they had melted and water had run into some of the flour. There was a big footprint there, mixed with mud. I managed not to step in anything.

Some of the stuff inside the fridge had been thrown about. There were a few beers and Cokes in the fridge. I got one of the Cokes and popped the top and went out on the back porch and sat down on the steps and tried to think while I sipped it.

It might have been a common burglary, but I couldn't figure what they had burgled. It didn't look like vandalism either, least not completely. Someone had been looking for something. And whoever had done the looking had owned a motorcycle. Horse Dick had owned a bike. The bikers who chased Leonard owned motorcycles. The kid that delivered newspapers on this street owned one too. But he didn't wear a size-fourteen shoe. Who the hell did?

I finished the Coke and looked at the tracks again, those leading into the woods, and those coming up on the side of the porch. I studied them carefully. They were pressed in pretty deep. Whoever had made those tracks was one big sonofabitch, and not just his shoe size. Guy could have been anywhere from two-fifty to three hundred pounds, or more. Maybe it was Bigfoot. Or Smokey the Bear. The thought of someone that huge made me a little queasy.

I went back through the house one more time, looking for clues, but nothing important jumped out at me. Which didn't surprise me. I wasn't much of a detective. I had enough problems just keeping up with socks that matched.

I closed the back door as best it would close, went through the house, locked the front door, stood on the front porch, finished my Coke and looked around.

The spot where the crack house used to be next door was nothing now but a patch of scorched earth and lumber. Someone's chickens were loose and pecking around in the ruins. I wondered what would happen if the chickens found some old drugs in there. A little crack, some cocaine. They would certainly lay interesting eggs.

Across the street where MeMaw used to live a new owner had moved in. The new owner had painted the house hot Pepto-Bismol pink with chocolate trim, and they liked dark blue curtains and had yard butts on the brutally mowed lawn.

Yard butts are what Leonard and I call those stupid, painted, plywood cutouts that are supposed to look like an old man or an old grandma bending over in the yard, the grandpa showing you his overall-covered ass, the grandma's dress hiked up, showing you her white-lace panties.

Leonard once told me he wanted to buy one of those plastic vaginas and butt holes you could get in sex shops and glue it on the seat of one of those grandmas. He figured if you were supposed to be looking up her dress, you might as well see something. It certainly would have been funny to see the owners of those yard butts come out the next morning to discover grandma giving the neighborhood a show.

I guess those dumb yard butts were better than those wooden Holstein cow sprinklers with a hose for a tail that swirled around and around tossing water. But not much.

I looked down the street, both ways, for no particular reason. Still looking for clues, I guess. All I noted was the street seemed to have changed a lot in the last few months. Some of the big trees along the pocked asphalt road had been cut down, and where there used to be shade there was sunlight. This neighborhood wasn't the best in the world, with its poverty and drug problems, but I had liked coming here.

Now, Leonard's house no longer seemed like Leonard's house, like my home away from home. Things had changed. On the street. In the neighborhood. In the house. In our lives.

Perhaps I missed Leonard having a new crack house to burn down next door. He had burned two of them. Well, three of them, if you count the time I helped him do one.

Who knew? Maybe they'd move a new one in any day now. Hope springs eternal.

I took a moment to think about the sex life I didn't have. Damn. I was getting as bad as Charlie. This kept up, me and him would be fucking.

I thought about Lt. Marvin Hanson, lying in bed in a deep coma. I assumed if I thought about how bad he had it, I could feel a hell of a lot better about being me.

It didn't work. I still felt like shit.

I watched a couple of blue jays fighting in Leonard's oak tree. Listened for a while to a small dog bark savagely at something somewhere off to the south. The dog didn't want to stop barking. A car drove by, an old black man at the wheel, one arm out the window. He was wearing a blue baseball cap with the brim pushed up. He looked hot and tired and satisfied. I looked at my watch. Three-forty-five. Guy was probably just off work from the early shift at one of the plants around town. Must be nice to have a shift. A regular check. Probably had a wife to go home to. A dog. Some kids. A TV with cable instead of foil-covered rabbit ears. I used to have an antenna, but the wind blew it away. I wondered where my antenna was. I wondered where my youth was. I wondered if that fucker who drove by got the American Movie Classics channel.

The wind died down and I began to feel uncomfortably warm. I unbuttoned my top shirt button.

I watched the blue jays fight some more. The dog had stopped barking. I still felt warm. I checked out the pink house with chocolate trim again. The colors hadn't changed and the lawn butts were still in place.

I looked at my watch once more.

Three-forty-six. Time was certainly shooting by.

I scratched my balls, got in my truck, and drove away from there.

8

I stopped at a pay phone and called Charlie. Before I could tell him the state of Leonard's house, he said, "I hope you got something good."

"It's not that good. It's about Leonard's house. I just went by there. It's been ransacked."

"Maybe Leonard did it himself. Came back, grabbed some stuff he needed, made a mess."

"I didn't say it was messy. I said it was ransacked."

I described the place to him. He was silent. If he had an opinion he didn't voice it. Just before I started collecting Social Security, he said, "You need to come up with Leonard."

"I'm working on it. Am I to think you no longer think he got nailed by bikers?"

"I think all kinds of ways. It keeps me from getting bored. And if you know where Leonard is, you ought to tell me."

"So far, nothing."

"You wouldn't lie to me, would you, Hap?"

"Gracious, no."

"I'm not fuckin' around here. This is some serious business."

"I know that."

"You put him up, hide him out, that's a crime. You know that. Right?"

"Of course."

"Are you talkin' through a cardboard tube?"

"It's my cold. It's getting worse."

"My cousin, he had a cold like that, neglected it. Fucker died. You takin' medicine?"

"I've bought some, but no, I haven't taken it yet. And I don't believe you had a cousin who died of a cold."

"Maybe it was my mother's cousin."

"You really aren't that concerned about my cold, are you?"

"Hey, you're sick, I'm sick."

"You think you'll soften me up, then I'll confide something to you, don't you?"

"You said it, I didn't."

"Let me ask you something. Raul. Is he a suspect in this case?"

"Everybody is a suspect. I'm thinking of running my wife in."

"Come on, Charlie. You got Raul in custody? Know where he is?"

"No, and if you know where he is, you'd best tell me."

"I just called 'cause I thought you should know about the house. You might want to go over there, bring some of your people, see if you can find a real clue. You could even bring your little Dick Tracy fingerprint kit."

"You probably fucked up anything might have been there to find."

"I don't think so. I know I'm not a real policeman like you—"

"You're not even a stuffed animal in a police hat."

"Very true. But unlike you, I don't have to step in shit to know a pile when I see it. And there is some shit goin' on here that's got nothing to do with Leonard. Not directly. At least I don't think so."

"You don't sound all that certain to me. Maybe you got to step in shit after all."

"Could be. But I did find a couple clues. You might take note of some footprints out back. They look to belong to Andre the Giant."

I told him about my trek through the woods to the road, what I found there. I told him what I had touched. I said, "By the way, as you well know, it won't be any surprise to find my fingerprints all over that house. And here's an idea, and this is just an idea, mind you, and I don't want you to take offense since it's from a layman and you're a real policeman with a badge and gun and everything, but you take fingerprints, what I'd do is see you have any other than Leonard's, Raul's, or mine."

"My," Charlie said, "you're a regular Boston Blackie. This stuff about fingerprints. And that footprint business. Shit like that'll bust the case wide open. All we got to do is make a cast of those footprints, make a shoe from that. Then we can go door to door and have people try it on. Shoe fits, we run the fucker in …. All right, Hap, get this. Time is running out, and I better not find you're fuckin' around on me."

"I wouldn't do that, Charlie."

"The hell you wouldn't."

"Charlie, you really got to either smoke more so you'll be less irritable, or you got to quit smoking so you can get some poontang and be less irritable."

"What I'd like is to fuck like a snake, then afterwards smoke like a chimney. Hap, you listen here. We're buddies, but when it comes to murder, that don't buy much. Hear me talkin'?"

"I hear you. I keep hearin' you. What the hell is with you? I still think you're pissed about Kmart closing down."

"It's not an easy thing to get over. But don't change the subject. I'll make sure Leonard gets as fair a shake as he can get. If it's self-defense, I'll do all I can to get him off. But I'll tell you now. I'm comin' after him, and if I discover you've had anything to do with hiding him, then I'm coming after you too."

"You said I had twenty-four hours. My understanding of that was I found him during that time, could straighten out things, you wouldn't bother me. Even if I did know where he was. Isn't that right? I had twenty-four hours, didn't I?"

"Had. You got a lot less now. But I also said no promises if things changed around here."

"Has something changed?"

Charlie let me hear the electricity in the phone for a while.

"Well, has it?" I asked.

"Just find Leonard," Charlie said, "and listen close. I'm coming after you," and he hung up.

I thought about that a moment, then understood what Charlie was trying to tell me. I called Leonard. I let it ring a couple times, hung up. Let it ring a couple times, hung up. Then repeated it. I hoped he'd realize it was some kind of code.

The third set of rings someone picked up the phone. I said, “This is me. If that’s you, might I suggest a stroll in the forest?”

The phone went dead. I took a moment to wonder if my phone was tapped, decided things had happened too quickly for that. I was okay. I was just feeling a streak of secret agent.

I pushed out of the phone booth and walked over to my truck. Down the road a piece I saw a yellow ’66 Pontiac parked next to the curb. There was a man sitting in it wearing a cowboy hat. He didn’t look like any of the cops I knew. He didn’t look like a cop. He didn’t look like anybody I knew, period. He didn’t seem to be watching me.

The phone booth was next to a 7-Eleven store. I went inside and bought a Diet Coke in a plastic bottle and a bag of peanuts. I drank the Diet Coke down a bit, poured peanuts into it, and went outside. I climbed into my truck and looked in my mirror. The Pontiac was gone.

Probably just some guy waiting for someone in one of the houses along the street. Or maybe he’d stopped to check a map. Pull his dick. Anything. I had to lighten up. I was starting to be one paranoid sonofabitch.

I drove away, an eye on the mirror, watching for yellow Pontiacs or low-flying stealth aircraft with radar.

9

I didn’t go directly home. I was sort of afraid to. I figured Charlie would be searching my place, and if Leonard had heeded my warning, he wouldn’t be there. It might also be better if I didn’t come up on Charlie and his folks going through my underwear drawer. I wouldn’t want to embarrass them.

I drove downtown and went to the all-day dollar movie and had popcorn. The popcorn was okay, but the movie wasn’t very good. I walked out about halfway through and stopped off at the yogurt joint and had a cone.

When I finished my cone, I cruised over to the bookshop and looked around the magazine rack. I didn’t see any *Boobs and Butts* there. Where did Charlie find that stuff? I hung around long enough the clerks began to watch me suspiciously. I bought a couple comic books, a *Batman* and a *Spider-Man*, and left.

When I got home, Leonard wasn’t there. I gave the house the once-over, went out on the back porch, and saw him strolling toward me from the woods. He had the twelve-gauge in one hand, a shovel over his shoulder, and I could see his revolver in the waistband of his pants.

Leonard smiled. “Thanks for the phone tip. I watched from the woods. Charlie and a blue suit showed up with the sheriff. They worked your lock and went inside and looked around.”

“That means they have a search warrant.”

“Probably. They were inside about twenty minutes.”

“They did good. I can’t tell they’ve been here. They even locked the door on the way out.”

“They looked around outside too. Found the sheets covered in pig shit.”

“They take the sheets with them?”

“No. At this point they probably haven’t put the pig shit and my daring escape together. I was smart enough to bury my clothes in the woods. I was going to do the sheets next. Actually, I don't think putting me and the pig shit together is going to mean anything anyway."

"You're probably right about that. Something new has happened. Now you're connected to all this officially, and Charlie had to come check my place as a likely hiding spot."

We sat down on the back porch and I told Leonard what I had found at his house. Told him about my conversation with Charlie.

"Any ideas?" I asked.

"Was the stuff really wrecked? Were my books ruined?"

"They're messed up. Some of them."

"The TV's screwed?"

"Looks that way. And the stereo."

"Shit."

"Your J. C. Penney's suit was tossed on the floor too."

"Now that fucker is dealing with dynamite."

I nodded. "I knew that would get you."

"Seems to me someone thinks I have something I don't. If I do, I don't know what it is, and I don't know how I came by it or why I'd want it. And even if I did, that's no excuse to fuck with a man's J. C. Penney's suit."

"Or maybe they think Raul has something."

"I hadn't thought of that," Leonard said.

"Or maybe they thought Horse Dick had something, and now they think Raul has it, and they thought he was hiding it at your house."

"Or someone thinks what Horse Dick had and Raul had, I now have."

"Or maybe it's a disgruntled hair patron of Raul's," I said. "A little too much off the ears and he's ready to flatten the kid's head."

"Come to think of it, he cut my hair once or twice, and I sort of avoided him after that. He tended to poke you with the scissors."

"I'll tell you this," I said. "If I had something that the guy owning that shoe printed wanted, I might be inclined to give it to him. Help him carry it out to the car, give him a blow job, wipe his ass, give his car a push uphill."

"That big, huh?"

"No. I just made all this shit up for your amusement."

Leonard sighed. "Sorry. I'm beginning to think I was born under a bad sign …. Do you think Raul's dead?"

"I don't know. Maybe that's the news the cops got. Maybe to them it's looking like you did him in too. I'm not saying he's dead, I'm just saying if he is, it'll compound things."

"Jesus, I hope he's all right. And not just for my sake."

"We're jumping a lot of ditches here for no reason, Leonard. We don't know anything. Not really. Charlie gave me the impression something was up, though, but I think now it was just the fact they were going to search here and he figured you might be here. He's trying to help. Guess it was good I called him when I did."

"Long as we're speculating, though, I just thought of something. What if the bikers didn't know Horse Dick was gay?"

"Who says they care?" I said.

"I'll stand by it for the moment. Considering most people aren't that liberal about homosexuality, and these guys are about as open-minded as a scorpion. It's a fuckin' Dixie No Nigger Bar, for Christ sakes. You think it's No Niggers But Queers Okay?"

"You never know."

"Yeah, well, let's place bets. So if the bikers first heard about Horse Dick being gay from me when I knocked knots on his head and uttered my classic line about his fuckin' around with my boyfriend, could be they got rid of him themselves. They figured I'd get the blame, and that way they could kill two birds—or two fags, if you will—with one shotgun blast."

"That's a possibility, I guess, but that doesn't explain your house being tossed. My guess is the incidents may not have anything to do with one another. They just unfortunately came together at the same time."

"Maybe," Leonard said. "Now what?"

"I think you ought to continue hiding out in the woods. I've got a pup tent, some camping gear, and I suggest we put it together and you use it. I'll find you at the Robin Hood tree when I get some word, or I need you."

The Robin Hood tree was a massive oak. It reminded Leonard and me of the great oak in the Robin Hood tales, therefore its nickname. It was near my place, on property of Leonard's, and it was out back of the house he still owned, but had boarded up until he finished repairing and selling the house he had inherited from his uncle. A chore that had turned into one of the labors of Hercules.

"I'm going to be at the hospital tonight and tomorrow night," I said. "I don't know I can slip out during the day or not. I do, I'm going to wind up owing so much money I'll spend the rest of my life trying to pay, and still won't be able to."

We put the gear together, along with the two comic books I'd bought, and Leonard took the stuff and melted into the woods. I'd have to get him a suit of Lincoln green. For that matter, I had a green suit I had bought at J. C. Penney's. I could loan it to him. Make him one of those little Robin Hood hats out of green construction paper, rob a tail feather from a chicken, stick it in the hat. I could call him Little Leonard.

When I had a few things packed, I took some cold medicine and drove into town on my way to the hospital. The sky was a gigantic charcoal smear backgrounded by a dying burst of red sunlight, bright and jagged as if God's heart had exploded. Bats filtered about, radaring for bugs.

I drove over to a burger joint and had a burger, thought about everything that had been going on, then thought about nothing. By the time I arrived at the hospital God's heart had bled out, and all that was left was a dark stain, like blood drying on a brick.

I was uncertain what I was supposed to do at the hospital, so I parked and went right up to my room. My name was still written on the paper in the slot outside the door.

I peeked inside. It was dark in there. The bed next to where I had slept was still empty. My bed, where I had had such joyous moments watching pigeons, was also empty.

I turned on the light, pulled back the closet door, and looked in there. My gown was dangling from a hanger. At least I assumed it was my gown. Same style. Same color. Plenty of room for my ass to hang out. I knew for a fact I'd had one just like it.

I looked at my watch. I was a half hour early. I sat in the visitor's chair beside the bed and wished I'd gone home first to get something to read. I looked out the window. It was dark, but I could make out the pigeon poop on the sill, the stuff I'd named Leonard.

I turned on the TV and watched a news program.

About eight-twenty Doc Sylvan came in. "Thanks for showing up. It's nice of you. You know, I didn't think you would. If you hadn't, I'd have made sure the insurance didn't cover shit."

I clicked the TV off. "I'm sorry, Doc. I wasn't trying to give anyone a hard time. I really did have an emergency. I just can't talk about it."

Doc Sylvan eyed me. "Yeah … Well, all right. Gown's in the closet. Suit up."

He went out and shut the door. I put on the gown and stuffed my clothes in the closet. Sylvan came back after a while. I had crawled into bed and had the covers around my neck.

"You stay here tonight and tomorrow night," Sylvan said, "and we'll be through with this insurance foolishness. You do that, I can make the insurance work. I think. You come to my office for the remaining shots."

"We could have done that in the first place."

"Insurance, Hap. Keep that in mind. Just keep telling yourself. Insurance. I'm tired of having to sound like a broken record."

"Yes, Yoda."

"You look like shit."

"I got a cold. I picked it up here."

"I don't doubt that. I hate coming to the goddamn hospital to examine patients. They always give me something."

"You could let them die."

"Believe me, there's some I wish would."

"My God, Doc, isn't that against that Hippocratic oath?"

“Hippocrates never had to deal with some of the assholes I deal with. He did, he’d have shoved that oath up their ass.”

“Are you indicating any patient in particular?”

“Could be,” Sylvan said. “Could be.”

Sylvan got his stethoscope and checked me over. He used a tongue depressor on me. He clucked and clicked.

“Upper respiratory. Bit of a sore throat. I’ll have them check you out. Give you something for the symptoms.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“Hey, what else can I do for my favorite patient?”

“Let me see …”

“Hap, get out of this bed before day after tomorrow, I’ll kill you.”

“Any news on the squirrel’s head?”

“Other than the fact there are tire marks on it, not much. It’ll be a while before we hear. They got boxes of heads at the lab in Austin. We’ve had several rabid dogs and raccoons since you came into the office. Goddamn woods are full of them this year. It’s epidemic. I’m leavin’.”

“Will you tuck me in before you go?”

Sylvan grunted and left. I closed my eyes, was surprised to discover that so early into the night I was sleepy. I suppose it was the cold, or the medicine I had taken before I left the house. Don’t take cold medicine and drive. I wasn’t driving. I couldn’t quite figure out what it was I was doing. I drifted off.

I came awake and checked my watch about eleven P.M. I was surprised. I felt as if I had been asleep for only moments. I used the bed-lift button, raised my back, turned the TV on again.

The entire television industry hadn’t revamped itself during my nap. Everything that was on the standard channels sucked the big ole donkey dick. I tried for some of the specialty channels. No luck. Didn’t have any. You’d think if you had to eat the food in the hospital, least they could do was get cable.

I turned off the television and sat in the dark. About fifteen minutes later Brett showed up pushing a metal table on wheels. She turned on the light beside my bed. She lifted a brown paper bag off the metal table. She smiled at me. God, I liked that smile.

“Well,” she said. “I heard you ran off.”

“Ssssshhhhhh,” I said. “Doc Sylvan and I like to think of it as a bit of a sabbatical.”

“Since you’re back, I figured you’d be needing this.”

She opened the brown paper bag, took out the copy of *Boobs and Butts* Charlie had given me, laid it on the nightstand beside my bed.

“One thing I like to see in a man,” she said, “is attention to culture.”

“That’s not really mine.”

“It was in the nightstand drawer here.”

“Yes, but Charlie, a friend of mine, gave it to me.”

“I see. Well, just so you’ll stay occupied, I brought you a little something.”

She reached back into the bag. She brought out a *Playboy* magazine and a *Penthouse.* “I thought you might as well move up to the classics. Though I’m afraid both of these have words in them.”

“Actually, *Boobs and Butts* is very precise. Very modern. They have words. It’s just minimalist. They choose what they have to say wisely and place the words under the photographs.”

“Yes. I read a few of those words. Did you know they misspelled *pussy?* They used one *s*.”

“No. I’ll have to drop them a line.”

“Let’s check the vital signs.”

She did the general routine, pronounced me a bit feverish.

“Doctor’s notes say you have a bit of a cold,” she said.

“I think I have more than a bit. In fact, when you’re in the room I think I gain a couple of degrees on the thermometer.”

“Is that a compliment, Hap Collins?”

“I hope so.”

She took a water pitcher from the table, poured me a plastic cup of water, gave me a couple of pills. I swallowed them. She said. “Those have plenty of saltpeter in them.”

“That’s a good idea,” I said. “In fact, maybe you could arrange for me to have an ongoing prescription.”

“I might be back later,” Brett said. “You’re not asleep, perhaps I can sit by the bed and read you the captions from the *Boobs and Butts*.”

“I wouldn’t sit too close.”

“Sleep tight, Hap Collins.”

“I doubt it,” I said. “Wait. What’s your last name? I never caught it.”

“I never gave it. It’s Sawyer. Brett Sawyer. I’m in the phone book. I don’t have an answering machine. I don’t fuck on the first date, and some men find me forward.”

“I can’t imagine that.”

“That I don’t fuck on the first date?”

“That some men find you forward. Hey, I’m gonna be busy some when I get out of here, but you think after that I could give you a call?”

“I’ve done everything but stick my butt in your face,” she said, “so I’ll leave some of the work to you. I’m in the phone book.”

She gave me that dazzling smile and went away. I lay for a while hoping the cold medicine she had given me would put me to sleep quickly and that it really did have saltpeter in it.

It didn’t. I turned off the light and lay there in the dark and looked at my dick making a pup tent of the blanket. I experienced all sorts of unclean thoughts. I certainly hoped Jesus wasn’t in the room with me right then. In fact, I might even have shocked the devil.

After a while the pup tent folded, and I fell asleep. If Brett came back, I never knew it. For the first time in a long time, the hospital let me sleep through the night.

10

After lunch the next day, Charlie came by. He was wearing a poorly cut brown suit with a light brown shirt and a dark brown tie. He had on tennis shoes, white socks, and his porkpie hat.

“When do you get out of this pit?” he asked.

“Tomorrow morning.”

“Then maybe I ought not get you too excited before then.”

“My God, are you fixing to strip?”

“Be the best thing you’ve ever seen, but no. You got to tell Leonard to come in.”

“We been over that,” I said.

“No. You got to have him come in. Way it looks now, he’s in the clear.”

“How’s that?”

“Bikers at the bar. They all called Leonard a mean nigger and numerous names so foul that if I was to air them politically correct liberals would start to fall out the sky clutchin’ their hearts, and the fuckin’ super-conservatives would like it too much.”

“Get on with the meat.”

“They all agree he was too busy running from them, tryin’ to hide, to have killed McNee, who they call Horse.”

“Yeah, I know that.”

“That they call him Horse?”

“That he’s called Horse and that his real name is McNee. But what about Leonard?”

“Leonard wouldn’t have had time to whack anybody. It’s not like they’re tryin’ to give him an alibi, it’s just their stories give him one anyway.”

“You wouldn’t pull me, would you? This isn’t some kind of trick?"

"You tell Leonard to come in. He'll end up owin' a fine for shootin' up the place, assault charges, maybe. Might have to buy the Blazing Wheel a new sign. He'll have to answer a lot of questions, but in the end he won't have to hide out. We can say he was hiding from the bikers for fear of his life. Say he's been in the woods all the time … Has he?"

I didn't say anything.

"All right, have it your way," Charlie said. "But, way it looks, his head is off the chopping block."

"I'll be goddamn."

"Yeah, me too. You have him at the station no later than tomorrow morning after you get out of here."

"It'll be more like after lunch. Hospital has to process me out."

"So you knew where he was all along?"

"Let's just say I think I can get in touch with him."

"Yeah. Right. After lunch tomorrow. No later. Hear?"

It went pretty smooth, all things considered. Leonard didn't get off scot-free. A court date was set, and it was certain he'd be paying a fine, and he wasn't entirely out of the woods on being a suspect in the death of Horse Dick, but no one was really trying to push him hard in that direction. Not with the bikers actually giving him an alibi. He got processed and out of the cop shop almost quicker than I got out of the hospital, and he didn't have to ride in a wheelchair out to the curb like I did.

I've never really figured that. You go to the hospital, they check you out, no matter if you're skipping rope and climbing the walls, they got to take you out in a wheelchair. It's one of life's little mysteries, like UFOs and the Loch Ness monster.

The morning after Leonard was set free it was hot and bright, but there was a cool wind with it. We met at his house to clean up the mess there, but finally said to hell with it.

I drove out to my house and he followed in the rented Chevy he was driving. We got cane poles and some fishing goods, walked through the woods to where the creek widened, sat there fishing for perch.

“I just couldn’t face that mess today,” Leonard said. “Besides, it makes me think about Raul.”

“The mess?”

“No. The house, stupid.”

“Any idea about the mess?” I asked.

“I figure it was the bikers. They found out where I lived, went looking for me, didn’t find me, trashed the place. That fits in with you finding the motorcycle tire prints.”

“Yeah, but I don’t know,” I said. “The bikers have been pretty candid about stuff. They didn’t admit to that.”

“They’ve only been candid when they could say what an asshole I was. And you know what, they’re right.”

“I never doubted that. Thing is, that mess bothers me. I think you ought to seriously watch your ass for a while. Those footprints out there don’t belong to the tooth fairy.”

“Yeah, all right,” Leonard said, but he didn’t sound too sincere. “You think Raul’s alive?”

“I don’t know. Haven’t a clue. I got to say this. Seems to me he’d have shown up by now. I’m sure you’re aware with you in the clear he’s considered the prime suspect in the murder of Horse.”

“I figured as much. They’re just replacing me with him. You know I can’t let that stand. Raul couldn’t murder anyone …. Shit, Hap. I love that kid. He’s a dip, but I love him.”

We caught a couple of perch, put them in a can of water, sat and talked. Leonard told me about Raul, and how things had gone sour, and how the kid was wilder than he’d realized. It was a pretty standard story. I’d heard it before, but it had been men talking about their women. Love was love, however, and the problems didn’t seem to change much, even if the lover was of the same sex, except there was a lot more fucking. Gay or not, men are men, and men seriously love to fuck, and you can write that down in your little black book, tear out the page, crumple it up, and smoke it.

When Leonard finished telling me his woes, I told him about Brett. Then we talked about Hanson, and how we had to go see him and watch him do his coma.

Next Leonard told me how he had gotten a tick on his balls while staying in the woods. He said he still had it. He couldn't get it off.

"It's in a hard-for-me-to-reach place," he said. "Maybe you could pull it off for me."

"Not on your life. I'm a pretty good shot, though. I could shoot it off."

"I'm serious here. This is a problem."

"Use a match. You light it, blow it out, then stick the hot end against the tick's butt, and he'll back out."

"You've done this?"

"No, but I've heard about it."

"You've had ticks on your nuts?"

"Yep."

"But you didn't try this method?"

"Nope."

"Why didn't you?

"Afraid I'd burn my balls."

"Some help you are. I think you just don't want to be handlin' no queer's balls."

"I don't want to be handling anybody's balls but my own."

"Yeah, well, you'll be sorry, I get that tick disease. You'll wish you'd pinched that tick off."

"I don't think so."

"Way this sonofabitch is swellin' up, I'm gonna have to put a camp chair beside the bed so my balls and the tick got a place to sleep."

"Hey, you want, I'll get your balls and the tick a blanket and a fluffy pillow, but I'm not pulling nothing off your balls."

As usual, the conversation degenerated from there, finally drifted, and we just sat there silently and fished. The wind stopped and turned hard and hot and the air was difficult to breathe, but still we sat, and finally the heat began to fade, and it was cool again, without the wind, and the air was fresh and the brightness of the day fell down amongst the trees, and the sky turned purple, then black, and the stars came out, big and bright and splendid.

We walked home through the dark with our gear, a can of perch and a flashlight, arrived at my house in time to clean the fish by porch light, fry them up, and have a good supper.

After supper we watched a little TV. Then Leonard left early. I promised to come over the next morning and help him clean. He drove off and I watched something on TV I wasn't really paying attention to for about an hour, then cut it off, went to bed, and read a science fiction novel for a while.

Next morning, early, I got up and drove to town and bought some sausage and biscuits at the drive-through of a fast-food joint, went over to Leonard's place.

When he let me in, the house smelled of coffee, and most of the living room had been picked up, and the kitchen porcelain was shiny and the kitchen floor in front of the refrigerator was bright and damp from a recent mopping.

"You've been busy," I said.

"Yeah," Leonard said. "Couldn't sleep last night. Stayed up cleaning. Come in the kitchen, just step careful. Floor's still damp."

I did that. Put the sack on the table, pulled up a chair. I said, "You pour us some coffee, and I'll give you a sausage and biscuit."

"That's a good-enough deal," Leonard said. "You know what's odd? I discovered something missing."

"Oh?"

"Videotapes. The blank ones, and the ones with movies on them. They're all gone."

"You mean someone broke into the house and stole movies?"

"Looks that way," Leonard said. "I got to figuring, and thought, well, the *Gilligan* tapes are gone, so it could have been Raul. Maybe he's the one wrecked the house. You know, pissed at me. Maybe thinks I did Horse Dick in. So he comes here, throws stuff around, and takes his *Gilligan* tapes. But the thing is, why would he take *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre, The Outlaw Josey Wales*, and a bunch of others?"

"They're good movies?"

"He didn't think so. Anything that had gunfire in it he was against. I'm not sayin' my tastes run to *Battleship Potemkin*, but all of Raul's taste was in his mouth, and besides for my dick, which spent a goodly amount of time in his mouth, I don't think he knew good taste."

"Maybe he stole them because you liked them? A kind of revenge."

"I thought of that," Leonard said. "But why did he steal the blank videotapes?"

"So he could tape stuff on them."

"All right. All that works, but why just the videotapes? There's music CDs here he liked, and he didn't take those. He didn't take anything else I think would have interested him. And this mess doesn't strike me as vandalism. There's a lot of things could have been broken for fun, but weren't. Most of the stuff is just tossed around. What's broken seems to have been the result of a search. It wasn't a vandal. I think someone was looking for something, and that doesn't fit in with Raul. He knew where everything was, so why would he throw stuff around?"

"He was mad at you."

"Could be. But, I don't think he took the videos at all."

"Someone else took the *Gilligan* tapes?"

"That's my guess."

"Man, a crime like that, it shows you what the world is coming to. Fucking crooks are like bottom feeders now. Who the fuck in their right mind would want a tape of *Gilligan's Island*, let alone the whole series?"

"Bob Denver?"

"Shit. Don't you know he gets tired of wearing that stupid sailor hat and trying to look perky?"

"You think the series waddled in shit, you got to see the reunion movie," Leonard said. "Raul made me watch it. And man, that one is really deadly. It sort of numbs you, you know, like a kind of nerve gas. I was weak for two days."

“You just hit on the secret,” I said. “It was stolen by the State Department to use as a means of covert warfare.”

“Way I figure it,” Leonard said, “them folks already got a complete set of *Gilligan.* It goes with their *Three’s Company* collection. It’s what they watch when they’re supposed to be solving the nation’s problems.”

We worked on the house until early afternoon, had some sandwiches, decided we ought to drive into town and buy a few cleaning supplies. We went in my truck. On the way back to Leonard’s house, he said, “This Old Pine Road, where Horse Dick got it. Could we drive over there?”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Guess I’d like to see the spot where this guy they thought I killed bought it.”

“I don’t know that’s such a good idea,” I said.

“Come on, Hap.”

I didn’t much care for it, but we drove out to Old Pine Road, which isn’t much of a road, really. It’s narrow and winds through a heavily wooded area and links up with a highway that leads to Lufkin. It’s shady because of the trees, and not too heavily traveled.

We drove along, finally saw some tire tracks burned into the road, heading through the underbrush and into a large oak tree. Beyond the oak the ground was covered in a deep carpet of kudzu vines and wildflowers, and the hill rolled down steep and turned level as it met the woods.

We pulled to the side of the road, got out and looked around. It was a bright, hot day, and everything I looked at seemed to be viewed through a piece of transparent, lemon-colored rock candy. The air was full of pollen. Every time I took a breath it was like sniffing flour. Within minutes my throat was scratchy and my nose was plugged. It didn’t help my cold much.

We looked at the oak, could see where the bike struck it. It was a damn good strike. A chunk had been taken out of the tree as if with an axe.

“If the shotgun hadn’t killed him,” Leonard said, “you can bet this tree wouldn't have done him any good."

"Without the shotgun, he wouldn't have hit the tree," I said. "Now you've seen it. Make you feel any better?"

"No. I don't really know why I wanted to see it."

We stood under the oak out of the sunlight while Leonard dealt with his thoughts, stood there hugging the shade. Not that it helped. It was still hot and the pollen was thick.

"You know," Leonard said, "I bet I could put a weenie on a stick, poke it out from under this shade, and the sun would cook it .... What's that?"

Leonard was turned away from the road, looking down the hill, toward the woods. I looked and saw a scattering of mosquitoes buzzing at the edge of the woods where shadow gave way to light. The insects rolled and rose and dropped like a tiny black cloud amongst the trees. I could imagine them looking up at us, thinking, *Come on down and we'll strip your bones, for we are the piranha of the air.*

It was the mosquitoes I thought Leonard was talking about, but then I followed his pointing finger and saw what he saw. It lay partially buried in the vines near the woods. It was silver, and the sunlight bounced off of it as if it were a mirror. The reflected light was painful to view and caused me to squint my eyes.

"I don't know what it is," I said.

"Could be a piece off the motorcycle," Leonard said.

"Cops looked the place over," I said.

"Don't forget, it's the LaBorde cops we're talking about. Charlie, excluded, of course. I bet they didn't even go down the hill. At least not all the way. Especially the fat ones. They went down too far, they wouldn't have been able to get back up."

"What if it is part of the motorcycle?" I said. "So what?"

"It could lead to the solving of the case."

"What, a fender? The handlebars?"

"You need to read some Agatha Christie, man."

"Why? Am I being punished?"

"You read her, you'll find nothing is too small. Let's go down and see what it is."

"It's a steep hill."

"I bet that's exactly what the fat cops said."

"They were right."

"We're manly men. We can do it."

"Will you carry me?"

"Nope."

We went down the hill, our ankles clutched by kudzu and all manner of undergrowth, and when we were within twenty feet of it I thought it was a huge wad of aluminum foil. Then I saw that what I thought were the natural crumples of a wad of foil were not crumples, but dents, and it wasn't foil, it was a motorcycle helmet. I could see part of the visor, and it was cracked, and I could see something behind the visor, and Leonard, who was slightly ahead of me, could see it too because he stopped walking, made a kind of startled move and let his breath out slowly.

"Shit," he said. "Goddamn shit."

I went on past where he was standing, got closer. There was a head in the helmet, and there was a body attached to the head, and the body was twisted down into the vines. I couldn't see the body from atop the hill, just a piece of the helmet, but I could see all of it easily from this angle, and the legs and arms looked as if they were nothing more than the limbs of a scarecrow, stuffed with straw, twisted into the kudzu.

I squatted down and looked at the face inside the helmet. The head was turned in there too far and was covered in what looked like molasses but wasn't. There were ants and maggots on the part of the face I could see. The wind had changed and the smell of death rode on it and blew into my nostrils and defeated the plugs of pollen. It was all I could do not to get sick.

I got up and turned Leonard by grabbing him by the elbow and started us up the hill.

"It was Raul, wasn't it?" Leonard said.

"Yep."

11

We made an anonymous call to the police department and they came and got the body, and next day they made a big deal out of it in the papers, about how the cops had done this great detective work.

There was stuff about the murder of Horse Dick, though he wasn't called that. There was no mention of the fact Raul was found just down the hill from where Horse bought it. But it was pretty clear, if you read between the lines, that Raul had been on the back of the bike.

It wasn't clear how Horse, between collecting knots from Leonard, ended up with Raul and the two of them had gone riding. But it appeared when Horse got his head blown off, the bike had gone into a tree, and so had Raul, and Raul had hit the tree so hard it had knocked him willy-nilly down the hill and into the vines.

That was pretty much the sum of all that was known.

Two days later Raul's parents came from Houston and had him buried in a little graveyard out in the country. It was a quiet shady place with Civil War veterans, black folks, and paupers, and for some reason they decided not to haul him home but to have him planted there.

Leonard wasn't invited to the funeral or the burying, but he went to the burial anyway. The graveyard was on one side of a blacktop road, and there was a cluster of oaks on the other side. We parked beneath them, sat on the hood of the rented Chevy, and watched the service.

We didn't have on black. We didn't have on ties. The coffin was bronze. The family was weeping.

The whole thing was over in short time, then the cars filed out. One of the people attending the funeral stood by the fence for a while, started across the road toward us. He was dressed in black, all neat. At first he was hard to recognize without his Hawaiian shirt, cheap suit, and porkpie hat.

“Thought you might be here,” he said to Leonard.

“Yeah,” Leonard said.

“I’m sorry,” Charlie said. “You should have been invited.”

“Family don’t like queers,” Leonard said. “Far as they were concerned, Raul wasn’t queer. He was just a little confused. Any day now he’d quit suckin’ dicks and start dive-bombing pussy.”

“Easy, Leonard,” I said.

“Yeah,” Leonard said. “Easy.”

Charlie climbed onto the Chevy’s hood, sat by Leonard. “I wasn’t invited either. Came anyway. Thought whoever did it might show up. You know, like in the movies. Returning to the scene of the crime.”

“You don’t mean me, do you?” Leonard said.

“No,” Charlie said.

“Well, you sure don’t mean me,” I said.

“No,” he said. “Actually, I came ’cause I thought I might see you two. Raul’s body was on Old Pine Road, just down the hill from where Horse Dick bought it. Down there all the time.”

“So we heard,” Leonard said.

“Shits went out there to investigate the site didn’t do much of a job,” Charlie said.

“Boy, that surprises me,” Leonard said. “A dead queer, I thought everybody would be in a hurry.”

“It ain’t one dead queer,” Charlie said. “It’s two.”

“All right,” Leonard said. “Two dead queers.”

“Could it be one of you boys called in about the body?” Charlie asked.

“Could be,” I said.

“Thought so. You boys are too nosey to let something lay.”

“Hey, we did better than you guys,” I said.

“That’s what gets my goat,” Charlie said. “Want a little tidbit, boys?”

“Sure,” I said.

“The two dead queers,” Charlie said. “One of them was a cop.”

We both stared at Charlie. I said, “Well, since it wasn’t Raul, that leaves Horse.”

“See,” Charlie said, “your powers of deduction. Phenomenal.”

“Don’t fuck around here,” Leonard said. “I’m not in the mood. Horse Dick was a cop?”

“Yep,” Charlie said. He reached inside his suit coat, brought out a flattened pack of cigarettes. He put one in his mouth, got out a lighter, and lit it. He said, “He was working undercover.”

“Under Raul’s covers,” Leonard said.

“He was on special assignment,” Charlie said. “Didn’t know it till the other day. It wasn’t part of my business. This was something the chief set up.”

“The chief set up stuff with a gay cop?” I said.

“Didn’t know he was gay,” Charlie said. “Chief knew, guy wouldn’t have been a cop, let alone on assignment. I’d seen the guy around, but he wasn’t part of my action. I didn’t connect the death of the biker with the cop’s death, not until it got to be more common knowledge. It was slow to leak around the department. Chief thought it made him look like an idiot, so he wasn’t blowin’ any trumpets.”

“I’ll be a sonofabitch,” I said.

“Guys are running a lot of drugs through the Blazing Wheel,” Charlie said. “So Chief got Horse … McNee … and that’s another alias. His real name is Bill Jenkins. Anyway, Chief got him to go undercover. Horse got involved with Raul, then he and Raul got dead.”

“You think it had something to do with Horse being a cop, or being gay?” I said.

“Don’t know,” Charlie said, shaking his head as he blew out smoke. “Maybe both. Maybe neither. Whatever, I wanted y’all to know, ’cause truth of the matter is this one may not get the attention it deserves. Cop gets killed in the line of duty, we’re all over it. But, like you said, Leonard, couple of fags, Chief being like he is, seeing this as some reflection on the department and himself … It could fall between the cracks. Might already be there. I maybe can't do what ought to be done. Get what I'm sayin'?"

"Yeah," Leonard said. "We get what you're sayin'."

"I didn't really know Raul that much," Charlie said. "I hate he's dead, though. I mean, you liked him."

"Good enough," Leonard said.

Charlie finished his smoke, climbed off the hood. "See you boys later."

Charlie went down to his car and drove away.

We sat there for a while watching the grave digger with his backhoe. He threw the dirt in fast and got things tidy, drove the backhoe through a large gate on the other side of the graveyard, wheeled it onto a trailer hooked to a truck. He fastened the backhoe down. He locked the gate up. He drove the trailer and the backhoe away.

Two men took down the striped funeral tent and placed the flowers and wreaths the bereaved had ordered onto and around the grave. They loaded up and got out of there.

We walked down to the graveyard, went through the gate. Walked past gravestones. I read some of them. Civil War dates. One worn stone bore the faded words BELOVED SLAVE AND SERVANT chiseled on it, which I thought was kind of ironic.

One said JAKE REMINGTON, adding, NO RELATION TO THE ARTIST OR THE GUN MANUFACTOR OF THE SAME LAST NAME. There was a Jane Skipforth, who died in the early 1900s, FROM COMPLICATIONS WITH MEN. A Bill Smith, who died in World War I. HIS PLANE WENT DOWN, BUT HIS SPIRIT SOARS. A Frank Jerbovavitch, who got old and died. A Willie, no dates, just Willie. A Fred Russel, just dates. No mention of his relationship to the famous western artist of the same last name.

And so it went. But it really didn't matter what was said or wasn't. Now they were all brothers and sisters under the dirt.

Leonard stood at Raul's grave, said, "Somehow, it don't mean nothin', a grave. Just like when my uncle got buried. He's dead, and that's all there is to it."

Leonard kicked some dirt onto the grave and we left.

12

When we got back to Leonard's house we drank some coffee and chatted a bit, but it wasn't a lively sort of chat.

After a while, I took a hint, told Leonard I was going home, and I'd call him the next day. He almost helped me to the door. He stood on the porch as I was getting in my pickup.

"Hap," he said, "ain't no one I'd rather have around than you. But sometimes I don't want no one around."

"I understand."

"This is one of those times."

"No problem."

I drove home, wheeled by Leonard's old house, the one down the road from me, gave it a longing once-over. It was boarded up and graying, and the old television antenna shooting up the side of the house, spreading out on top of the roof, had been ravaged by wind. It looked like some kind of giant alien hand gone to rot, leaving only bones. Paint flaked like psoriasis off the porch and the front door. The grass was tall and nodding in the wind.

I wished Leonard would move away from his uncle's house and come home. The place wasn't much, but I liked him down the road from me. We had had some good times out here, and maybe we'd never have them again. Life was starting to get in the way.

I was pretty wired when I got home, so I tried a shower, but that didn't help. I sat around for a while, trying to read, trying to watch television, trying to listen to music. None of this did me any good.

The day wore on. I got to thinking about Brett. I looked at my watch. It was late afternoon, but she wouldn't have to go to work until late. I dialed her number. She answered on the third ring.

"Honey, I was beginning to think I was going to have to part my hair on the other side," she said.

"Come again?"

"I thought I was losing my touch."

"Do you practice it much?"

"Actually, I don't. And I'm not normally such a floozy, but I haven't met anyone that's interested me in ages."

"That's flattering. What interested you in me?"

"I just love that little bald spot."

"I don't think you mean that."

"You know, you're right. I don't." Brett laughed. The laugh was as nice as her smile. "I don't know. Not really. There's just something about you. You remind me of a big puppy dog. I think that's it."

"Woof, woof," I said.

"How about taking me to dinner? I haven't eaten yet, and I've got to go to work before long. I've had one of those days where all I've had to eat is coffee."

"Well, I've had one of those days too. Maybe we can cheer each other up."

"Forty-five minutes," she said.

We went to an expensive place called the West Coast. The place looks better than the food tastes, though the food isn't bad. The West Coast is on a hill and has a large advertising sign out front that lists the specials of the week, most of the specials being some kind of seafood or steak. The restaurant itself is made of great slabs of lumber and vast expanses of glass. It has well-manicured bushes and lots of parking places. For some reason, people dress up when they go there.

I dressed up a little myself. Dark slacks, dark blue sport jacket with a light blue shirt. I wiped off my shoes with a wash rag until they almost looked as if they had been polished. I had a tie in my coat pocket that I decided not to wear. It was a nice tie. Maybe later I could get it out and show it to Brett, just to give her some idea of what I might have looked like had I worn it.

When I picked up Brett, I wished I had on the tie. She looked nice. She had on a white blouse with a blue design on it, a blue skirt, dark blue shoes, and dark hose. Her makeup was spare and her hair was as lustrous as a goddess's. The blouse revealed the tops of her breasts and she smelled so good I thought I might have to pull over to the side of the road and cry for a while.

"I hope I look all right," she said. "I started to just shit in the face of all feminists tonight and wear an all-purpose deluxe tight-as-sin polyester screw-me-to-death outfit and no panties. I wear that, when I walk it looks like my thangamajig is shellin' a walnut."

All I could respond with was, "I'm sure that would have been very nice too."

"Well, this will have to do. I didn't want you to spring a leak on our first date."

"It's fine," I said. "Looks great."

"I hope so," she said. "Actually, it's kind of painful. I got on one of those bras hikes your titties up. They aren't as form-fitting as the goddamn box says they are. I feel like I got a truck jack under each one of 'em."

We made romantic small talk like that on the way over, and once inside and seated at our table, a guy dressed in a white dinner jacket stood up at an organ and played and sang in a manner so awful I thought for a moment he was a comedian. When I realized he wasn't, I said, "I'm sorry. I could have taken you to Burger King and we could have listened to Fats Domino on the jukebox. This clown wasn't here last time I came."

"That must have been Christmas Eve 1984, because I been here a lot and he's been here since I've been coming, and he's never been able to carry a note in a sealed Tupperware container. He can do a damn good 'Pop Goes the Weasel,' though, and come Christmas he has a medley that ends with 'Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer' that'll break your goddamn heart."

I smiled at her. "You are definitely different, Brett."

"Not really," she said. "I just put up a bold front. I'm really a chicken shit. This dating business is confusing to me. I don't know if I want a real relationship anymore or a quick fuck. What about you?"

“I’d really hate to choose.”

“I’ll tell you a secret too. I don’t come on to every man like I did you.”

“You keep telling me that.”

“Do I?”

“Yep.”

“Well, I really do like you. If you had money I’d like you even more.”

“I like you too, but I don’t have money.”

“I didn’t think you did. You don’t look like you got more than a couple dimes to rub together.”

“Don’t worry. I can pay for the meal.”

She smiled again. Damn, I liked that smile.

“I don’t mind you don’t have money,” she said, and she reached out and placed her hand on top of mine. “I just said it would be convenient you had it. As for you liking me too, that’s good, but men like women right off if they look a certain way. And there’s some men, they go long enough and it’s late enough and they’re drunk enough, and some of them don’t even need the drink …. Well, they’d fuck a three-hundred-pound cross-eyed sow in a John Deere cap.”

“You got to be proud of those old boys,” I said. “To think appearance doesn’t matter. That’s very modern, don’t you think?”

“What I think is I may not be a *Playboy* model, but I been around enough to know I look better than a tie rack. Figure that won’t last much longer at my age, so I better use it while I got it.”

“I may let my biology bark now and then,” I said, “but I make my final judgments with my heart, not my eyes. And just for the record, on the visual part, you’re a long way off from having ties hung on you. But that’s not the long and the short of it for me. How you look, I mean. I grew up in the sixties. I’m for equal rights and I’m for women. I even think of myself as a supporter of feminism as long as it doesn’t come across as stupid and strident as extreme machoism …. Is that a word?”

“Who cares? I get your drift.”

“All right. Whatever, strident on either side wears me out. Like

I said, my biology barks now and then, but when it comes down to it, I like to think I'm not the sort of guy can be pulled around by the ying-yang. I like to believe I'm made of sterner stuff than that."

"I grew up in the sixties too," Brett said, "but I hope there's at least a drop of male chauvinist pig in you, or I've spent too much time brushin' my hair. They still use that term, don't they? 'Male chauvinist pig'?"

"I'm not sure," I said.

"Men and women, biology and the goddamn federal budget," Brett said. "All a mess, isn't it?" I agreed it was.

Brett said, "If you're a woman and you like sex, you're a whore. If you don't like it, then you're frigid. If you use what charms you have to get sex, then the feminists hate you, and if you don't want to marry every goddamn hard dick gives you a poke, then the men think you're a ball breaker, or you're back to number one again. You're a whore."

"It is confusing," I said.

"And you know what?" Brett said. "I think you could be pulled around by your dick a little bit, I wanted to pull it."

"You're right," I said. "I take all that bullshit back. Start pulling."

A well-dressed waiter came by then. A good-looking college kid about nineteen. He was very polite and acted as if he couldn't wait to give us menus, take our order, and be our food slave for the next hour or so. I caught him peeking at Brett's titties, but I thought it might be ruder to ask him to stop than to ignore him. Besides, I couldn't actually blame him. It's easy to talk a line of shit about how looks don't matter, and they shouldn't, and as you mature they don't matter as much, but the eyeball is connected to the crotch in men, and that is the sad way of the world, and no matter how many volumes are written on political correctness, the one-eyed snake that lives between the legs of men will not read and strives only for satisfaction.

The waiter took our drink order and went away. While I studied the menu, I found myself feeling guilty. I was having fun, about to eat a good meal, sitting there with a good-looking date, and Leonard was sitting at home with a can of tuna fish, a handful of bad TV stations, and no vanilla cookies.

Well, he could always go down to Burger King.

When the waiter came back with our drinks we ordered a dozen oysters, steaks, and salads. The oysters came and Brett ate hers with lots of lemon and sauce, and I ate mine with just the lemon. The salad came and it was a good salad, or as good as salads get in Texas. A Texan's idea of a salad is a few bananas and strawberries inside a mold of lime Jell-O.

The baked potatoes had all the fixings. Cheese, sour cream, butter, bacon bits. The steaks weren't bad either, both of them cooked medium rare. I drank a nonalcoholic beer, and Brett had another mixed drink. And if I could remember the roster of all the songs that talentless sonofabitch in the dinner jacket sang, I'd go to my grave a happy man.

As we ate we blocked out the singer's frantic organ playing and tired voice and talked about ourselves. My side of the story was pretty easy to tell. It was mostly about bad jobs, growing up, this and that, but I left out the part about being an ex-con because I was a draft re-sister; that would come later when we knew each other better.

Brett told me she had been raised in Gilmer, Texas, had been a cheerleader and later a majorette, and that she'd once had a fantasy she might like to fuck the football team. But the fantasy wore off before she got the opportunity, and in the long run, after knowing a few of them, she decided the knob on the end of her baton was about as stimulating. Real lady talk.

"When I was eighteen," she said, "even without the football team, I was a walkin' sperm bank. A psychologist will tell you it's because there was something wrong with me, and who am I to argue. They'll tell you my parents beat me or fucked me or doodled with my asshole while I slept, or a next-door neighbor liked to pay me nickels and ice cream to have me strip naked and sit on his coffee table while he beat off to violent Bugs Bunny cartoons. And I'm sure it happens, but I had a good home life and was well loved and was popular in school, went to church, got baptized, and even attended charm school."

"I take it you didn't get a diploma from charm school."

The great smile again. "Actually, I did, smart ass. But as I was sayin', ain't none of that bullshit applies to me. I do have a sneakin' suspicion what my problem was and is, however."

"What?" I asked.

"I got on the pill when I was sixteen because I think I just simply and dearly loved to fuck. I still do. Though I've got morals now."

"You don't do it on the first date."

"That's it. That's the moral. And I make the man wear a rubber. But I suppose that's nothing to do with morals. You could call that disease control. Has to be, because I hate those goddamn rubbers."

"So do men. Go on, tell me more."

Brett told me she had a twenty-seven-year old son named Jimmy who lived in Austin and was into Taoist philosophy and the martial art of aikido. Jimmy believed the source of his energy came up from the center of the earth and moved through his colon and all around inside of him. He had lots of internal energy. What the Japanese call ki power. Three people couldn't lift Jimmy off the ground because of his ki. He could hold his arm out and you could swing on it. For all this internal energy, however, he lacked common sense and didn't have a bank account. He wrote to Brett at least twice a month for money, and last time she heard he was in love with a former cocaine addict turned Christian Scientist who was healing an unexplained open wound on her leg—more of a running sore, actually—with prayer. Jimmy said he was certain in time his girlfriend could cure it right up. For the time being, however, she had also consented to the use of gauze, peroxide, and adhesive tape, though this was not common knowledge she shared with her church.

Brett had a young daughter named Tillie, who lived in Denver. She said the last letter she got from Till, as Brett called her, was encouraging. Till said her pimp didn't beat her as much these days and most of her old injuries had gone away, though she did sport a small white scar over her right eye, and on cold days she walked with a limp. She had bought a new spitz puppy she named Milo, but her pimp didn't like it and shot it and she was kind of happy about that now because she didn't really need a dog in a small apartment where she had to entertain men.

The apartment, Brett told me, was a room over an all-night garage, and most of her customers were brought there by taxi after reading her name off a Fina station's shit-house wall. The pimp lived uptown in a condo. Brett finished by saying, "Guess I can't be too hard on Tillie, she's just doin' for money what I used to do for free, though admittedly I didn't advertise in the Fina station toilet."

"I always felt bad about not having kids," I said. "But I'm feeling better now."

"I must admit, I've come to understand why certain animals eat their young," Brett said. "But I wouldn't have missed them growin' up. I love them. The problem was their father was an asshole and I was too young to raise babies. It's our fault they both turned out to be worthless pieces of shit. I had the first one when I was sixteen. The second one when I was eighteen. I did the best I could but I was a kid myself. Earl didn't do a goddamn thing except suck the end of a bottle and hump truck-stop waitresses. After we were married for a while, Earl decided he liked to toss me over the TV set on Friday nights, bounce me around the bedroom, punch me, then butt-fuck me as a little treat when his arms got tired. This went on longer than I like to admit. I kept thinking I could change him."

"I'm sorry to hear it."

"That's all right," Brett said. "Nineteen eighty-five I finally got tired of it. I hit him in the head with a shovel while he was digging for fishing worms in the backyard. I seen him out in the yard digging, and just the night before he'd given me one of them beatings I was tellin' you about, and he put a beer bottle up my ass and poured the beer into me, and I was not in a cheery mood about it. Anyway, I seen him out there, so I made my plans. I hit him in the head with that shovel and I'd brought some lighter fluid and kitchen matches with me, and after I hit him I set him on fire. You might call it premeditated. You may have seen something about it back then. It made all the papers and TV. I burned the back of my hand a little when I was doing it, but Earl got the worst of it. He's in some kind of home now in Houston, a ward of the state, and he can't do things for himself and has trouble with simple math problems. Stuff like, if you have two apples and you eat one, how many are left?"

"Jesus, Brett. Did you do some time?"

"Judge let me off. There was plenty of evidence Earl had it coming. I dressed nice that day, best hot pants I had—you remember hot pants, don't you? Well, I wore pink hot pants and a tight top, and as the judge was a known lecher, he let me off on a kind of self-defense thing. Earl's relatives tried to sue me, came back on me for every kind of thing there was for about six months, but after a while they got to feelin' good about Earl being gone too. He was always borrowin' money from 'em and he was known to conk the sisters now and then, and I figure he'd been fuckin' the youngest one, 'cause she had a kinda twitch to her eye and didn't like men much. Earl's mama thought Earl was a lot like her husband, Earl's daddy, who used to beat her. Her husband, Earl Senior, died of a heart attack one morning in a moment of fury over runny breakfast eggs. So, his family kinda got to respect me a little, 'cause down deep they didn't like that sonofabitch Earl Junior neither. I'm not sayin' they exactly thanked me for settin' Earl's head on fire and bangin' his brain around, but they began to feel fortunate he didn't have anything upstairs left to use for devious means. Instead, he was tryin' not to mess himself too often and learn not to lick his fingers when he got single square breakthrough. That's kind of his lifetime career now. Keepin' shit off his fingers."

"Always an important point," I said.

"His family sent me a Christmas card for a few years after I moved away," Brett said. "All this happened over in Gilmer, and I can't say I've missed the place much or looked back, though I do miss the Yamboree now and then. You know, the big sweet tater celebration they have over there every year?"

"I've been to it."

"What kills me is the main float they make. It's always this big yam, or sweet tater, but it looks like this big brown turd. I rode on it back when I was in high school. I was the Yamboree Queen one year. I remember I drank some Boone's Farm apple wine and rode on that turd down Main Street waving at people, got so goddamn tickled I nearly fell off. People thought I was just hysterically happy that I was that year's turd queen. That's back when I first was datin' Earl. He wasn't so bad then, and I've got some good memories, but the best one is the last one, when Earl was running across the yard with his head on fire, just before the neighbor tripped him and put out the blaze with a water hose."

"Did he beat the flames out with the hose, or did he have the water on?"

Brett laughed. "He had the water on. When I think about that day I get a kind of warm feelin' inside. Not as warm as Earl's head got. But warm."

"I don't suppose any of your other relationships have ended in tragedy?"

"Don't worry. Earl's the only one I ever set on fire, and I haven't taken up a shovel since, unless it was to plant flowers. It was just one of them things. Enough was enough. I burned up his car too. I was so goddamn angry after he got his head fire put out, I pulled his car into the drive, poured gasoline on it, and set it ablaze. I did that 'cause he treated that car better than me."

"You certainly had a big day that day."

"You betcha," Brett said. "And you know what? I got a friend goin' through that shit right now. You met Ella, didn't you?"

"She's a nurse too?"

"That's the one," she said. "She told me she talked to you. Her husband beats her regular, and she won't leave. I've tried to get her to leave, but she won't, and she ain't for settin' his head on fire."

"Actually, that's for the best, Brett."

"I reckon, but she ought to do somethin'."

"I wish her luck," I said.

"Luck ain't gonna have a goddamn thing to do with it," Brett said.

After dinner I drove Brett back to her place and she made coffee, then dressed for work. While she dressed I sat on the sofa and drank my coffee and looked around the living room. It was neat and simple. She had a row of books, mostly nursing text books and a few bestsellers. A few knickknacks. No shovels or lighter fluid.

There were photographs of her two kids. They were probably in their teens in the photos. Handsome kids. The girl looked as if she were going to grow up to resemble her mother. Probably did by now. Except for the scar and the limp. The boy was nice-looking. Probably wowed a lot of women in the aikido class during his discussions of Taoism. I wondered what he could do with a left jab to the nose, a swift kick to the gonads.

Brett came out wearing her nurse duds. “I’m sorry I had to deflate my titties,” she said, “but duty calls.”

“That’s all right. Would you like me to run you to work?”

“No. I got to come home sometime, and I don’t want to be dependent on you. I had a good time, really. I hope you did, even if you didn’t get any nookie.”

“Listen, Brett. You don’t need to keep that up. I like sex. Really. But I like you too. I want to know you better. I’d prefer not to spend a lot of time with you around shovels and lighter fluid, but I do want to know you better. You don’t have to come on so strong.”

“I guess you’re right. But I got to tell you, sweetie, when you been fending for yourself long as I have, you use ever’ tool you got in your toolbox. I guess I bring out the monkey wrench sometimes when a pair of pliers would do.”

“It’s all right,” I said. “I’ll see you again if you’ll let me.”

“You bet. And soon.”

“One thing,” I said. “You got any photos of you riding that turd in the Yamboree?”

“Somewhere. Next time we get together I’ll let you see ’em. I even got one of me when I was a baby on a fake bearskin rug I’ll show you.”

“Great. Good night, then.”

“Wait,” she said. “Come here.”

I went to her and she started to kiss me. I said, “I’m on the tail end of a cold.”

“I’ve had colds before,” she said. We kissed. It was very nice. I kissed her again.

“I got to go,” she said.

We went out and she locked the house and we kissed again and I walked her out to her car. She drove away in her Ford and I got in my truck and left her place tasting the lingering sweetness of her on my lips and tongue.

13

When I got home Leonard's rented Chevy was in the front yard and I could see the glow of the TV through the windows. Inside, he was sitting in my recliner watching a true-crime show. His face was drawn and his skin looked gray. There was a Jiffy bag package by the chair.

I said, "I thought you wanted to be alone?"

"I did," Leonard said. "But when I got alone, I decided I didn't want to be alone. Where you been?"

I told him.

"Glad to hear it. I thought you'd given up dating."

"So did I," I said.

"How'd it go?"

"Good. I think."

Leonard grew silent. I could tell something was wrong, that he was trying to maintain a front of control, so I didn't throw off his game plan. I let him lead. Eventually, he said, "I have something I'd like to tell you, something I'd like to show you."

I sat down on the couch and waited. Leonard had his pipe with him, the one he smokes now and then. He packed it carefully because his hands were shaking. He lit it and puffed. He used the remote to turn off the television.

He said, "So I'm sittin' home alone, thinking, always a dangerous thing for me, and I ask myself, this videotape business, it's obvious someone is looking for something, and it's on video. What could it be?"

"And the answer is?"

"I didn't come up with anything. I asked myself another question. Why would they come to my place to look for the video? That one seemed obvious."

"Raul," I said. "We've determined that possibility already."

“That’s right. Raul got a video belongs to someone else, and whoever it belongs to, they go looking for it.”

“So why didn’t they check Horse Dick’s place instead of yours?”

“I thought of that. I called Charlie and said, ‘You know my place was trashed because someone was looking for something. What about Horse Dick’s joint?’ Charlie tells me, yeah, it was wrecked. I tell him about my videos missin’, and we get to talkin’, and he says he was the one inspected Horse’s place and didn’t remember seeing any videotapes there. Didn’t think about it at the time. Wasn’t looking for any. But he recalled a VCR, and now that he thought about it, that didn’t make sense. Could be that way, you know, like Horse Dick only rents videos, but usually where there’s a VCR there’s a videotape or two. You know what else Charlie told me?”

“No.”

Leonard took a deep breath on this one. “This is hard, man. Raul, he didn’t die from hitting that tree. Wasn’t shot either. Charlie, he got back to headquarters after the funeral, and he’s bawlin’ his men out, ones looked over the hill, and they showed him pictures and video, Hap. Pictures of the tree, the hill, and Horse Dick’s body, and all along the woods, and guess what?”

“I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“Raul wasn’t there.”

“They overlooked him.”

“No. They didn’t miss him. Charlie pushes for the autopsy report, looks it over. Coroner, he’d been told to just take it like it looks: someone, assailants unknown, killed Horse Dick, and Raul died in the motorcycle crash. Chief, he don’t want to deal with any other possibilities because of fearin’ it might connect with a gay killin’, then it would come out Horse Dick was a butt-hole bandit and a cop. Thing is, Raul was thrown off the bike, but that didn’t kill him. Whoever *they* is, ones shot Horse Dick, somebody … They took Raul with them.”

“Oh, shit,” I said.

“Yeah,” Leonard said. “They took him, kept him a while, hooked some kind of battery to his balls and gave him a jump-start. Several times. Coroner thinks they wetted him up to get the kind of contact they wanted with the cables. They broke his foot. Probably stomped it. They used some kind of bat or board on his knees and shins. They pushed all his fingers back till they broke. They broke his arms and twisted them behind his back and cranked them around some more, making those nerves jump. They finally twisted his neck with some kind of garotte, stove in his head with something heavy, stuck his noggin back in the helmet, took him out there and dumped him where they got him."

"Christ, Leonard. You're sure?"

"Charlie's sure. The coroner's sure. Raul was lyin' out there rotting these last few days, but he hasn't been there the whole time."

I sat amazed, a little sick to my stomach. "I'm surprised Charlie would tell you all this."

"You heard what Charlie said earlier. Chief's tied his hands. Won't let Charlie do what needs to be done. Ain't no one gonna do much about this shit. Couple queers aced is almost good business far as the chief's concerned. As for Charlie, he sounds dispirited. Like he's losin' his will to be a cop. So, it's you and me, bubba."

I thought about that a moment. I said, "I don't know it's our place to deal with something like this, Leonard. It's police business. I think what Charlie's implying is we find something good, something helpful, we report it. But he's not suggesting we take the law into our own hands."

"You're not listening, Hap. It's police business when they want to make it their business. They don't make it their business, then I got to make it *my* business."

"I don't like the sound of that."

"Maybe I'll put it to music and you'll like it better. You want to hear the rest of what I think?"

"Yeah."

"I think they—whoever they is—tortured Raul for the whereabouts of the tape or tapes. Raul wasn't a tough guy, but he must have felt strong about this one, Hap, 'cause he didn't give it up. He lied. Told them what they wanted was where it wasn't.

They tried him out. They checked Horse Dick’s place. No dice. So they talk to him some more in that special way they have. So now he puts them on my place, thinkin’ he’s gainin’ some time to maybe get away. Or maybe he is a tough guy. Tougher than I knew. Whatever, he puts them on me ’cause maybe he thought I could handle them. Figured he sent them there and I was there, I’d handle them. Or maybe he didn’t give a shit about me. But the thing is, they tossed my place and didn’t find anything. They decide to give Raul a little more business, or maybe they just got tired of his bullshit and finished him. Or maybe he died sooner than they expected. Thing is, he goes out without giving them what they want to know.”

Leonard paused to relight his pipe. I said, “Question immediately comes to mind is, how do you know they didn’t find the video? Maybe it was at your place and you didn’t know it. Raul had a house key, could have hid it there. Or maybe they went to your place first, hit Horse Dick’s second. Maybe he had it.”

“I thought of that,” Leonard said. “But I also thought Raul might have hid it somewhere else. So my next question was, where would he hide it? Remember what I told you about all the crap going on at my place, my mail being screwed around with —”

“The other address,” I said.

“That’s why you’re my friend,” Leonard said. “You can keep up with me. Almost. Mailbox out here isn’t checked often. I come out maybe once every month or so. It doesn’t get any mail to speak of anymore since I switched back to the town address. Mostly just junk mail. It’s a huge mailbox, so it’s a pretty safe place to leave something. I drove over tonight, got out my trusty flashlight, looked in the mailbox, and what do you think I found?”

“That Jiffy bag by your chair,” I said.

“Bingo, my man. That and some junk mail. And you won’t believe what’s in the Jiffy.”

Leonard grabbed the Jiffy bag, took a little notebook out of it and tossed it at me. I grabbed it and looked at it. It was a standard promotional-style notebook for King Arthur Chili, a local business.

“I couldn’t make heads or tails out of that,” Leonard said. “Wait before you look. There’s a couple of videotapes inside as well. I’ve seen one of them. I got it loaded in the VCR. I want you to see it.”

Leonard plucked the remote out of his lap, turned on the set and the VCR. I moved over and stood behind him to watch.

There was static and darkness, then gray shapes. The gray shapes became clearer, but never too clear. One of the shapes was a tanker-style truck. It was parked and a hose was being fed from it into a hole in cement, a hole like a cistern, and you could hear the sound of a pump sucking up the contents of the cistern, running it into the truck. The other gray shapes were two men with the truck. One of them was scrawny, with longish hair and a dark cap of some kind. He had on jeans and a jean jacket with the sleeves cut out. No shirt. Classic TV and movie-biker garb. The other guy wore jeans and a dark T-shirt and jackboots. He had long hair tied back in a ponytail. He looked about fifty-five or so and was about the size of the Green Giant who sells peas on the commercials.

“Bigfoot!” I said.

“Bingo again,” Leonard said. “He’s also Big Man Mountain.”

“Say what?”

“Professional wrestler. One of LaBorde’s claims to fame. He was a villain on the circuit. Retired a year or two ago. Read about it in the paper. Word is they retired him ’cause of some shit he had goin’ down, but I don’t remember what it was. But there was a scandal.”

“I seldom read the papers,” I said.

“Well,” Leonard said, “you should. But that’s him.”

“How can you tell? I can’t see his face worth shit.”

“True, but how many long-haired guys have you heard of weigh about three-fifty and stand well over six foot?”

“I don’t know of any.”

“Well, I know of one. Big Man Mountain. Bigfoot, as you call him. He dressed that same way when he wrestled, as a biker. And it appears that’s his normal attire.”

There was more of this, two guys standing around while the hose sucked the contents of the cistern. Then the two guys got in the truck and the video jumped around in blackness and static. When it started up again, there were more clips of this activity with the tanker, and in some cases I recognized where they were, the back of restaurants in town. A Mexican restaurant where Leonard and I often ate because the food was cheap and good, another restaurant where the food was good, but not cheap, and we didn't eat there. We wanted to, though.

Besides the work with the tanker truck, there were also some clips of this big truck with sideboards and the same guys and two other guys dressed in similar garb. They were parked behind a building, loading barrels onto the back of the truck. As with all the video, the guys looked nervous and furtive.

"The rest of the tape is just more of this," Leonard said.

"I don't get it. Why would Raul mail himself a tape of some bikers sucking crap out of cisterns and putting barrels on trucks?"

Leonard cut off the VCR and the set. "Do you remember that article I read to you a few months back? Out of the paper?"

"No. I hardly remember where I was yesterday."

"Man, you got to pay more attention to the newspapers," Leonard said. "Grease nappers."

"Grease nappers? What grease … Wait a minute … The folks stealing grease from restaurants, selling it to the recycling folks. It was kind of a humorous article. Something about 'Police Set Grease Trap for Suspects.' "

"That's it. Except the police didn't catch anyone. And if you remember, there's lots of money in grease napping."

I went back to my spot on the couch. I said, "You tryin' to tell me Raul was filming grease nappers, and they caught him, tortured and killed him over it?"

"There's lots of money in grease," Leonard said. "Silly as it sounds, with just limited facilities, you can make up to a couple thou a day. Better-organized than that, hittin' LaBorde, Lufkin, Tyler, you could make a hell of a lot more. Maybe ten thousand a day. People have been murdered for a lot less than that. And if they thought the whistle was going to be blown, they could have murdered Raul, and it wouldn't be for grease. It would be for money."

"All right," I said. "Say the grease nappers were filmed by Raul. You got to ask yourself, why? I mean, since when is Raul an investigative reporter?"

"I don't know he was. I think these tapes belong to Horse Dick, the cop. He's undercover, acting like one of the guys. That's why it jumps around. Sometimes he's helpin' them do the work. Then, when he's standin' over to the side, smokin' a cigarette, pissin' or somethin', he filmed them with a hidden camera. Later he had the stuff put on video, for easy viewing. While he's doing this investigation, he falls in with Raul and they start swappin' spit and sperm, and pretty soon it's pillow talk, and Raul knows everything Horse Dick knows. That could be what led to Raul's demise."

"What about the chief? Wouldn't he have this information? If so, why would Horse or Raul hide it in your mailbox?"

"Maybe Horse Dick didn't have time to get the stuff to the chief. Maybe he was waiting until he had a full investigation. Maybe the chief has a copy. I don't know. Thing is, I believe Raul got wrapped up in this business pretty tight, got to thinking he was some kind of hot-shit undercover guy himself. Horse Dick tells him things are getting tight, maybe they ought to get rid of the tapes for a while, so Raul mails them to my old address. That's his handwriting on the envelope. Then, when Raul gets caught by the bad guys, he doesn't tell them where they are. How's that sound?"

"Lots of things wrong with that scenario. Why would Raul and Horse Dick not turn the evidence over to the chief, they thought they were in trouble? Why wouldn't Raul tell these thugs where the videos are? Torture like that, you'd tell anyone anything they wanted to know. And if you don't mind me saying so, Raul wasn't that tough."

"I don't really have an answer for that, but things occurred to me. Back when I was burning those crack houses, rumor was the chief was getting a slice of the drug pie, which was why the houses kept being built up. Him and the owner of the houses were supposed to be in cahoots."

"Never been any proof of that," I said, "though I don't doubt it."

“Chief sent Horse Dick in to investigate drugs through the bikers. Maybe this is law enforcement, and maybe its the chief’s way of getting enough evidence on the bikers to make sure he gets a cut. Horse Dick figures this out, so he doesn’t hand in the videos. He hides them. That kind of explains why the chief isn’t pursuing this business. It could be more than just the gay thing.”

“Problem with that theory, Leonard, is the video is of grease nappers, not drug lords.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Leonard said, and relit his pipe. “But it could all connect.”

“I guess. Sounds thin to me. But if drugs were happening along with the grease napping, wouldn’t there be videos of drug activity?”

“Maybe this was the best Horse Dick could get on them,” Leonard said. “Could be like the way you use income tax fraud to get gangsters for worse business. Nail them for grease, you put the drug business out of business.”

“There’s something in that,” I said. “What about the other video?”

“I was going to give it a look-see, but then you came home. My guess is more of the same.”

We loaded the video. It wasn’t about grease napping. It was two guys walking, and it was easy to recognize the place. It was LaBorde Park. I recognized the bench the guys were walking past. I knew the camera view was being taken through the shrubbery across the way. The lighting was bad, just some of the pole lights in the park, and the camera jumped this way and that, but it was enough to see the two guys. They stopped walking, and one guy put his hands on the other guy’s shoulders. Now that their faces were toward us, code bars appeared, disguising their features. The guy who was being held by the shoulders got down on his knees and unbuckled his partner’s pants, probed for goober, found it, put it in his mouth.

Suddenly some fellas burst out of the bushes. They rushed the guy doing the suck work, and the guy having it done on him stepped back and watched. The guy who had planned to treat the other one got kicked, slapped, and rolled in the dirt. This went on so long it was almost too much to watch. After a while the guy who had offered his dick came over with his tool still hanging out and a knife in his hand. He put the knife to the assaulted man's throat, made him do what he had wanted to do in the first place. While the guy on his knees sucked, the guy with the knife used his free hand to pull a cigarette pack out of his pocket. He shook out a smoke and put it where the bar code was. His hand put away the pack and came up with a lighter, then the lighter flame went behind the code bar. The lighter came down and was put away. From the way the smoker acted, he could have been alone.

The guy on his knees was still at work; the smoker used the knife to tap him on the head, to keep a kind of rhythm, sang, "Mama's little baby love shortnin', shortnin', mama's little baby love shortnin' bread," over and over. And he wasn't even in tune.

The others stood around and jeered and watched and wore their code bars. When the job was finished on the smoker, the others got in line and took their turn.

When they were all finished, they shoved their victim down and went away. The camera went off and the video showed us some blackness, some gray, then it was over. It was one of the most humiliating things I'd ever seen.

"Not exactly Oscar material, is it?" I said.

"Jesus," Leonard said. "What was that all about?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "Was it staged?"

"I don't know," Leonard said. "But I tell you this, if it was, it sure blurs the line … Amateur films?"

"Maybe. But what's the deal? One film on grease napping, the other on gay bashing? Or is it supposed to be some kind of sex tape?"

"It didn't have anything to do with sex, Hap. It's about power, man. Gays, they're more of a target than women or blacks. Most folks think a gay gets a beating, they get what they deserve."

"Could have been a gang of gays doing it," I said.

"That's possible," Leonard said, "but straights like their dicks sucked bad as anyone, especially when it humiliates someone and empowers them."

"I'm going to have to keep you away from those pop-psychology books," I said.

“You know, you’re right,” Leonard said. “I’m startin’ to sound like you. You won’t tell anyone I used that word *empower*, will you?”

“I’ll try and keep it under my hat. But, whatever, the same question still begs to be answered. What is it all about? What’s the connection between grease and a fucked-up film like this?”

Leonard shook his head. “I don’t know. Maybe there’s something in the notebook. Me, I couldn’t make diddle out of it.”

I got it and opened it. There were rows of letters. Stuff like YCU—ART—QWEP. Beside that, another set. And another. All across the page and down. I looked the notebook over slowly. There were ten pages of this stuff.

“What the hell do you think that’s all about?” Leonard said.

“This look like Raul’s writing?”

“No.”

I studied the notebook a few moments. I said, “Same number of letters in each group. Some of them have the same first three letters. Think about it.”

“I have thought about it.”

“It’s easy. It’s not like some super code. Probably someone’s personal notebook. It’s put together like this so most people picked it up wouldn’t put it together quickly, but it’s nothing takes a lot of work to figure out. In fact, it’s kinda stupid, really.”

“You’re tryin’ to make me feel stupid.”

“I like to grab the chance now and then.”

“Come on, Hap. I’m depressed enough here.”

“Phone numbers. You coordinate the letters with the numbers, and you got phone numbers. The first three are area codes.”

I went to the phone, studied the letters on the dial, compared them to the numbers beside them.

I said, “Lot of this is Houston area codes. Some of the others show up a lot are Dallas. I don’t know the rest.”

I picked up the phone, dialed one of the long-distance numbers. A woman’s voice said, “East Side Video.”

“Where exactly are you located?” I asked.

She told me. I wrote it down on a pad while she talked.

“Thanks,” I said. “I wasn’t quite sure.”

I tried several other numbers. They were all video stores. I wrote them down. I gave the list of names and stores and their locations to Leonard and let him look it over.

“It sort of connects,” Leonard said. “You know, like I almost got an answer, but not quite.”

“I think these are stalk-and-rape tapes,” I said. “There’s stuff like this comin’ out of Japan. I saw something about it on one of those news shows a while back. I may not read the newspaper enough, but I try not to miss my TV. Stuff they do in Japan, they don’t actually show the rape. May be set-up stuff, but like you were saying about what we just saw, it blurs the line.”

“What’s the deal with the Japanese tapes?”

“Japanese started selling that shit here in the States. Video stores sold and rented it. It was damn popular till pressure was put on the stores to remove the tapes. Where do you think those tapes went?”

“Under the counter,” Leonard said.

“In a lot of cases, I think so. And if the Japanese government is getting pressure from our government, or just from watchdog groups, it occurs to me the U.S. might start producing its own videos. We are, after all, capitalists. Entrepreneurs here in LaBorde rough up gays in the park, film it, sell the stuff to the shitheads who’ll market it. The market will mostly be big cities.”

“That works,” Leonard said. “Makers of this smut would have it pretty good ’cause most of the park gays, they’re underground. They don’t want to go to the police, admit they’re gay. And if they aren’t closeted, still, the idea of admitting to what happened, the humiliation, holds them back. Very few talkers.”

“Correcto. And my guess is some of those reports we’ve heard of beatings in the park, they were worse than we know about.”

“And the chief kept it under wraps?”

“It’s hard to know how corrupt the old bastard is. He may not be that crooked. We may be puttin’ shit on him he ought not have to wear.”

“You always like to think that way, Hap. For someone’s been through things you've been through, you can be naive as a baby duck. There's folks out there think if they make a dollar off this stuff, and they didn't do what's on the video, and no one was killed, and it's a bunch of queers anyway, it's okay to sell it. I think the chief may be one of them folks. I think he may be one of them only cares about the dollar, not even if someone's killed or if he did it."

"I don't think it goes quite that far. But the real question is, what can we do about it?"

"These guys, whoever they are, they probably killed Raul to protect this racket, the grease, the gay-stalk tapes. And I'll tell you, my friend, if the law won't do it, I am gonna find out who's who, and then ain't nobody but the devil gonna know their names."

"Then you'd be just like them."

"Pullllleeeezzze. There's few people think a roach exterminator is a murderer. I'm not talkin' about beatin' up and rapin' innocent people who are lookin' for love in all the wrong places. I'm talkin' about stampin' out a plague, man. Listen. I know how you are, and there ain't no use talkin'. You do what you want? I've heard you rave about the horrors of the child sex trade in Thailand, the poor, the plight of blacks and women and gays, and all the stuff you gripe about, but me, I'm gonna do somethin'."

"I didn't say I didn't care, Leonard. I said—"

"Save it."

"Don't be mad. I—"

"I said save it."

Leonard got up, gathered the tapes and the notebook, shoved them inside the Jiffy bag, and went outside. I didn't follow. I sat on the couch until I heard his car start up and go away.

14

That night I slept poorly. My mind wandered from that sick video to images of what had happened to Raul, and finally to Leonard. Leonard and I often fought. Leonard was quick to lose his temper, but something like this, I didn't really know what to think, what to expect. I wanted to help him, but bending the law was one thing, breaking and stomping the shit out of it was another.

I did what Leonard wanted, I'd have blood on my hands, and I wasn't sure where we would stop once we got started. I had killed before, and I didn't like it. I didn't lose lots of sleep over it, as it had been self-defense, and no other alternative was available, but I thought about it and didn't like it, and didn't feel heroic. I didn't want to put myself in a position where I had to kill.

I tossed and turned, finally got that business off my mind long enough to think about Brett. I thought about what she had done to her ex-husband. Was that self-defense or vengeance? Too bad Leonard was gay. He and Brett might go well together.

Jesus, I liked Brett, but did I really need to fall for an unrepentant firebug woman with asshole children?

Come to think of it, was I such a good catch myself?

That's the way the night passed, back and forth, an occasional snooze here and there, but mostly me tossing and turning and considering.

I got up early, put on coffee, thought about calling Leonard, but didn't. It was too early, and since he was already pissed, that wasn't going to mellow him out any. While I mulled all this over, it started to rain. Good. Great way to start the day.

I hung out till daylight, finished breakfast, and decided to call Brett. She ought to be getting home about now, and I figured before she dropped off to sleep, I might speak with her. I calculated the time it would take for her to drive home, and phoned. She didn't answer.

I waited a while, drank a cup of coffee, and called back. She answered this time. She sounded tired.

"Hey," I said. "It's me, Hap."

"I still remember you," she said.

"Well, hell, Brett. Now that I got you, I don't know why I'm calling. I know you're tired—"

"Are you?"

"What's that?"

"Tired?"

"Actually, yeah. I've had coffee, but it isn't helping."

"You came over, I know something might invigorate both of us. That is, unless you're so tired you don't think you can be invigorated."

"That's me pullin' up in your drive now."

• • •

Fast as I wanted to get there, I took time to go by Leonard's. I figured he was sleeping, so I didn't knock. I wrote him a note and stuck it in the screen door. I gave him Brett's phone number, told him to call me after noon. I wrote that I was sorry. That we should talk. I signed it "Mom."

When I got to Brett's place she opened the door and let me in before I could knock. I stood just inside the doorway trying to get my breath. She was wearing a pair of brief red panties, some brand-new flip-flops, and a small dark mole like a chocolate drop on her right breast near the nipple. A very nice nipple, I might add.

"If you don't mind," she said, "I thought we'd call this a second date."

"I'm easy," I said.

"So am I," she said. "And I got a whole box of rubbers on the nightstand to prove it."

"That's what I call hospitality."

"Well, I am excited to see you," she said, "but actually I had to rub ice on my nipples so they'd stand up like this."

She took me by the hand, led me to the bedroom. We embraced and kissed. She started removing my clothes, and I helped her. We lay down on the bed together.

She said, "If you have a shoe fetish, I'll leave the flip-flops on."

I laughed and she flicked them off. I helped her out of the red panties. I didn't want her to be uncomfortable. I used my tongue to taste the chocolate-drop mole. Much better than chocolate, actually. We made love for an hour, then fell asleep to the sound of the rain.

When I awoke, Brett was leaning over me.

"I really enjoyed that," she said. "I even came."

"I hope you don't mean in spite of me."

She laughed. "No. I don't mean in spite of you."

"Me too," I said.

"What?"

"I came too."

She laughed. "Men always come."

"Ejaculating is not the same as coming, in my book. It feels good, but when you really get off, you know the difference. It's not just a release of pressure. It's a special state of mind. You know, like when you switch channels on TV, and surprise, it's your favorite movie just starting."

"By God, Hap, you're a goddamn philosopher."

"I know it."

"What's your favorite movie, by the way?"

"You're not going to ask me my astrological sign next, are you?"

"I don't cotton to that shit. I'm interested in movies."

"Casablanca. And I like slow walks in the park and I'm going to be a brain surgeon and try and help all mankind."

She laughed. "I like *To Have and Have Not.* That's my favorite."

"That's my second favorite."

"My second favorite is *The Sound of Music*."

"I like *Casablanca* and *To Have and Have Not."*

"That part where they sing the do-re-me song, or whatever it is. I love that."

"I like *Casablanca* and *To Have and Have Not."*

She slapped at me. "You don't like *The Sound of Music?* It's the greatest musical ever made! I bet you think it's kind of sissy."

"Yeah."

"Hap Collins, I thought you were a sensitive man."

"I am," I said, and pointed my finger at my eye. "Press right here and it hurts. But *The Sound of Music*, I'd rather have my dick nailed to a burning building than have to sit through that shit again, and I don't care if the popcorn is free and you're giving me each bite with your vagina."

"Vagina?"

"That's a medical term for *pussy*, honey."

"God, Hap, you're almost a doctor .... So you don't like *The Sound of Music?"*

"No. Actually, I loathe it. But you like *To Have and Have Not.* That's good."

"I was always nuts about Bogart. I like Walter Brennan too. I like where he talks about being stung by a bee."

"Me too. I like Lauren Bacall too."

"You would."

"Shouldn't I? You kind of remind me of her, actually."

"In what way?"

"You're both women."

"Asshole ... You know what?"

"What?"

"What I want us to do is go in to the doctor and get checkups. Make sure there's no AIDS stuff going on. I want to get past this rubber-on-the-dick stage real quick. I say we start our relationship with complete confidence."

"You won't take my word I haven't got AIDS?" I said.

"I'll take your word you don't think you have it, and probably don't, but you might not want to trust my word. I've been sexually active my whole life, Hap."

"And all that practice has really paid off."

"It's not that I actually think I've been unsafe, but I want us to start with a clean slate."

"All right," I said. "It's a deal. 'Course, as you know, I've just had a lot of blood work, so I think we can safely say I'm okay."

"All right," Brett said.

"You'll look at my charts, won't you?" I said. "Talk to the doctor?"

"Most likely."

"All right," I said. "One thing, though."

"Shoot."

"I'm old-fashioned in one way. Well, maybe lots of ways. But if this is a relationship, and not just a good time, I want it to be a relationship."

"You mean I have to quit screwin' the entire medical staff and the patients at the hospital?"

"Yep. And I'm giving up farm animals for you, baby."

She snuggled in close. "Wow. Now that's dedication of purpose. You know, there's still several rubbers in the box."

"I hate leaving a partial box, don't you?"

"Absolutely," Brett said.

"It's so untidy."

"Absolutely. By the way, Hap. Did I tell you that I used to be a man?"

I hit her with a pillow and she laughed and we made love again.

"I guess it must have been around five o'clock when the phone rang and Brett stirred and got up and walked nude into the kitchen. After a moment she came back. "It's for you, hon."

"Thanks. I hope you don't mind. I told a friend I'd be here."

"Not at all," she said. She was standing in the doorway, one leg cocked forward, showing me what I wanted to see. I got out of bed and went by her and she took hold of me and said, "I still got supplies in that box."

I kissed her and she held me where I wanted her to hold me. I put my hand on her and said, "Did you shave it just for me, or do you keep it like that?"

"I shaved it just for you," she said. "I thought it might be a little different. Besides, it keeps the lice out. You like it?"

"If you don't know by now," I said, "I don't know what to tell you."

After a moment I broke loose, went into the kitchen, practically having to walk around my dick. I picked up the phone.

"Yes?" I said.

"It's me," Leonard said, as if I were expecting someone else.

"I'm so glad," I said.

"That lady I was talkin' to? Is she the one?"

"She's the one."

"Good. I'm glad."

"Did you call to congratulate me?"

"No, I called because your note said to call."

"I was feeling very brotherly then. Right now I'm not so sure I want to waste my time with you. This woman, I think she could make me take a tire iron to Minnie Mouse."

"That's great … hey … really, Hap. Peace, man."

"Peace, Leonard."

"I was pissed. I'd had a few drinks. I'm fucked up over all this."

"Nothing more needs to be said."

"I love you, man."

"And I love you. Listen up. Let's find out what we can. I'm with you, but …"

"I have to behave myself."

"Exactly."

"I can only promise that up to so far."

"We look around," I said. "We find something. See how the police can be made to do something, we keep the blood off our hands. Got it?"

“What if we can’t?”

“We cross that bridge when we come to it.”

“When do we get started?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Where?”

“The place where Raul got his hair-cutting experience. What’s it called?”

“Antone’s.”

“I’ll pick you up at your place at nine o’clock.”

“See you then,” Leonard said.

I went back to the bedroom. Brett was holding the box of prophylactics. She shook it.

“I say we tap the box out,” she said.

We didn’t quite manage that, but when we were finished, Brett pushed up tight against me and closed her eyes. “Spoons,” she said.

I held her, and soon she was asleep. While she slept, I looked at her and thought about her ex-husband beating her, raping her. How could he?

I thought about those nice long fingers of hers coiling around a shovel, squirting lighter fluid, striking matches. I kissed her cheek and lay against her and felt her warmth, and soon I too was asleep.

15

We awoke in the late afternoon and had dinner out of Brett's fridge. Ham on white. While we sat naked, eating sandwiches and crunching potato chips, there was a knock on the door, and we had to rush to put on clothes.

Brett finished first by pulling on a long T-shirt. She went to the door while I continued dressing in the bedroom. I was having trouble finding my pants but finally located them under the bed in a wad. Found a sock behind a chair.

I finished dressing, went into the living room area. Ella was there. She grinned at me. She really did look like Brett's younger sister.

"Well, I see you two have hit it off," she said.

"We're not doing much hittin'," Brett said, "but we are gettin' off."

"Brett!" Ella said. But I could tell she wasn't all that offended.

I smiled at Ella. Close up, I could see her very pretty face wore a black eye, partially hidden by makeup.

"You just come by to annoy us?" Brett said.

"No. I came by to talk to you about switchin' shifts with me next week. Can it happen?"

"It might," Brett said. "I'll have to think on it, though. Sometimes Ole Head Nurse Meanie doesn't like changes, and honey, I don't know she'll like you."

"Yeah?" Ella said. "What's wrong with me?"

"Same thing's wrong with me and a couple of the other girls." Brett gave me a soulful look. "We're just too good-lookin' for her. She thinks everybody ought to be uglier than her."

"Is that possible?" Ella said.

"I don't think so," Brett said. " 'Course, you take a few more shots to the head like that one, you might be in the runnin'."

Ella looked embarrassed. She said, “Brett … I …”

“Sorry,” Brett said. “I didn’t mean to embarrass you. Hap here, he understands.”

“No, I don’t,” I said.

“Hap Collins!” Brett said. “You do too understand.”

“I don’t mean to embarrass you either, but now that Brett’s said something, I don’t understand why you’d take this shit.”

“Brett, you shouldn’t have said anything to anyone,” Ella said. “That wasn’t right.”

“You can’t keep hidin’ it, girl,” Brett said. “That’s the worst thing to do. You hide it, you’re helpin’ him do it.”

“She’s right,” I said. “Dump the bum.”

“He’s been going to counseling,” Ella said.

“Bullshit on counseling,” Brett said. “The guy’s a turd. Flush him.”

“I love him,” Ella said.

“I loved that shit-ass husband of mine, too,” Brett said. “But one day I didn’t and I had to set his head on fire.”

“I’m not like you,” Ella said. “I got to go.”

“Ella,” Brett said. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have …”

“No,” Ella said. “You’re right. Think about the shift, will you?”

“Sure,” Brett said.

Ella left quickly.

When she was gone, Brett said, “Bless her.”

We were about to finish eating when there was yet another knock on the door. Brett answered. It was Ella. She was in tears. “My car won’t start. I’m going to be late. He hates it when I’m late. I thought maybe … he … I’m sorry. What’s your name again?”

“Hap,” I said.

“Hap, I thought you might help me with my car?”

“Honest truth is I can’t fix a wheelbarrow.”

“Kevin will be so mad,” Ella said.

“We’ll drive you home,” Brett said. “Okay, Hap?”

"Sure."

We took my pickup. We drove out to the east side of town. It was a beautiful day and the rain of earlier had given it a kind of glow, like the world had been washed down and polished.

About a mile and a half outside the city limits we came to a spot where an old country store had stood. I had stopped there once and bought a barbecue sandwich. It had tasted like shit. Now the store was just a shell of a building. Windows knocked out. A door halfway down. That's what happens when you make lousy barbecue.

We turned down a dirt road along a row of mailboxes and lights on poles, drove past a dog kennel where a half dozen hot-looking Siberian huskies watched us pass.

Shortly thereafter, we drove onto as ugly a stretch of land as I've seen. You could tell right off that not too many years ago woods had stood here. Someone had clear-cut it, sold off the lumber, then made a mobile-home park out of it. In this case, they hadn't even bothered to scrape it down to the clay. Some of the stumps still remained, burned black but still standing. Between clumps of stumps and pools of rainwater, trailers stood.

We drove past a row of run-down trailers with broken toys in the yard, sad dogs on chains, and finally drove around to a fairly nice little white trailer with pink trim. The yard was clean, except for the standard redneck signpost—any kind of black car on blocks. This one was a Ford Mustang. When I was in high school I had wanted one of those. Thought I'd die if I didn't get one. I didn't get one and I was still living.

We parked and let Ella out. She thanked us, and as she started toward the trailer the door opened and a man came out. He had on jeans and was shirtless and barefoot. He was a stocky guy with a slightly protruding but solid-looking belly. He was about my height. Good-looking fella with a crewcut.

"Where the hell you been, Ella?" he said. "I been sittin' here waitin' on my goddamn dinner."

"My car, honey," Ella said. "It wouldn't start."

"My car wouldn't start," Kevin said in a mocking tone. "It's always somethin', ain't it, bitch?"

Ella turned to us. “Thanks. I’m sorry.”

“That’s all right,” I said. “You sure you want to stay?”

“Yes,” Ella said.

“Hey,” Kevin said, “who you talkin’ to?”

“Ella …” I said.

“What do you mean, ‘do you want to stay?’ ”

“I mean you sound a little drunk, and maybe she ought not to stay.”

“You keep your nose out of my business, old man.”

“Old man?”

“Yeah. Old man.”

Ella took hold of Kevin’s shoulder. “Don’t, honey. They gave me a ride.”

Kevin pushed Ella down on the wet ground. Brett rushed over to help her up. “You get back in the truck, cunt,” Kevin said.

“That’s it,” I said. I had been standing outside the truck with the door open, leaning on it. I closed it and started toward Kevin.

Kevin said, “What you gonna do, fuckhead?”

“I can either sit you down and have a nice talk, or punch your lights out. Since I figure you’ll be a boring conversationalist, I like the second idea.”

“Punch my lights out?” Kevin said. “I’ll have you know I was a goddamn good boxer. I almost went pro.”

“Then I’m sure you’ve seen a left jab,” I said, and jabbed him. I hit him solid on the right eye and his head snapped back. Then I kicked hard off my back leg and caught him in the balls. I half-leaped then, caught his head as he bent over, drove it down with an elbow and lifted my knee into his face. When he came back up, his face bloody, I skipped in and caught hold of his arm and his shoulder, brought my right leg behind his right leg, and reared backwards hard as I could.

He went down quick and smacked his head against the dirt. Spittle flew out of his mouth and gleamed like a string of diamonds in the sunlight.

Ella rushed over, draped herself over him, held one hand toward me. “Don’t, Hap! Don’t hit him anymore.”

“Why not?” I said. “I’m just startin’ to enjoy myself.”

“He doesn’t mean it,” Ella said. “He can’t help himself. It’s not like him. He’s not himself.”

“Then who the hell is he?” I said. “Was he that other fella when he blacked your eye?”

“I pushed him into it,” Ella said.

“Jesus,” I said. “You better get straight, Ella. I can see a couple having a spat, even taking a slap at one another in a moment of anger. But this. Him punchin’ you around …”

Kevin had gotten up on one elbow. “You better go, man.”

“Why?” I said. “You going to whip my ass, big man?”

Brett came over and took my arm. She said, “Let’s go, Hap. Your testosterone is showing. Ella. You want to go with us, you can. You want to call someone about this. The women’s shelter. Whatever. We’ll make sure you get to do it.”

Ella shook her head. She started helping Kevin to his feet.

“You want to see the left jab again?” I said to him.

“You caught me by surprise,” he said.

“Looked to me I caught you in the eye,” I said.

“Then you kicked, like a sissy,” he said.

“Tell everybody a sissy kicked your ass, then,” I said.

Ella started helping Kevin toward the trailer. She paused and looked back over her shoulder. “Thank you, but it’s not your business. Really. It’s not your business.”

Ella went up the steps with her arm around Kevin. They went inside the trailer and closed the door. We got in the pickup and drove away.

Once we were out on the highway, Brett slid over close to me.

“You were magnificent, Hap.”

“I think I got a little John Wayne.”

“You know what?”

“What?”

“I just loved his movies. Will you take me home and seduce me?”

“Because I beat Kevin up you’re hot?”

“No. Because you got pissed when he called me a cunt. I am sometimes, but I thank you anyway.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I like what you tried to do for Ella. But she doesn’t change, Hap. She never does. I’ve tried to get her to leave him, but she keeps going back. Someday he’ll kill her.”

“I fear you’re right,” I said.

16

We drove back to Brett's place, went to bed and made love, then showered together. I dressed and got ready to leave so she could have time to herself before going off to work.

As she kissed me 'bye at the door, I said, "I'll be back."

"Hell, I know that," she said. "You done had a taste."

I drove home, read until late, slept fitfully. Next morning I picked up Leonard and we cruised over to Antone's.

The air was sweet-smelling after yesterday's rain, but you could tell already it was going to be hot. It was going to be that kind of April where spring, except for an hour or so in the morning, was mostly forgotten. Ozone-layer problems, perhaps. I liked to blame it on all those evangelists and their goddamn hair spray. Hadn't they heard of spritzers?

Antone's was what used to be called a barber college and hairdressing salon. It did business, but it mostly trained people for business. It was located where Main crossed Universal Street. Below Universal was a poor section of town, but on the opposite side of the street things began to look up. Drive a short distance and you were on the town square, where things were clean and bright.

Go the other way, you were descending into a toilet that might flush at any moment. A place where Those in Power liked to keep the people they thought of as rejects.

We parked in the parking lot next to Antone's and a recreation center that used to be a 7-Eleven before it got robbed so often it was sort of like a free-money drop for the thugs of LaBorde. Through the glass you could see folks who ought to have jobs, or kids that ought to be in school, shooting pool. There were a number of motorcycle types in there as well. I hoped none of them recognized Leonard from his little escapade at the Broken Wheel.

Leonard glanced through the glass at the pool players. He didn't say anything, but the look on his face told me plenty. Leonard thought most of these folks were lazy shits and worthless, and I suppose he was right to some degree. Many of them were just that. Plain sorry. But I never found that life worked that way, black and white. Good and evil. Most of the time it was a mixture. That's what made it so hard. You couldn't generalize and be a thinker. There were assholes on both sides of the coin, but there were good people shouldering bad breaks as well. Miss two paychecks, have the car break down, and you could go from lower middle class to living in a cardboard box under the river bridge, eating out of Dumpsters and pushing a shopping cart.

Inside Antone's there was a lot of activity, people cutting hair and doing perms on folks with a desire for cheap haircuts, coloring, and curls. Always a scary proposition to get a haircut at a beauty and barber college.

I used to get my hair cut that way before I decided three bucks was too much for what they did to me, and eight bucks downtown at a real barber shop was just right. When I got my cheap haircuts it wasn't at Antone's. It was the original barber college, and it was located in another poor part of LaBorde back when we called LaBorde a town, not a city. The place was cleverly named Bob's Barber College, and it smelled of hair oil, shaving cream, and men's sweat. That's all you saw there. Men. It didn't do beauty cuts and it didn't do anything fancy, so it didn't attract women. It was a place where men talked the kind of talk that used to be called man talk. Hunting and fishing, cars and dogs and women. Usually in that order.

Got your hair cut there, way it was done was limited. There was the Dust Bowl Oakie cut, which seemed mostly a kind of hand-on-top-of-head-and-cut-around-it style, shaving from about the middle of your head to below your ears. Then there was the cut called by many of us the Mental Health and Mental Retardation cut. Same style they gave the mentally handicapped at the state school. This translated as cut what you see, and all you want, long as there's some hair left on the top of the head like a topknot. Got through with you on that, you looked a little bit like a turnip. There was also the GI cut, which was a shaved head. This was mostly given to those suspected of insects. And finally, there were standard jobs, like Little Man Number One. This was almost passable unless you wanted it blocked in the back. That didn't exist. The head got cut pretty good, but when it came to the back of the neck, it got shaved slicker than a snot-covered doorknob. There was Little Man Number Two as well. This one you got a haircut and a shave, as well as a few deep cuts soaked in some alcohol-based stink-water that made flies light on your face. Lastly, there was Little Man Number Three, but it was so dreadful it's difficult to talk about. This was the specialty of Bob himself, guy who taught the others. He gave all his haircuts while drunk and with a palsied hand, and many of us suspected his tools of trade were the Weed Eater and the garden snips.

Nothing like old memories.

Me and Leonard spent a few minutes watching a young blond lady with scissors snip hair out of an elderly man's nose, but when the hairs being snipped began to yield little gooies on their stalks, I lost interest.

Finally a man came over to help us. He was short and pale-skinned and had his dark hair combed back tight and plastered with something so shiny you could almost see your reflection in it. He had one of those pencil-thin mustaches like forties movie stars wore, ones make you look like you had a drink of chocolate milk and forgot to wipe your mouth. He had his colorful shirt open almost to his navel, and let me tell you, that was no treat to view. He had a chest like a bird and a little potbelly and a thin straight line of hair that ran from chest to navel and looked as if it had been provided by the nose hairs the blonde had clipped. He was wearing a gold medallion on a chain around his neck. The medallion reminded me of those aluminum-foil coins you unwrap and find chocolate inside. He must have been on the bad side of forty. A face, a body like that, you're not born with it. It takes some real abuse and neglect to create.

"May I 'elp you, *messieurs.* I am Pierre."

His accent was right out of Peppie Le Pew, the Warner Brothers cartoon skunk, with maybe a bit of the Frito Bandito thrown in. Not quite Spanish, not quite French, all false.

"Pierre?" Leonard said. "You're really named Pierre?"

"That ees correct."

"Where's Antone?" Leonard asked.

"There is no Antone," Pierre said. "It's jest a name I liked."

"Then you're the owner?" I asked.

He nodded. "What ees the thing I can due fer yew?" Pierre said, and his accent was even less identifiable now. Some German seemed to have slipped into it.

Leonard gave Raul's name and said, "Seems he was killed. Murdered. It's been in the papers, so you probably knew that."

"Oh, my," Pierre said. "I do not read zee papers."

Leonard gave me a knowing look, one that put me in Pierre's camp.

"I knew eee was missing. The cops, zey 'ave been 'ere. But ded, dis I deed not know."

"What we want to know," I said, "is about this deal you have with your graduates cutting hair in people's homes."

"Eet ees all zee rage," Pierre said. "Ze wealthy customers, zey love it. Raul, he was, a, how yew zey … goode one. Unlike some."

Pierre glanced at a young man who was cutting furiously at a woman's long blond hair. The guy had a strained look on his face like he had never done this before, and knew even if he did it again he wouldn't be any better.

Pierre turned back to us. "Some, zey are quite … how you say … 'opeless."

"Did Raul do a lot of these jobs?" Leonard asked.

"Some. Eee may 'ave done others I dew not know of. But many customers called 'ere, for referrals. We gave Raul some of zeees referrals. Eet ees part of our zervice to graduates."

"Can you tell us who these people were?" I asked.

"Are you with ze po-leece?"

"No," Leonard said.

"Zen … I don't know."

"We're not askin' you to turn over the secrets to the atomic bomb," Leonard said.

“We’re friends of Raul, and we’d like to talk to people who knew him,” I said. “It’s for his parents. We’re kind of … you know … trying to piece together his life for them. Something they can cling to. You understand?”

Pierre nodded, and when he spoke this time, he almost sounded tongue-tied. “I suppose zere is nofhing rong weeth zat.”

We followed him into his office. He sat down behind his desk while we stood. He rummaged in a drawer, came up with a leather-bound file book. He opened it, ran his finger along a page. He stopped, made a satisfied noise, found a pad and pen and wrote down a couple of names for us, gave them to Leonard.

“Just these two?” Leonard said.

“Eee cut zere ’air regularly,” Pierre said. “Others eee set up on ees own, for zem, I can not ’elp yew.”

“Wee-wee,” Leonard said.

“It’s *merci,”* I said.

“No,” Leonard said. “I have to wee-wee. You got a john here, Frenchy?”

• • •

We sat out in the parking lot and looked at what Pierre had given us.

Leonard said, “Hope that guy ain’t gay. He could give our whole sexual orientation a bad name.”

“Let me tell you,” I said. “He’s heterosexual, he’s not doing us any good either.”

“What kind of fucking accent was that?” Leonard asked. “It changed from one word to the next.”

“It was a bullshit accent is what it was. Closest Pierre’s been to France, or anything French, is a croissant. Maybe he’s been to Paris, Texas.”

“I hear that,” Leonard said. “Don’t you know that fucker is worn out at the end of the day. Trying to remember what spin he’s been putting on particular words. Hell, he made me tired just to listen to him. What are the names he wrote down?”

“Charles Arthur. Bill Cunningham.”

“Whoa,” Leonard said. “Charles Arthur. You know who that is, don’t you?”

“No.”

“King Arthur, the chili king. King Arthur Chili, like it said on the pad in the Jiffy bag.”

“I know who King Arthur is,” I said. “I just didn’t know him as Charles Arthur.”

“The pad in the Jiffy bag, then the name coming up at Antone’s, that’s certainly coincidental.”

“There’s lots of those pads,” I said. “They give them out free all over town. Raul cut Arthur’s hair, probably picked up a notebook while he was there. King Arthur could have given it to him.”

“With coded numbers written on it?”

“You got a point there,” I said. “But Raul could have brought the book home and Horse Dick could have written down the coded numbers for some reason. It could have been something he was working on. That makes more sense to me, actually.”

“Maybe,” Leonard said. “And still, Raul could have picked it up while cutting Arthur’s hair. Sneaked it.”

“I have to ask the same question. Why?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t we drive out to the plant, see if we can find King Arthur?”

“Big shot like him,” I said. “I bet he’s never there.”

“Yeah, but we got to start somewhere,” Leonard said. “Or how else we gonna get in our annoyance quota.”

KING ARTHUR CHILI ENTERPRISES, as the sign over the huge gate read, was way out in the country and set on about twenty-five acres. It was a cluster of big buildings that stank. One side of the acreage was a meat-processing plant, the other side housed the place where the chili peppers were ground and the chili was whipped up and shoved into and sealed in cans. The whole place smelled of hot pepper and drying blood.

There was a rendering plant out back of it all, and twice a week at night the stink of it was absolutely awesome. It was where the tougher meat, the hides and horns, and the occasional old horse were processed into soap, fertilizer, and other odds and ends. Or at least I think they still made soap out of old horses. Maybe not.

Joint used to pump out dead cow and horse stink in the form of greasy black smoke all the time, until city ordinances got tight and King had to start letting loose with his garbage smoke late at night, twice a week.

It was such a stout stink that sometimes, the wind was blowing just right, it would travel out as far as where I lived, slip in through the windows and gouge my nose until I came awake. On the side of town where Leonard lived, twice a week it would damn near slay you.

The lot was loaded with cars, but we found an empty space with some big shot's name written on the curb. We parked in that slot like it was ours and we were proud to be there.

The secretary was thin, young, silver-blond, and so goddamn cheery I wanted to strangle her. We told her we would like to see King Arthur, and she told us he was out. We asked to see someone in charge, and after twenty minutes in the guest chairs, the skimming of several stimulating magazines on the chili business, a nice-looking man about fifty with shiny gray hair came out. He was dressed in a plum-purple leisure suit with a white belt and white shoes. The leisure suit looked brand-new, and this baffled me. They had quit making those horrors years ago. It pointed to the scary proposition that this guy liked those fuckers so much he had them special-made. In my eyes he was already guilty of something, if nothing more than being a public eyesore.

He came over, shook our hands, told us his name was G. H. Bissinggame, and we told him ours. He asked us what he could do for us. I told him about Raul, how he used to cut King Arthur's hair, told him about Raul's murder, said we were curious about his death.

Leonard said, "We're kind of poking around, nothing official. We wanted to know if King Arthur could tell us anything about Raul might help us figure out who killed him."

Bissinggame furrowed his brow. "Why would Mr. Arthur know such a thing? Isn't this a matter for the police?"

"We're not saying he knows anything directly," I said.

“We’d just like to talk to him. Something Raul might have said, anything might give us a lead.”

“Why would he say anything to Mr. Arthur?” Bissinggame said. “Mr. Arthur was a customer, not the boy’s therapist.”

“Then you knew Raul?” Leonard asked.

“No.”

“Then how did you know he was young?” Leonard said. “You called him a boy.”

“Whoa, here,” Bissinggame said. “You’re being a little nasty. You’re trying to tie me into something, way you talk. You’re not the law. You don’t have the right to do that, and I’m sure there’s no need for Mr. Arthur to talk to you.”

“I just asked if you knew him,” Leonard said.

“No, you didn’t,” Bissinggame said.

“You’re right,” I said. “Leonard, here, he and Raul were very close. He’s a little touchy.”

“I apologize,” Leonard said, but with his tone of voice he might as well have gone on and called Bissinggame an asshole.

“Could you do this?” I asked. “Could we write down our names, phone numbers, and could you ask Mr. Arthur to call? We’re trying to help out the family, sort of piece things together for them. You know, last bits of information about their son.”

“You said you were trying to find leads to the murder,” Bissinggame said.

“That too,” I said.

“I’ll tell you now,” Bissinggame said. “Mr. Arthur, he doesn’t return calls. That’s why he has a secretary, and this Raul, I recognize who he is because Mr. Arthur often conducted business while getting his hair cut here at the plant. But I didn’t really know the boy. Mr. Arthur said very little to him, as I recall.”

“Let me ask this,” Leonard said. “What if Raul had a King Arthur Chili pad, and inside the pad there were some letters written down that coincided with phone numbers, and say these phone numbers connected with video stores, and say me and Hap had the pad and a couple videos, would that interest Mr. Arthur?”

Bissinggame looked at Leonard as if he had just swung in on a vine. “What?”

“Never mind,” Leonard said.

“You need a lesson in manners,” Bissinggame said to Leonard.

“You gonna give it to me?” Leonard said. “A man wearing a fuckin’ purple leisure suit is the one needs manners. Don’t you know shit like that offends everyone?”

“Come on, Leonard,” I said.

“I’m going to call security, you don’t leave right now,” Bissinggame said. “Our security people, they aren’t a bunch of fat cops. They don’t mess around.”

“Come on, Leonard,” I said.

“Security?” Leonard said. “Now I’m scared. What kind of leisure suits they wear? Lime green? Peach? You had on one of them peach kind, I’d have to hit you.”

“We’re going,” I said.

“Best do,” Bissinggame said. “Helen,” he yelled to the secretary. “Call security.”

Helen picked up the phone. I took Leonard’s elbow and led him out of there. As we went down the corridor toward the exit, I said, “Shit, Leonard. I can’t take you anywhere. Next time, you stay your ass in the car.”

“I bet that dick’s got on spotted boxer shorts,” Leonard said. “Man, them leisure suits, they’re a crime against humanity.”

“Well, you’re right about that.”

“Guy like that, way he defends his boss, I bet he’s got naked pictures of ole Chili King doing the ass end of a dead beef. Pins that to his mirror while he whacks off with his dick poking out of that leisure suit. Know what I’m sayin’?”

“I got you.”

“Fucker would give a snake a blow job, it wore a leisure suit.”

“Give it a rest, Leonard.”

“Cocksucker,” Leonard said. “Hope he gets a bowl of bad chili. Probably likes it that way, strained through his goddamn shit-stained underwear.”

“Careful. You start talking bad about chili, Texas is sure to be next. And you know well as I do that's not good."

"You're right," Leonard said. "I stepped over the line."

We had just gone out the door when a white car with KING ARTHUR CHILI written on the side of it parked in the middle of the lot and two guys in green uniforms with badges and no guns came over and stood in front of us. One of them was about the size of a moose, and the other may well have been a moose without antlers.

"We got a call you two were causing trouble," said the real moose. He was chewing on an unlit cigar as casually as a cow chewing cud. The other guy, the one the size of a moose, had an expression about as illuminating as a potted plant, but lacking the warmth. He could have been thinking about mayhem and murder, lunch break and a cigarette, sex or a gerbil up his ass. That face gave nothing away.

"How you know it's us?" Leonard said.

Moose grinned. "They said a white guy and a black guy."

"Yeah," Leonard said. "How do you know you ain't got the wrong black and white guy?"

Not A Moose said, "Because they said the nigger had a smart mouth. You're a nigger. You got a smart mouth."

"Now you've done it," I said.

"What?" Moose said.

"I said now you've done it."

"What the fuck's that mean?" Moose said.

"It means," Leonard said, "I'm in the mood to snap your dick off and shove it in your ear. Who you think you're connin'? You ain't even real law. Guys like you, we wipe our asses on you."

"Daily," I said.

"Yeah," Leonard said. "Daily."

"Sometimes twice a day," I said.

"That too," Leonard said.

"Yeah," Moose said, and his hand went to his back pocket and came back wearing a pair of brass knuckles.

Leonard said “Asswipe!,” stomped the guard’s foot, grabbed the hand with the knucks on it, swung under the guy’s arm, then with a palm on the fucker’s elbow snapped him to the cement, bouncing his head off of it, smashing his cigar into his face.

Not A Moose rushed forward then, about to grab Leonard. I kicked him in the leg, just above the ankle, stuck my thumb in his eye. He let out a yell and sat down in the parking lot, both hands over his face.

“I’m blind! I’m blind!” he yelled.

“Are not,” I said.

“I can’t see!”

“Take your hands off your face, you ignorant motherfucker,” I said.

As Not A Moose experimented with his vision, I turned to watch Leonard. Leonard peeled the brass knucks off Moose’s hand and tossed them on top of the chili building, said, “Fetch that, dick cheese.”

Dick Cheese, also known as Moose, came up on one knee and stayed there. He wouldn’t even look at us. He let the mashed cigar fall from his lips as if he were shedding a tooth.

Leonard said, “Y’all through?”

Dick Cheese nodded.

“Good,” Leonard said. “You guys need you another line of work. You’re not even mediocre at this one. My preference is neither of you get up till we’re gone. Hear me? That’s just a preference. You get to choose for yourself. That’s what makes this country great. Free choice. But you get up, me and Hap, we’re gonna shake out the jams. Know what I mean?”

We walked past Not A Moose, who was sitting on the ground nursing his watery eye. I said, “I’d put ice on it, I was you, otherwise it’ll get puffy all around. I’m sorry.”

“You skinned the shit out of my ankle too,” Not A Moose said.

“Ice might be good for that too,” I said.

We strolled over to the truck and drove off.

17

A few days went by and no answers fell out of the sky on us. Raul was still dead. I hadn't won the lottery. The two security guards didn't show up with new brass knucks. Bissinggame didn't send us a fashion catalogue containing custom-made leisure suits in ugly colors.

There were events, however. Leonard had finally gotten the tick off his balls. Used a match, as I had suggested. It worked. 'Course, as he feared, he managed to burn his nuts, so I was on his shit list for a couple days. The tick ended up in the commode, a burial at sea.

Somewhere during all this we put the notebook and the videos back in the Jiffy bag, placed them in a metal box, hid them out at Leonard's old house inside a torn-out section in the back of his living room couch.

I got my last rabies shot from my surly doctor, found out the squirrel head had come back positive from Austin. That part made me feel kind of weird for a day or two.

Oh, yeah, and the guy in a yellow Pontiac wearing a cowboy hat was glanced by Leonard and myself on several occasions, following us when we were together a couple of times, following me once on my own, and following Leonard a few times. It was, of course, the yellow Pontiac I had seen outside of Leonard's house the day I went in and found it tossed. So much for paranoia. Sometimes they *are* out to get you. They'd do better sneaking up on you, though, if they didn't drive yellow Pontiacs. A Yorkshire hog in a three-piece suit and a derby with a red turkey feather in it would have been less conspicuous.

We didn't let on we knew he was following us. We wanted him to make a move, but he never did. Kept his distance, wasn't always there, but just when you thought he was gone for sure, he'd show up again, like a pee stain in your shorts.

The only really good thing about those few days was Brett. We spent a lot of time together, getting to know each other, solidifying our relationship, allowing our souls to meld into one, and, of course, fucking like two anacondas during mating season.

So, life wasn't all bad on my end, but Leonard, well, he was like a pot of water on the stove. You never knew when he'd boil. Little things like that lousy tick and a burn on his balls set him off. And all those videos that had gone missing, his John Wayne and Clint Eastwood movies were in the batch. He really took that hard. And the fact his J. C. Penney's suit had been mistreated and had a stain of some kind on it didn't set well with him either. Just grumpy, is what he was. It was getting so I wanted to find Raul's killer just so I wouldn't have to hear Leonard bitch.

One day, because we hadn't figured out our next move, which with us was common, Leonard and I went miniature-golfing. Spring had choked off pretty much for good, it seemed. It was late April and unseasonably hot, like two rats in caps and sweaters fucking in a wool sock under a sun lamp.

The sand at the little golf course was turning pure white from the heat, was as thin as bleached flour, and the gravel that was mixed with it crunched wearily under our hot, heavy feet. No trees. Kids screaming and shoving. And the windmill on the tenth hole didn't work; wouldn't turn, so you had to kind of boost your ball over the boards on the side, shoot from the foul area, knock it back in. Done that way, it was hard to figure your points. I wanted to just pass up the hole altogether, but Leonard wouldn't hear of it.

"A man starts, a man finishes, no matter what," he said.

"Yeah, right, boss."

We batted the ball around for a while, and by the time we finished I had won and Leonard was in an even more foul mood.

"I used to be good at this," Leonard said. "You know me and Raul played a lot?"

"No. I didn't."

"Yeah. I always beat him. I can't believe you beat me."

"Look, you want the truth, Leonard, I boosted the ball with my foot on the windmill hole. Okay. It gave me the one-point difference.”

“What I figured … You’re not just sayin’ that?”

“Nope. I boosted it.”

“Cross your heart and hope to—”

“Leonard. I said, I boosted it.”

“I thought I saw you do that out of the corner of my eye.”

“Let’s don’t get too carried away.”

“Then you didn’t really?”

“I did, but I was very clever about it. You didn’t see me.”

“Good,” Leonard said, “loser buys lunch.”

There was a little restaurant in front of the miniaturegolf course, and we went in there to eat. It was supposed to be a health-food place, so most of the food tasted like yesterday’s dog shit reheated and hammered, but they made a pretty good meat loaf. We had that. We sat near the window.

The yellow Pontiac, which had followed us from home, was sitting across the street in the Kroger parking lot. It was a good spot. The traffic on North Street was heavy, and it would be hard for us to get over there before he spotted us, cranked up, and left.

“You think he thinks we don’t see him?” Leonard said.

“I don’t know,” I said.

Leonard ate a bite of his meat loaf, said, “Remember how this meat loaf used to just pass muster?”

“Yeah.”

“It tastes like it was rolled in someone’s dirty socks now.”

“Oh, good. I can’t wait … Who do you think the guy in the Pontiac is working for?”

“King Arthur,” Leonard said.

“You didn’t exactly take time to think about that answer.”

“No. You asked me what I thought, and I told you.”

“You got to remember, I saw Mr. Pontiac before we ever went out to the chili empire.”

“That’s because he had my house staked out. He was waiting to see who came in. You happened to be there.”

“But he quit following me. He just showed up again recently.”

“Right after we went out to the Chili King’s place of business. Seems obvious to me.”

“Why did he stop following me in between?”

“Maybe he lost you and didn’t find you again. Until lately. Hell, you gave Bissinggame your address and mine.”

I nodded. “That works pretty good. I like it. I doubt it’s true, but we’ll go with it. I hate unsolved stuff.”

“Me too,” Leonard said. “Want to go over and knock on his door?”

“We’d never make it. He’d be gone before we got halfway across the street.”

“You think he’s takin’ notes, snappin’ pictures?”

“I don’t care if he’s playing with himself over there, I’m tired of him following us around. It makes me nervous.”

As if he had heard us, the car began to roll. It went out of the Kroger lot and onto the street and headed north.

“Shall we chase it?” Leonard said.

“What?” I said. “And miss this meat loaf? … What the fuck we eatin’ here for?”

“It’s cheap and all we can afford,” Leonard said.

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “Pass the hot sauce.”

After lunch we came up with an idea. It may not have been the best in the world, but it was an idea, and when we had one, we liked to grab on to it and hold it tight, ’cause we might not have another.

We stopped at a gas station, filled up, and headed south for Houston. It was almost a three-hour drive, and then we got lost, so we spent five hours from LaBorde to the store I had written down on my list, East Side Video.

East Side Video was in an okay section of town and it had lots of videos. We looked around the store for a while, then went over to the fellow behind the counter. He was in his late twenties, with longish red hair done up in corn rows. He looked up at us. He had a pimple on his chin like a volcano. It had such a puss head on it you wanted to hit it with something.

“Help you?” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. “We’re looking for a special kind of movie.”

“What kind?” he asked.

“Well, I don’t see it on the shelves. It’s … a little different.”

“Yeah,” he said. “You mean in-and-out stuff? We got that, but we don’t put it out next to Mickey Mouse.”

“It’s under the counter, then?” Leonard said.

“Yeah. We got some stuff you can look at.”

“What we’re really looking for is a little different from that,” I said.

“How different?”

“Real different,” Leonard said. “We were told you had some tapes, some stuff like they make in Japan.”

The guy pursed his lips. “Yeah? Who told you this?”

“Some guy,” Leonard said.

The counter man nodded. “We got some tapes we sell that are a little different.”

“One we’re interested in … well … it’s got queers getting the shit kicked out them,” Leonard said.

The redhead grinned. “Yeah. Some people think they’re real. They look real ’cause they’re so sloppy. Yeah, we got that. It’s not common knowledge, but we got it. We sell ’em. Not good quality. I mean, it ain’t gonna be *Ole Yeller*, know what I’m sayin’?”

“Sell a lot of them?”

“No,” said the counter man, “but at a hundred dollars a pop, we don’t have to sell a lot. Come to think of it, I guess we do a pretty good business with it.”

“Against the law?” Leonard asked.

“Why you ask?”

“Just wondering,” Leonard said. “And if it is, maybe we got to think twice about buying it.”

“Technically it’s covered by the First Amendment. ’Cause it ain’t real. Just looks real. But there’s folks don’t like the idea, so we keep it under the counter."

"We seen the one our friend had," Leonard said. "It looked real."

" 'Tween you and me," the counter man said, "it might be real. But the people make 'em claim they ain't. They get cornered, they say they bought them from a video enthusiast and they're just showin' what someone took a video of. Kind of like reporting the news. You know, like that fellow few years ago did the video of executions. We got that one here, you want it."

"No, thanks," I said.

"These queer kick videos, I figure what the hell, one more queer with a black eye ain't nothing to me. I'd kick one of the little faggots myself, make him suck my dick I wanted it sucked, though I ain't so sure I'd want a queer's lips on my tootie-toot, know what I'm sayin'? AIDS and all. Fucker might bite me."

I could sense Leonard's tension. This guy kept it up, he was gonna wake up with a shelf full of videos shoved up his ass.

"All right," I said. "We'll take one. If it's one thing we like to see, it's a queer get his."

The kid reached under the counter and brought out a tape in a cheap box with a photocopied cover that read: KICKIN' FAIRIES.

"Nice title," I said.

"Yeah, they ain't real original," the kid said. "But I seen this one, and I tell you, if it's set up, it's set up good. It looks real as a car wreck."

I peeled a hundred dollars out of my wallet, just like I had it to spare. I put it on the counter.

The kid took the money and shoved the video at me and said, "No receipt on this stuff. No returns. We don't buy this shit back. We can run off another one cheaper than we can fuck with that."

"I.R.S. might not like you not keeping records on this stuff," Leonard said.

"I.R.S. might not know," the kid said.

We drove into the nightfall, cruised mostly silent back to LaBorde, the video on the seat between us.

18

I won’t describe the video we bought in great detail. We watched it when we got back to Leonard’s place. It gave me nightmares. Like the kid said, if it was set up, then it was a horribly beautiful setup.

In this one some thugs in the park, presumably the same cowardly thugs from the first video, still wearing their bar codes across their faces, took a brick and knocked a young man’s teeth out and made him suck them, bloody mouth and all. Then they kicked his ass and left him lying in the dirt. If it was special effects, it was damn good special effects. But considering the way the rest of the video looked, I doubted there was anything artificial about it.

“Do we show this to Charlie?” I said.

“Not yet,” Leonard said.

“Why not? I don’t like the idea of this thing being in my house.”

“We’ll put it inside the couch at my old place, with the rest of the stuff.”

“I don’t like that either.”

I took the video out of the machine and put it back in its box.

“I never thought I’d live to see such a thing as this,” I said. “I can’t believe it. What in the hell has happened to everyone? Every time I turn around, I’m amazed at how little I know about human nature. About anything, for that matter. But this …”

“Whatever it is,” Leonard said, “I’m tired of it being given names and excuses. Guy sells drugs, it’s because his grandma died. Poor kids sell drugs, it’s because they’re poor. Guy goes off his rocker, kills someone, it’s because he eats Twinkies and the sugar gave him a rush. I reckon sometimes it is those things, but you know what? I don’t give a shit. I think a person ought to be responsible for being an asshole. Used to, person had to be responsible, had to pay the price, there was less of this shit then."

"There're more people now, Leonard. More pressures."

"There are more assholes," Leonard said, "and it ain't got a damn thing to do with pressure. Or say it does. So what? You ain't been pressured, man?"

"Leonard, you yourself are talking about going out and eliminating some people. What's the difference?"

"Difference is, I'm responsible for my actions. I ain't gonna say I got a bad hotdog and it gave me a bellyache and that made me do it. I'm gonna do it 'cause I want to do it, and I got my eyes wide open going in, and if I can do it and get away with it I will. As for you, I only want you to go so far. I don't want to be responsible for your actions."

"It would be hard for me not to help you," I said.

"I know," Leonard said.

"What about Charlie?"

"Wait a bit."

"How long?"

"A bit. I want to see we can find some things on our own. We solve it, we got things laid out so the chief can't tuck it under his ass, then we show it to Charlie and maybe I don't have to empty my box of shotgun shells."

A day later I started looking for honest work. The dough I had made offshore had been damn good, but at the rate it was going, it wouldn't be long before I had nothing more than an empty palm and a flapping wallet.

I went first to the aluminum-chair factory, but just walking in the door made my stomach hurt. Factories and foundries, and I've worked in both, were my idea of hell on earth. I stood there a moment smelling machinery oil and listening to the thud of the machines at work, watching people shuffle about as if they were pushing great boulders up a hill, and I went out of there.

I went to a local feed company for a try. The foreman told me quite frankly, "We mostly just hire niggers and wetbacks 'cause they work cheap."

“I work cheap,” I said.

“Yeah, but the way we work someone, we wouldn’t do that to a white man.”

“Well, that’s certainly white of you,” I said. “Yeah, ain’t it,” he said.

I left that cocksucker to it, drove all over town, tried a lot of places, but there wasn’t much available, and what was available wasn’t worth having. I put in some applications. One that looked promising was a job at the chicken plant, being a security guard. It wasn’t exactly what I wanted, but at my age exactly what I wanted I couldn’t get and what I could get I didn’t want.

I began to think of the rose fields again, where I always found work, but decided against it. That hot sun, that dust up the nose, I just didn’t think I could go back to it. It was a young man’s job on his way to somewhere, a foolish man’s job on his way to nowhere, or the last job a man could get.

It was a pretty sad situation. Here I was in my mid-forties and no real job, no retirement fund, dog-turd insurance, and a squirrel bite on the arm.

After a day of unsuccessful job hunting, I drove over to Brett’s and took her to dinner at a kind of home-cooking joint, then we went back to her place, went to bed and made love, which was a damn sight better than looking for a job or working in the aluminum-chair plant. Though, considering most anything is, that isn’t giving Brett the sort of compliment she deserves.

As we lay in bed, we began to talk. We talked about all kinds of things, and gradually we got around to me and my life and I told her about my job search, and how I had never really settled into anything, jobwise, that mattered. I told her about Leonard, that he was black and gay and that he and I were as close as brothers. Probably closer.

“Wow!” she said. “I’ve never really known any black people, you know, close up. Friend-like. Way you say you guys are.”

“Is that a problem?”

“You know, I was one of them kind always thought that line about ‘some of my best friends are niggers’ made a certain sense. I didn’t mean nothing by it, I was just ignorant as a fuckin’ post.

Later on, I was all for civil rights, and I went out of my way to treat the blacks in school like they were my friends. Condescending is what I was. In other words, I was actually a blue-collar redneck trying to come across like a middle-class stiff ass trying to show those poor niggers what a liberal I was. So I haven't really hung around that many blacks."

"You didn't mention the gay part."

"Yeah, there's that, too. I always kind of thought of gays as perverts growing up. I never hung around any. Maybe it's high time I gave it a try. This Leonard, he's your brother, I reckon he ought to be mine too."

"You couldn't have said anything better."

"Great," she said. "I get to be the first in my family to hang around with niggers and queers."

I laughed at her.

" 'Course," she said, "my family background was the kind of folks thought you touched a black person's hand you could get cut, like sharkskin can cut you. I grew up thinking all blacks did was fuck, which seems like a fairly legitimate pursuit, actually."

"I like it."

"Yeah. It passes the time. My daddy, he was the kind of guy thought miniature golf ought to be Olympic sports, called blacks darkies when he wasn't calling them 'shines' or 'niggers.' My mother, who was a kind of liberal for where we lived, called them 'nigras' or 'coloreds' and thought they ought to have the right to vote but should have their own toilets and water fountains. Later on, after civil rights, she never did like the idea of going into a filling station and thinking a black ass had been on the crapper ahead of her. So, you see, I've had some hurdles to overcome."

"Well, your old man might have been a racist, but I'll tell you, when it comes to miniature golf as an Olympic sport, he might have been on to something. It's a hell of a lot more entertaining than skating."

Brett grinned. "Give us a kiss."

I did. And another.

"Now," she said, "make love to me and try to have it last longer this time."

"Thanks for considering my ego."

"Not at all," she said, shifting herself under the covers to accommodate me. "You know where the hole is, don't you?"

"I'm a little bit limp right now," I said.

"Hey, baby, it's not the meat, it's the motion. We'll make it happen if we have to poke it in there with a stick."

"Oh, that's stimulating."

We didn't have to resort to the stick.

And Brett was right.

It wasn't the meat. It was the motion.

19

Along nightfall, when Brett was off to work, I drove home happy and satisfied. Feeling that, in spite of things, life was coming together. I went inside, and as I reached for the light switch the ceiling fell on me and the floor jumped up and hit me in the face. Next thing I knew there was pain in my side and I was rolling into more pain, then hands had me and I was pulled up and a big shadow came out of the greater shadows of the house and kneed me in the groin, dropped me to the ground. Then the knee found my chin and gave me a little merry-go-round trip. Someone behind me put his forearm around my neck and squeezed and lifted. I was as good as hung.

"Howdy," said the big shadow.

All three shadows dragged me outside. They were not shadows in the pale moonlight, but men, and one of them was a very big man, the man in the video, the man who belonged to the feet that had made the tracks around Leonard's back door. Had to be. Guy like that, you could take his shoe and a boat paddle and shoot the Colorado rapids. He was the man Leonard called Big man Mountain, the professional wrestler.

The other two were economy-sized enough. They were not easy to see there in the moonlight, but one had a pale face that appeared to have exploded from the inside. The acne scars on his skin held the shadow, made the grooves in his flesh look like whiplashes.

The other was a stocky black man with close-cropped hair and a forehead that shone brightly in the light of the moon. He had breath as sweet as a bean fart.

Big Man Mountain pushed me down on my face, and the other two helped pull my arms behind me. They tied my wrists together with something that felt like wire, hauled me up and pulled me out back of my house.

There was a ’64 Chevy Impala parked there, probably black, but it was hard to tell in the dark. It might have been blue or green or any dark color.

I felt like a goddamn idiot. I had walked right into it. I hadn’t expected a thing. I had been too euphoric. They had driven over and parked their car behind my place, gone in through the back or broken out a window, and they had waited on either side of the door for me. The big guy, he had probably waited in the kitchen. I had walked straight into bad business, stupid as a duck flying over a blind.

The two smaller thugs put me in the backseat between them. The giant forced his frame behind the wheel, fired up the Chevy. A car passed us as we headed out of my driveway; its lights were bright and Big Man cussed them. We drove on down my little road, on out to a full-fledged four-lane, and away we rolled. Down the dark highway, away from town, out into deeper darkness where the highway lost its lanes and narrowed, where the trees hung thick like tar-baby fingers over the road.

Way on out we drove, heading toward Louisiana, which lay sixty miles away. I sat there and thought about what I could do, but it didn’t add up to much. My hands were behind my back and I was between two guys who looked as if the last sentimental thought they’d had was watching a puppy go under their car wheel and hoping the little motherfucker didn’t pop their expensive tires.

We rode on, the windows down, the wind blowing in cool and wet with the smell of swampy water. It ruffled our hair, dampened our faces. Cars passed us. Cars came up behind us. I wanted to stick my head out the window and yell, but I figured I did that, I was a goner for sure. I tried to stay alert, looking for possibilities. I had a feeling possibilities were somewhere other than Texas that night.

We went halfway to Louisiana, veered to the right down a red-clay byway, cruised into deeper darkness where the land turned swampy and the shadows grew great, and the head beams were the only light you could see.

Way out we drove. Way out.

“I don’t guess this is a surprise party?” I said.

“Oh,” said the black man on my left, “don’t know. Might call it that.”

“You surprised so far, ain’t you?” said the man with the pocks. He put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it and tossed the match out the window.

“We kinda good at surprises,” said the black guy. “Fact is, I thought you ’bout as surprised as anybody I ever surprised. And I surprised me a few.”

“Shut up,” Big Man Mountain said.

I wasn’t sure who he was talking to, me or the other guys, but we all went silent and the car cruised on and the wind was choked thick with the smell of damp earth. Sort that fills a grave.

Car lights swung in behind us, and for an instant they gave me an unreasonable hope. Then the lights moved to the side and the dark shape of the car passed us.

On we drove, into an even deeper wooded blackness where the trees dipped low and the vines hung loose, dripping down and scraping across the car like the wet hair of a drowned corpse, and finally there was just this little dirt driveway in a small clearing, and in the clearing was a shack. I reckoned it was some old hunting shack, probably abandoned, or owned by an out-of-towner, and Big Man and his buddies had taken it over. We parked and the two guys in the back helped me get out by encouraging me with a couple of sharp blows to the ribs.

I stood out there in the night, the moon leaking weak light through the trees like spoiled cheese dripping through a grater, and took in the smell of everything: rich earth, the rankness of swampy water, the stench of dead fish. Frogs bleated. A night bird cried. I could hear my heartbeat.

I figured these were to be the last things I would ever smell or hear, so I did my best to enjoy them. In an odd way I felt extremely alive.

I wondered if my body would ever be found. I wondered how long Brett would miss me. I wondered if animals would gnaw my bones. I wondered if Leonard would discover who did it, and if so I wondered how horribly they would die. I sort of hoped Leonard didn’t find out. The idea of him spending the rest of his life in prison did not appeal to me.

Pock Face took the key from Big Man Mountain, opened the trunk of the car, took out a foam ice chest, and carried it toward the shack. Big Man Mountain pointed the beam of his flashlight at the door, and the black guy opened the door with a key and we went inside.

There was an old gas-powered generator in one corner of the room, and Big Man Mountain gave the flashlight to Pock Face and he held it while Big Man fired up the generator and turned on the light.

The light was a low-wattage bare bulb dangling on a frayed black wire, and in the light, dust motes rode about the starkness of the room like frenzied insects. Near the generator was a table, and on the table was a car battery, some cables, a stained brown pillow, and a large metal bowl. The windows were boarded over. The back door had a flap lock on it with a padlock through it.

Beneath the bulb was a wooden chair. They sat me in that and produced some cord and tied my ankles to the chair. From that position I could see there was a ball bat by the door, leaning against the frame. It was stained all over. I had an idea what with.

Big Man came over, squatted down in front of the chair, and took a long look at me. His beard was jet-black and well groomed. His brown eyes were almost friendly, reminded me of a puppy that wanted a pat on the head. His voice turned soft, almost feminine. He carefully unwrapped a breath mint and placed it gently on his tongue. “You got scared eyes,” he said.

“You bet,” I said. In fact, they were starting to water.

“You and your nigger, you got stuff stirred up,” he said.

I glanced at the black guy. No help there. He wasn’t outraged and ready to change sides. *Nigger* was just a word to him. Fact was, he seemed kind of bored, like this was a job he did a lot and didn’t have feelings about one way or another, long as the paycheck showed up.

I glanced at Pock Face. He had his finger in his nostril, chasing a wily snot ball.

“You shouldn’t go around askin’ questions like you’re askin’,” Big Man said. “It could make some people look bad, know what I’m sayin’?”

“King Arthur?” I said.

“Well, let’s just say it could make some people look bad,” he said.

“Could I just apologize?” I asked.

“I don’t think so,” Big Man said. “Know what’s in the ice chest?”

“Ice?”

“Right. But no beer. No soda pop. No fish. Just ice. Ever had your balls packed in ice, Collins?”

“No. It sounds kinky, but I’d really rather not. Especially if you’re doing the packing.”

Big Man turned to the black guy. “Get the chest over here, Booger.”

“I ain’t handling his bobs,” said Booger. “You want his meat packed, you pack it.”

“Git the ice chest, shithead,” Big Man said.

Shithead didn’t look happy about it, but he went over and got the ice chest and set it by the chair. He opened the lid. I glanced inside. Crushed ice.

Big Man said, “What I do here is I take the ice, put some in a metal bowl, and we drop your pants, and we set the bowl in the chair, and put your ass on that pillow over there, and we drop your oranges in that bowl, and guess what?”

“My balls get cold?”

“Real cold. That normally might even numb the pain. But the thing is, they also get wet. You take a little electricity, hit on them wet spots, and let me tell you—there ain’t nothing like it. Know where I learned this little trick?”

“Your mom?” I said.

He grinned at me. “Guess.”

“I don’t want to guess.”

“Yeah, but I want you to,” Big Man said. “Unless you’re ready to get started.”

“Charm school,” I said. “You learned it in charm school.”

Big Man shook his head. “Professional wrestling.”

“No shit?”

“No shit.”

“Listen,” I said, “I haven’t got anything against you. I don’t even know you, or these other gentlemen. You don’t even have to drive me home. Just let me go.”

“I’d like to,” Big Man said. “I don’t like my work, but it is my work, and I’m good at it, and I made a vow a long time ago, once I start a job I finish it, and I do what I’m going to do as well as I can, even if I don’t like it.”

“Is this going to be like a warning?” I asked.

Big Man shook his head. “Not to you. To the nigger, yes. We’d have got him first, it would have been like a warning to you. Know what I’m sayin’?”

“Maybe you could get someone me and Leonard don’t even know and make it like a warning to the both of us,” I said.

“Very funny,” Big Man said. “It could be that woman you been bangin’.”

“You sonofabitch.”

“You want we should trade you for her?”

“Do your worst, asshole.”

“Oh, you don’t know my worst, gallant little man. Let me tell you, they put me out of professional wrestling ’cause I didn’t like to lose, even when I was supposed to. I liked to give people permanent injuries. Wrenched neck. Dislocated elbow. Knee. Rupture. Little mementoes. Got so no one wanted to wrestle Big Man Mountain.”

“It was probably the odor.”

“Trying to provoke me, aren’t you? You’re thinking maybe I’ll just finish you off. But no. You got to go the distance, you don’t tell me what I want to know. Back when I wrestled, had a little thing I did where I took a battery with a crank into the ring with me, hooked cables to my ears and pretended to fire myself up a bit. You know, crank it while it was hooked to my ears. One time, I fucked up. Battery was charged and I did it for real. Knocked me on my ass. I sort of liked it. A little jolt, it perks you up, you get used to it. Sort of like shock therapy. Which, by the way, I’ve had.”

“Get on with it,” Booger said.

“Shut up, Booger,” Big Man said. “I’m talking to Mr. Collins. You know, Collins, I know a lot about you. I been following you around. Having you followed. I know when you eat. When you shit. When you beat off. I know you’re throwing a pound of round to that little nurse. I’m thinkin’, all this gets through, you’re nothing but a greasy rag, I might could pay her a visit.”

“Leonard will kill you.”

“The nigger? I don’t think so, Collins. I think I will kill him.”

“Whatever,” Booger said.

“Mountain,” said Pock Face, “I ain’t ate yet. Can’t we get this shit over with? I want to grab a burger.”

“Get the ball bat,” Big Man said. “Warm up a little.”

Pock Face got the bat and started swinging it through the air. He banged it hard on the floor a couple of times, smashed it into the wall once. While this was going on, Big Man kept talking in that slow sweet voice of his.

“So, this shock business, if you’re used to it, you can take a little voltage. You’re not, hurts. I’m gonna hook your balls up, give you a few leaps to the meat, then I’m gonna ask some questions. Things about what you know and what you’ve done about it. Now I got to be honest here. You aren’t going to make it, Collins. Don’t try to imagine you are. You’re gonna die. The boys here, they’re good. They can make you suffer a long time. The faggot, Raul, you know about him. He made it hard on himself. I wouldn’t have thought it, you know. A fruit with balls, but he had them. Literally. They were big mothers when we put them in the ice.”

“Weren’t so big later,” Booger said.

“That’s right,” Big Man said. “That ice, the electricity. It doesn’t do a man’s *cojones* good, Collins. But you see, you tell us what we need to know, no voltage. Just a good shot to the bean with the bat. Puts you right out, if it don’t kill you. Couple more, gone for good. You only feel the first one. And not much ’cause you get nailed hard. No more worries. Try to be the tough guy, hold out, we got to give you some business. Hear what I’m tryin’ to tell you, Collins? Answer me, man.”

"I hear," I said.

"Good. So we got no hearin' problems here. Now here's your first question, and I beg you to consider before you answer. Where's the video?"

"What video?"

Big Man hung his head. "All right. Booger, take down his pants."

"You take down his pants," Booger said.

Big Man, who had been kneeling, came up suddenly and slapped Booger behind the head, pulling him into his other hand, which took hold of Booger's throat.

"You big black dick!" Big Man said. "I told you to take down his pants. Now do it."

He pushed Booger to the floor. Booger unfastened my belt and tugged at my pants and underwear, pulled them down to my knees. Pock Face handed him the pillow. Booger shoved me up and put it under my ass. He sat the bowl up next to me and scooped out a handful of ice with his hands and put it in the bowl and then he pushed the bowl under me so that my testicles hung into it. At first it was a cold jolt, but almost immediately I started to numb. I tried to shake myself loose, but Booger held the bowl. Pock Face came up behind me and slipped a rope over me and tied me more firmly to the chair.

Big Man said, "You aren't gonna believe the kind of trip you're gonna take. Over there into Pain City, my man. But, I'm gonna give you another chance to take the Ball Bat Highway on out of here. Last thing you'll hear is the wind from that bat. Then it's all over."

"I swing it just right," Pock Face said, "you won't hardly hear that."

"There you are," Big Man said. "Now, once again. And I want you to come right at me with the answer when I ask this. Where is the video?"

"You're supposed to know so fuckin' much about me, why don't you know where the video is?"

"Okay," Big Man said. "Maybe I don't know as much as I said. Maybe I know a lot less, but I'm here to learn, Collins. Where is it?"

"Go to hell."

"Kinney," Big Man said to Pock Face, "hook up the battery, bring it over here. Couple shots from Reddy Kilowatt, this fucker's gonna sing like a mockingbird."

Pock Face set to work.

"I ain't gonna keep hold of this bowl now," Booger said.

"'Course not, you moron," Big Man said. "You done this before."

"Naw, I did the bat last time," Booger said. "I like the bat."

"Everybody likes the bat," Big Man said. "Except, of course, the man in this chair. There's been a couple others in this chair, Collins, you know that?"

I wanted to say something smart, something strong. But I couldn't.

"You look a little nervous, Collins. Want to say about the video?"

My mouth was so dry I could hardly speak. "No."

"Man, what's the deal?" Big Man said. "It ain't nothin' to you. You're gonna die anyway. We don't get it from you, we got to go after the nigger. Maybe the nurse."

"She doesn't know anything," I said.

"I got to be the judge of that, Collins. I think you're an honest man. Really. I get those kind of vibes from you, but still, you see, I'm a professional. I might have to bring her out here. But I promise you this, Collins. I do, we'll make it nice for her. And since she ain't got no balls to drop in the ice, we might make it nice for her a lot of times. So many times it ain't so nice. And maybe it's not nice for her any time, but if it's nice for us, we got to keep it up till maybe she tells us something."

"She doesn't know a goddamn thing."

"Come on, Collins. Save her some trouble. Spare your nigger's balls. Tell us about the video."

"The police have it."

Big Man shook his head. "No they don't."

"Yes they do."

"Nope."

"Yes."

"Nope. They don't have it, Collins. I know that. You have it, or you know where it is."

Pock Face dropped two cables into the bowl. Booger let go of the bowl quick. Pock Face gripped the handle on the generator.

Big Man moved very close to me. He said. "We hit the crank, you get the juice, I can tell you now, you're most likely gonna shit yourself. If not this shot, the next one. Save the humiliation. Take the bat. We'll tidy you up a bit afterwards, pull your pants up, dump you in your nigger's yard. That way, you don't rot somewhere."

"I don't think you'd do that," I said.

"Use the bat?"

"Clean me up and dump me where I'd be found."

"You might be right," Big Man said, "but you could go out without all that pain. All right, Collins. The moment of truth. One last time, then Kinney, he's got to hit the crank, and then we got to start breakin' some things too. Where is the video?"

"What video?"

"Hit it, Kinney."

And Kinney did and the world went black and then white and then it threw colors all around and I felt my body jump like frog legs on a griddle, then I heard a scream, a loud, horrible scream, like a woman in fear, but the scream was mine. The room was blood-red, then black, and out of the blackness Big Man's face floated and hung above me like a moon made of gangrene flesh surrounded by hair and the sweet smell of a breath mint.

"How was that?" Big Man asked.

It took a while for me to get my breath. "Invigorating," I said.

"Oh," Big Man said. "You liked that, huh?"

Again, some time passed. I said, "I prefer it as a onetime experience."

"I bet. We got to do it again, Collins. Unless you want to tell me something I want to know. I'll say this for you, you let a fart like the clap of creation, but you didn't shit yourself. But let me tell you this. Booger, he knows better than to stand behind that chair. Shit has a way of flyin' out from the back there and sprayin'. Those stains on the pillow, what you think that is?"

"Olive oil?"

"Shit. A little blood."

"You might as well finish me," I said. "You aren't going to get anything from me, because I don't know anything."

"He might be tellin' the truth," Booger said.

"Yeah," Big Man said. "He might. But things still got to come out the same. How's about we give him another boost?"

I already felt as if I were going to pass out. I pulled up all my reserves, which were mostly AWOL, and steeled myself.

There was an explosion and the walls of the shack vibrated and the floor jumped and the lightbulb above me rocked and I realized it wasn't my balls and brain dealing with electricity. It was a real explosion, outside the shack.

Big Man bent down, snapped a revolver out of an ankle holster, leaped for the door, jerked it open. The night was bright orange and yellow with flecks of red. I could see the '64 Impala. It was blazing, sending up gasoline and oil to the great motor gods of the heavens.

A sound behind me. A *wham!* Followed by another. Then another. Booger leaped and got hold of the ball bat, and Pock Face jerked back from where he was kneeling. The wires on the battery jumped out of the bowl, and the bowl turned over and the ice ran under my ass. Pock Face bumped my chair and I went over sideways. Pock's head knocked against the lightbulb, sent it swinging.

Then it all happened in the alternating light and shadow of the swaying bulb.

Big Man popped a shot from his little ankle gun. It made a bright burst in the shadows. The bulb swung back and there was a blast from a shotgun.

Pock Face, aka Kinney, hurtled over my chair, crashed to the floor next to me. Some of the dark jelly that was now his face slapped against my cheek and chin. The blood was so hot it stung.

Big Man bellowed, bolted through the open door as another blast from the shotgun ripped into the air where he had been standing. Fragments of the wall and door frame leaped toward me.

Shadow.

A tall man, the one with the shotgun, stumped past me, and as the light swung back and finally came to rest, I saw his shotgun stock swing out, catch Booger upside the head with a sound like someone popping loose the vacuum-packed lid of a jar.

Booger took the blow with a grunt and a spray of teeth. He swung the bat, but the man holding the shotgun used his weapon to block it, brought the barrel around in a short arc and hit Booger in the face. Booger did a kind of backwards hop, hit the table, knocked it flat, fell down on top of it.

The man with the shotgun kicked his boot into Booger's balls. Booger screamed and the man fit the shotgun into Booger's mouth. He said, "Good night, ass-lick," and fired.

Booger's head sort of went away.

I lay very still. The man with the shotgun squatted down and looked at me. He was a lean-faced dude wearing a stained white cowboy hat, old boots, blue jeans, and a faded western shirt decorated with little green flowers. I realized the face belonged to the man in the yellow Pontiac.

"Your ass is hangin' out, friend," he said.

"I'm also tied to a chair."

"I see that."

"You planning on shooting me, too?"

"Well, you are kinda gift-wrapped … But no."

The cowboy took a large knife from his jeans pocket, cut the cord on my feet and around my chest, then he got behind me and went to work on the wire, twisting it free.

I wobbled as I tried to stand. The cowboy put the knife away with one quick movement, took my arm and helped me. I pulled up my pants and fastened them. I said, "Man, I don't know what to say … Did you have to kill them?”

“How about ‘Howdy’? And yeah, I guess I did. I started to just yell time-out, but decided that wasn’t a good idea. I’m Jim Bob Luke.”

“Hap Collins,” I said.

“I know who you are,” he said. “I followed them out here, then drove past, you know, to stay cool, so they wouldn’t know I was following them, but the sonofabitches sort of lost me for a time or I’d have been here sooner.”

“I’m just glad you showed up. Not that I understand why. What about Big Man?”

“Oh, I ain’t worried. I been watchin’ the doors.”

“Confident, aren’t you?”

“I invented the goddamn word. Now, why don’t you use your shirtsleeve and wipe them brains off your face, and let’s skedaddle before ole big un comes back.”

“I thought you were confident.”

“I am. But I ain’t stupid.”

20

Jim Bob Luke led me out through the back way, over the door he had kicked down. We went quickly into the woods. He moved well in the woods, and we went along like that and found a spot where we could look through the foliage, back at the shack and the raging fire of the Impala, but there wasn't any sign of Big Man Mountain.

"Hated to burn a classic car like that," Jim Bob said. "I started to just kick the door down and come in blazin', but I like a little edge. You any good with guns?"

"I don't like them, but I'm good with them."

"Good. I got another one here, and it ain't no peashooter. It's a forty-five automatic."

He gave it to me. We sat there and watched the car burn. The fire wasn't so high now and it licked around the frame of the Impala like the devil's tongue licking the bones of an animal.

"Ole big un is out there somewhere," Jim Bob said. "I'm tryin' to decide I want to hunt him down or not."

"He has a gun."

"I know. He shot at me with it. He's a shitty shot. Couldn't hit a circus elephant in the ass with a trick stool. But out here in the dark, and this being his stomping grounds, maybe I ought not. How you feelin'?"

"Queasy."

"Can you buck up?"

"Yeah."

"Come on."

We moved deeper into the woods, along the edge of a swampy creek, then finally out of the trees into a clearing. We climbed under a barbed-wire fence and onto the grass next to the road. The yellow Pontiac was parked there, in the grass. It sat on four flat tires.

“Well,” Jim Bob said, looking around. “Looks like ole big un got here ahead of us.”

“Think he’s watching us?”

“Could be.”

Jim Bob reached in his back pocket, took out a pen-light and flashed it around. He found tracks in the soft dirt of the road. He said, “Motherfucker’s got some feet on him, don’t he?”

“I’ll say.”

“And look here.”

Jim Bob put the penlight’s glow on the side of his car. There was a deep scrape along the side.

“He just had to do that, didn’t he?” Jim Bob said. “Well, the scraped paint don’t stop me, and I got me four spares in the trunk, so fuck him. I used to be a goddamn Boy Scout. I came prepared.”

I hurt something awful downstairs in the ball department, but I changed the tires while Jim Bob kept guard with the shotgun. “Why’d he just do the tires?” I said. “Why not screw something else up?”

“I think we interrupted him,” Jim Bob said. “And he didn’t want any part of this shotgun.”

I changed the tires as fast as I could, constantly expecting a shot in the back. But Big Man Mountain didn’t come out of the woods with his little ankle gun blazing. He didn’t offer to help me with the lug bolts. A Saint Bernard didn’t bring me a keg.

When all four spares were on, Jim Bob put the flats in the trunk along with the jack and drove us out of there. I couldn’t hold out any longer. The pain was too much. The activity had made it worse. I passed out on the car seat.

When I awoke, Jim Bob had my feet and Leonard had my arms. I looked up at Leonard. He said, “Take it easy, brother. You all right now.”

“Funny,” I said. “I don’t feel all right.”

I closed my eyes and they carried me away and put me on a cloud and the cloud was comfortable, except for a fire built between my legs, but I couldn’t move to get away from the fire; no matter how hard I tried it followed me, and finally I slept, fire or no fire, and in my dream heads kept exploding, and two rabid squirrels, one with a pocked face, the other one black with a shaved head, bit me repeatedly on the balls, while another squirrel, very plump with oversized feet and a beard and devil’s horns, turned a crank on a battery that threw sparks.

21

When I awoke it was early morning, still dark. There were strands of light in the darkness outside, but the strands seemed to be suffering against the night, as if blackness had decided to push the light back and hold it down until it stopped breathing.

And maybe it just seemed that way because I had witnessed two men killed and hadn't had any breakfast and my balls felt as if someone had borrowed them during the night for a game of Ping-Pong and had put them back in reverse.

I went into Leonard's kitchen, saw Jim Bob sitting at the table with Leonard. They were drinking beer. Jim Bob had his hat cocked back on his head, his legs resting on a chair.

"Breakfast of champions," I said.

"There you have it," Jim Bob said. "Pour these suds on a bowl of cornflakes, you get all the vitamins you need for a day."

I got a glass and the milk jug out of the fridge and sat at the table. I poured milk in my glass. Even doing that made my balls hurt.

Leonard said, "Jim Bob here's been tellin' me about last night. Just started telling me some other stuff. Actually, now that I think about it, I been tellin' him stuff, and I don't know why."

"I'm charmin'," Jim Bob said.

"Yeah, and I could be fuckin' up, talkin' like that," Leonard said. "I don't even know you."

Jim Bob grinned. "Like I said. I'm charmin'."

"You saved my man's life, here," Leonard said. "That gives you some points. But it don't give you the game. Know what I'm sayin'?"

"I think I'm pickin' up the important parts," Jim Bob said.

"Way I see it," I said, "I could use lots of explanation. And let me throw in a tip, Jim Bob. Don't try and follow people in a yellow Pontiac. It's conspicuous."

"Hell," Jim Bob said. "I know that. I wasn't all that worried you saw me or not. Not later on. I followed you lots you didn't see me, yellow Pontiac or not. Actually, my preferred toolin' vehicle is a red fifties Cadillac I call the Red Bitch, but right now it's in the shop. Or to be more exact, it's being rebuilt from the tires up. I fucked that baby up big-time. Ran it into a brick wall tryin' to run over a sonofabitch tried to kill me."

"You're quick to take people out, aren't you?" I said.

"Wooo," Jim Bob said. "Now that he's at the house all safe and sound with his balls in his drawers, he don't want to like no killin's. Let me tell you something, Collins. Wasn't for me, you'd have charcoal briquets for nuts right now. You think I could have gone in there last night and them boys would have just challenged me to a paper-rock-scissors contest?"

"Ole Hap here," Leonard said, "he swats a fly, he's gonna brood on it for a couple days, maybe put out a little sugar on a dog turd for the relatives."

"I'm just saying two men are dead. I'm not saying I'm against you saving my life or protecting your own. It had to be done, but I'm not proud of the fact."

"Hell, I'm proud," Jim Bob said. "Only thing I regret about drizzly shits like that is I can't kill them three or four times apiece."

"How do you know about us?" I asked.

"He's a private detective," Leonard said. "He also knows Charlie."

"That certainly helps with the detective work, doesn't it?" I said.

"That's a fact," Jim Bob said. "But I done told Leonard some of this stuff."

"How about you go over it a little more?" I said.

Jim Bob upended his beer. "You got any more of this piss?"

"Fridge," Leonard said.

Jim Bob got up, found himself a beer, sat down. He twisted off the top and took a deep jolt. He sounded like a pig sucking on a nursing bottle.

When he had slogged about half the beer down, he sat the bottle on the table, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, said, “I reckon I can give you the short sporty version.”

“I get the feeling nothing you say is going to be short,” I said.

Jim Bob grinned at me. “You got a point there. I won’t kid you, I like to hear myself talk, ’cause I’m so goddamn interestin’.”

“Then make me interested,” I said.

“Whoa, goddamn it, hold off,” Jim Bob said. “Incoming.”

Jim Bob lifted his hip and let a fart fly.

“I been saving that one,” he said.

“It was nice of you to share it with us,” Leonard said.

“Yeah, well, sniff deep and you can have a Mexican dinner secondhand,” Jim Bob said.

“Don’t you get a little tired working so hard to be folksy?” I said.

“Naw,” Jim Bob said. “I figure it’s kind of an edge. People don’t know what you’re really thinking. They think you’re just a shallow good ole boy.”

“But you aren’t?” I said.

Jim Bob gave me a dazzling smile. “Naw, Collins, I ain’t. But you can believe what you want.”

“Jim Bob’s here because of a kid named Custer Stevens,” Leonard said.

“That’s right,” Jim Bob said. “His parents live in Houston. I have my office over in Pasadena, Texas. Or I call it an office. It’s a little pig farm I own. These days you got to shoot the bad guys and raise your own meat, ’cause the pay for private detective work stinks.”

“You’re drifting again,” I said.

“So I am,” Jim Bob said. “Well, this Stevens, his boy come down here to go to the university. Damnedest thing was they sent him here to get him out of the big city, thought he’d be nice and safe here. Neither one of ’em knew Custer liked to suck dicks. Anyway, Stevens had a chum down here named Richard Dane. Few years back I did some work for ole Dane, and Dane recommended me to Stevens."

"You get around, don't you?" I said.

"I certainly do," Jim Bob said. "There ain't hardly a town in East Texas I ain't worked in one way or another. There's people all over the place got problems, and I'm a problem solver."

"You left out what this Dane recommended you to do," Leonard said.

"Well, this boy, Custer, he come down here and got in with boys liked to do the brown-eye express, and pretty soon he's hanging out in the park shoppin' for goober. He meets a guy, and this guy takes him into the middle of the park, then a bunch of guys jump out, beat him up, knock Custer's teeth out, make him do a circle suck and a goober jerk for about fifteen minutes."

"And they put it on film," I said.

"Exactly. Custer decides to phone his parents about the fact he's a Hershey highway kinda guy, tells them what happened. They get all bent out of shape about his sexual preference, but when they drive down to see him, see the beatin' he's took, hear about the video, they forget all that shit and do the right thing. They go to the police. They talk to the chief. He gives 'em a line of shit, but they can tell pretty quick-like he don't give a fuck about a fag and they get vibes he thinks the whole thing serves the boy right.

"To shorten it up, the boy leaves school, goes home, and they wait for justice. And wait. And wait. Chief ain't do'n dick. He's shufflin' some papers. Now, Richard Dane comes in. He's in contact with Stevens, and he's the one recommended the boy go to college here in the first place, so Dane, he feels guilty. He tells Stevens I done some work for him once came out satisfactory, and he might want to hire me to snoop around. Stevens hires me. I know Charlie on the department from a little job a year back. I call him, drive down to visit. Charlie helps where he can, but it ain't much. He tells me about the other beatings in the park. All of them swept under the rug by the chief, so I start poking my nose around and this fella McKnee keeps comin' up."

"Horse," I said.

"That's the one," Jim Bob said. "I check out the park, this guy's always around. There's gay action, this guy's around. You wouldn't believe how many propositions I got from goober grabbers while I was doin' this."

"You don't hear me propositionin' you," Leonard said.

"Yeah, well, it was just the good-lookin' ones," Jim Bob said. "I was flattered, but I don't swing that way. But hell, I played the game a little. There was even one with a fat ass and a funny hat I might have had a fantasy or two about."

"Cut the shit," Leonard said. "Get on with it."

"I'm doin' this for a while, then this Raul shows up. He's with Horse. I start seein' him around. It don't mean nothin' until I go to the park one night with my standard queer duds on—"

"What are standard queer duds?" Leonard said. "Do I look like I got on standard queer duds?"

"Well, I don't know what you got on underneath," Jim Bob said.

"You're startin' to fuck with me," Leonard said. "I don't like it."

"Like it or don't like it," Jim Bob said. "There's a way most of them fellas dress. I ain't puttin' 'em down for it, but they dress a certain way, 'specially if they're tryin' to get their cable up a butt. I dressed way I seen them dress. And it worked. So there."

Leonard leaned back in his chair with his arms crossed. He looked as if he could eat ground glass and chew nails.

Jim Bob said, "I'm tryin' to connect with these fucks beat up Custer Stevens, so I'm roamin' the park day and night, and one night this fella, a good-sized fella, comes up to me and makes with the come-on.

"I'm thinkin', now, if this guy just wants to play and I lead him on, I'm gonna feel kinda silly when it gets to the part where I'm supposed to swing my rope, but I play along, and this guy leads me to a spot, and these guys come out of the bushes on me. I had to give a couple of them an attitude adjustment with my blackjack."

Jim Bob suddenly produced the blackjack from his back pocket and slapped it into his palm. "Couple of shots from this and it's lights out and a headache in the mornin'. Them fuckers bolted. When they did, I seen there was someone else runnin', some fuck in the bushes. I chased after him. He had a video camera. I was closin' on him when this guy—one led me into ambush in the first place—caught up with me and jumped me. It was the fella I shot to hell last night. White guy with the moon craters. I wrestled that fuck all over the park, got him in a step-over-toe hold, and cranked on that baby a while."

Jim Bob replaced his blackjack, sucked more beer, continued.

"By this time his buddies, ones weren't unconscious, got their shit together, and one of them had a gun, and I hadn't brought mine, and I knew that was my cue to go to the house. So I darted, and they let me dart. I made it to my car, and what do I see as I'm jettin' away from the park? The guy with the video camera, and he's gettin' on the back of this Harley, and ole Horse is drivin', and you got one guess who this video man was."

"Raul," Leonard said.

"On the nosey," Jim Bob said. "They were videotapin' this shit for their pleasure. Or, to be more precise, for money."

"Raul was the cameraman?" I said.

"You betcha," Jim Bob said.

I watched Leonard's face do a series of moves, then settle.

I turned back to Jim Bob. "Did you know these tapes were going underground to video stores?"

"Having encountered similar things before," Jim Bob said, "I sort of put it together. And it didn't take a genius to figure the folks I had my little tadoo with in the park were the ones beat the Stevens kid up and that Horse and Raul were connected. I followed them. And later I followed them some more. Sometimes one, sometimes both."

"I guess all that watchin' got you connected to me and Hap," Leonard said.

"Yeah," Jim Bob said. "And I found out Raul went out to King Arthur's place to cut hair, and later to his plant. And then all this shit starts comin' down, and I get to puttin' it all together, tryin' to make a case I can give the cops, and guess what. I lose track a bit, next thing I know Horse gets his head blown off and Raul disappears."

"And what did our intrepid investigator deduce from all this?" I asked.

"I figured Leonard done 'em both in. I figured I had to follow that part of the story too, you know, construct the whole picture. So I come here and I see you come out of the house, Hap. I been spot-checkin' you two ever since. You got good taste in nurses, Hap."

"Leave her out of this," I said.

"Nothing raw meant," Jim Bob said.

"Charlie knew all this?" Leonard asked.

"Nope," Jim Bob said. "I didn't keep Charlie informed. I got the original info from him, then I was on my own. I didn't even know he knew you two until after Horse bought his ticket. I seen him talkin' to you then. And I talked to him yesterday some."

"When did you decide I wasn't the killer?" Leonard asked.

"When the cops decided you weren't," Jim Bob said.

"But still you followed?" I said.

"That's right," Jim Bob said. "I didn't know exactly what I was followin', but I was followin'. I was checkin' other leads too. You guys weren't the only ones. You're lucky I was followin' last night."

"And why were you?" I asked.

"I thought it was time you and me met, talked," Jim Bob said. "I realized we were after the same thing—folks behind all this shit. I thought I'd talk to you, then Leonard. I was on my way to your place when Big Man Mountain passed me in the Impala and I seen you in the back. And you didn't look like you were on your way to the skatin' rink. I turned around, followed, and you know the rest."

"Bottom line," Leonard said. "What's this all about?"

"What do you figure?" Jim Bob said. "I've showed you mine, now show me yours."

Leonard looked at me. I nodded. Leonard said, "We figure King Arthur has some thugs who are stealin' grease, and Horse gets in with these thugs as an undercover cop. He takes some secret video of King Arthur's men stealing grease and they want it back. Then there's this other video of the stuff like happened to your client in the park. I guess Horse and Raul found out about that business by accident, then dealt themselves in. Even started helping make the videos. Christ! I thought I knew Raul."

"Shit," I said, "that's the whole story right there, isn't it? Horse started out investigating, then got in on a better end of the business. Grease-napping was the sort of thing he'd turn in, but this other thing, the video business, he could make some real money there. He dove in and went to work for the bad guys. They said anything, he could turn them in and just say he was workin' undercover, playin' them along. He had them over a barrel."

"In summation," Leonard said, "we ended up with a couple videotapes and a notebook full of coded stuff."

"All right," Jim Bob said. "That's interesting. It may not mean what you think, though."

"How's that?" I asked.

"Look here," Jim Bob said. "You got to see things through. You take flyin' saucers, for instance."

"Flyin' saucers?" Leonard said.

"Yeah," Jim Bob said, "for instance. Guy goes out at night, sees somethin' in the sky he don't recognize, he starts talkin' about UFOs. And he's right. He did see an Unidentified Flying Object, but that's all he saw. UFO doesn't mean flyin' saucer, spacecraft. It means somethin' unidentified. But way most people think is they see something they don't know, next thing is they're sayin' they saw a flyin' saucer, when in fact they don't know what they saw. Might be a flyin' saucer, might be God moon'n' us, but they don't know. It's a jump they've made."

"You're sayin' we're jumpin' conclusions?" I said.

"I'm sayin' you could be," Jim Bob said. "Or rather I'm sayin' you could just have part of the story. Know what else it could be?"

Leonard sounded solemn as a reverend preaching his mother's funeral. "Could be Raul and Horse Dick decided to blackmail King Arthur about the videos he was makin'. Ones they helped make."

"Bingo," Jim Bob said.

"No shit!" I said.

"No shit," Jim Bob said. "Horse still has the undercover connection, King can't say anything to the cops 'cause he'll get nailed, and he can't really do anything legal to Horse, 'cause Horse can do what you said, claim it was all part of his undercover sting."

Leonard said, "I figure Raul and Horse decided to mail that package to my mailbox. Thought they were safe long as they had that. But they were wrong. Whoever they were blackmailing decided to eliminate the blackmailers, take the pressure off, then all they had to do was find the blackmail items."

"That's right," Jim Bob said. "They snooped around. Didn't come up with the business, decided you guys had a connection, took a flyer and toted Hap out to the woods for a few bouts with a battery and a ball bat."

"And they still don't have what they want," Leonard said.

"But they still want it," I said.

Jim Bob nodded and sipped the rest of his beer. "That's about the size of it," he said.

22

I managed a shower to give myself some perk, put back on my clothes, and Jim Bob drove me out to my house. Leonard rode with us. Leonard had armed himself with a little .38 revolver that he wore in a clamshell holster. He had his shirttail out, as usual, so the little pistol was not visible unless you were looking for it.

Jim Bob, equipped with his twelve-gauge, opened the front door and led the way inside. Leonard went in the back, I went after Jim Bob.

The place was empty. The back door had been jimmied and the door was completely off the hinges. That was how they had gotten in after parking the Impala out back.

I hadn't noticed it the other night, probably because my concentration was mostly on Big Man's knee in my face, but the house had been tossed from one end to the other.

"Maybe they know about my old place too," Leonard said. "We ought to get over there."

We went. Inside, his house looked the same. No footprints in the dust. Everything in its place. Leonard pulled the couch from the wall and reached up in the rip and removed the metal container. He opened it. The video and the King Arthur Chili pad were there. He had brought the video we bought from the store in Houston, and he added that to the box and took it with him.

We drove back to my place and Leonard and Jim Bob helped me set the door back on the hinges. We found the hinge pins they had knocked out lying in the backyard. We shoved those back in. The door hung a little crooked, and when it closed it bulged some at the lock, but at least it closed.

I went in the bedroom, opened my nightstand drawer. My .38 revolver was still there, along with a box of shells. I changed into a clean shirt and pants, got the revolver out of the drawer and made sure there wasn't a load under the hammer. I put the .38 in my waistband, took a handful of shells, poured them into my pants pocket. It's a good thing I was out of grenades, because I wouldn't have known where to wear them.

We talked a little about this and that, and Jim Bob gave us the number of the Holiday Inn where he was staying. He drove off, and Leonard took the videos and the notebook out of the box and stuffed them in a couple of plastic bags and put them back in the metal file box. He got my shovel and went into the woods while I straightened the house. He was going to the Robin Hood tree, to bury the file box. Good idea.

About an hour later he came back and helped me finish straightening up the living room. While we worked, I said, "How'd it go?"

"The ground was hard," he said.

We finished up and I made some coffee. Leonard and I sat down at the kitchen table with our cups. I said, "What do you think?"

Leonard shook his head. "I don't know. I think it's like I said, like what Jim Bob thinks. Raul and Horse Dick tried to blackmail King Arthur and lost their lives for it."

"Blackmail," I said. "That seems kind of intense. I always thought Raul was, as you say, a little shallow, but blackmail?"

"I look back on things, I think maybe it's his style. It's not something you really see close-up, or want to see, but now I feel like a fool. One of the things hardest to figure in life, and you may have been the one told me this, but there's this person you meet who seems intelligent, you know, has a common awareness of things, but when you get right down to it, they've got no real depth. They're less than what you see. I was beginning to realize that about Raul. Not that it helped much."

"Does it change how you feel about him?"

"Things changed the minute he started hanging out with Horse Dick. I started to understand things about him I didn't like. Worse, I got to understand some things about myself. Like maybe I'm not quite the tough guy I thought I was. I still love the guy, but it's mostly in memory. I got to say this, though, he was a hell of a sight tougher than I imagined. That's a side of him I didn't know."

"You mean the business with the battery? The ball bat?" Leonard nodded. "Yeah."

"Could be he was just tryin' to hang on to life," I said. "Knew he told where stuff was, it was all over. Person will take a lot of pain to live as long as they can. It isn't necessarily brave, it's desperate. Guy like Raul, he might have thought no matter how much pain he went through, eventually they were gonna let him go. You know, like when you're a kid in the school yard and the bully holds you down and roughs you up, but you figure at some point he's got to quit."

"Hell, Hap. Let's just say he had guts."

"All right," I said. "He had guts. But knowing what you know now, can you let it go? It's not really our place, this judge-and-jury business."

"Don't forget executioner."

"I was trying to skip that part."

"Way I see it, you take Raul out of the equation, these fucks have screwed my house up, they've tried to torture and kill my best friend—"

"Wasn't no try about it. You ought to see my balls."

"No, thanks. You wouldn't look at my tick, so I'm not looking at your wounds …. What I think is, take 'em out. The law's got itself all balled up, so we got to do it. Charlie, he can only do so much. King Arthur, he's a man with money and thugs. He does what he wants, unless we get rid of him."

"Too much for me."

"After what they did to you?"

"I don't want to be like them, Leonard. I keep telling you that."

"Trust me. You aren't like them."

I sipped my coffee, studied the sky through the kitchen window. I said, "What about Jim Bob?"

"I think he's a dick, but I trust him."

"He's a friend of Charlie's. Charlie sees something in him, guess we got to give him the benefit of the doubt."

"He's full of himself, though."

"There's that," I said. "But let me tell you, he can do what he says he can do. You should have seen him take those two guys out, and ole Big Man, he knew the fucker wasn't kiddin'. He beat a retreat right off. He'd been about a fraction slower, you could have strained strawberries through him. And I tell you, Big Man, he isn't a shrinking violet. He told me how when he was wrestling he used to charge himself up with a shot from a generator and a battery."

"Don't believe everything you hear," Leonard said. "Wrestlers, they're showmen."

"Hey, I believe him. You haven't been face to face with the guy. He's some kind of seriously sincere scary, babe. That's what I'm tryin' to tell you. What I think is we ought to turn over the videos and the notebook to Charlie. He does the best he can, and we're out of it."

"I know how his best will turn out," Leonard said.

"He's a good man," I said.

"Yeah," Leonard said, "but without Hanson around, and the chief having his dick in more holes than we can imagine, it'll get buried. I don't want it to get buried."

"Shit," I said. "I can't believe how fucked up I am."

"What?" Leonard said.

"I'm sittin' here like I'm on holiday, and Big Man, he threatened Brett. Come on, let's get over to the hospital."

I drove us there and we went inside and up the elevator to the floor where Brett worked. I talked to a guy in a white jacket pushing a food cart, but he didn't know Brett from Eisenhower.

We went to the nurses' station and I asked a pretty black nurse if she knew Brett, and she did, and she pointed down the hall. A big heavy black nurse, who must have been head of operations, caught the tail end of our conversation and gave me a dirty look. I tried my charming smile on her. She didn't seem to like it much. She touched her nurse's hat as if it might have a razor edge and that she might whip it off at any moment and throw it at me.

I knew it wasn't wise to mess around Brett's job like this, put her on the spot, but I had to talk to her. Had to tell her what kind of bad position I had put her in. As usual, just knowing me was causing someone I cared about pain.

I looked around as we went down the hall, nervous as hell, half expecting Big Man to come out of a sickroom with a battery and generator under one arm, a ball bat under the other.

At the end of the corridor I saw Brett come out of a room, look in my direction, double-take, smile, then walk toward us.

“That her?” Leonard said.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Looks your type,” he said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

But there wasn’t time for him to answer. Brett was in front of us. I could tell she was looking over my shoulder, back at the nurses’ station.

She said, “Hap. Good to see you. But I’m working right now.”

“I know,” I said. “This is Leonard Pine.”

She smiled at Leonard. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Nice to meet you,” Leonard said.

“Really,” Brett said. “I can’t visit. Old Lady Elmore runs a tight ship.”

“That the fat lady looks like her feet hurt?” Leonard said.

Brett grinned. “That’s her. And her feet probably do hurt. Mine do.”

“Brett,” I said. “I don’t mean to bother you. This is kind of an emergency.”

“Emergency?” she said.

“No one’s hurt,” I said. “Well, not much. But inadvertently I may have got you into some deep shit.”

“I don’t get it,” she said.

“I know,” I said. “Can you get off?”

“I … I don’t know,” she said. “If I can get Patsy to take over for me. But she won’t like it. I was just on vacation.”

“What about Ella?” I said.

“I wouldn’t ask her right now,” Brett said. “I’m just glad she and I have started talkin’ again. She’s finally thinkin’ about leavin' that shit Kevin."

"Good," I said. "But you got to get off. Really. I wouldn't do this if it wasn't important."

"Okay," Brett said. "Okay. But will you go down to the lobby and wait?"

We sat in Brett's living room, Brett and I on the couch, Leonard in a chair across the way. I explained all that had happened, told her about Jim Bob and our conclusions.

"My God," she said. "I certainly know how to pick my men."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I never thought it would come to something like this."

"This wrestler?" Brett said. "He threatened me?"

"He knew about you," I said. "He may have been talking out of the side of his mouth, but after what happened to Raul, and me, I got to be worried about you."

Brett sat for a moment. She looked at me. She looked at Leonard. She went into the bedroom and shut the door.

Leonard said, "Sorry, Hap."

"Yeah."

The bedroom door opened. Brett came out with a holster containing a .38—.38's were certainly popular in my circles.

"Let him come," Brett said. "I like you, Hap. You got your warts, but so do I. You didn't bring this on yourself. Let the fucker come. I'll shoot him so full of holes he'll think he's a tennis net. I done burned one fucker's head, guess I can put a bullet in another one's."

I thought, goddamn, if this ain't true love, I don't know what is.

23

"They're a little slow," I said, "and I'd keep my conversation down to stuff like, 'Bathroom's over there,' 'Coca-Cola's in the fridge,' and 'Do you want that bucket of chicken crispy or original recipe?' "

We were in Brett's living room, me and her, and we were looking out the window at Leonard, who had just arrived in my truck with Leon and Clinton. You could see them clearly beneath the bright streetlight.

Leon and Clinton were two black twins in their thirties with heads like bowling balls and bodies like the columns that hold up the British Museum of Natural History.

They were friends of Leonard's. He met them after whipping their asses. They had given Raul a hard time at a convenience store, and Leonard, who was considerably smaller, heard about it, hunted them down, and wiped the floor with them. Him beating them like that had nothing to do with their toughness; they were tough. But Leonard was tougher. Better trained. And smarter. 'Course, bless their hearts, a snapshot of a human brain was smarter than they were.

Since that time, they had been there for Leonard when he needed them. He needed them now, for me.

They got out of the truck and stood around in Brett's yard. Leon, also known as Scum Eye because he had some kind of condition that'd made his eye mat over, picked up a rock in the yard and threw it and hit Clinton in the back. Clinton, pissed, looked around for a rock, found one, and threw it at Leon.

Leon, quicker than he looked, ducked and the rock struck something out of our sight that made Leonard, Clinton and Leon wince.

"Shit," I said.

"Christ," Brett said. "Are them fellas housebroken?"

"Barely, but they're all right," I said. "Anybody fucks with you, they'll take them apart and reassemble them so that they don't match up."

"They getting paid for this?" Brett asked.

"We're slippin' 'em some bills," I said. "They'd do it for nothing, but they haven't got jobs. Got laid off at the aluminum-chair factory sometime back, and they haven't worked since. All the brain surgeon jobs are taken. But they're all right."

"They look a little scary?"

"You ought to see Big Man Mountain."

Brett gave me a grim look.

"Sorry," I said. "But that's the reality. These guys, they can take care of themselves, and they'll take care of you."

"I can't go to work with these fellas hanging on my neck," Brett said.

"I know. What we're gonna do, we're gonna put Clinton here. He's gonna stay in the house while you're at work. That way, no one's comin' in to wait for you. You get home, need something, he goes with you if Leonard and I aren't around. Okay?"

"Okay. What about work?"

"Leon will be there. I don't know he needs to follow you around. He'll just be around. Sittin' in the waiting room, the parkin' lot, kinda watchin' out. I don't know we can do better than that if you're going to insist on workin'."

"Like I said, landlord won't fuck me for the rent."

"Yeah, well, he's a fool. You got your pistol?"

"Pistol-packin' mama," she said, reached down, and pulled up her nurse's uniform. The gun was strapped to a holster around her thigh.

"Would you like me to check and see that garter holster is too tight?"

"That's all right," she said, lowering her hem.

"You know how to use that?" I said. "Having it is one thing, using it is another."

"Hell, I'm certified to carry it. I took the course."

The course was for the new law passed in Texas where you could legally carry a concealed handgun after taking instruction in laws and marksmanship.

"My guess," she said, "is I'm the only one of us legal. And I could shoot before I was legal. And you can take that in any manner you want. I got a buck knife in my purse too. It isn't legal. But I'll tell you, that little honey, legal or not, will cut your fuckin' nuts off with a wisp of a blade."

"I'd rather not talk about nut injury right now," I said.

"Sorry … That business gonna cut down on our activity?"

"Not even if I have to tie them in a sling."

Leonard and the twins came inside. Leonard introduced them. Clinton, who did most of the talking, said, "How're ya doin'?"

"Fine," Brett said. "Well, not really. There's someone might want to hurt me."

"He ain't gonna hurt nothin'," Clinton said. "We tie that motherfucka in some fuckin' knots is what we do."

"And he don't like knots, we shoot him some," Leon said, reaching under his sweatshirt, producing a large, greasy .45 automatic.

"Yeah," Clinton said, "like till our guns run out of bullets."

"Then we gonna reload," Leon said.

"Good," Brett said. "That's what I want to hear."

"That don't stop him," Clinton said, "we reload again."

"We get the idea," I said.

Brett turned to me. "What about you and Leonard?"

"I figure we'll do what the old Southern guerrilla fighters used to do in the War Between the States."

"And what was that?" Brett asked.

"Cuss niggers?" Leonard said.

"No," I said.

"Lynch niggers?" Leonard said.

"Shut up, Leonard," I said. "We're going to quit waiting. We're going to take it to them."

"Goddamn," Leonard said. "Now I'm inspired."

Brett went back to work, Leon in tow. We left Clinton at the house with instructions not to eat Brett out of house and home, try and spare some furniture, and to piss in the toilet with the lid up.

A little research gave us the location of King Arthur's place, and next morning we drove out there. It was on a vast acreage of mostly red clay, because a bulldozer was pushing down trees when we got there, making it that way.

We parked alongside the road and watched from the truck, over a barbed-wire fence. Watched the dozer work. It was knocking down hills of dirt that I figured were Indian mounds. They had the look of mounds, and in traditional East Texas manner, they were being pushed flat for progress.

Fuck the Indians. Fuck the pottery. Fuck the heritage. Fuck the ground. Fuck the trees. Let's get this shit flat, mud red and nasty, bring in that double wide.

Which was exactly what had been done.

Several of them.

From where we sat we had a good view because there wasn't any trees, just some stumps, and this big dozer knocking those annoying mounds flat. The property was all red clay for acres and acres, except for a patch of costal bermuda in one corner, and some steroid-fed cows and a big, red, metal barn, and, I swear, four double-wide mobile homes. Two long, two wide, linked.

"Well, what we gonna do, brother?" Leonard said. "Charge in, beat the piss out of him?"

"No, that's more your style. I'm going to wait. We're going to follow. We're going to isolate. Then, we're going to talk."

Jim Bob's yellow Pontiac pulled up behind us and he got out and walked around to my side of the truck. I had the window down and he took off his cowboy hat and stuck his head in.

"I hope you fucks ain't sneakin' around," he said, " 'cause you ain't sneaky."

"We figure we're all right," I said.

"I'm surprised you fellas have lived as long as you have," he said. "You got charmed lives, that's what I think."

"Clean livin'," Leonard said.

"Guess that's it," Jim Bob said.

"How did you know we were here?" I asked.

"I followed you from the nurse's house."

"Why are *you* still sneaking around?" Leonard said.

"Habit, I reckon."

"When in hell do you sleep?" I asked.

"When I've got the time," Jim Bob said. "As for other matters, like this King Arthur fella, maybe I can help you out, since I done been through all this some time ago. King Arthur, he don't leave the place till after noon. Fact is, about one-fifteen every day, Monday through Friday. He drives over to the plant, goes in through a special back entrance. By five o'clock, he's back out at the car, and he goes home. 'Course, I ought to mention that when he goes and comes from work, he goes with some guys look like they'd twist the heads off parakeets and suck the neck stumps for entertainment."

"You know everything, don't you?"

"Damn near it," Jim Bob said. "What's your plan?"

"Actually," I said, "we have a simple plan. Two plans. I want to talk to King Arthur, but what I figure is, we'll follow Leonard's plan."

"Which is?" Jim Bob asked.

"We're going to beat the old fart up till he comes through with a confession."

"Yeah," Leonard said. "And we're gonna beat up his companions too."

"King Arthur ain't that old," Jim Bob said. "About my age. And he looks to me like he can handle himself. As for you beatin' the companions up, Leonard, I hope you've had your Malto-Meal."

"Well, what would you do?" I asked.

"I'd beat the fuckers up," Jim Bob said.

We left the dozer to its work, followed Jim Bob back to the Holiday Inn. We had coffee in the cafeteria and Jim Bob told us some things about King Arthur.

"You know that King Arthur used to be a chili cook-off king, and that's what catapulted his recipe to stardom, so to speak? Only thing is, they found ole King was payin' judges off to vote for him. Didn't matter it was some little local thing, or a big tadoo. He took winnin' serious-like, right down to money and young pussy for the judges. Took to callin' himself King Arthur. Started the chili business, and it skyrocketed. Didn't hurt he was also into every goddamn dirty deal in East Texas, from runnin' whores to makin' sure black folks who owned stores paid a little kickback. They didn't, their businesses had a way of attractin' fires."

Jim Bob talked about King Arthur for a while, depressing me. Then somehow he and Leonard veered off into politics.

While they generally agreed on issues, I went into the lobby, used the pay phone to call Brett's house.

She and Clinton had just watched a late-morning talk show.

"This was a rerun about people who stole stuff out of stores to give as wedding gifts," Brett said. "Whole family. Had 'em on television talkin' about it, like they're some kind of celebrities."

"These days they are."

"Bunch of white-trash thieves gettin' their fifteen minutes. And funnier yet, or sadder yet, while they're on the show, host gets a call from the hotel where these skunks are stayin', and they've taken the towels and sheets and ripped the hair dryer off the wall. They found all the stuff in their luggage backstage, and now they're in trouble again. I got access to all these channels, and this is the shit on them. It's scary."

"You watched it," I said.

"Clinton made me."

"Hell, Clinton likes game shows," I said.

"All right," she said, "you caught me .... How's things?"

"Right now they aren't happening. But they will. We have a plan."

"What?"

"We're gonna beat up King Arthur and his goons."

"That's well thought out."

"We might even steal his chili recipe."

“Make him eat it,” she said.

“Say what?”

“You had any of that stuff? I don’t know it could be a whole lot worse to put shit in your mouth.”

“Trust me,” I said. “It would.”

“All right, you win,” she said. “But not by much. You’re kidding about beating King up, aren’t you? Not that I mind, I just don’t know that’ll be such a good idea.”

“I reckon we’ll do what we do when we come to it,” I said.

“It’s good to know I got you fellas setting up a complicated sting,” Brett said.

“Yeah. Must be comforting. Take it easy, baby.”

“You too, hon.”

I rang off, joined Jim Bob and Leonard. They were talking about muzzle velocity in rifles.

I had another cup of coffee, listened till they wore down and we went to Jim Bob’s room.

We watched television and jawed until noon, then headed for King Arthur’s.

24

Jim Bob drove my truck with the three of us crowded in it. We had Jim Bob's shiny black twelve-gauge pump on the floorboard. I could smell the gun oil as we drove. I kept pushing my hand against my shirt, so I could feel the .38 beneath it in my waistband. Leonard was fumbling with the radio, trying to pick up a country station.

I had been in a lot of encounters, more than anyone had a right to believe. I had grown up in a rough town and fought dozens of fights until I graduated high school. Most of them were simple, not life-or-death battles, but a couple or three had been heavy-duty. During the sixties I had grown my hair long, and there was plenty of redneck opposition to that, so I was on the line daily, arguing or fighting with someone.

I had worked a number of blue-collar jobs, and the length of my hair had been an issue. More fights. I didn't pick fights, and tried diplomacy first, but I was still too quick to use my fists, and though I don't like to admit it, there was a time when I had enjoyed it. I didn't lose my temper easy, but once I did, it was savage, and afterwards I felt a strange hollowness that made me feel dirty and inferior to people around me.

Once, late at night, Leonard and I discussed our physical encounters. Not only those that had happened to us together, but individual events. It was a strange moment, a mix of brag and fact, shame and pride, remorse mixed with euphoria.

And here I was again, on my way to what would most likely turn into a confrontation, and perhaps more than a couple of punches. We weren't carrying our guns to plunk at cans. My stomach boiled. My head throbbed. Yet, at the same time, I felt disconnected from my body; seized by a combination of fear and anticipation.

We parked behind a closed-up fireworks shack down the road from King Arthur's red clay nightmare, got out of the car and sat on the hood so we could watch when he drove by.

Jim Bob said he knew the car, so his eyes were the ones on the highway. While we waited, he told us some funny stories and some bad jokes, then said, “All right, get in the truck.”

We looked and saw a big silver Lincoln with dark windows cruising down the highway. A moment later we were behind it, hauling as fast as my little pickup would go.

“Driver usually turns here,” Jim Bob said.

Jim Bob was right. The car veered to the right, headed down a blacktop road that I knew would meet Old Pine Road, and finally onto the highway that would lead to King Arthur’s chili works.

Jim Bob gunned the truck and started around. The Lincoln tried to be helpful, pulled hard right, but Jim Bob pulled hard right too. Next thing I knew, he was nosing my truck into the side of the Lincoln. Sparks flew up. Paint flecks flicked by the window.

“Hey,” I said.

Jim Bob paid no attention. He rammed hard with the pickup and the Lincoln began to veer. I realized it was starting to veer near the great oak where Horse Dick and Raul’s bodies had been found.

Irony or accident? I had to remember to ask Jim Bob, provided I didn’t end up with the dashboard in my teeth, the motor sticking out of my chest.

The Lincoln sailed onto the grass beside the road. The driver fought the wheel, missed the tree, but went over the edge of the incline, down the hill, clattered and bumped and slid into the weeds and slid again, this time sideways into the trees at the bottom. The Lincoln hit the trees with a solid whack and a crunch, and the sunlight caught taillight fragments flying into the air.

I could see all this because Jim Bob had driven the pickup after them. He hadn’t let off a bit. We bumped and bopped, striking our heads on the roof, lurching toward the dash, and finally we skidded sideways to a stop just before the hill got really steep and dropped off toward the trees where our road partners had collided with a patch of wilderness.

Jim Bob jerked the door open, grabbed the shotgun, and yelled, "Showtime!"

Leonard and I got out quick. I slid in the grass but managed to keep my footing and get my gun drawn without shooting myself. We hurried down the hill toward the Lincoln.

The driver, a fat man in a black suit, and two other water buffaloes in black suits were staggering out of the car. One of them, the guy from the backseat, had his gun, a nine millimeter, drawn. The car door was open behind him, and I could see King Arthur sitting in the backseat, or at least I assumed it was King Arthur. I had seen his likeness on cans of his chili. Way he was sitting there, you would have thought he was waiting on a bus.

The man with the drawn gun lifted it and Jim Bob fired the shotgun, sprayed dirt in front of the guy.

Jim Bob said, "Mine's bigger than yours. Toss it!"

The man tossed the gun.

The other two—and one of them was on the far side of the car, having exited from the front passenger side—had their hands in their coats, and Leonard and I pointed our guns at them. Jim Bob said, "You guys lose the hardware before it gets you hurt."

They looked at one another, eased their weapons out of their coats and dropped them.

Jim Bob said, "You, on the other side there, mosey on around here where I can see you good and make sure you ain't got a bazooka in your sock."

The man, who was large with hair so thin and gray on the sides he looked completely bald at first glance, came around slow-like, his teeth, wet from saliva, shining like greased piano keys in the sunlight.

King Arthur, wearing a white Stetson, a gray cowboy suit with gray boots decorated with red chili peppers, slid out of the Lincoln on our side, stood and looked at us. He was about five-ten, a solid one-eighty, had a lined brown face with a anteater nose. He had a cleft chin deep enough to hide a dried pea in, and shit-ass eyes.

King reached inside his jacket, slowly pulled out a pack of cigarettes, showed them to us, lipped one, put the pack back, and nodded toward one of the buffaloes.

The one that had been in the backseat with King looked at us, slowly reached in his pants pocket, produced a lighter, and lit King's cigarette.

"Driver's ed, boys?" King Arthur said.

"Let's cut through the crap," Leonard said. "You know who we are?"

"Yeah, I do," King Arthur said, puffing on his cigarette. "Troublemakers. And look what you've done to my car."

"I don't think you'll be reportin' it," Jim Bob said. "Might toss a little too much light on you."

King Arthur smiled. "You thought that was the case, you'd have gone to the police. How come you didn't? You been puttin' your shitty noses in my business for a while now."

"So you do know us?" I said.

"I know all kinds of shit," King Arthur said. "You're all connected to them queers got killed."

"Here's the deal," I said. "We're gonna put it to you straight. We're out to cause you some grief. But right now, this is more personal. Three of your goons—and if you're missing a couple you might check a cabin in the woods—broke into my house, sacked it, roughed me up, took me out to this shack, and a guy workin' for you, one Big Man Mountain—"

"The wrestler?" King Arthur said.

"You know who," I said. "This Mountain, he hooked a cable and battery and a little hand-cranked generator up to my balls, and gave me a few volts. Fortunately I'm still here, thanks to some help."

"Don't mention it," Jim Bob said.

"What I'm here to tell you," I said, "is very simple. We could kill you right now, and I think that would most likely be a good idea, but it's not my style."

"It's my style, though," Jim Bob said, "so keep in mind, King, things could change at a moment's notice."

I gave King Arthur a look hard enough to drive a nail. I said, "I'm going to tell you straight out we're going to nab your ass.

You can count on it. Legal-like, if possible. But let me make this clear, and I suggest you open your eyes wide and put on your glasses and use binoculars so you can see what the fuck I'm making clear. You screw around me or Jim Bob or my brother Leonard, my girlfriend—and you know who she is because Big Man Mountain did—I will kill you."

"If I don't do it first," Leonard said.

"Don't forget me," Jim Bob said.

"This is your one and only warning," I said.

"You boys got me wrong," King said.

"Yeah," I said. "You're an innocent fella. That's why you have three bodyguards."

King nodded. "All right. I ain't so innocent, but I got bodyguards mostly because I can. I like the looks of it. And now and then, I get a little trouble. I got some deals goin' here and there outside the chili, but I ain't never had to shoot nobody. Or have nobody shot. 'Course, with you boys, I might make an exception. I don't get it. All this over some fuckin' grease?" King Arthur dropped his cigarette in the grass, put a boot heel to it. "Over some faggot cop took a video of my grease operation? You boys takin' over where he left off? That it, huh? How much you want?"

"We don't want anything other than what I just said," I told him, lowering my gun.

King Arthur said, "You think I killed those queers, don't you? Over some grease they filmed? I tried to pay them off, but I didn't kill them."

"Tell it to a lie detector," I said.

"I would," King Arthur said. "Listen up, you three. You think you're tough guys, but you ain't so tough. You don't know shit. I might have given those boys a rough time, but I wouldn't have killed them over grease. Chance of a murder rap isn't worth it. Not over two queers with a video of my boys stealing some grease."

"Big Man was on that video," I said. "You tryin' to act like you don't know him? And as for not killing, he was certainly in a killing mood the other night."

“I know him,” King Arthur said, putting a fresh cigarette in his mouth. He turned to the buffalo beside him. “Dick Head, give me a light.” The same big man who had lit his cigarette before produced the lighter again and lit this one. King Arthur took a puff. “But he doesn’t work for me anymore. He went off on his own. As for those two guys you say were killed, I don’t know them. And that can get you in trouble, boys, authorities found out about it.”

“Go on and tell ’em,” Jim Bob said.

King Arthur shook his head. “Naw. I don’t give shit. They ain’t none of mine. Let me tell you goober-doodles something. This grease business, so I got caught with my shorts down and my dick in a pig. It don’t matter. It’s profitable enough if I get caught and pay some fines, I can go back and start doing it a week later. I was even willin’ to pay off the queers, even if they were a little greedy. I always kinda like to see a cop go bad. It justifies my belief in human nature, and that Horse, he was a real loser. The other faggot, I think he might have been the brains behind things. I don’t know. I don’t give a shit. They turned up dead and that didn’t hurt my feelin’s any. And yeah, I know who you three are. I got my contacts. You been nosin’ around a lot. I know the nigger here is a dick sucker and a pervert too.”

“Ixnay on the iggernay and the ervertpay,” I said.

“Yeah,” Leonard said, “I don’t like it.”

“Yeah,” King Arthur said, “well, sorry. But you dick-licks are barkin’ up the wrong tree. You got the video, I’ll slip you some serious bucks to have it back, way I was doin’ the queer boys, but to tell the truth, I don’t get it back, I don’t care. It don’t matter to me. I’ll deal with the consequences as they come along. I done played the game all I’m gonna play it.”

“Thing is,” Jim Bob said, “it ain’t the grease we’re talkin’ about.”

For the first time since he had crawled out of the Lincoln, I saw a look of puzzlement on King’s face, or maybe it was concern, or perhaps a bowl of his chili had just backed up on him.

“Then what in hell is this all about?” King Arthur said.

“Another video,” Leonard said.

“Of what?” King Arthur said. “You got two videos of my men stealing grease, it’s no worse than one in my book. Look here, I do a little illegal business here and there, just to keep me in clean panties and corsages, but so what?”

“What about videos of LaBorde Park?” I asked.

“Say what?” King Arthur asked.

“What about a coded notebook with alphabetically hidden phone numbers of video stores?” I asked.

King Arthur blinked. “I don’t know what the fuck you boys been drinkin’, but it’s fucked up what brains you might have. I don’t know nothin’ about no other videos or notebooks or video stores. That’s what Bissinggame was sayin’ y’all said. I figured he’d misunderstood you.”

“What about a notebook from your plant?” I asked. “A King Arthur notebook?”

“Those things are everywhere,” King said. “Listen here, boys. I got to get this car out of the ditch.” King turned to the man beside him. “Get me the phone?”

Just as the man started to move, Jim Bob said, “Let’s hold the phone.”

The big man looked at King. King nodded. King said, “You got something to say, say it clear, or get on with it. Shoot us or let me get this car out of the ditch. I got a full day ahead of me. What’s it gonna be?”

“All right,” I said. “Get the phone. But before I go, King, let me come back to what I said in the first place. Stay away from me and my friends.”

“Gladly,” King said.

The big man got the phone out of the car and gave it to King. King started to dial as if we weren’t there.

Jim Bob said, “You boys take it easy till we’re gone. Just leave your guns on the ground.”

We went up the hill backwards, our guns pointing at them. Jim Bob eased the truck back onto Old Pine Road.

As we cruised along, I said, “Well, we sure scared him.”

“Yeah,” Jim Bob said. “King was so nervous, he’d had a cot and a pillow, he might have taken him a little nap.”

25

We went to Leonard's house, called the cop shop and asked for Charlie. He was out, but the dispatcher promised to shoot a message to him. Five minutes later, he called back and I answered.

"What's up?" he asked.

"We need to see you," I said. "Me, Leonard, and Jim Bob."

"All right. I'll be there pretty pronto-like."

"You don't sound as cheery as you're tryin' to sound," I said.

"Actually, I'm having a bittersweet day. But for the moment, I'd rather not talk about it. I'll tell you the sweet part when I get over there, though."

"What about the bitter?" I asked.

"I don't know yet," he said. "See you."

• • •

We were sitting on Leonard's front porch in the swing seat when Charlie drove up. It was a sticky day with the sun bright as God's eyes and the sky a milky blue. The air smelled of mowed yards and perspiration. The scent of gun oil was still on my hands.

Charlie got out of his car and lumbered up the walk toward the porch. He didn't look good. Tired. Hair uncombed. No porkpie hat. His clothes were wrinkled and shiny-looking, as if he hadn't changed them in days. He smiled weakly, shook hands with all of us. He and Jim Bob exchanged some greetings.

Charlie sat down on the edge of the porch, got out a cigarette and lit it. He took a deep drag that turned about a quarter of the cigarette to ash. He held the smoke, and then let it out slowly through his nose and sighed as if he had just laid down for a good long nap.

“What you boys got?” he asked.

“We ain’t sure,” Jim Bob said. Then he told Charlie what had gone on, including running King off the road and us pulling guns on him. He left out Big Man Mountain and the two thugs he’d shot to death. He ended with: “King call in any charges?”

“Not that I know of,” Charlie said. “But this running people off the road, it ain’t good, pardner.”

“I didn’t think he’d call in,” Jim Bob said.

“King could still be innocent,” I said.

“I think we got our man,” Jim Bob said. “What’s the odds of two tapes and a notebook with King Arthur Chili on it being unrelated?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “King seemed pretty confident to me. He wasn’t worried about the grease business, and he actually looked surprised when we brought up the other video, the notebook.”

“I’ve seen some good liars,” Leonard said.

“I damn near don’t see nothing but liars,” Charlie said. “Got so I think everyone’s a liar. I find someone who isn’t, I stick to them. I wasn’t that way, all three of you goons would be under the jailhouse already.”

“Any thoughts on any of this?” I asked Charlie.

“I don’t know,” Charlie said. “King has been in some shit, though most of it slides off of him, but murder … I wouldn’t put it past him, but so far he’s avoided that little bugaboo. He’s got him a bunch of little rackets, but he gets caught, he usually squirms out of it. And he’s got money. And lawyers. And he’s got the chief, who I’m sure gets a pretty good chunk of pocket change from King himself.” Charlie paused and smiled. “Thinking of the chief makes me think of Hanson. And my good news.”

“You ain’t gonna say what I think you are, are you?” Leonard said.

Charlie nodded. “Yeah. He came out of the coma.”

“I’ll be goddamn,” I said.

“I talked to his wife,” Charlie said. “She said the doctors think he’s okay, just addled. He’ll be down awhile, have to have some physical therapy later, but they say he seems all right. Confused some.”

“I would be,” I said. “Last thing he remembers is sliding into a tree, then he wakes up at his ex-wife’s house with tubes in him. That would be disconcerting. You seen him yet?”

“Not yet,” Charlie said. “I got to give it some time. They’re holding back visitin’, ’cept for the immediate family.”

“Far as I’m concerned,” Leonard said, “you are part of the immediate family.”

“Well,” Charlie said, “the immediate family doesn’t see it that way. I don’t think they like cops much. That’s the whole beef between him and his wife. ’Course, now that I think about it, I don’t like cops much either.”

“I don’t know Hanson well,” Jim Bob said. “Met him a couple of times on business-related affairs here, mostly heard about his reputation. He used to be on the cop force in Houston a few years back. He busted a big case or two there. That’s all I know, but what I do know of him, he seems like a good man.”

“Good as they get,” Charlie said.

“He’s going to be all right?” I said. “I mean, really all right?”

“You mean in the head?” Charlie said.

“Yeah,” I said.

“They think so.”

“Well, I’ll be goddamn,” I said. “I figured he was ruined for life.”

“You can’t underestimate that fella,” Charlie said. “He always comes back. And tougher than he was before. Now, what is it you want from me?”

“I think we got our answer when King didn’t call in,” Jim Bob said.

“King doesn’t want trouble for the grease racket, doesn’t want to direct attention to himself, but that doesn’t mean he’s in on this gay-bashin’ video business,” I said. “He could be tellin’ the truth.”

“King Arthur don’t know from truth,” Charlie said. “He used to be a used-car salesman.”

“Well,” Leonard said, “there’s a strike against him.”

“Amen,” Jim Bob said.

“And he did some bible-thumpin’ too,” Charlie said.

“Way I remember it,” Jim Bob said, “bible-thumpin’ is like an automatic two strikes.”

“With an extra penalty,” Leonard said.

“Looks to me like there isn’t anything I can add here,” Charlie said. “I can harass King if you want to give me the videotape on the grease stealin’. He might readily cop to that part. We could maybe nail him on that.”

“I like the idea of puttin’ him in for the worst of it,” Leonard said.

Jim Bob nodded. “Me too.”

I nodded as well. “Can you give us a little more space?”

“Hell,” Charlie said. “I haven’t give you dudes anything but space. But, yeah. A little. Y’all got a beer?”

“Aren’t you on duty?” I said.

“Yeah,” Charlie said, “but I’ll take my badge off and close my eyes while I drink.”

“That’ll work,” Leonard said. “Let’s go inside.”

Charlie actually had three beers and kept going out on the front porch to smoke cigarettes. On his last trip to the porch I joined him, said, “Tell me the bitter.”

He looked off at the heavens, which had changed. The sun had fallen behind some darkening clouds and the sky itself had lost its milky blue look and had clabbered. Everything was still.

“Tornado weather,” Charlie said.

“The bitter?” I said.

Charlie took a deep drag on his smoke, said, “All right. You know, all this stuff ’tween me and Amy about cigarettes? The sex?”

“Sure.”

“It ain’t the cigarettes.”

“What is it?”

“She just don’t want to make love to me. She’s foolin’ around.”

“You got proof, or you feeling paranoid?”

“Proof.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Yeah. Me too.”

“You’re absolutely sure?”

“Yep.”

“What you going to do?”

“I don’t know yet. Somethin’.”

“Nothing stupid, I hope?”

“You mean like shoot them?”

“Like that, yeah.”

“Naw, that ain’t my speed, bud. I might even could forgive her, you know.”

“You confronted her?”

“Not yet … Hap, I got to tell you, this whole cop business—I’ve about had it.”

“That’s the beer talkin’,” I said.

“Naw, it ain’t the beer,” Charlie said. “It’s me. Listen, you guys told me about King Arthur, but there’s stuff you haven’t told me. I’d do that now.”

I gave him the short version of Big Man Mountain and the ball-stimulator incident.

“You tellin’ me Jim Bob killed those two bastards right out?” Charlie said.

“Looked dead to me.”

“Guess I gotta find some reason to check that cabin out.”

“He was just tryin’ to protect me, Charlie. He burst in there like he did to keep me from going the way Raul went. He didn’t have a choice but to shoot them.”

“He came there to shoot ’em, Hap, you know that. That ’lectricity, it make your pecker stand out?”

“I tell you about how my life was threatened, I nearly died, and you want to know that?”

“Well, yeah.”

“I think it made it curl up,” I said. “Actually, I wasn’t thinking about which direction it was going. It hurt too bad. What do you know about Big Man?"

"He's had him some arrests," Charlie said. "Quit wrestlin'—rather, they threw him out—a while ago. He's been in some shitty business. He worked for King a while. Word is they split early. Big Man didn't like takin' orders way King gave 'em. It wasn't a conflict in morals, it was two assholes bumpin' together and not likin' it. Story on Big Man is he starts a job, he finishes it. But when he finished for King last time, he didn't sign on again. Who knows, maybe he's had a change of heart. Or a need for money."

"So you really don't know if he's working for King?"

"Not last time I heard," Charlie said, lighting a cigarette. "But things change, man. Look at Hanson. Christ, my marriage."

"You know the guy?"

"Yeah, and I hate to say it. It's so goddamn insultin'. It's our goddamn insurance agent. Anybody would fuck an insurance agent, they got to be low. Sonofabitch don't buy at Kmart or Wal-Mart. Them suits he wears, they're tailor-made. Got him a razor cut. And you know what?"

"What?"

"Motherfucker smokes. And he's gettin' her pussy, and he smokes. Fuckin' cigars, no less. Now ain't that some shit?"

I smiled, and Charlie tried to smile, but it wasn't working.

"Tornado weather," Charlie said. "You said that."

"Warnings are out. Been out all day. Things scare me to death. Can't stand the thought of them. You think I ought to let Amy go?"

"You're asking me about women?" I said. "You got to be desperate."

"You're right," Charlie said. "I forgot, you're like a number-one fuck-up in that department."

"Things are kind of better, now," I said. I told him about Brett, and about how Big Man had threatened her, what we were doin' about it.

"You could be fixin' yourself up for worse business," Charlie said.

"You going to put a twenty-four-hour guard on her house for me?" I asked.

"You know I can't," Charlie said. "More I pay attention to you guys, even tryin' to help, just makes it worse. Past business has made it so the chief would just as soon throw you boys to the dogs."

"Brett isn't part of that."

"I know. But the chief isn't going to let me put a twenty-four-hour guard on anybody. I do, I got to tell him why. Then I got to tell him Jim Bob blew two guys away, and that connects to you and Leonard. Fact is, I ought to do something about Jim Bob zeroin' them guys, but it just ain't in me, man. I don't give a shit. The one with the pock face, I know who he is. He's done everything from robbery to murder to fuckin' little girls. One of them his own eleven-year-old daughter. If you can call givin' sperm to an egg makin' you a father. Hard for me to lose much sleep on that sonofabitch it's him. It ain't him, it's one just like him. I don't know the black guy, but I figure he's a member of the same platoon. I got some off-duty time comin' up, though. I can help you watch your girlfriend then. Next week, all week."

"Charlie, I was you, I'd use that time to talk to my wife. I don't know much, but could be she's not getting what she wants at home, and I'm not talkin' about sex."

"Could be lots of things, Hap. And I don't know what any of them are. I think maybe I got to confront her. She's in love with this guy, not me, then she ought to go on. I want her to go on. But it has to do with me, I ain't doin' somethin' just right and can start doin' it way she needs, we might can work stuff out."

"I certainly hope so," I said.

" 'Course, she could just be an asshole."

"There is that."

Leonard came out on the porch. "What you guys doin'? Come back in. Have a beer."

"No, thanks," Charlie said. "Got to go. Good luck to both you fellas. And be careful, I'd hate to have to arrest you."

When Charlie was gone, Jim Bob came out on the porch to join us. He sat down on the swing and started moving it with his foot. He said, “Way I see it, boys, we’re kind of at an impasse.”

“How’s that?” Leonard said.

“I think this chili fuck is responsible for the beating my client took. This connects with them other two gettin’ killed, Horse and Raul, but that isn’t strictly my business, though I’m willin’ to make it my business. But, Hap, you don’t feel confident chili dude’s the man. Leonard, you think it’s him, but I can see you fadin’ a bit.”

“Fadin’?” Leonard said.

“You got your doubts,” Jim Bob said, “or rather you know Hap’s got his and you’re runnin’ on his track.”

“I think for myself,” Leonard said.

“I never doubted that,” Jim Bob said, “but you think a way fits in with how Hap feels. He’s the same with you. I can respect that. It’s stupid. But I can respect it.”

“This leading up to something?” Leonard asked.

“Yeah, it’s leading up to me goin’ back to the hotel, takin’ a bath, jerkin’ off, watchin’ a little TV, a good night’s sleep, and tomorrow I’m back down to business. I’m gonna stay on chili man’s ass until I get what I’m lookin’ for.”

“And if it isn’t him?” I asked.

“It’s him, all right,” Jim Bob said. He stood up, set the beer bottle on the porch railing, went down to his car and drove away.

26

I lay in a tub of warm soapy water with my arm around Brett. She lay with her head against my shoulder. We had been lying like that for some time. Enough that the water was starting to cool.

Outside I could hear rain beating on the roof of the house. In the living room I knew Leonard, Clinton, and Leon were watching television, probably thinking about what we were doing in the bedroom, thinking all sorts of wild things, and of course, they were right.

We had bucked like colts, squirmed like snakes, rolled like seals, and done some cheap, disgusting things that had made us happy.

After a while the water cooled and so did we. We got out of the tub, dried each other, lay on the bed, kissed and fondled, and one thing led to another and we were at it again. Afterwards, we lay there in each other's arms and talked. I said, "I'm beginning to feel guilty. You and me in here having fun, and the boys having to watch television."

"Shit," Brett said. "There's this special on poisonous toad frogs in the Amazon tonight. How in hell could they be envious of us, knowin' that's comin' on?"

"You know, you're right."

"They finish that, we're still busy, they can switch over and watch the life of that shit O.J. Simpson on *Biography*. Sounds to me they got a pretty full evenin'."

"You're right again."

" 'Course, I have to go to work, so it doesn't matter much. We got to quit fuckin' sometime. 'Course, I'm not tryin' to say it has to be right now. You want to see you can lower the bald man into the canyon one more time?"

"Absolutely," I said.

We tried to make love again, but this time we weren’t as successful. Oh, all right—I wasn’t as successful. The bald man was tuckered out. We laughed about it, kissed, got dressed, went into the living room.

Leon was asleep on the couch. Clinton was lying on a pallet, his head propped up on pillows. Leonard was sitting on a chair drinking a Coca-Cola. They were watching an old detective show.

“Lazy, rainy day,” I said.

“Man, ya’ll must have been playin’ Monopoly,” Leonard said. “Long as y’all were in there, you had to be.”

“Monopoly?” Clinton said. “I like that game. We could play to pass time.”

“I was kidding,” Leonard said.

“I do have a Monopoly game,” Brett said. She went to the closet and dragged it out.

“I don’t know,” I said. “You get to playin’ that, you might could get distracted too easy.”

“Naw,” Leonard said. “It’s okay. It’s not that engrossing.”

I went to the window, pushed back the curtain, and looked out. It was rainy and dark and the day was dying on top of it. I could see lightning shimmering against distant clouds.

Soon Brett would be heading to work, Leon and his .45 with her. Me, I had a late job interview at the LaBorde Fowl Processing Plant for a night watchman job. My application had yielded some interest in the way of a postcard. I had called and a night foreman named George Waggoner had set up an interview.

I turned to Leonard. “What are your plans, Leonard?”

“Me and Clinton gonna play a little Monopoly, I think. Then I’ll go pick up some grub. I might stay the night, Brett don’t mind.”

“ ’Course not,” Brett said. “It’s good to know you’ll be here when I come home.”

“In the mornin’ I’m supposed to meet Jim Bob at my place, and so are you, Hap.”

“What for?”

“I called him earlier, see if he’d had any luck.”

“Well?” I said.

“He said he had some things comin’ together, he’d know better tomorrow, so we’re gonna meet in the morning. Nine o’clock, my place.”

“Good enough,” I said.

“You fellas think this wrestler really means to hurt me?” Brett asked.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “I’m just being cautious. For a while.”

“How long?” Brett said.

“I don’t know.”

“And you really haven’t any idea if he means to hurt me or not, do you?”

“No.”

“You can count on one thing, though,” Leonard said. “It ain’t gonna happen. He ain’t gonna hurt nobody.”

Brett smiled at him. “Thanks.”

Leonard nodded.

Brett looked at me. “You got that interview.”

“I know,” I said. “I’m about to leave …. Didn’t you tell me to remind you to call Ella?”

“That’s right,” Brett said. “I thought I’d check on her. She called yesterday. She’s made up her mind to leave that thug Kevin.”

“I’m glad,” I said.

“Me too,” Brett said. “I’m going to call, try and give her the moral support. ’Course, if he’s there, that won’t be easy. He sleeps a lot, though.”

“He work?”

“Some kind of shift where he’s on a few days, off a few days. He’s off right now.”

I gave Brett a kiss, told everyone so long, drove to the chicken-processing plant to check on the night watchman’s job.

“This is a costly operation,” Waggoner said.

“Yes, sir,” I said. “I understand.”

“There’s all manner of expensive equipment here. We even have the occasional business spies. People trying to sneak in here and get our secrets. That's going to get worse, Collins."

"You've actually had spies?" I asked.

"Couple of niggers hired by our competition, and I won't even show the company the respect of saying their name."

"What did these spies do?"

"They took photographs of our equipment."

"No shit."

"And of our chickens."

"Doesn't one chicken look like another?"

"Not when they're raised the way we raise them. We slap the juice to them, Collins. We got the biggest, fattest chickens you ever seen. Big fat juicy drumsticks. That's 'cause they don't walk on 'em. Can't. Our chickens can't walk. We've bred them that way."

"Hope you haven't just given me one of your secrets."

"No. That one's out. Darn animal-rights people been all over our rear ends about that one. Let me tell you, Collins, we're the envy of every chicken-processing plant in East Texas. Possibly Oklahoma and Louisiana as well. You can even throw in Arkansas if you want."

"Why not," I said.

"What's that?"

"I said why not throw in Arkansas."

"Is that some kind of remark, Mr. Collins?"

"You said we could throw in Arkansas. I'm saying it's okay with me."

Shit, I thought, don't do it to yourself, Hap. Waggoner is an officious, fat, rednecked prick in an expensive suit with a tie that doesn't match, but hold back, baby. You need the work.

Waggoner studied me to see if I was being humorous. I could tell this was a guy didn't like humorous. He saw humorous, he'd shoot it and fuck it in the ass and bury it in the chicken shit at the plant. That's how he felt about humorous.

"We need a man who is willin' to put his life on the line, if need be," Waggoner said. "For chickens?" I said.

"For the business, Mr. Collins. And yes, chickens. We take this business very serious, and I need a man who is serious."

"I think I can be serious about chickens," I said.

"No thinking to it, you are or you aren't."

"I can do the job, Mr. Waggoner. I can keep people out. I can patrol the area. And I don't think there's really that big a threat to the chickens or your industry from industrial spies, but I see one of those sonofabitches, I'll be on him like stink on shit."

"I'd prefer you not use that language, Mr. Collins."

"All right," I said.

"I'm a churchgoing man myself."

"Which church?"

"Methodist."

"Dancing Baptist."

"What's that?"

"That's what they call Methodist. Dancing Baptist. You know, they're allowed to dance. Baptist aren't supposed to. Sometimes, they call Methodist Baptist that can read."

"I'm not sure I care for that sort of thing, Mr. Collins."

"It's a joke, Mr. Waggoner. I'm a little nervous. I'm tryin' to warm us up."

"Well, you're not. I don't care for humor in job interviews."

"Sure you're not a Baptist?"

"What?"

"Never mind."

"You know, we got some other jobs here might be better for you. Chicken reproduction, for one."

"Come again."

"Chicken reproduction. We need people to help us stud chickens."

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that. How would I stud a chicken?"

"I think you're tryin' to be humorous again, Mr. Collins."

“I don’t think so.”

“Obviously, you would be required to stimulate the roosters and preserve their sperm.”

“You’re kiddin’?”

“I am not.”

“You’re sayin’ you’d want me to jack a rooster off into a test tube?”

“Something like that.”

“You really do that?”

“Have you heard of such a thing for bulls? Horses?”

“Well, yeah. That’s bad enough, but you want to offer me a job jacking off chickens? You got to be out of your mind, man.”

“People do it.”

“Not me. I came to see about a night watchman job.”

Waggoner took my application, opened a drawer, and slipped it inside. “I believe that’ll be all the questions I need to ask, Mr. Collins. Something comes up, you fit the qualifications, I’ll give you a call.”

“You’re not going to call me, are you?”

“No.”

“I didn’t think so. That being the case, let me tell you something. I think your fuckin’ chickens are second-rate. I wouldn’t wipe my ass on your chickens, let alone jack one of the sonofabitches off.”

“Good night, Mr. Collins.”

I drove home, sat around in my kitchen with a glass of milk and a Moon Pie, nibbled at it, felt blue. I couldn’t even get a job at the goddamn chicken plant being a night watchman. All they had for me was a position jerking a rooster’s dick. It didn’t get much worse than that.

I looked through my old record albums, my audiotapes, and the handful of CDs I owned. ’Course, I didn’t own a CD player, so I just sort of pretended I could play those if I wanted to.

Finally I found a tape Leonard had given me. It was Junior

Brown. Junior Brown played an instrument of his own devising, a cross between a guitar and steel. He sounded like Ernest Tubb singing to music played by Chet Atkins, Jimi Hendrix, and a honkie-tonk drunk.

I listened to that a while. Took a shower. Went to bed. Looked at the ceiling. Squirmed in the covers. Listened to the rain outside. I kept checking my .38 on the nightstand.

I tried to figure if Jim Bob was right, and this King Arthur was the mastermind. He seemed the most logical, but Big Man hadn't said he was behind it. He hadn't asked for videos. He had asked for *a* video and the book.

I churned all of this around for a while, got up, turned on the box fan, put a chair under the back doorknob to reinforce the lock. I put a chair under the front doorknob. I checked all the windows to make sure they were locked. I wanted them open to let in the cool, wet wind, but I was afraid. I kept visualizing Big Man Mountain slipping through one of the windows, that goddamn battery and crank generator under his arm.

I wished I had a vicious dog. I wished I was at Brett's place, in bed with her, holding her close. I wished I'd win the lottery. I sort of wished I'd gotten the job at the chicken plant, even if I had to jack off roosters. I wished I was a thousand miles away.

I felt as if I had just closed my eyes, then morning light was in my face and I got up.

It was early yet. Brett was not off work. I decided to dress and drive over to the hospital, catch her as she came out, see if she wanted to go somewhere for breakfast.

The day had cleared, the air was almost sparkly, and the birds were out in force, singing various operas. The streets were shiny-slick with water and there were few cars moving about.

As I drove off the highway and into the parking lot, I saw a cop car. There were medical personnel rushing about. My stomach sank. I parked and leaped out. I started walking very fast toward the sirens, the lights, the commotion. Another cop car whipped into the lot and whirled over there. People were coming out of the hospital, across the way, from houses nearby.

I walked even faster, but now a crowd had sprung up, most of them from the hospital staff. I grabbed a guy by the elbow.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

Another man standing next to him said, “Some guy shotgunned some people in a car. Big guy. He shotgunned them. I talked to a guy saw it happen. The cops got the guy saw it over there, talking to him.”

I pushed through the crowd, got cussed, kept pushing. I made my way to the forefront. I could see Brett’s car. The windshield was blown away. There was glass all over the place. They were lifting a man onto a stretcher. Even from a distance, I could see it was Leon. Big bad Leon. Minus the top of his head.

Oh, Jesus.

They covered him quickly.

On the driver’s side of the car they were lifting someone else out. A woman in a nurse’s uniform. Suddenly I was right there. Looking down on a woman’s body. Her entire face was gone. Hell, her head was practically vaporized.

Shotgunned.

Both of them shotgunned.

I put my hand against a car and held myself up. A cop grabbed my elbow. “Hap,” he said.

I turned. It was Jake, a cop I knew a little. “Did you get the guy did it?” I asked.

Jake shook his head. “No, we got a pretty good description, but we didn’t get him. We will. You all right, man?”

“Yeah.”

“Jesus, Hap. You know these people?”

“Yeah. I got to go.”

“You’re all right?”

I ignored him.

“I might need to talk to you,” he yelled after me.

I shoved through the crowd and back to my car. I started it up. I drove away from there, nearly ran a half dozen people off the road. I drove over to Leonard’s. He wasn’t there. He’d be at Brett’s, waiting for her to come home. Waiting for me to stop by.

I used my key and got the door open. I went to Leonard's closet, pulled his twelve-gauge out of there. I got the box of shells off the top shelf. My hands trembled as I pushed them into the loading chamber and put a handful in my front pants pocket.

I had been sleeping while Brett was murdered in the hospital parking lot. Sweet, beautiful, foul-mouthed Brett.

Brett and Leon.

I had been sleeping.

I had been stupid.

How could I think having a watch on her would matter? Not even Leon could handle Big Man Mountain. I could see it now. Mountain had merely waited until Brett got off work; then, as a punishment to me, he had shot her to death. Leon would have tried to stop him, but it didn't matter. Big Man had shot them both, fast as he could pump a shotgun.

Leonard and Jim Bob had been right. I should have gone savage. I should have gone wild. Had I done that in the first place, gotten rid of Big Man Mountain's employers, Brett and Leon would still be alive.

I was climbing in my truck with the shotgun when Jim Bob pulled into the drive. That's right. Nine o'clock, me and him and Leonard were supposed to meet. I'd have to take a rain check.

"Hey, Hap, where you goin'?" Jim Bob yelled.

I didn't answer. I backed out, drove very fast along the street toward the main highway, and when I reached it I drove even faster, toward King Arthur's place.

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The world grew smaller as I drove, the exterior of the truck becoming nonexistent. I didn't remember the road at all. Just the world growing smaller, smaller, until it was nothing more than the cab of that truck, then my space on the seat, then the inside of my head. I drove with one hand on the wheel, the other on the shotgun stock, touching it as tenderly as a lonely man might touch his privates in the dark.

Thinking and wondering, how come the horrors happen to me and those I care about? What the hell have I done? Who's throwing the dice?

Well, this one time, I was going to throw the dice. I was going to throw them right down King Arthur's throat.

The driveway to King Arthur's trailers was blocked by a metal gate. I got out of the truck with the shotgun, climbed over the gate, and started walking briskly toward the trailers.

As I neared the trailers, a huge rottweiler appeared. It barked at me once, started to run toward me in that menacing manner dogs have. I lifted the shotgun, shot it in the head. It did a flip, splattered and slid on the red clay and lay there, one back leg flexing.

"Sorry," I said. "Nothing personal."

I walked faster, and now I was at the front of the closest trailer's door. One of the goons who had been in King's car that day jerked open the door, a nine in his hand. I was close, real close. I swung the shotgun stock up and connected with his chin. He straightened up and went backwards and lay on the floor, showing all the enthusiasm of a bearskin rug. I climbed over him, picked up the nine, tossed it backwards out the open door behind me.

I came along the hall, striding fast, and another one of the guards presented himself. I lifted the shotgun. He leaped aside as I fired and the blast took out a chunk of the trailer's back wall. I heard him making a rustling, scuttling noise somewhere out of sight, then I heard the back door open and slam, and I knew that big bad motherfucker wasn't so bad after all, that he was running fast now, and if nothing got in his way, he ought to make the edge of the goddamn Atlantic Ocean by midnight.

"King!" I yelled. "King!"

I picked a door to my left, blasted it with the shotgun. It flew open, and I was inside, and there was King, lying in bed, Bissinggame beside him. They sat up quickly. Both were nude. Bissinggame had a peach-colored leisure suit draped over a chair. On the chair were jockey shorts, peach socks, and white shoes.

King had his hat on the nightstand beside him and he had his hand in the nightstand drawer, reaching for something.

"I thought you hated queers," I said.

I shot the nightstand. It exploded. A lamp crashed. A .45 that had been in a drawer, before it became kindling, clattered to the floor. King jerked back a bleeding handful of wood splinters.

"Goddamn," he said.

"I just been to the hospital," I said. "My girlfriend. And a friend of mine. They've been shotgunned to death by your man, Big Man Mountain."

"He's not my man," King said, and he was as calm as a man about to order lunch in a restaurant.

"Jesus!" Bissinggame said. "I'm not queer. I'm churchgoing. He makes me do this."

"Big Man is your man," I said. "He's always been your man. I can't believe I listened to you. I want you to know, you sorry cocksucking asslicking piece of pig shit, what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna blow your ass away. Bissinggame, you want out of here, go now!"

Bissinggame slid out from under the covers, reached for his underwear on the chair.

"Go naked, or die naked," I said.

"I'm gone," Bissinggame said, and he came around the edge of the bed. Then I saw his eyes go wide, and I knew someone was behind me, but I didn’t care. It didn’t matter to me. Nothing mattered to me but that King would die. I jerked the shotgun to my shoulder and pulled the trigger.

I shot a big chunk of ceiling to pieces, and the pieces fluttered down all over the room. I wasn’t sure how that happened, until I realized there was a black hand on the barrel of the shotgun. I turned to fight, but the hand was Leonard’s, and he pushed me and pulled the shotgun away from me and flung it in a corner.

Leonard pulled an automatic out from under his shirt and held it casually. “It ain’t your style, brother,” he said. “You ain’t the one for it. Hell, you know that. I know that. Besides, you’ll be doin’ it for the wrong reasons and you’ll feel bad about it in the morning.”

“But I’ll feel good now,” I said.

There was a commotion in the hallway, a yell, a bunch of grunts, then a falling sound. Jim Bob came in holding his blackjack. He looked at me. “You gonna take a place, you got to secure it, Bub. There was another one in the house. Now there’s two on the floor. Motherfucker tried some Tae Kwon Do kicks on me, only he ain’t so good. Tae Kwon Do ain’t so good no more. Fact is, it ain’t been Tae Kwon Do for twenty years. It’s been that tournament shit.”

“Third man passed us in the yard, running,” Leonard said. “I suppose you made a face at him, Hap.”

I didn’t answer. Leonard turned his attention to Bissinggame. “Goddamn, Bissinggame, you call that a dick? Put somethin’ over that thing ’fore it makes me sick. Looks like a little old grub worm with pecans tied to its tail. Hell, get back in bed.”

“He makes me do this,” Bissinggame said. “He pays me a lot of money, so he makes me do this.”

“Shut up,” Leonard said. “You got a shit ring on your dick. Get back in bed.”

Bissinggame got back in bed, pulled the covers over his hips. King sat up in bed. He didn’t look any different than when I came in. Found nude with a man. A shotgun pointed at him. His car ran off the road. A bowl of chili. Everything was the same to him. He leaned over the side of the bed, picked up a pack of cigarettes and a lighter with his splinter-filled hand. He got out a cigarette, lit it and puffed it. Blood dripped off his hand onto his chest and onto the sheets. He said, “Now what? So you know I’m a lyin’ sonofabitch. I fuck men. I fuck women. I’d fuck my goddamn dog, but I figure you killed it.”

“I regret the dog,” I said.

King grunted. “Bissinggame here, shit, he’s a Baptist church deacon. Ever fuck a deacon, nigger?”

“Can’t say that I have,” Leonard said.

“Well, they give a whole new meaning to the word *tight-ass,”* King said and laughed.

“King had Brett and Leon killed,” I said. “Let me have the shotgun back, Leonard. I just want to do what you and Jim Bob wanted to do in the first place.”

Leonard looked at me. “You go on outside,” Leonard said. He went over and picked the shotgun up where it lay against the wall.

“You kill him instead of me, it ain’t the same,” I said.

“It’s not your way, and you know it,” Leonard said. “Go outside.”

“You’re wrong,” I said. “I can kill him. I want to kill him. Let me have the shotgun.”

I lunged for Leonard and the shotgun, but Jim Bob stepped in and hit me across the back of the hand with the blackjack. I went to my knees for a moment, eased slowly to my feet. The pain passed quickly.

Jim Bob grabbed my shirt collar, said, “Come with me, or the next one’s upside your ear.”

“He’s going to kill him. I want to do it,” I said.

Jim Bob jerked me around and I rabbit-shot him one in the ribs. Jim Bob bent. Leonard flicked out his left hand, caught me on the back of the head, and down I went. Then Jim Bob twisted my wrist into a lock, used it as come-along, took me out of there.

Behind me I heard King say, “You gonna shoot, nigger, get it over with, otherwise I’m gonna get up and take a shower. Throw a little alcohol on this hand.”

Out in the yard Jim Bob said, “You gotta calm down, Hap. You got to listen.”

A shotgun blast went off inside the trailer.

“Jesus!” I said. “Fuck that sonofabitch!”

A moment later Leonard appeared in the doorway holding Bissinggame’s leisure suit. He came down to where we were standing.

“You shouldn’t have done it,” I said.

“Oh, I don’t intend to wear it,” Leonard said.

“I don’t mean the leisure suit, you idiot,” I said. “You shouldn’t have killed King. Now it’s your neck. I wanted to take him out. I didn’t care what happened to me. I wanted to see that smug sonofabitch’s head go to pieces. I didn’t want you in on this shit.”

“I know,” Leonard said. “But I didn’t shoot anybody. I just shot another hole in the ceiling.”

I stared at him. Leonard took one of my arms, Jim Bob the other. “For Christ sakes, you’re letting him off scot-free,” I said.

“He didn’t do anything,” Jim Bob said.

“You said it was him,” I said. “You said he was behind it all.”

“I thought he was,” Jim Bob said. “Guess what, I think I could be wrong. And let me tell you, Hap. This bein’ wrong—I find it disturbing. It ain’t somethin’ I’m used to.”

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Jim Bob drove my pickup with me on the passenger side. He parked it behind the fireworks stand not far from King's place. Leonard picked us up in his rental, took us back for Jim Bob's car.

I rode with Leonard as Jim Bob followed. We drove east, way out to a roadside park, pulled over. Jim Bob pulled in behind us. We gathered at a concrete picnic table. There was a cool wind blowing, but you could feel warmth creeping into the breeze. Another half hour to an hour the air would be sticky as Velcro.

"You know, I'm going to kill King anyway," I said.

"If you do," Jim Bob said, "make it a lot less obvious."

"You've made it harder now," I said. "He'll be expecting me. He'll maybe even call the cops."

Jim Bob shook his head. "Naw. He may act cool, but he ain't anxious the word gets around he brown-rings. It don't go with his image. That's what King is. Image. I'll say this for him, though. He ain't excitable."

"How the hell did you two know where I was going?"

"We can come to that in a moment," Leonard said. "Listen here, Hap. Leon is dead, but Brett isn't."

"Horseshit!" I said. "What the fuck they going to do? Give her a new head, pump a little blood in her heart, prop her up with a stick? Believe me, you asshole, she's dead."

"No," Leonard said. "Leon and Ella are dead."

I sat silently for a moment. I was looking at a brick barbecue cooker. Someone had stuffed it with trash. A crow lit on it, pecked at something between the bricks.

"I don't understand," I said.

"We been tryin' to tell you for a time," Jim Bob said. "But you won't shut up."

"My God," I said. "Brett is okay?"

“Right as rain,” Jim Bob said.

“After you left Brett’s,” Leonard said, “she called Ella. Ella wanted to swap shifts with her this week.”

“Oh, God,” I said. “I forgot.”

Leonard said, “Brett called, Ella answered, said she’d call back. She did, about twenty minutes later. She was at her mother’s. She’d walked out of the trailer while Kevin was sleepin’, walked down to a fillin’ station and called a taxi. She called Brett from her mom’s. Seems Ella finally decided she was gonna leave her husband, but she had to go to work in a couple hours and she didn’t have any more money after the taxi. Leon drove Brett’s car over there to give Ella a ride to work. They got to the hospital—”

“Big Man was waiting and thought Ella was Brett,” I said.

“Nope,” Leonard said. “Big Man didn’t shoot anybody. It was Kevin. He didn’t want her leavin’. He was waiting on Ella. He recognized Brett’s car, saw Ella driving. He had his shotgun. He walked over and shot her, killed Leon, who I figure was trying to protect her.”

“You know it was Kevin?” I said.

“Uh-huh,” Leonard said. “He drove over to Brett’s house, stood out in the front yard with a shotgun and a pistol and yelled obscenities and said he’d killed the bitch, et cetera. Somehow, he blamed Brett. Least that’s what we were gettin’ from his rantings. Before any of us could do anything about it. Shoot him. Call the law. He put the revolver against his eye and took the A-train.”

“I’ll be goddamn,” I said.

“You’d killed King,” Jim Bob said, “you’d have killed him for something he didn’t order done.”

“Thing is, cops were on this Kevin asshole pronto,” Leonard said. “Someone at the hospital knew who he was, seen him do the deed, and told the cops. They didn’t have any trouble spottin’ his car, following him over to Brett’s. They got there before the gunsmoke from Kevin’s pistol cleared. We were standin’ out in the yard when they showed up. One of the cops said he saw you at the hospital. Said you took out of there like a bat out of hell. I had a pretty good idea where you were going. I left Clinton with Brett and went after you.”

“And me,” Jim Bob said. “I was on my way to Leonard’s house to tell you boys some new business. That look in your eyes and the shotgun told me you weren’t just goin’ for breakfast, so I followed. Met Leonard in King’s yard. Now I’m learning some of the details for the first time.”

“Poor Leon,” I said. “Poor, poor Ella.”

“Poor Clinton,” Leonard said. “Fact is, I don’t want to leave him with Brett long. He’s a messed-up man. Something came up, well, he might not be up to his usual standards.”

“Leon wasn’t up to his,” I said.

“They aren’t pros,” Leonard said. “They’re just a couple schmucks like us. Jim Bob’s the only pro here.”

We sat for a few minutes, studied the cars zipping by on the highway. I turned to Jim Bob, said, “You said you thought you might be wrong about King Arthur?”

“Could be,” Jim Bob said. “I got to thinking you might be right, that I ought to follow all the leads, not make a snap judgment. I checked out this other fella, other name this Pierre gave you. Bill Cunningham.”

“We didn’t tell you that,” I said.

“I’ll come to that,” Jim Bob said. “Cunningham’s a lawyer. Nothing obviously funny about him. Fact is, I think he’s clean.”

“I thought you said he was a lawyer,” Leonard said.

“You’re right,” Jim Bob said. “I lost my head.”

“So you don’t know anything more than you did know?” I said.

“You know how I got on to King in the first place?” Jim Bob asked. “I come to town, I look around, I connect with this Raul in the park, follow him around, finally over to this hair spot, Antone’s. Raul gets killed, I go in there and ask around, pretend to be a Texas Ranger. Pierre, guy with the cartoon skunk voice, gave me a couple names. Same names you guys got.”

“So?” I said.

“I get to thinking, what if you’re right and chili man is just a low-rent crook, not into all this. I check out this Bill Cunningham, and nothin’. I get to thinkin’ what could be the source. You know, tryin’ to go back to where the river starts instead of just jumpin’ in and swimmin'."

"I don't follow you," I said.

"The source for your information about King was Pierre. The source of my information about King was Pierre. That don't mean nothin' by itself, but why not check this Pierre out? So I watch this Antone's. Being the astute sonofabitch I am, I notice bikers from next door like to wander in there, but ain't none of them come out with haircuts or dye jobs."

"The biker connection?" Leonard said.

"Bikers would show up at the rec hall over there, hang out a while, then go to Antone's, in the back way, come out with little packages, get on their wheels and ride away. Interesting, huh?"

"Very," Leonard said.

"That's number one," Jim Bob said. "Number two is I call a cop friend in Houston, someone can give me the information but can stay out of our business. This Pierre, it took some time to run him down on the computer, but his real name is Terry Wesley, and guess what? He's got a rap sheet longer than the pope's robes. Lot of it is pimpin' young boys. In Houston he used to meet buses, catch the kids had run off from home. He'd befriend them, pull them into the service. Had them hangin' around the goddamn Greyhound station hustlin' goobers. Anyway, Pierre got busted for pimpin' more than a couple times. Word was, he specialized in providin' the rough trade. You know, guy comes in, wants to butt-fuck him a boy, likes to slap him around a bit. This way, fucker gets some ass, feels like a tough guy too. You'd be surprised how much of that shit goes on."

"Sad thing is," Leonard said, "I ain't much surprised at anything anymore."

"Got one more card to play," Jim Bob said. "I followed one of the bikers carried a package out the back of the hair joint. He took a little road trip to Dallas. I followed. He delivered the package to a video store in Dallas. Got a little package back. My guess, a video for the store owner, money for Pierre, and a nice cut for the biker. Pierre, he's got these bikers jettin' all over East Texas. It's an easy, cheap way to deliver the shit. And another thing, they can dub this crap forever."

"And there's always new films," Leonard said.

“That’s right,” Jim Bob said. “It’s not like they got to have a Francis Ford Coppola behind the lens.”

“Could King and Pierre be together on all this?” I asked.

“I thought about that,” Jim Bob said. “It’s possible. But I don’t think so. I think Pierre gave us King’s name pretty easy. They were partners, he’d have held out.”

“What gets me is it’s gays doin’ it to gays,” I said.

“Welcome once again to the real world,” Leonard said.

“I suggest we have a little talk with Pierre,” Jim Bob said. “Pretend to have taken Raul and Horse’s place as blackmailers, make him push a move. Then we gift-wrap him for the cops.”

We went in Jim Bob’s car to Antone’s. Pierre wasn’t there.

“Well, where is he?” I asked the lady in charge.

She was a heavyset blond lady whose hair looked as if it had been the recipient of many an experiment, the most recent being an incredible rat job that revealed pink patches of skull. She was badly made up with too much powder and lipstick, false eyelashes thick enough and enough to support a transport plane. She was outgoing and windy as hell; had a mouth like a leaf blower. No doubt she had given phone death to many a listener.

She said, “Well, I don’t rightly know where that little Frenchy is. He kind of comes and goes, you know. I’m in charge most of the time. Name’s Delores. Pierre has other things goin’ on I don’t know much about. Quite the little entrepreneur. Sometimes he’s here all week, sometimes you don’t see him for a week. I ain’t seen him for days. I open up, do hair, teach some of the students how to do hair, then I go home. You smell them peroxide fumes all day, you get so you can’t wait to get out of here. I go home and drink lots of goat’s milk. It’s supposed to help get rid of all kinds of toxins in the body, or at least that’s what my herbal medicine man tells me. He’s this Mex’kin lives on the other side of the railroad tracks. Hear him tell it, there ain’t a goddamn thing that goat milk can’t cure. ’Course, at four dollars a gallon, that shit ought to make you younger, tighten up your love sack, and put your cherry back in it. You boys want to leave a message?”

"He comes back," Jim Bob said, "just tell Pierre three fellows came by to extort some money out of him, but not to worry, we'll be back."

"That's a hell of a message," she said.

"Ain't it?" Leonard said.

"He got a home address?" Jim Bob asked.

"I can look it up," Delores said. "You know, I been workin' for that little French twist for a full year now, and he ain't never invited me or anyone here over to his house."

"Maybe he hangs his underwear on the doors," Leonard said.

"I hadn't thought of that," Delores said. "One thing I can do without is lookin' at stains in drawers. My husband was terrible about that. I figure he wiped his butt, it was an accident, or his shorts got sucked up his crack. Way I figure, when he died, the undertaker had to use a hose and a putty knife to get him clean."

"Soul mates, huh?" Jim Bob said.

"Hell, only thing that bastard had any soulful connection with was *Championship Bowlin', a* beer, and a bag of taco chips, which is what I figure killed him. I'd have known that, I'd have kept a bigger supply around."

We followed her into Pierre's office. She got out the phone book, flipped it open, found his name. "There it is," she said.

When we were outside in the parking lot, I said, "Gee, Jim Bob, right in the phone book. You're quite the detective."

"Go fuck yourself," Jim Bob said.

29

Pierre's house was easy to find. We drove over there and parked at the curb and sat for a moment.

"Are we waiting for Pierre to come out to the curb?" Leonard said.

"No," Jim Bob said. "We're gonna go up there and intimidate him."

"Intimidation is good," Leonard said.

"We don't push in," Jim Bob said. "We don't go past the door. We just intimidate. We put him in a position where he wants our asses dead."

"He already wants our asses dead," Leonard said.

"What we're gonna do is let him know we're on to him," Jim Bob said. "We're gonna make him so nervous his shit will be nervous. Then we'll leave. Let him think a while, see if he makes a play."

"If he doesn't?" Leonard asked.

"We'll come back on him like ass rash in a few days," Jim Bob said. "We'll keep it up until he's got to scratch."

We walked up the drive. It was a nice drive. The lawn was well clipped. There was a sprinkler system going, which, considering we'd just had a lot of rain, seemed wasteful. The garage was locked up tight. The houses on either side were nice and well dressed. Suburbia, U.S.A.

We went to the door. Jim Bob rang the bell.

We waited.

Jim Bob rang the bell again.

"Maybe the bell doesn't work," Leonard said, and he knocked.

We waited some more.

"You boys stand here," Jim Bob said, and he slipped around the side of the house.

Leonard said, “Watch that sonofabitch move? He’s like a ghost.”

“You think he moves good going around the side of a house, you ought to see him blow up a car, kick down a door, shoot two thugs to death, and run Big Man Mountain into the woods. Then take me out the back door with him. He may actually have been eating dinner while he was doin’ that.”

Few moments later Jim Bob came back. He said, “Back door is opened. Been jimmied.”

“Uh-oh,” I said.

“Yeah,” Jim Bob said. “Uh-oh.”

“What now?” Leonard asked.

“Well,” Jim Bob said, “ain’t nobody seems to be lookin’, and since we don’t need a search warrant …”

The back door had that distinctive Big Man Mountain look. It appeared a crowbar had been inserted, and with a heave, the door had been snapped free of its lock. Even with a crowbar, that took some muscle.

Jim Bob kicked the door with the toe of his boot; it swung open, and we slipped inside. The air-conditioning unit was humming nicely. It felt good. Sunlight crept through the cracks of the living room curtains. Place looked like a magazine shoot. Expensive furniture, carpet, and paintings.

Jim Bob knelt, pulled up his pants legs. He reached inside his boot, took out a little leather zippered case. He unzipped it. There was everything in that case but a change of clothes.

Jim Bob removed a small wad of plastic from it. He replaced the case and unfolded the plastic. The plastic was several paper-thin gloves. He gave us each a pair. We put them on. He said, “Let’s look around.”

I took the kitchen. There were food dishes on the table, some kind of leftover Chinese was my guess, but I couldn’t tell for certain. What was left of it was long spoiled, gone black and full of flies that had come in through the cracked back door. There were two smeary plates on the table, two wineglasses, a half bottle of red wine. Flies skated over the greasy plate and sat around on the mouth of the bottle, making small talk, I presumed.

Jim Bob opened a bedroom door, peeked in. “This is sweet.”

Leonard and I took a look. The decor had gone from *Better Homes and Gardens* to Elvis on drugs. It was a big bedroom with a round bed and a mirrored ceiling. The covers, crushed red velvet, were in a wad. There was a huge television set and a VCR. A glass bedside table with books on it. The books were photographs of nude men. On the walls were paintings of nude men making love to one another.

We slid into the room and Jim Bob went around the bed and stopped and said, “This, however, isn’t so sweet.”

Leonard and I took a look. Some guy I had never seen before lay there, tiger-striped underwear pulled down to his knees. His arms were bent at the elbows, his hands pushing palms up, as if he had ended up that way trying to fend someone off.

He was long and lean and might have been in his thirties. He smelled bad and his gut was swollen. The air conditioning had kept him in pretty good shape and the stink was surprisingly minimal. There was a small, but well-defined hole in his forehead. Not a designer move, this hole. It didn’t go with the gold earring or the toupee that had blown off his noggin and onto the wall like a kitten tossed from a speeding car. A puddle of blood pooled under his head. I figured you rolled him over, you’d find an exit hole about the size of the national debt.

“I think we can safely declare that whoever this fucker is, he’s dead,” Jim Bob said.

“Any idea who he is?” I said.

“One of Pierre’s boyfriends,” Leonard said.

The bathroom door was partially open. I went over there and gave the door a shove. “Oh, shit,” I said.

Flies rose up angrily, buzzed about, then found their footing again. Unlike the body on the bedroom floor, this job had taken some time. Pierre—I assumed it was Pierre from the general build and greasy hair—was naked, his knees on the floor in a pudding of dried blood. He was bent over and leaning into the tub. His hands were tied behind his back with blood-splattered zebra-striped underwear.

There was something long, thin, and dark shoved up his ass, and what had once been his face was a swath of dark ruin and happy flies. His head nodded toward the tub as if bowing in reverence. There was blood on the wall, inside the tub, all around the body. There were footprints in the blood, and there was a towel on the floor where the man who had made the footprints had wiped the blood off his shoes.

Way Pierre was arranged, it was obvious that whoever had shoved whatever up his ass had sat on the commode to do their work. Nice and comfy, easy to get to Pierre's blow hole. Behind the commode on the wall was a plaque that said READING ROOM.

On the floor next to the commode lay a heavy tenderizing mallet, a gold cigarette lighter, a box cutter, and a pair of tin snips.

I eased in a little closer. Jim Bob and Leonard looked over my shoulder. The stink in there was more intense than in the bedroom. I put my hand over my mouth and breathed shallow breaths. I glanced in the tub. There were some messy things in there. I thought I recognized a dick and balls, but how can one tell about these things when they're covered in gore and withered from a few days of disconnection? It could have been a blackened and withered banana and two dried grapes, for all I could tell. There were teeth in there too, some gums and jawbone attached. There was also a hole in the tub where a bullet had gone through the back of Pierre's head and out the front and into the ceramic.

"I guess intimidation is out, huh?" Jim Bob said.

"Yeah," Leonard said. "I don't think we can beat this."

Jim Bob eased past me, lifted Pierre's head by the hair, squatted down and took a look at his face. "It's Pierre," he said, confirming what we already knew. "And he's had a dental job and a little tattoo work."

We leaned for a glance. Carved into his forehead with the box cutter was the word WELSHER. Below that, the tip of his nose was missing, and what had once been a mouth was just a gaping hole edged by bone and a tooth hanging by a strip of bloody skin.

"What's that in his ass?" Leonard asked.

"Barbed wire," Jim Bob said. "And you can be certain it wasn't no fencin' accident. I bet whoever stuck it up there didn't even grease it."

"You know who stuck it up there?" I said. "You see the size of those prints? Way that back door was opened?"

"Yeah," Jim Bob said. "Big Man Mountain."

"So maybe you're wrong a second time," Leonard said. "Looks like Big Man and Pierre weren't in cahoots."

"I think the word *welsher* carved into Pierre's head explains a few things," Jim Bob said.

"Explain them to us somewhere else," I said. "I've had about all this I can take."

We returned to the living room. The air was considerably better in there. Jim Bob said, "I think Pierre made some kind of financial arrangement with Big Man, and Pierre didn't deliver, and Big Man took it personal. Figure Pierre was in here with his fist up this guy's ass and Big Man came in and gave them a surprise party. A noise maker for the lover, and a bag of games for Pierre himself. I think toward the end there, it didn't have nothing to do with money. Big Man had a mission in mind, and it was supposed to end with Pierre dying slowly and badly. And that's just the way it went. Let's finish looking."

We checked another bedroom. It was full of shelves, and on the shelves were rows and rows of videotapes. Jim Bob took a couple of them down, went back to the bedroom with the body and the VCR. Reluctantly, we followed. Jim Bob played a bit of each video.

"Jesus," Leonard said. "This shit is worse than the ones we got."

"Later stuff is my guess," Jim Bob said. "Fucks like this, they start out doin' a little rough stuff, then they build on it. Pretty soon, it's beyond a few bites and pinches and ass whippin's. It steps over into torture. You'll note, the park isn't the background for these. More seclusion. More time to make the kind of videos Pierre wanted to make, wanted to sell."

Jim Bob returned the videos to the shelves. We finished off our little escapade by looking in the garage. No car, but there was a motorcycle. It looked as if Big Man had traded out with Pierre, leaving his bike and taking Pierre's car.

We left out of there and drove away. It was a hot day now and the car's air conditioner was off, but I felt a chill anyway.

We stopped at a self-service gas station, threw away the gloves we'd used. I called the police department with a little tip about a house with two dead bodies in it. Before they could ask any questions, I hung up.

I went out to the car. Jim Bob had his hat pushed way back on his forehead and was pumping gas into his car's tank and Leonard was using Bissinggame's leisure-suit jacket to clean bugs off the windshield.

I leaned against the car. I kept hearing those damn flies and smelling that stench, seeing that face that wasn't a face. Poor bastard. Worse yet, he hadn't even had the taste to wear decent jockey shorts. Who the fuck made them zebra-striped briefs anyway? There ought to be a law against that kind of shit. That and leisure suits.

Leonard trash-canned the suit, came over, leaned next to me. "You know, you dampen that material, it makes a pretty good swipe."

"Neat," I said.

"How you doin', man?"

"I don't know."

"Yeah, me neither," Leonard said. "Lot has changed in a short time. I don't know how I feel about anything. Poor old Leon."

"Yeah," I said.

"Clinton is gonna be seriously fucked up."

"Yeah."

"Poor Ella."

"Yep," Leonard said. "Poor Ella. Know what I think?"

"What?"

"I think the worst is over."

"You're talkin' about our lives," I said. "Seems to me you're being foolishly optimistic. Every time we turn around, we're openin' up a can of worms."

Leonard clapped me on the shoulder. "It's all right, man. We're both gonna be all right. Big Man had a falling-out with Pierre, took care of Pierre, so Pierre's no longer a problem. Big Man won't have any interest in us now. It's just a matter of time before the law runs him aground. Guy looks like that can't hide forever. As for King, well, we turn in the tapes to Charlie, and let Charlie sort stuff out. We've done all we can do."

"Reckon so," I said.

"You know, today's been different."

"That's an understatement."

"No, I mean it's been me keepin' you from goin' off half-cocked. Usually, it's the other way around."

"That's what's bothering me," I said. "I came within an inch of killing a man for no reason other than anger and suspicion. One squeeze of the trigger, I'd have been no better than Big Man, Pierre, or the rest."

"On your worst day, you're better than all of them," Leonard said. "You'd killed King, it wouldn't have hurt my feelin's."

"Leonard, sometimes you scare me."

Jim Bob went inside to pay for the gas.

I said, "He doesn't seem particularly perturbed, does he?"

"I have a feeling that weird fuck has seen more bodies and strange shit than we have, Hap."

"All I know is I feel like my life has been poisoned. I come home from a shitty job, get bit by a rabid squirrel, find out my insurance policy sucks the dog dick and my best friend is accused of murder."

Leonard nodded. "I know. One day I'm living with this guy I love, next thing I know he's run off with a grease ball, then Raul's killed, and I find out he was a grease ball himself. It's pretty disconcerting. I thought I could choose my men better than that."

"Considering my fuck-ups with women, I can't say much," I said.

"You're right," Leonard said. "You can't."

"I think Brett might be different. I want to believe she is. I want to believe I’m different. That I’ve changed. That I’m not quite so stupid.”

“Well,” Leonard said, “Brett strikes me as one hell of a lady. As for you, howsabout we not hope for too much?”

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Couple days later, as reinforcement, I phoned Charlie and told him most of what I knew, holding very little back. The cops had already been to Pierre's and had found the videos. There were videos without face bars on them as well, so most of the people involved in the sorry business could be identified.

"I want to thank you and Leonard for the stuff you stuck in my mailbox, Hap."

"What stuff?"

Charlie laughed. "All right. Play it that way. But some helpful sonofabitch put two videos and a notebook full of coded phone numbers in there. One video is about grease, the other is about sex and violence."

"Does it help any?"

"Doesn't hurt. Fact is, this is one time where an entire ring of assholes is gonna get nailed. A few of the bikers involved won't get pinned, 'cause there ain't enough proof, but there's a string of video-store owners right now whose assholes are suckin' wind. I hate to give you any fuckin' credit, but you and Leonard can be proud of yourselves on this one."

"Yeah," I said, "but at what price?"

"At the price had to be paid," Charlie said. "You could have done better. You should have had the law in on it, but the law wasn't worth a shit on this one. You did all right, Hap. You and Leonard and Jim Bob. There's anyone ought to feel bad, it's the law."

"Long as you don't," I said. "Your hands were tied."

"I ought not to have let them been tied," Charlie said. "I don't know I'm thinkin' clear as I ought to be."

"Can you keep mention of me and Leonard out of this?"

"Yeah. We can use Jim Bob a little. He don't mind and it won't hurt him like it might hurt you. He was hired to do a job, you see, even if being a private detective don't exactly make everything he did legal."

"Maybe you could drop the two boys in the cabin," I said.

"We found them fellas," Charlie said. "One I thought I knew I did know. The other one's got a record long as the other. Scumbags, both. We're gonna blame it on Pierre. That way Jim Bob isn't put on the spot, and neither are you."

"Pierre wasn't the kind to do his own handiwork," I said.

"Maybe, but we're gonna make it look like he was."

"That's not very nice," I said.

"No," Charlie said, "and it ain't even legal."

"What about Jim Bob?" I said. "Haven't seen him since the day we found Pierre with a length of fence up his ass.

He didn't say 'bye or kiss my ass, he dropped us off and was gone."

"That's his way. Saw too many Lone Ranger movies when he was a kid. He's gone back to Pasadena. His job was finished. He can tell his client the stalk-and-rape ring is busted and he can go back to farmin' hogs and waitin' for the next job."

"What about Hanson?"

"I been over to see him, Hap. He's doin' pretty goddamn good. Amazing, actually. He gets better, I'll tell him all this shit. He'd want to know."

"What about Big Man Mountain?"

"Still hasn't turned up. He took off in Pierre's red Mercedes."

"That ought to show up."

"My guess is he dumped it right away, caught a bus to someplace hot and dry."

"Right now, Texas is hot and dry."

"Drier yet. Mexico."

"I don't know I should ask, but how about the wife?"

"We're separated, Hap. I think maybe it won't work out, know what I'm sayin'?"

"Yeah."

“She’s seein’ this fuckin’ insurance guy kind of regularlike. Did I tell you he smokes?”

“Yeah.”

“Sonofabitch,” Charlie said. “I hear that,” I said.

Ella was buried the next day. I went to the funeral with Brett. Day after that, Leon was put down. Leonard and I got together, made a deal to pay for his funeral. Doing that tapped me out, but it didn’t matter.

It was a hot day with a hot wind and the striped funeral tent rustled as the preacher talked a hot wind of his own. Leon got as good a sendoff as a launch party for the dead can be, considering, as is often the case, the minister who preached the sermon didn’t know him from creamed corn.

Later, when me and Leonard and Brett walked with Clinton out to his car, he said, “Wouldn’t none of that stuff preacher said about Leon true.”

“It’s just the way it’s done,” Brett said.

“Yeah,” Clinton said, “well, they ought to do it some other kinda way. They made Leon all out to be this suit-type man. Shit, I’m gonna miss my bro.”

“I’m sorry, Clinton,” I said. “It’s sort of my fault.”

“More like mine since I asked you and Leon to help out,” Leonard said.

“And mine,” Brett said. “He was helping me.”

“No, it ain’t y’all no kind of way,” Clinton said. “It’s that sonofabitch killed him’s fault. Me and Leon, we knew what we was gettin’ into. You folks hang tough.”

Clinton, trying to hold his head up and stay solid, climbed in his car and clattered away.

“I got to tell you,” Brett said. “I first met those two, I thought they were just a couple of ignorant thugs. I think now they’re better than most of the educated people I know.”

“Leon and Clinton,” Leonard said, “they invented grit. I’m gonna miss ole Scum Eye. He was a stand-up guy.”

Brett took us both by the arms. “So are you two guys,” she said.

And with her holding our arms, we walked down to my pickup and drove away from the hot wind and the striped funeral tent, the headstones rising up sad and white and gray.

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Next few days weren't so bad. Things started to sort themselves out. I got a job at a club, bouncing. The pay wasn't much, but I figured I could do it for a week or two until I found something else. Only thing was, I didn't start for a couple of days, and I was dead broke.

Brett soothed that. She managed to take some time off from work, even if she didn't have it coming. We spent a lot of time together, at her place and mine, getting to know each other better, and from my end I certainly liked what I had come to know.

Brett coming out to my house changed the place. She couldn't stand the way I did things, so she did it her way, and I liked her way better. The dishes were cleaner and neater and the house smelled better. The gym-sock stink in the bathroom was gone and the mold was off the shower curtain.

'Course, Brett made me do all the work to get the place in shipshape condition, and she was one hell of a D.I. I figured next thing coming was I'd have little wooden plaques with slogans on them hanging over the kitchen sink and the bathroom shitter.

On a hot Sunday morning, two weeks after all hell had gone down, the sky began to darken and threaten rain. By eleven A.M. the heat was dissipating and the air turned cool. I got up and opened all the windows. In the distance, in the dark clouds, lighting bolts hopped and squirmed as if mating.

Brett and I had spent a large portion of the morning in bed, making love, and now we were in the kitchen. Brett was wearing one of my T-shirts, and she sure did it more justice than I could have, especially since that was all she was wearing. I liked to watch her move, leaning over the sink, messing with pots and pans, trying to find something in the cabinet worth fixing for lunch.

I was in deck shoes, torn jeans and a black T-shirt so faded it looked the color of ancient cigarette ash. I washed my hands and surveyed the interior of the refrigerator. It was as lonesome in there as Custer on the Little Big Horn.

"Hap," Brett said, "even I can't make a meal out of this stuff, and I can toast shit and bricks and make you happy. This calls for severe action. I'm gonna go to town and buy some grub."

"I'd offer you money, but I don't have any."

"Hell, I know that."

"I'll pay you back when I get my first check."

"You can buy me a meal."

Brett darted into the bedroom, pulled on a dress and shoes, bounced out of there with my truck keys. I stood on the porch and waved. She wasn't gone thirty seconds before I took notice of the sky. It had changed. The air was neither cool nor hot. I felt as if I was in the middle of a bowl, and the sky, which had gone green, was gradually descending on me. I knew the signs. Tornado.

I wished I had noticed before Brett drove away. Now there was nothing I could do but stand there in the eerie silence, wondering if it would happen, wondering if she would be okay. A car on the road is not a good place to be during a tornado.

I watched to see if a funnel might be forming. The clouds were nervous, though not as nervous as me. They rolled and twisted and at times I fancied I could see them dipping down like the bottom part of a blackened snow cone, but in the next moment it looked like nothing more than a wispy black cloud.

I decided to pour myself a cup of coffee, sit on the front porch and keep an eye on things. Weather turned sour and the sky skipped down, I was going to make a run for the bathroom and my tub, supposedly one of the safest places you could be during a tornado, if for no other reason than the plumbing is rooted deep into the ground. But of course there was really no safe place to be during a tornado, unless it was someplace where the tornado wasn't.

Before I got back to the front porch, the rain came, blowing hard, and there was a sudden blast of hail so ferocious I couldn't stay on the porch. Sitting there was like being a victim of a biblical stoning.

I rushed inside, shaking the rain off of me, listening to it blow at a slant under the porch and slam the wall. A chunk of ice literally the size of a baseball crashed through the window behind the couch, flew over it, slammed against the floor and bounced and hit a chair in the kitchen, thudded back into the living room, rolled to the middle of the floor.

I turned to look at the broken window. Rain and smaller chunks of hail were slamming against it now, and I heard another glass go in the bedroom. It was eerie, the wind blowing that way, pushing the hail straight before it. If this wasn't a tornado, it would damn sure do until the real thing showed up.

I was thinking about pouring another cup of coffee and nesting in the bathtub with a flashlight and a book and one ear cocked for wind. Anything to get my mind off the storm and Brett being in it. But I didn't do that. I guess it was people like me that waited until the last minute and were taken away by the wind. Instead I went to the side window of my living room and glanced out. Trees were bending way too far, and I saw lightning leap out of the sky and smack one like an insolent teenager, knocking pine bark and needles a-flying.

When I turned around the back door jumped away from the wall with an explosion of busted lock, and I thought, goddamn, the twister's got me, but then I saw it was a human tornado.

Big Man Mountain. He came quickly into the room. He was wearing jeans and a filthy white T-shirt and his clodhopper boots. He was soaked with rain and it ran off of him in great rivulets and pooled quickly at his feet. He looked like hell. He was pale as Casper the Ghost.

I thought about my gun, back in my bedroom in the nightstand drawer, and I started to run for it, but Big Man came through the open kitchen and into the living room at a rush. I braced myself to fight, but he leaped up and twisted and shot out both feet and hit me with a drop-kick that flung me across the room and into the front door with a sound like someone dropping a dead blowfish on the dock. It hurt like a sonofabitch. I tried to get up but didn't have any wind in me. Big Man had hold of me and lifted me over his head as if I were a sack of flour, tossed me back onto the floor. I tried to curl my body and duck my chin, roll with the fall, but it still hurt like hell.

Next thing I knew, Big Man had me by the head and was yanking me around and whirling me onto the couch. I came to a sitting position and shot out my foot as he came at me, scored a good one on his chin. He went back and I came up and he swung and I went under and struck out with a knee that caught him in the thigh, and it was a good shot, right on that point in the thigh that makes you wish it was someone else's leg, even your mother's. I whipped my arm around and hammered him in the kidneys, slid in behind him, tried to grab him in a stranglehold. But this wasn't smart. That was his game.

Big Man grabbed my arm, bent forward suddenly, and I found myself flying. I landed on the couch again, facedown. I tried to get up but took a kick in the ass, right above the blow hole, right there on the tip of the spinal cord. I went out, and when I awoke I was in hell.

I was on the couch, sitting. My feet were tied with a twisted coat hanger and my wrists were bound behind my back with what I figured was the same. At my back the wind and small pellets of ice whirled through the broken glass and smacked the back of my head, neck, and shoulders. The couch was soaked with cold rain.

Big Man had pulled a chair up in front of the couch and he was looking at me. To his right he had placed another chair. On the chair, from my cabinets and closets, were a variety of items. Straightened coat hangers, a butcher knife, a corkscrew, pliers, and an ice pick. There was also a glass of water and a bottle of aspirin.

Big Man had taken his shirt off, and he was a massive hunk, with a big solid belly and a hairy chest and arms that looked like knotted ship cables. On his right lower arm was a large festered wound. His face was oily and covered with sweat beads the size of his own knuckles, which were considerably larger than diesel truck lug bolts. He was holding his head up with difficulty. His breathing was bad. His face had gone from pale to blue, but not as blue as his lips. His eyes were scummy around the edges and the whites were no longer whites, but reds. In his left hand he held a Swiss Army knife open to the spoon.

"I was thinking of your eyes," he said. "I thought they might be a good place to start. But I'm having second thoughts. I say let you see what there is to see until the very last."

"There's no reason to do this, Big Man," I said. "It's all over. You did Pierre in yourself. What's the point?"

Big Man smiled at me. His teeth appeared not to have been cleaned in ages. They were yellow, with brown roots that were probably from chewing tobacco.

"The point is *completion,"* Big Man said. "No one believes in completion anymore. I do. I finish what I start. I was paid to do you in, get a video and a book, and now I'm here to do just that. I could have done the nigger, but you worked out better. I been hiding in the woods. You're easier to get to here. You, the nigger, the cunt, it don't matter, long as I come up with what I set out to come up with. The book. The video."

"It's over, Big Man."

Big Man shook his head. "No. The other night was left undone, Mr. Collins, but as you can see, here we are again."

"You did your job, man. Pierre isn't here to pay you anymore. You're not obligated."

"He hired me. He didn't pay me. I had to extract some vengeance for that. I took a little money from him, a few items I could sell. Nothing that drastically exceeded what was owed me for the job I had done so far. He wanted to not pay me because I didn't get the video and the book. He wasn't giving me enough time. Jesus, you know, Collins, I feel like shit."

"Big Man. Listen. The notebook, the videos. The cops have them."

"You said that before."

"And I lied, but this time it's true. It's all over. I wasn't trying to blackmail anyone. That wasn't my purpose."

"Shut up. I got a headache. I'll do the talkin'."

"That looks like a bite," I said, nodding toward the wound on his arm.

"Fox. I was campin'. Livin' in the woods in Pierre's Mercedes. I got out to take a piss. Fox came at me. Leaped at me. Bit me. I strangled it. I never seen one do like that before."

"It was rabid, Big Man. You've been bitten by a rabid fox."

"No."

"Yes. A rabid squirrel bit me, so I should know!"

Big Man burst out laughing. "A rabid squirrel! What's your game, Mr. Collins?"

"Big Man, I don't have the video or the notebook. Your job is over."

"It's over when I say it's over. And if you don't have the video or the notebook, well, I'll know for sure after we try out a few of these instruments. A corkscrew twisted into the knee, just above the knee joint. You wouldn't believe—"

"Yes, I would."

"Oh, no. Experiencing it is the only way to believe it. I've tried it on myself. It really hurts. Of course, I didn't go as deep into my flesh as I'm going to go into yours. I'm going to screw it right into your leg and through the muscle and nerves and into the bone. Then I'm going to do your triceps tendons. Now there's some pain, my man."

The house rattled. The rain slammed harder and harder.

Big Man took the aspirin bottle and unscrewed it and shook several aspirin into his mouth. He picked up the glass of water, tried to sip it. He tossed it across the room, spat the aspirin in my lap.

"I can't swallow," he said. "Hell of a cold."

"It's the water. Hydrophobia. You have rabies, Big Man. You need a doctor. It may not be too late."

Big Man stood up violently, causing the chair he had been sitting in to fall backwards to the floor. "I do not have rabies. I startled a fox, that's all. You're not going to frighten me."

"I got bit by the squirrel, doctor told me a story about a boy got bit and died screaming in bed, gnashing his teeth. Finally his father smothered him. Whatever you do to me, it won't be half of what's going to happen to you. Call the doctor, Big Man. Get some help. This rabies stuff, it's got you half out of your mind. Maybe more."

"Oh, you think you're clever. Well, you aren't. I'm gonna start with the coat hanger." Big Man closed up the Swiss Army knife and jammed it in his pants pocket. He grabbed the straightened wire hanger off the chair. “What we’re gonna do is, I’m gonna pull down your pants, Collins, then I’m going to insert this up your asshole slowly, twisting, pushing, and you are gonna talk like a sonofabitch. You’re gonna—”

The front door came open suddenly, and standing in the doorway, soaked to the skin, was Brett. Water was running out of her hair and into her eyes, and she was scared-looking and talking as the door came open. “Truck ran off in a ditch. I—”

Then she saw Big Man.

“Come on in, honey,” Big Man said. “You’re just in time to see me screw this up your lover’s ass. Maybe up the pee-hole in his dick. Fact is, that sounds better. I haven’t tried that.”

Brett’s face went slack and her right hand smoothed the side of her thigh and dropped lower and took the hem of her dress. She lifted it, and I could see her panties, all wet and sticking to her like cobwebs, and I could see her beautiful legs. One of them had a belt around it with a holster strapped to it and a .38 in the holster. I had forgotten about that. She didn’t go anywhere without it anymore.

She came up with the .38 and fired three times, so goddamn quick it was almost like one shot.

Big Man looked down at his chest. Three small red spots appeared on his filthy T-shirt. He looked at Brett, said, “You’re first, split tail. Right up the cunt.”

He stepped toward her, holding the coat hanger, which wobbled like a giant insect antennae. Brett fired twice more.

Big Man paused, as if he had been strolling and decided not to cross at a certain traffic light, but to go the other way. He stepped back once, turned around, started walking toward the back door. He fell and grabbed the counter that separated the living room from the kitchen and held himself up. Brett fired again, and Big Man reached behind him, fanned at his spine like he was trying to swat a wasp.

He kept his feet, went out the back door walking briskly, but not running.

“Brett,” I said. “You all right?”

“I guess so,” Brett said, stepping out of the doorway and into the house.

“There’s pliers on the chair here. Get them, undo these coat hangers.”

Brett got the pliers and started twisting my ankles and wrists free.

“That must have been Big Man,” she said.

“In the flesh,” I said. When I was free I rushed to the bedroom, came back with my shotgun, a flashlight, and my .38. I gave Brett the shotgun. “He comes back, cut down on him with this.”

“You bet,” she said. I kissed her. Her lips trembled, and so did mine.

I took my .38, went out the back way, into the rain and the dark and wind so stout it could have blown Jesus off the cross.

There was no trail to follow in the blasting rain, but I went the path of least resistance into the woods. It was the way he would have gone, hit like he was. I found an animal trail and went along that, and once in the glow of my flashlight I saw blood on the leafy ground, being washing away by the rain. Fast and hard as it was raining, that meant Big Man was a very short space ahead of me.

As I went, I heard limbs cracking under the stress of the wind, and the tops of trees nodded down and lashed above me like mad women wailing. I went along until the trees broke and there was a clearing where there had been a bit of forest fire, and next to the clearing was a dirt road, more of a trail really, and in the clearing was what had to be Pierre’s red Mercedes. It had been lashed by limbs and splattered with mud, which had dried so hard even the rain wasn’t knocking it off. The windshield was cracked in several places. It was easy to figure Big Man had been using it like a tank, driving down the wooded backroads and sometimes over no roads at all, trying to avoid the cops. Looking for me, trying to finish some mad mission made madder by the bite of a rabid animal.

I looked around and didn’t see Big Man. I walked carefully around the Mercedes. On the other side the back door was open. I could see Big Man’s feet sticking out through the opening.

I eased over there and looked in. Big Man lay on his back on the seat, looking at the roof with eyes wide open. He had the Swiss Army knife in his fist, and it was open to a small blade, and the blade was buried in his jugular. He had managed to start at the center of his throat and pull the blade all the way through the artery.

Somewhere in the back of his jumbled brain maybe he believed what I said about the rabies. Or the .38 slugs were too much. Or he was just tired. It was hard to say, and it didn't matter. He was dead. His blood ran down his neck and over his chest and puddled beneath his head on the leather seat, dripped off the side and onto the floorboard, where his jacket and dozens of candy-bar wrappers and soda cans lay.

I put the .38 in my belt. I got hold of his feet and bent his legs and pushed him all the way inside and closed the door.

I started back for the house and for Brett, ready to start yelling soon as I broke the woods, lest she shoot me with the shotgun.

But the wind picked up and trees began to crack and fall. All around me they fell, and I tried to maintain the flashlight, but lost it. I was knocked to the ground, then the rain stopped and the wind stopped and the sky lightened, but when I crawled out from under a clutch of small limbs and looked upwards through the trees, the sky was green.

Then there came a howl. I had heard it before, and my blood chilled.

Tornado.

I dropped to the ground in a little indentation and the trees began to whip, and directly to my right I could see an oak being pulled up by the roots. I tucked my face into the wet leaf mold and tried to become one with the earth, and all around came the howling and the lashing of rain, and there was a tugging at me, as if I might be pulled from the ground like a farmer jerking a turnip from the dirt, but I was low enough, and clinging to the earth like a goddamn lizard, and I held.

And the great storm raged and screamed around me and Mixmastered the forest, filled my nostrils with leaf mold and soil, and still it churned, and still I held, and after what seemed like the proverbial eternity the wind died down and there was a gentle breeze and a light rain and the air was filled with the aroma of damp earth and raw tree sap from twisted pines.

I stood up slowly. My pants were around my ankles and my shoes were gone and so was one sock. A vast expanse of the woods had been annihilated. I stood amongst twisted stumps and shattered limbs. My shirt fell forward, and I realized the storm had twisted the damn thing off my back. I tried to pull my pants up, but the backs of the legs and the seat of the pants were gone.

I pulled the shirt off and threw it down and stepped out of the ruin of my pants. Wearing my underwear and one sock, I started back for my house, but as I went I found that I could see a great distance now because the storm had taken away the natural barrier between me and my house, and where it ought to have been was only a bathtub and some bits of wreckage. Across the way, over the little dirt road and the barbed-wire fence and into the pasture there, I could see what was left of my house, sitting on the tip of its roof, the walls spread out and shattered like the staves of a barrel.

I tried to run but couldn't. There were limbs and stumps everywhere, and I was barefoot. I hopped and stumbled my way into the clearing that had been my backyard, tiptoed through the grass burrs that had grown up from me not mowing. I started yelling for Brett.

My stomach turned to acid. This was my life. Murder and storms and destruction, the loss of loved ones. I started to cry. I stumbled to where my house once stood and called for Brett as if I could scream her down from the heavens into which she had been blown, or perhaps call her up from beneath the sickening pile of lumber.

Then I heard, "Hap."

I turned. Rising out of the bathtub, which had held to the ground because of the deeply buried pipes, was Brett. She was holding the shotgun and her hair was cluttered with plaster and splinters.

I blundered over to her and she laid the shotgun beside the tub, stood up and hugged me. We both began to cry. I held her and held her, then I was in the tub with her, the two of us clinging to each other as if we were two parts of a whole.

We held like that for hours and hours, crying and kissing and not really talking, and finally the gentle rain stopped, and we lay there sopping wet in the cool tub, watching the light of the sky die out slowly and the night creep in. The stars poked at the velvety blackness, like the tips of pins being stabbed through dark fabric. The moon rose up then, quartered and weak, but lovely just the same.

There in the dampness, the tub our bed, the night our roof, overwhelmed with a strange sense of peace, we fell asleep, holding each other.

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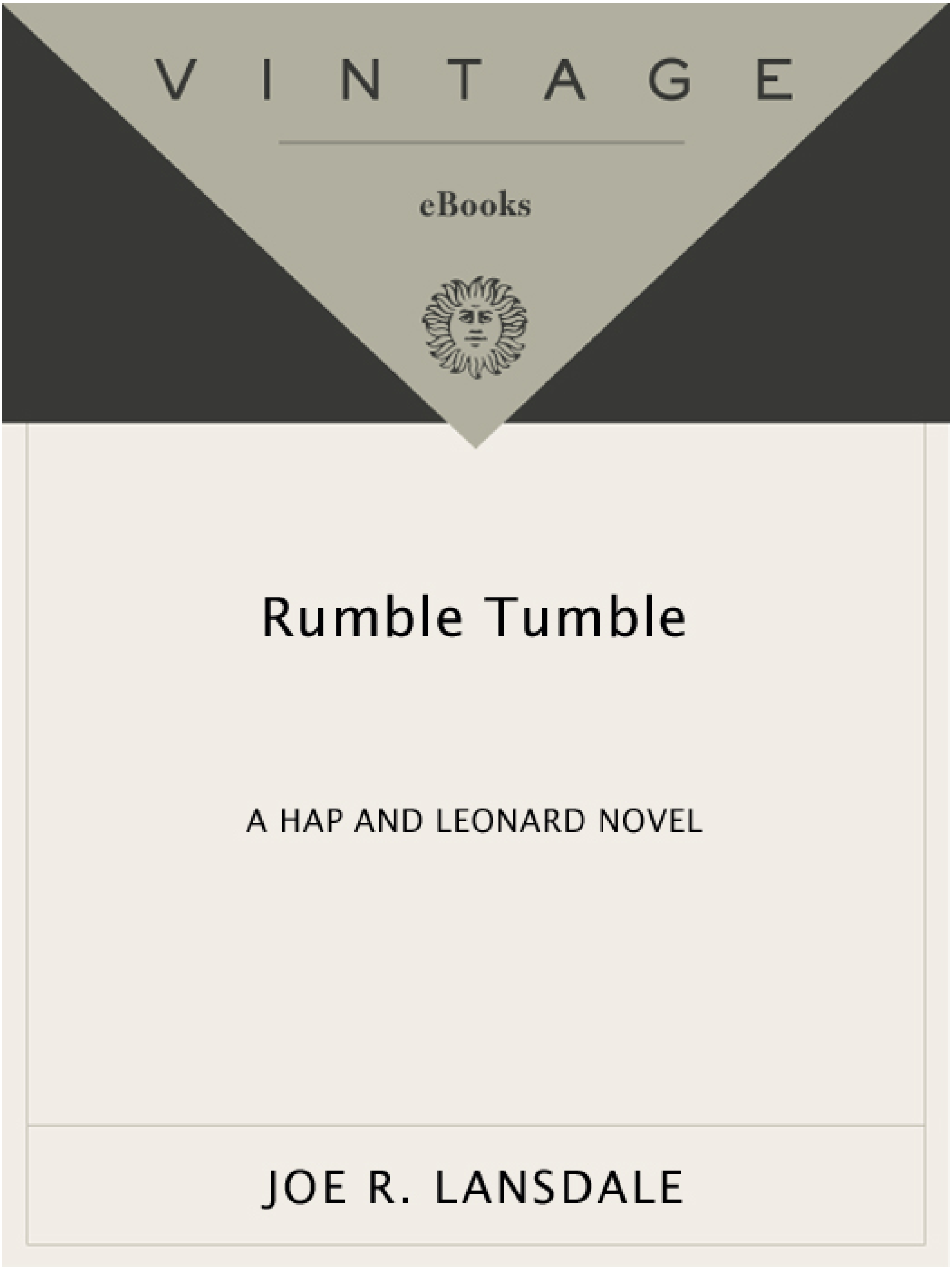

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Rumble Tumble

A HAP AND LEONARD NOVEL

JOE R. LANSDALE

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JOE R. LANSDALE

Joe R. Lansdale is the author of more than a dozen novels, including *Sunset and Sawdust, Lost Echoes, Leather Maiden*, and *Vanilla Ride. The Bottoms* and *Mucho Mojo* were *New York Times* notable books. He has received the British Fantasy Award, the American Mystery Award, the Edgar Award, the Grinzane Cavour Prize for Literature, and seven Bram Stoker Awards. He lives with his family in Nacogdoches, Texas.

www.joerlansdale.com

Rumble Tumble

A Hap and Leonard Novel

Joe R. Lansdale

Vintage Crime/Black Lizard
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For Jimmy Vines, with mucho respect.

Many of the towns and cities mentioned are real, but Hootie Hoot, Oklahoma, though inspired by a number of oddly named Texas and Oklahoma towns, does not exist. At least I don't think it exists. If it does, my apologies. The same goes for Echo, Texas. I've also made some minor changes in Texas and Mexican geography to suit my storytelling purposes.

J.R.L.

Heat not a furnace for your foe so hot
That it do singe yourself.

Shakespeare, *Henry VIII*

“Remember what Nietzsche said—‘Live dangerously.’ ”
“You know what happened to Nietzsche.”
“What?”
“He’s dead.”

—Joan Crawford responds
to Jack Palance in *Sudden Fear*

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Books By Joe R. Lansdale

1

An easy and convincing case could be made that my life has been short on successes, both financial and romantic, but no one could say with any conviction it has been uneventful.

In fact, of late, it had been so full of events, I concluded I had outlived my allotment of outlandish moments, and now the law of averages was on my side for pursuing a relatively tame existence. At least until old age set in and I took up residence in a cardboard box beneath the overpass on Highway 59, taking a dump behind a bush and licking secret sauce off old Big Mac wrappers for sustenance.

That was how I figured most of us baby boomers would finish the race. No Medicaid. No Medicare. No insurance. No couple of million stashed back for our dotage. Maybe not even the cardboard box. Hell, for that matter, we couldn't even be assured of a bush to shit behind.

My dotage was a ways off yet, but a lot nearer than I liked to think. Though I had days when I wished I wouldn't make that geriatric goal—end up in a cardboard box, stiff and rotting beneath an overpass with one of those Big Mac wrappers clutched in my fist—nor did I wish to gain the better scenario of passing on to the great beyond via a crisp white bed in a nursing home with a plate of mashed green peas on my dinner tray and a tube in my dick.

My best friend, Leonard Pine, always says the best way to go is lying in bed listening to a Patsy Cline song, or watching the last fifteen minutes of Championship Wrestling, which was funny enough to kill you.

None for me, though. Times like that, when I was blue and thinking of my exit, I wished to go out between the legs of some wild redhead while striving for a double on a cool winter night, her hot breath in my ear, her fingernails buried in my ass like tacks in a bulletin board.

It could happen.

Currently, I knew the wild redhead. She was my age, forties, her life full of her own unique events. Including setting fire to the head of an ex-husband and beaning his brainpan with the business end of a shovel. But even though she might worry me some when near matches or farm implements, going out between her legs was, as I said, not such a bad way to pass, so I tried to stay within her proximity as much as possible these days, lest I feel a bit of a murmur, a flashing of life's events before my eyes. I could only hope if such a dire situation arose, she would be in the mood and I could fight off the inevitable for whatever time was necessary for me to selfishly satisfy myself.

But redheads have drawbacks. They can be trouble and they can mess up your law of averages, even when they don't mean to, even when they aren't directly responsible. Trouble sticks to them like pork to a pig's ass, and if the trouble isn't on them, it's on someone close to them.

I know that sounds a little like astrology—the stuff about redheads, not pork—but then again, you been through what I been through, you might come to believe it. And even if I don't believe it in the long run, in the short run, well, I got to consider it.

For me all this got to rolling on a day when I was sorting my stuff in Leonard's barn, where it had been stored for the last few months.

Leonard had owned a house in town for some time now, and when a tornado took my place away, I moved into his old country place, and it wasn't so bad. Then he sold his house in town for pretty good money, had to move back to his country place, and now we were housemates.

Frankly, I felt put out. Even if it was his house. I went from sleeping in the bedroom to sleeping on the couch, and he made me clean up the place more than I liked.

We had roomed together before, for a short time, and it had been okay, but now I had gotten used to living alone again, and I was having a bad time of it. Worse yet, way things were going, I might be moving in with my nasty redhead any day. Brett had invited me, and I wanted to, but I was having so much trouble readjusting to Leonard, and I had known him for years, the idea of living with someone else was goddamn scary. I was suddenly concerned about skid marks in my underwear. Socks that didn't match. Farts, burps, and stink from the bathroom.

I wished my house hadn't blown away.

I wished I weren't so set in my ways.

I even wished I could find a good deal on a mobile home to move to the acreage where my house once stood. And if you knew how much I dislike mobile homes—those plyboard and aluminum tornado magnets in the pleasing shape of a shiny rectangle—you'd realize just how desperate I felt.

Then there was the other side of me. The one that always wanted a relationship. I didn't have a woman in my life, I was pouty and blue, and even watching the September lovebugs hump made me horny. Now I had met someone who had more to offer than just sex. Brains. Humor. A way with fire and shovels. Kind of a middle-aged man's dream, I suspect. And still, I hesitated.

Guess, when you come right down to it, you just can't make me happy.

Anyway, I was on my knees, sorting my stuff in Leonard's barn, which was essentially a gray, peeling, clapboard shell with a dirt floor. I had all my things in cardboard boxes, and I was trying to figure what I should keep and what I should get rid of. During the storm, a large part of my junk had been rained on, wind-blasted, and just generally screwed. Rats had been in it since, and some of the paper and cloth items had been chewed.

Over the last few months I'd been halfheartedly going through the stuff I'd gathered up after the storm. Going through it, not so much afraid of what I might find, but more afraid of what I might not find. Some part of my life gone.

The twister had knocked the largest part of my goods ass over tea kettle, blown them to hell, or maybe worse, all the way to New York City. Maybe up North some Yankee was looking at my books, wearing one of my shoes. Laughing at my photographs. My favorite pants might be in a tree somewhere. My record collection at the bottom of a lake. It was too goddamn depressing to contemplate.

I had just put a batch of ruined books in the trash box when

Leonard came into the barn. He was wearing sweats and carrying two cups of coffee. He looked as if he was straight from the shower. His short kinky hair glistened and his face looked like buffed ebony. The sunlight shone brightly through the door behind him, and I could see steam rising up from the coffee, blending with the dust motes in the air. Leonard said, “You going to move in with her?”

I stood and brushed the dust off my hands. Leonard gave me a cup. “I don’t know,” I said, and sipped the coffee. It was good rich coffee with some kind of chocolate flavoring in it.

“You ought to.”

“You trying to get rid of me?”

“Some. You’re fuckin’ up my house.”

“Like it’s anything special.”

“Hey, it may be a shack, but it’s better than your shack, which, I might point out, would be harder to put together than one of those thousand-piece landscape puzzles. If you had all the pieces.”

“Touché.”

“And the way you handle your domestic business, man, it’s tiresome. Think I want to have your old smelly drawers hanging on my couch arms for doilies? Goddamn shoes in the middle of the floor, dirty old socks up under the chair. Hell, man, smells like someone’s been wiping their ass and hidin’ the paper somewhere.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“All right, then, your shoes are slightly off center of the middle of the floor. But I still trip over them. Now what about Brett? You movin’ in with her, or not?”

“I’ve been burned so many times in love I’m not sure I want to go through it again.”

“Yeah, but all your other relationships were stupid. This one isn’t.”

“She set her husband’s head on fire, burned his car too.”

“Don’t forget she beaned him with a shovel and he’s in a home somewhere trying to decide if blue socks go with a paper hat and a fart."

"There's that."

"Maybe she should have left the car alone, Hap, but way I see it, far as his head's concerned, sonofabitch had it comin'. Besides, she didn't burn his whole head up, just some of it. Guy beats a woman on a daily basis, and one day she's had enough, it's okay she sets the guy's head on fire."

"This coming from an arsonist."

"Don't bring that up. You're tryin' to change the subject. Law let me go, didn't they?"

"It was a miracle." And it was. Leonard had burned down three crack houses, and each time he'd managed to get off. 'Course, I helped burn down one of them, so I couldn't be too self-righteous.

"They let Brett go, didn't they?" Leonard said.

"The judge was a lecher. She was young then. She wore tight shorts and a halter top. I'm surprised they didn't throw her a parade and give her the key to the city. Way she looks now, back then, man, she must have been something."

"Being queer, it's hard for me to know what a good-lookin' woman's supposed to look like, but I figure Brett's it. She's got all her workin' parts, don't she?"

"Yeah."

"You get along, don't you?"

"Yeah. She's funny. I like being around her. We seem to have something going besides dating and rutting, although I hasten to add I don't want to undervalue rutting."

"Then what's the holdup?"

"I just don't want to screw up again."

"Hap, that's what you do best. And if you ain't willin' to screw up, you ain't ever gonna get any of the good out of life either. That's the way of the world, according to Leonard Pine. And keep in mind I just went through somethin' worse, and I'm out here lookin' for love all over again. It's the way of our species."

"We're a stupid species."

"Yeah, but we're consistently stupid. So, you get what I'm sayin'?"

“You’re as big a screwup as me?”

“No one is, Hap. But thing is, even though you fuck up more than most, everyone fucks up. Only difference with you is you think your fuckups matter more than anyone else’s. Strangely enough, there’s a kind of conceit in all that.”

“I reckon you’re right.”

“Good. Why don’t you tell her you’re moving in?”

“Because I’m still not sure.”

“You see her today, right?”

“Right.”

“She’s expecting an answer, right?”

“Right.”

“Do it.”

2

I drank my coffee, sorted my junk awhile longer, put on my sweats, and Leonard and I went jogging along the road in front of his house and past my place, which now consisted of a bathtub. It was the only thing the tornado hadn't taken away. And good thing too. Brett had been hiding in it.

Sad as it was to pass the place by, I remembered the tub fondly. I had found Brett there after the storm. We had lain together inside the tub, and after the rain passed and the sky cleared, we held each other beneath the bright stars and the cantaloupe slice of quarter moon. Early in the morning, before full light, there in the cool damp tub, we had made love.

"You're dragging ass," Leonard said, jogging ahead of me.

"I'm getting fat," I said.

"I've noticed. Too many doughnuts. Too much late-night eating."

"It's a habit I've got. I eat when I think about Brett. I think about not being with her, I eat. I think about moving in with her, I eat."

"Frankly, Hap, ole buddy, I think you just eat."

"I hate it when you're right."

We jogged down the road a ways, then back again. It was a cool September morning, moving toward a warm afternoon, and the lovebugs were so thick in the air, you swatted at them, you brought down a whole squadron. They were present every year, but this was a bumper year, and according to old weather philosophy, the year they were the thickest meant the fall and winter would be extremely cold or rainy or both.

I was puffing pretty hard when we got back to Leonard's place. Leonard wanted to hang the heavy bag in the barn and work it some, but I decided it was time I bucked up and went over to see Brett, made a decision one way or another. She wasn't expecting me at an exact time, just before lunch, and it was now ten o'clock.

I showered, had another cup of coffee, went out to the barn and watched Leonard hammer the heavy bag for a while, then drove to Brett's in my junky Chevy Nova. I had owned the wreck about three months, and it was already due for the scrap yard. It clattered and coughed and blew black smoke out the rear like an old man with a gastric condition. I was ashamed to be seen in it, ashamed to pollute the air like that.

I had purchased the rolling calamity for three hundred dollars after my truck got destroyed during the tornado, and the way I saw it now, I'd paid about two hundred and ninety-nine dollars too much, even if it had come with a pack of rubbers in the glove box, half a cigar in the ashtray, and air in three tires.

I had put air in the fourth tire, and one of these days I was going to toss out that cigar and the rubbers. There was also a row of hardened gum that had been mashed underneath the dash, and I had plans to remove that as well. So far the urge hadn't hit me. The most I had done to redecorate the Nova was put my .38 Smith & Wesson in the glove box on top of the pack of rubbers.

As I drove over to Brett's, I tried to decide what to say. What to do. Everything I thought of struck me wrong. Maybe we could just keep things like they were? Then again, I did that, eventually I'd lose her. I had to make up my mind one way or another, and suddenly I knew what the problem was.

I didn't feel worthy.

I worked a night job at a club, beating people up who misbehaved. What kind of job is that for a grown man? What did that offer a woman like Brett? I didn't even have a home, a decent car, or, for that matter, any decent clothes. I was just a goddamn vagabond living day to day on the grace and goodwill of friends like Leonard and Brett.

I had been raised by solid blue-collar folk, and they had reared me to respect and like myself, to have confidence, and for years I had plenty. But these past few years, it had begun to erode. I was a middle-aged man who still didn't have a career, and it looked less and less like I would ever have one.

What could I do? I was smart enough, but what were my credentials? Lifting big rocks? Eating dust in the rose fields? Slapping drunks upside the head, twisting their wrists, and throwing them into a parking lot? It wasn't much of a résumé.

And my looks weren't going to carry me through either. I was graying at the temples, balding at the crown, growing thick, and my face had a look of hound dog sadness about it, as if I had second sight and knew bad things were coming.

When I got over to Brett's she was sitting in an aluminum chair on the front lawn fighting lovebugs and mosquitoes. I could see her from the curb where I'd parked. I got out and went over there, smiling. Brett wasn't smiling, however, and I got a nasty feeling in my gut, like maybe I'd waited too long to make up my mind one way or another.

"You like bugs?" I asked.

"Not really," she said, and this time she smiled. It was a little strained, but it was a smile.

"You look like maybe you're smiling around something sour."

"I'm glad to see you," she said. "Especially now."

"Something wrong?"

"Yeah. Let's go inside."

Inside, we picked lovebugs out of each other's hair and opened the screen and threw them out. There was a pot of coffee on, and Brett poured us cups. We sat at the table, then she looked at me and tears began to squeeze out of her eyes and run down her cheeks.

"Brett, what's wrong, honey?"

"It's Tillie, Hap."

Tillie was Brett's wayward daughter. A young woman who had gotten mixed up in drugs and prostitution and whose last letter home was hopeful because her pimp had stopped beating her as much and her limp was better. Brett had tried to talk her out of the life, had offered to have us come get her, but she didn't want out, or didn't know how to get out, or it was some kind of stubborn pride thing. It was hard to say. Frankly, I tried not to involve myself unless Brett involved me.

"What's the score?" I asked.

"There's a man in a motel wants to talk to me about her. He called this morning. Says she's in trouble and I should talk to him."

"He didn't tell you what about over the phone?"

Brett shook her head. "He wants money."

"To tell you what kind of trouble she's in?"

"I'm supposed to go over there around one o'clock and bring five hundred dollars. I told him I had to have someone drive me. I didn't want to go there by myself."

"That's a smart idea."

"He said that was okay."

"I don't like the sound of it," I said.

"Neither do I, but he said Tillie was in deep shit and I ought to know about it. He said Tillie paid him some to tell me she was and that I'm supposed to pay him some before he tells me what the problem is, and he said if cops come he won't tell me anything and everything is off. But I come with one person and five hundred dollars, he'll tell me what I need to know."

"A real Good Samaritan."

"I got a gun," Brett said. "I can use it, and it's legal. But I still don't like going over there by myself, gun or not. Me with all that money. I don't know he's got someone with him or not. But him talking about Tillie like he knows her, I got to go see."

"No problem. We'll both go."

3

My wreck was iffy just driving into town, so we went in Brett's blue Plymouth Fury. Like me, she had recently traded cars, and though this one was many years old and not exactly a road racer, it had been regularly serviced, and could get up to seventy miles an hour without the assistance of a tow truck. It's also nice to be driven around town by a good-looking redhead, even if you're on a bicycle built for two.

On the way over to the motel the lovebugs pelleted the windshield and collected beneath the motionless wipers like dead soldiers in trenches, left greasy yellow and green spots all over the glass.

We got to the LaBorde Motor Inn about ten minutes before one and parked in front of a row of doors. I had brought the pistol from my glove box, and I stuck it under my shirt against my spine.

Brett has a thigh holster, and she wore a skirt so she could wear the holster and the snub-nose .38 she owns. It's not that she goes around wearing a thigh holster and a .38, but recent events had led to this, and she has a license. In Texas, with the right training and certification you're allowed to carry a concealed handgun. It's a law Leonard loves and I hate, but I'm a hypocrite, because I keep a revolver in my glove box, and from time to time on my person. I'm even more of a hypocrite because, unlike Brett, I never bothered to get a license.

We walked to the metal stairs, went up and found the number the caller had given Brett, and knocked. Thirty seconds didn't pass before the door opened and a face showed over the chain inside the door, and it was some face. It looked like first base after a hot season in the Astrodome: pocked and beaten and not too clean. He stuck the face out enough so I could see his nose had been broken and some teeth with it, and recently. Behind the face I could see a body that looked as if it ought to be used to hold up something heavy. He took the chain off for a better look at us, and we got a better look at him. He wore a dirty white dress shirt and black pants with gray pinstripes and shiny black dress shoes, except for the toe tips, which looked to have been dipped in shit.

"You Brett?" he said.

Brett nodded.

"We told you not to bring nobody," he said.

"You, or whoever I spoke to, said I could have someone drive me," Brett said.

"We thought you meant some other woman," the face said.

"I didn't say that," Brett said. "What's it matter?"

"I don't know it matters," said the man, "but we didn't think you'd bring no man."

"Well," Brett said. "I don't know why you shouldn't have thought it."

"Hey," I said, "do I look dangerous to you?"

"Naw, you don't look dangerous," he said, and he walked away from the door and we followed inside.

The first thing I noticed was a midget sitting on the bed. I think that's normal, noticing a midget first. He had on a tailored blue Western suit and shiny blue cowboy boots and a gold cowboy shirt with silver snaps and a string tie with a silver cow head clasp holding it together. The suit looked as if it had once been expensive and nice, but now it was covered in filth and so was the shirt. The steer horns leaned a little too far left and somehow gave the midget an unbalanced look, as if he had been laid out without the use of a plumb line. I figured originally a hat had gone with the outfit, but now his blazing red hair was scattered over his head in such a way if you took a photo of it, it might look like a man with his head on fire, à la Brett's ex-husband. He had a big thick cigar in his mouth, but it wasn't lit, and his feet dangled off the side of the bed almost two feet from the ground. He had a face I couldn't judge for age. He might have been thirty or forty or fifty. For all I knew, he was twenty-one and constipated or had just previously passed a kidney stone.

Second thing I noticed was the big guy had drawn a little silver automatic out from behind his back. The rest of the room sort of lost interest for me after that.

The big guy sat down in a chair with his automatic and held it against his thigh. Next to his chair was a table lamp, and on the table was a glass containing a clear liquid that I guessed from the smell in the room wasn't water. And considering how rank our hosts smelled, this meant some goddamn serious drinking had been going on.

"What's the gun for?" I asked.

"He's the nervous type," said the midget.

"What about you?" I said. "You nervous?"

"No, I'm not nervous," said the midget. "Not as long as he's got the gun. Y'all sit somewhere."

Brett took a chair and I sat on the edge of the bed so I could see both guys. I said to the big guy, "You shoot that off, you got the noise to worry about."

"I'm not that worried," said the big guy.

"Drink?" said the midget.

Brett and I declined. Brett said, "One of you called me about my daughter."

"That was me," said the midget.

"Told me you had information and to bring money for it, and I have. Five hundred dollars."

"We should have said a thousand," said the midget.

"But you didn't," I said. "You said five hundred and here we are with it."

"It's all I got," Brett said.

"And we don't know what you got is worth five hundred dollars," I said.

The big guy said, "It might not be worth five cents, but we can take the five hundred dollars anyway."

I reached quickly behind my back, under my shirt, and pointed my gun at the big man. I said, "You might not."

The midget laughed. "You know, you could be right."

The big man wiggled the gun against his thigh like he wanted to lift it. I said, "Nope, nope, nope."

"Easy does it, Wilber," said the midget. "This man's got a look in his eye. Like someone who might have grown up on cowboy movies."

"Let's just have you put the gun on the table there, away from your drink," I said. "I wouldn't want to confuse what you might be reaching for."

The midget made with his odd laugh again.

Brett moved slowly and smoothly and her hand went under her skirt and came back out. She was holding the snub-nose. She pointed it at the midget.

"Oh, ho," said the midget.

"Just in case you got a gun too, shorty," Brett said.

"I got one," the dwarf said, "but it's in my suitcase."

"I told you that was a dumb place to put it," said the big man, placing his automatic on the table.

"Turns out you're right," said the midget. Then to me: "I thought you said a gun would make noise."

"It will," I said, "but like your buddy here, I'm not that worried about it. Now, you either got something to say, or you don't."

"We got plenty," said the midget. "First, I'd like to say you got good legs, lady."

"Thanks," Brett said. "My day's made."

"I'd also like to know what these bugs are all about. Is this a consistent thing here in East Texas?"

"Every year about this time," I said. "They're not usually this thick. Don't usually mate this long. Lots of them are supposed to signify a forthcoming bad winter or lots of rain. Might be both. Least that's the folklore."

"In Oklahoma we're having quite a run on mosquitoes," the midget said. "Big things. Very fat. They carry disease, you know?"

"We've got mosquito problems here too," I said. "And roaches. And June bugs. And all manner of squiggly-shit bugs who have names I don't know, but that's all the entomology lesson you get today. Tell us what you got to tell, or we walk. With the five hundred dollars."

“Walk, you don’t learn about daughterpoo,” said the midget.

“Yeah,” I said, “but we walk after I pistol-whip the both of you, and what the two of you learn is it hurts.”

“You look like a man would hit a midget,” said the midget.

“You betcha,” I said, and tried to sound convincing, the way Leonard would sound, because he was definitely a man would hit a midget, or anyone who fucked with him.

The midget touched his jacket, said, “I want to reach inside here, get a match and light my smoke. That okay?”

“No,” Brett said. “I don’t like it.”

“I talk better I got a smoke,” the midget said.

“I bet you can talk good either way,” I said. Then to the big guy: “I’m liking where that gun is less and less. Brett, you mind taking it?”

Brett leaned over and grabbed the automatic off the table and dropped it onto her lap. She held the .38 on the big guy now. The big guy looked at the gun in her lap, then at her face, then at her gun. He grimaced, and considering how he already looked, it wasn’t pretty.

I turned so I could lay my gun across my knee. That way it was easy to move and point at the midget should he find something inside his coat I didn’t like, but it was a little less personal this way.

“I really would like to smoke,” he said.

Brett nodded. The midget reached inside his coat and brought out a little folder of matches. He peeled one off and lit his cigar. The room turned foul quickly. He said, “This daughter you got, lady. She’s in some manure up to her eyeballs.”

“And you drove all the way down here to tell us,” I said. “You’re some good goddamn citizens, aren’t you?”

“We drove down here ’cause we thought it might get us some money,” the midget said. “And we need money. We’re on our way to Mexico. Me and Wilber, we worked for Jim Clemente up until a day or so ago. But we had an unfortunate turn of events. We got our hand caught in the till, so to speak.”

“Who’s Jim Clemente?” I said.

"He's the main man in Tulsa, that's what he is. You want a whore, you buy one, somehow money goes back to him. Some little chippie in boogie town does a coon and gets ten bucks, Clemente, he gets six of it. You want someone killed, he's the one has it done. He has folks who do it."

"Like you two?" I said.

"Yeah, like us."

"What do you do?" Brett said to the midget. "Punch them in the butt?"

"It's not nice to make fun of a physical liability," said the midget.

"Look at it this way," Brett said, "you can drink out of the toilet without straining your back."

"That's no way to talk to a professional," said the midget.

"Professional, my ass," I said. "You didn't search either of us when we came in. You're about as organized as the Iraqi army."

"We been through some hard times," said the midget. "We're a bit scattered. And we aren't in that line of business anymore. By the way. They call me Red."

"I don't give a flyin' shit your name's God," Brett said. "You tell me about my daughter now, or I'm gonna shoot holes in your little kneecaps."

"My goodness," Red said. "What a foul-mouthed lady. I never could stand a woman cursed and talked tough."

"I'm not askin' you to stand it," Brett said. "I'm askin' you to stand bullet holes in your kneecaps. After that, maybe I'll shoot off the head of your little dick."

"Well," Red said, puffing his cigar. "I could ill afford that. Let me try and put it in a nutshell."

"You couldn't put it in a number ten washtub," Wilber said.

Red ignored him, said, "Wilber and I worked for Jim Clemente. We did odd jobs for him. We checked on things for him. One of the things we checked on was hookers. Your daughter, ma'am, is a hooker, and with the kind of mouth you have, I can see how she might have drifted from the straight and narrow. In my case, my old mama sold me to a carnival. I rode big dogs on a little red saddle. I had some acts with chimpanzees as well. Little rascals are always fornicating or defecating on something, and it doesn't bother them to throw dung either, I'll promise you that. Humiliating. It gave me a bad outlook on life. That and always looking at people's crotches."

Brett said, "I don't care you had to wear diapers, fuck a duck, and eat monkey shit."

"I just bet you don't, lady," Red said. He took hold of his cigar, turned it around in his mouth, pulled it out, blew smoke, put it back and looked at the toes of his boots. He said, "What I'm doing is trying to find a place to begin."

"Just about anywhere is starting to look good," I said.

"Then, I suppose I should start with the strangulation of Maude Fields. Does that seem appropriate to you, Wilber?"

"That'll work," Wilber said.

4

The air-conditioning unit cut off and back on. A blast of cold air filled the room. Red said, “This Maude was a madam out of Oklahoma City. She worked for Jim Clemente. Not that she wanted to, but if Jim decided you were working for him, then you were working for him. Like I said, some whore put out for money somewhere, Big Jim, he knew about it and you owed him. Someone snorted some coke or sold a rock, he got a share. He was fair in his own way. Maude got the largest cut of the meat she was selling, but Jim, he got a share, and it got so Maude was obstreperous. Holding out. She’d been warned. More than once. Jim can be a very warm and understanding guy, but he doesn’t like to warn someone more than twice.

“He sent me and Wilber over to Oklahoma City to have a talk with her. She was most inconsiderate. Not unlike the lady there with the revolver. Very rude. Very … how shall I put it. Very … Go Ahead. Well, our orders were simple. Either she came through, or we eliminated her and set something up new for Jim. She didn’t come through. In fact, she tried to shoot the both of us with a derringer. That didn’t work out. She missed. Wilber disarmed her and held her down and I strangled her with a stretch of piano wire strung between two wooden knobs. It sounds exotic. Almost secret-agent-like. But it’s really a messy instrument. They say a gun is messy, but I must tell you on authority this isn’t true. I suppose a bullet makes a kind of mess, but it’s from afar if you want, and if you get a good shot in, and you don’t shoot your target in your living room, you just walk off.

“Not so strangling a colored woman who I would judge tapped out at about three-fifty and could tie a good-sized hog in a knot with her bare hands. Wilber had to sit on her, and I had to hold her head in my lap and use the piano wire on her throat. Very messy. Gets all over you.”

“Yeah, and she shit herself,” Wilber said.

“Yes,” said Red, “there was that. Defecation. Most unpleasant. I was reminded of the chimpanzees I used to work with."

"Had on a muumuu," Wilber said. "It ran down her legs. Got on my hands, all over my pants and shoes. Had to throw them away. The pants, not the shoes. Shoes cleaned up all right."

"It took us a good part of a half hour to finish her," Red said, "and I bet that piano wire cut all the way to the bone, and still she struggled. I've never seen anything like it. The woman was a regular Rasputin."

"And she just shit all over everything," Wilber said.

"You said that," I said.

"Seemed the more I tightened that wire, the more she fought," Red said. "Wilber there, big as he is, couldn't hold her down. When it was over, we were both exhausted. It was quite a rumble tumble."

Red looked at Brett to see what effect he was having. Brett's face held no more emotion than the revolver in her hand. I could see a flash of disappointment roll over Red's face, but he covered it with a puff of his cigar. A cloud of dark tobacco smoke rolled up and gathered about his red head like smoke above a forest fire. Red leaned over and thumped his ashes in an ashtray on the nightstand next to the bed.

"You telling this so we'll know how tough you are, or just because you like to hear yourself tell it?" I said.

"Both," Red said. "And Maude has to do with Tillie, and that has to do with Jim, and finally with us, then you. I'm wanting you to know too, that though Wilber and I have had our disagreements with Jim, I think Jim is one heck of a good fella."

"Ain't no one nicer to niggers," Wilber said. "He's got lots of niggers work for him, and Indians, and that's more than can be said for folks down this way."

"Jim is quite advanced when it comes to equal opportunity employment," Red said.

"He's got some old niggers work for him too," Wilber said. "He'll hire an old nigger fast as a young nigger. 'Course, just for certain jobs."

"Frankly," I said, "Jim's work relations don't interest us all that much."

Red nodded. We were all close friends now. “Big Jim does have his problems, however. Gambles too much.”

“He’ll gamble on anything,” Wilber said. “I’ve seen him bet on how long a guy’s dick would be. And that fella had to get it out too, and Big Jim, he could guess a thing like that.”

“But he isn’t homosexual, or anything like that,” Red said. “He just likes to gamble, and the wilder the gamble, the more he likes it. Always pays up when he loses too. ’Course, he don’t lose much. Big Jim’s a character. All in all, you couldn’t ask for a nicer more honest employer in this type of business.”

“Tell us about Tillie,” Brett said.

“Well, Tillie worked for Maude. She was one of Maude’s girls, you see. When we did Maude in, we put the old reprobate in a piano crate with about three hundred pounds of rocks to keep her company, drove her all the way to Arkansas and dropped her hefty self in a lake. We made it a kind of holiday, stopping to see scenic markers and points of interest along the way, though we drove over there faster than we drove back. She started to acquire an aroma about the time we got to the Arkansas line. When we completed the chore, we returned to Tulsa to see Jim. Jim was so pleased, he put me in charge of Oklahoma City and sent Wilber with me as a kind of enforcer.

“Let me say that the two of us merchandised more tail than Maude had sold in her lifetime. She had been holding out on Jim, but she hadn’t been doing anywhere the business she could have. We set up little safaris, had girls hauled across state lines, doubled our truck stop business, and set up new houses in Texas, Louisiana, and Arkansas. We even had a traveling trailer we drove about Oklahoma, hitting the high spots. You wouldn’t believe how easy it is to slip a girl into a rest home to help some old codger enjoy his last days. They’ll blow six months’ snack allotment for one good night with a woman. Some who hadn’t had an erection in years were astonished to discover they could manage quite nicely with the right stimuli.

“I’m sure our girls hastened a few deaths that way, but considering the alternatives, I doubt the old fellas really minded. Besides, when you’re seventy-five or so, after a full-course dinner and a slice of young tail, what else you got to look forward to?

“ ’Course, you got to bribe lots of interns and nurses and stuff, so it’s not quite as profitable as it should be.”

“About Tillie,” Brett said.

Red nodded. “The traveling trailer was, in many ways, our busiest little sideline. Your daughter was part of that recreational tour from time to time, Ms. Brett.”

“Then you were Till’s pimp these last few years?” Brett said.

“I suppose you could say that,” Red said, “though it doesn’t have quite the professional ring I prefer. I like to think of myself simply as a businessman, and Wilber here as the pimp.”

“Yeah,” Wilber said. “I’m the pimp. I keep the girls in line. I take care of the johns don’t want to pay, and if shit goes on some place I ain’t, we got … had … fellas took care of things for us.”

“We were doing quite well selling women,” Red said. “So we were able to give Jim almost double what Maude had been giving him, and still there was money, and, well, I hate to admit it, but greed got the better of us. We thought since Jim was making double what he was making before, he’d be happy, and not realize we were making almost as much as he was.”

“But he found out,” I said.

“I’m afraid so,” Red said.

“Man,” said Wilber, “we fucked up a sweet business.”

“Yes, we did,” Red said. “It became necessary that we depart. Some of Jim’s men paid us a visit, and but for the grace of the devil they would have killed us, but Wilber here fought dynamically, disposing of a couple of the hoodlums with his bare hands. I shot two of them to death, but not before I was roughed about quite a bit. My suit shows the activity. And you can see the damage to Wilber’s face. A rumble tumble on the same par as that with the colored woman. Perhaps brisker.

“Preparing to depart, we discovered we were financially embarrassed. We made a lot of money, but we spent a lot of money. This suit alone, designed to my specifications, cost six hundred dollars. Can you imagine that? There’s not enough actual material here for a good-sized throw rug. But, we had no money, so we had to ask the girls for money.”

“You asked?” Brett said.

“Well, we actually persuaded them it was good idea. Guess what? They had very little. Considering Jim and ourselves took a nice chunk of their earnings, and allowed them to spend the bulk of the remainder through us for supplies, well, whores are not very rich. Your daughter, however, had managed to save some money and she offered it to us without any persuasion. It was only five hundred dollars, but with the rest we had from the other girls we acquired just short of a thousand. Not a lot for men who normally spent that in a day, but beggars couldn’t be choosers.

“Your daughter gave us the money and said if we would come here and tell you that she wants out, and that she needs help to get out, you would give me another five hundred dollars.”

“You did this for five hundred dollars?” I asked.

“McDonald’s pays considerably less a week for tossing burgers, sir,” Red said, “and at the moment, every little drop helps. If we can scam out on this motel bill before they realize our credit cards belong to a colored man we mugged in Amarillo out back of a barbecue joint, we can start rolling promptly, steal a car closer to the Mexican border. We might just manage to elude anyone Jim sends after us. Once in Mexico, five hundred dollars becomes two or three thousand, you use it right. Then we can have some breathing room. Perhaps run some whores down there. There’s always some sort of enterprise going on in Mexico, though much of it seems to involve the use of knives and guns.”

“You ought to be used to that,” I said.

“The degree of excitement is higher down there,” Red said. “I’ve lived there before. Shortly after I departed the circus. Unlike Americans, Mexicans—though short-tempered and fond of sharp weapons—seem to appreciate a midget.”

“Where is Tillie?” Brett said.

“I’ve written the location down,” Red said. “May I reach in my pocket?”

“Carefully,” I said.

Red brought out a piece of paper and handed it to me. I took it and opened it and looked at it. “You could just be picking up five hundred dollars,” I said. “This could be a Laundromat.”

“Could be,” Red said. “But it isn’t.”

“It isn’t even Oklahoma City. What the hell is Hootie Hoot?”

“I know how it sounds,” Red said. “But it’s a real town. It’s a little burg outside of Oklahoma City. We actually found it to be quite a refuge, and it provides easy access to the city, and frankly, most men who wanted to purchase sex didn’t want to pay for it in a place they thought there might be law. This burg, cops were paid off. They liked a little regular tail themselves, see. We get the five hundred dollars or what?”

I looked at Brett. Brett stood up and tossed me Wilber’s gun. I caught it and dropped it on the bed between my legs. Brett lifted her dress and took five hundred dollars out of the end of the thigh holster. We all checked out the thigh holster and what it was strapped to. In the light I could see little freckles on Brett’s thigh, like the blush on a strawberry.

Brett put the revolver in the holster. The five hundred was folded. She unfolded it. She stood next to the table lamp where Wilber sat and counted it out aloud, dropping each bill on the table.

“How does it look?” Red asked Wilber.

Wilber picked up the money and thumbed through it. “Like five hundred dollars.”

“Good,” Red said. “Good.”

Wilber sniffed the money. “And it smells like a woman’s thigh.”

“Even better,” Red said.

“You said Till was in trouble,” Brett said. “Besides being a whore in Big Jim’s stable, how’s she in trouble?”

“It’s my guess the other girls will tell that she helped us willingly, to help herself get out. Big Jim doesn’t like that sort of thing. He’ll have a special work plan for her.”

“What’s that mean?” I asked.

“It means she won’t like it,” Red said. “As for what he’ll have in mind for her, I can’t say. Maybe he’ll put her on the street in Tulsa. Some other place not even that nice.”

“Then this address could be meaningless?” I said. “Probably is by now.”

“It’s the last address where she was,” Wilber said.

“Correct,” Red said. “That’s all we know.”

“That’s not worth five hundred dollars,” I said. “That’s worth a sack of dog shit.”

Red looked at Brett. “Ma’am.”

“Keep the money,” Brett said.

“All right,” I said. “This is where our association ends. I don’t want to ever see either one of you again. I do, I might not like it.”

“Suits me,” Red said. “I haven’t found either of you particularly sociable.”

“I ain’t scared I see you again,” Wilber said. “I think you ain’t near tough as you think you are.”

“You’re the one with the broken nose and the fucked-up teeth,” I said.

Red laughed.

“Yeah,” Wilber said, “but wasn’t you did it.”

“That’s true,” I said, and moved quickly and shot my foot out and hit Wilber in the mouth. His head went back and hit the wall and he came out of the chair charging. I sidestepped and brought my gun down behind his ear. He fell down and I kicked him again. A tooth slid under the bed and I could see a piece of another in my tennis shoe with a bloody spot around it.

It wasn’t really necessary, but I bent over and hit Wilber one more time behind the ear with the revolver. “That’s because we heard Till’s pimp beat her. And if you weren’t the one, my best apologies.”

Wilber moaned, rolled over on his back. “Bastard,” he said. “I might want to see you again sometime.”

“Your choice,” I said. “But I don’t recommend it.”

Red recovered his matches and was relighting his cigar, which had gone out. The only thing he had done during the action was raise his feet a little. He said, “Now you got the news on Tillie, might I suggest you forget it. Taking one of Jim’s whores is not a good idea. He frowns on all manner of business tampering, and we are living proof of that, and the fact that we’re living proof is rare. The whores, they do what they’re told, and they stay where they’re told, and they don’t want to do that … Well, they still do it."

"I'd like to see you tangle with Big Jim," Wilber said from his position on the floor. "I'd like you to tangle with me when I'm ready."

I didn't say anything to that.

Brett opened the door. I took hold of Wilber's automatic and popped out the clip. I wiped the automatic with my shirt, threw it on the floor. I put the clip in my shirt pocket. I held my gun next to my leg and Brett and I walked out of there and closed the door and went along the walk quickly, down the stairs, out to her car.

I took Wilber's ammunition clip out of my pocket, wiped it with my shirttail, and dropped it into the parking lot.

When Brett was behind the wheel and I was beside her, she looked at me, said, "Surreal."

"Yeah," I said. "What now?"

"A light lunch. Sex."

"With me?"

"Unless you can suggest someone else."

I shook my head. "Nope. Don't think so. Nobody comes to mind, anyway. We could check the want ads, you like."

"Nah, you'll do."

5

On the way to Brett's house, I felt her mood go dark. She had suddenly realized just what kind of people her daughter was involved with. It's not that she hadn't known before, or hadn't tried to convince Tillie to give it up, but now, with Tillie wanting out, and her seeing scum like Red and Wilber, she knew the world of her daughter firsthand. It's one thing to wave at the devil from afar, quite another to shake the bastard's hand.

Brett didn't say a word about how she felt, but I could feel the change in her, tangible as the taste of a stinkbug in your last spoonful of custard.

And speaking of which, the lovebugs were worse. They came at the car like bullets, splattered and spurted their grease across the windshield until it was impossible to see. Brett had to pull over at a serve-yourself filling station. I got out and pumped gas and tried to clean the windshield with the water hose and a paper towel, but it wasn't a very good job. The water just mixed with the bug goo and spread itself over the windshield like film over a dying eye.

Back in the car, I said, "How about that light lunch?"

"Sure," Brett said, then she began to cry. I slid over and put my arm around her and kissed her cheek, which was wet with tears. She said, "I know now she's in trouble. Hell, I've known that all along. Why didn't I do something?"

"You tried to talk her out of it."

"I should have gone up there and got her."

"She wouldn't have come."

"She wants out now."

"That's now," I said.

"She could be dead."

"No reason to think that. Guy like this Big Jim, he doesn't kill his stock over something like that. Meat on the hoof is how he sees it. It'll probably be like Red said. A punishment of some kind. Hooking where she wouldn't want to hook."

"I can understand fucking," Brett said, "but for money, and with anybody, and with someone telling you what to do. And all kinds of disease. Some of the men …"

"I know."

"I can't believe I'm boo-hooing like this. It's embarrassing."

"Shouldn't be."

"But it is."

"Hell, I cry, Brett."

"Does it mess up your eye makeup?"

"Absolutely."

She smiled, said, "I could call the cops, and maybe do something there, but a hooker, I don't think they're going to be all that concerned. They were, this Big Jim wouldn't be doing business like he's doing."

"Some cops are concerned," I said. "Most. It's just not that simple. Guys like Big Jim know how to do bad business and have people know it's bad business, and still get away with it."

"Then I've got to go get her. Hap, I have to."

"I know."

The light lunch was at Brett's place, a tunafish sandwich with sweet apple slices in it, ice tea with lots of ice and no sugar, potato chips, and sweet pickles forked from a jar. We sat at the kitchen table and ate slowly and talked awhile, tried to figure what to do.

I said, "You know this isn't going to be a walk in the park?"

"Yes. I know."

"We're not going to drive up there and say 'We've come to get Tillie. Sleepover is finished.' It's not that easy."

"I know."

"It could turn ugly."

"I understand that. I'm not askin' you …"

"You are and you aren't," I said. "We've been over that. I'm not saying I won't go. I've already said I would. All I'm doing is warning you. We go up there, it could still turn out bad for Tillie."

"You think, as is, it's going to get better?"

"No, I don't. I guess I'm actually telling you what you can expect for yourself. It might be best you stay here, let me go."

"I wouldn't let you go by yourself."

"Leonard and I would go."

"You don't know he'll go."

"Yes, I do. But if he didn't, couldn't, I'd still go. And this is more something me and him can handle."

"You're sure?"

"No. But it sounds good."

Brett turned her glass of ice tea around and around in her hand, said, "I can't let you go by yourself. You go, with or without Leonard, I go too."

"What about your job?" I asked.

"What about yours?"

"I can leave it. It's not like I wasn't looking for a job when I found that one."

"I can get off too."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure. It might make my supervisor's butt hole suck wind, but I've got some more vacation time coming. I need to get off, I can."

"All right," I said. "But you got to consider some things. These guys, they probably knew Tillie, all right. They may have worked for this Big Jim, but we don't know they're telling the exact truth."

"I guess I have some doubts, them driving all the way down here for five hundred dollars."

"Actually, I buy that," I said. "Scum like that, they'll do anything for a buck. They've probably robbed and looted every damn thing they could on their way down here. They figured since they were en route to Mexico, they might as well stop by and pick up five hundred bucks from you. We don't even know for sure Tillie wants you to come get her, or that she told them to ask for five hundred dollars. They may just know you're her mother, and nothing else. This could all be some story they made up. A grain of truth here and there, like a couple of whole corn kernels that have passed through the bowels on their way to becoming shit."

"That's metaphorical talk for you think they could be lying a lot. Right?"

"Right."

Somehow we drifted toward the bedroom, and it was very cool in there, and the sheets were soft and sweet-smelling and Brett was warm and even sweeter, and I kissed her lips, then her breasts, pausing to roll my tongue around and over her hard nipples. I ran my tongue down the length of her long legs, and kissed where she had shaved herself, then I kissed everything else there was to kiss, rolled her on her stomach, moved her legs apart, and entered her.

Brett had the CD going, playing *The Best of Percy Sledge*—which means anything he ever sang. The song was "When a Man Loves a Woman," and the way he sang made time stop. We made love for a long time, and eventually I had no idea which song was playing, and finally, when we finished, both of us satiated, I was somehow startled to realize we lay hugging each other in silence.

After a while, Brett said, "Now, that was some fuck."

"Yeah," I said, "and next time, I'm going to put my whole thing in."

"Yeah, right," Brett said. "What I meant to say, was that was some fuck, considering what you have to work with, and I don't mean me, pardner."

"Oh ho."

"Ho ho."

"Ho, ho, ho."

"Oh, ho, ho, ho."

We lay there for a while, kissing. Brett said, "You know, what we been talking about. About you and me."

"Me moving in?"

"Yeah. I still want that. But right now, I don't know we should. I don't know how things are—"

"I understand."

"—and Tillie, we go get her, well, I may need to keep her here, and with you and me trying to work things out together right now, I don't know."

"I understand."

"Well, don't understand too goddamn quick, mister. I want to do it, but maybe right now isn't good. It could put a strain on all of us that we don't need at the moment."

"It'll be all right."

"I love you, Hap."

"And I love you."

"It's okay we wait?"

"Sure."

"Want to stroke the bald beaver again?"

"Will it bite?"

"Absolutely."

We made love again. Less passionate this time, but satisfying nonetheless, then we lay with pillows propped behind our heads and Brett got the remote off the nightstand and turned the television on.

We lay there and watched some stupid talk show with a pig that was supposed to play a harmonica. The pig seemed bored. His owner held the harmonica, and the pig, a red neckerchief tied around its throat, tried to be cooperative and made a halfhearted attempt to blow into it. He could make a noise, but I wouldn't call it music. The pig's owner claimed it was taps.

Frankly, unless the sonofabitch can hit more than one note, I'm not that impressed with harmonica-playing pigs. In fact, way I feel these days, I don't know one could actually play taps, or even "The Star Spangled Banner," would excite me much.

We lay there holding each other, watching this pig, and finally some other program even more bland, then nothing. We fell asleep in each other's arms, the TV going, and when we awoke in the late afternoon a famous talk show host was trying to help some whitebread woman in a five-hundred-dollar dress sell a book she'd written on the power of love; about how all we had to do to make things right was just believe in love and it would fill the air.

Pollution fills the air, honey, you believe in it or not. Love takes more work than that. And unlike pollution, sometimes love goes away.

6

When I got back to Leonard's place my car windshield was caked with bugs. I used the hose and an old rag to clean it, but it wasn't a much better job than I had done on Brett's car at the filling station. Just call me Greasy Bill.

After I had been struggling for a while, Leonard came out of the house with a squeegee and gave it to me. I assumed he had been watching me through the window and had become frustrated. I used the squeegee and the hose and finally got the windshield clean. All the while I was doing this, I was glancing at Leonard out of the corner of my eye. I could see he was in a foul mood. He had that pouty mouth with the wrinkled forehead he gets when he's ready to jump your ass. Not the look where his eyes are on fire and you know someone is going to get mauled or maybe die, but the one tells you he's pissed and ready to let you know.

I tried some polite conversation about the bugs and the weather. Pointed at a couple of interesting birds I saw on fence posts, but Leonard wasn't having any of that. I tried a clever slide into talking about Brett and her daughter, but he wasn't having any of that either.

He said, "Before we talk any outside shit, we're gonna talk some inside shit. I mean mine and your shit. Come on."

I followed him into the house. He said, "Sit down right there and wait a minute."

I sat on the couch. He left the room. A moment later he returned. He was carrying a roll of toilet paper and a toilet paper roller. "I'm gonna show you a little trick, here, Hap. You see, when you use the last piece of shit paper on your nasty ass, you take the roller post, that's this thing here, long and hard, unlike your dick, I'm sure. And you take this long and hard thing, the dick we'll call it, so it'll be something you can understand, and we take this dick, and we put it in the hole in the toilet paper tube.

“And in keeping with your mental faculties, we will call this hole in the toilet paper tube the pussy. So you take the dick, put it in the pussy, then, finished, you realize that the dick is sticking in the pussy and out the asshole, which is what we’ll call the other side of the tube. You take each end of the dick, ’cause somehow it got broken off, okay, and you take each end of the dick and slip it into the little notches that hold it on to the wall in the bathroom. This way, you got a new roll of crap paper on a stick. That simple enough for you, Hap?”

“Good grief, Leonard. Don’t have a cow.”

“Yeah. Well there ain’t nothing like taking a big ole greasy crap and having to duck-walk over to the cabinet to get another roll while you got a goddamn hunk of turd hanging out of your ass. You ought to try it some time.”

“Not my sport.”

“Let me ask you something, Hap. Who you think’s been puttin’ the paper on the goddamn roller?”

“Elves?”

“No. Let me ask you something else, Hap. Can you now, after instruction, put the dick in the pussy?”

“What if the paper tube has a headache?”

“Don’t push me, Hap. I’m not finished here. Pay attention.”

Leonard put the roller and paper on his easy chair. He opened the closet door and pulled out a broom. He got down on his knees by the couch, said, “Lift your feet.”

I did. He swiped the broom under there and came out with a pair of formerly white, now gray, jockey shorts, festooned in cobwebs, bearing a couple of dead roaches like stickpins.

“These ain’t mine,” Leonard said. “These here are your ole nasty drawers. You’ve had them under there since you first moved in here. I go to clean today, and what do I see?”

“The toilet paper elves?”

“Your shitty drawers.”

“My guess is, same elves been putting that paper on the roller have been fucking around with my underwear.”

He stuck the broom and underwear in my face. “Got a shit stain in the seat. Your trademark.”

“Careful, you could put an eye out with them drawers.”

“These are yours, Hap.”

“How the hell would you know? You check out my shorts every night? Could be one of your old boyfriend’s.”

“They ain’t no old boyfriend’s, ’cause I don’t mess with men don’t wipe their ass good, and they ain’t mine, ’cause I don’t take off my drawers in the living room and kick’m under the couch. That’s a Hap Collins trademark. That and pissin’ around the toilet, not just in it. You go in that bathroom, stand by the crapper, that goddamn rotten-ass piss on the floor will suck your shoes off and dissolve them.”

“Well, you ought to clean more often, that way there wouldn’t be underwear under the couch, or pee-pee on the bathroom floor.”

“Hap, you’re askin’ for it, man.”

“Way I see it, those elves can put a roll of paper on a stick, they ought to be able to get underwear out from under couches and wipe around the base of the commode, and you and I could just hang easy.”

“You are *asking* for it, man. Let me question you some-thin’ else: when’s the last time you cleaned anything in this house? We’re gonna have to have a come-to-Jesus meetin’ on that, my friend. And you ate the last vanilla cookie. Those are mine, Hap. Mine.”

“I apologize. We were all out of steak. And if you think you’re blue now, I’m going to throw more color on you. Me and Brett, we’re not moving in together.”

Leonard lowered the underwear onto the floor and tossed the broom down. “Ah, hell. Y’all have a fight?”

“No.”

Leonard picked up the roller and paper and sat down in the chair and held them in his lap while I explained.

When I was finished, he put the roller and paper on the floor and walked over to the shabby fireplace and plucked one of his pipes from the pipe rack on the mantel, grabbed his bag of tobacco, unrolled it, and filled his pipe. He picked up a box of matches, returned to his chair, and studied me a moment.

"What you're sayin'," he said, kicking back in his easy chair and sticking the pipe into the corner of his mouth, "is, in a nutshell, this gal, this Tillie, decides to be a whore, then times get hard and she's ready to quit and they won't let her quit?"

"That's it."

"She think whoring had a retirement plan?"

"I don't think she thought at all."

"I don't even know this girl, Hap. There's lots of whores out there. Why, if I decided to save one, would I pick this one?"

"Because she's Brett's daughter."

"I don't know Brett that well. I mean, I like her, but I don't know her that well. You know this isn't going to be an easy thing. Just drive up there and knock on the door and help this whore carry her suitcase out to the car."

"Exactly what I told Brett."

"You're going, I go or not, aren't you?"

"You bet. So's Brett. She insisted."

"This Brett, she's got you by the ying-yang."

"The ying-yang. The balls. The heart. She's got me, man. And she's not asking me to do this. I'm volunteering."

"Oh, she's asking all right. I know you, a good-lookin' woman comes along and plays the right tune, you dance."

"All right, let's say she's asking. I love her. Why shouldn't she ask? Who else is she going to ask? I've done more for people I didn't care about as much, so why shouldn't I do it?"

"Because you might get your ass shot off. And considering you got one of them little narrow white asses, you can't spare much."

"You got enough for both of us."

Leonard let that one go by. He pulled a match, lit his pipe and puffed. "I reckon we get this over with, and Brett has time to settle stuff with her daughter, then maybe she'll take you in."

"That's the plan."

"We get this done, then maybe a short time after, I can get rid of you."

"That's possible."

Leonard nodded. "What we're going to need first is a few guns. I think for something like this, we're gonna need a few unmarked guns. I got a shotgun fills that bill, but we could use some other stuff."

"You're always with the guns."

"What do they shoot at us with when we do stuff like this, straws full of spit wads?"

"No."

"What then?"

"All right, I'll say it. Guns. Happy?"

"Yep. Now, we're gonna need guns. Correctomondo?"

"I suppose."

"I know you don't like the gun talk, Hap, but you know well as I do, at some point those people up there, they're who I think they are, they're gonna point guns at us. And the guns are gonna be loaded, and when they pull the trigger our heads are gonna go away. Unless we shoot first or intimidate their asses into not shooting at all. Maybe that way, we don't have to shoot. We throw the whore in the car, then drive like bastards."

"It's not my plan to go up there with guns blazing. I don't work like that."

"I know. I just said as much. We take it easy if the easy way is there. But it isn't, we got to go the hard way, then we got to be prepared. There's this guy I know, he can help us."

I thought awhile. Anytime talk of guns comes up, I get nervous. I don't like them. I was about the best goddamn shot with a rifle or handgun you ever saw, but I still didn't like them. I own one, and I still don't like them. I knew there were times when they were necessary, and it was better to have one and not need it than to not have one and need it, but goddammit, I still don't like them.

I sighed. "This guy you know. When can we see him?"

"I've mentioned him before. Haskel. You don't call him. You don't plan. You just go over to his place and be real careful."

7

This guy Leonard knew sold cold guns was named Haskel Ward. He lived down in the river bottoms about fifty miles from where we lived, not far from the Louisiana border. I had never been to Haskel's, but I knew where he lived and a little about him from hearing Leonard talk. Not that he had a lot to say about Haskel, but the name had come up, and what little he did say about him was not endearing.

Next morning, on our way to Haskel's, we drove through town in Leonard's new Dodge Ram, which was a treat he had given himself when he sold his house. We stopped at a fast-food place and had one of those breakfasts that has so much cholesterol in it the damn thing comes with a vein pump. After breakfast, I found a pay phone and called Brett.

"I'm off work for a couple of weeks, Hap," she said. "That way, we go get Till, I can have some time with her before I go back to work."

"That's good."

"I'm packing a few things now."

"That's good too. Keep it light. But we're not going today."

"We're not?"

"Leonard and I have to pick up a few things."

"What kind of things?"

"Just be patient. I know you want to go right away, but we go, we got to be prepared."

"In what way? Packing a lunch?"

"Guns. Cold guns."

"Cold?"

"They aren't registered. They can't be easily traced."

"Oh. When are we going then?"

"My guess is we get the guns today, take care of some last-minute business the next day, then we go."

"Then maybe I should work tomorrow."

"If you can, you should. Don't plan on leaving until day after tomorrow. It's best when you do something like this you don't run off with your fly down and your dick hanging out. Or in your case, a tit."

"Not out of my fly though. I'm not that droopy yet."

"Darling, you aren't droopy at all."

"And most of the time you aren't either."

"I'll call you tonight."

By midday it was humid as a monkey's armpit down in the bottoms where the trees grew close together and right up next to the road. The moss and vines hung from the trees like alien spiderwebs and the birds were thick and colorful and loud and fluttered about like living Christmas ornaments.

We rode down the red-clay road with the air-conditioner on and the windows rolled tight, and the lovebugs, dense as back home, swarmed the truck from all sides and splattered against it like kamikazes.

Eventually the little red road played out at a dead end where a clapboard house three shades below gray stood amongst tall grass, a broken tricycle, an ancient Ford truck on blocks, an old wrecker with an oily winch. There were three young kids in the yard, two boys and a girl who looked as if they might bathe if they were pushed into a creek at gunpoint, held under with a foot, and beat with soap.

There was a chinaberry tree off to the right, and we parked under that next to a rusted outboard motor and a very old carcass that may have once been a possum. We got out of the truck and the kids came over. I thought they were going to sniff us like dogs. They looked to be about eight, ten, and twelve under all that dirt, the boys being the oldest.

Leonard said, "Aren't y'all supposed to be in school?"

The oldest said, "We're off today."

The girl said, "We don't go much. Daddy said we're gonna start getting home schoolin'."

In what? I thought. Collecting dirt?

"Haskel around?" Leonard asked.

"He's out to the barn," the oldest said.

"Could you go get him?" I asked.

The older boy studied me. "Well, I reckon."

"I mean, if it wouldn't hurt you," I said.

"I don't reckon it'll hurt none. Y'all stay right here. Pa don't cotton to folks wandering around here much."

"Probably afraid they'll step on a nail," I said. "Or trip over a car part. Or maybe step in a possum."

The kid went away then, but not like he was in a hurry. Way he walked with his head down, you might have thought he was cataloguing worms and insects in his path.

The remaining two kids stared at us. The little boy looked to have caught a good shot in the forehead at one time, maybe with a stick or a rock. He had a crease there, like you might iron into a pair of trousers. The little girl had black greasy hair with lovebugs in it, patches of dirt on her face that gave her a spotted pup appearance, and slimy trails from her nose to her upper lip.

I tried to make small talk with the kids, but they didn't exactly warm to me. They didn't seem annoyed either. Sort of ambivalent, as if they had both just gotten over a lobotomy operation and were still weak from it.

Fifteen minutes later the oldest boy came strolling up. He said, "Pa's comin'. He told me tell y'all you better not be sellin' nothin'."

"We're buyin'," I said. "'Course, if he wants a good set of encyclopedias, we might can fix him up."

"I wouldn't count on it," said the older boy. Then added proudly: "He don't read much."

I looked up then. Coming around the far side of the house was a man I assumed was Haskel. Even from a distance, you could see he was about as clean and cuddly as a steaming pile of diseased dog shit. He had on a pair of faded overalls with no shirt, and was spitting a nasty brown stream of what I hoped was tobacco.

He walked briskly, and as he neared I could see he wore a pair of loafers without socks, and the arms that swung by his sides were big and gnarly, as if they had been broken several times and the bones had healed improperly.

When Haskel was still out of earshot, Leonard said, “Let me do the talking.”

Haskel walked up, wiped his hands on his overalls and put them in his pockets. I could see his right hand had hold of something bulky in his overall pocket. I assumed it wasn’t his dick.

Haskel looked at us carefully. He had a bumpy face that made you nervous. He said to Leonard, “I reckon I know you, don’t I?”

“You have a good memory,” Leonard said.

“Double-barrel shotgun, sawed off,” Haskel said. “Some ten year ago.”

“More like fifteen.”

“More like twelve, now that I think about it. I ain’t as good with colored faces.”

“We all look alike, huh?”

“Far as I’m concerned, everybody looks alike, but coloreds look more alike. I hope you ain’t working for the law now.”

“Why would I?”

“Sometimes it happens. It’s not something I like. I tend to become angry something like that goes on.”

“Don’t try and scare us,” Leonard said. “It isn’t necessary.”

“There’s lots of fellas weren’t scared that aren’t scared even now, but they ain’t happy neither. They got dirt in their faces and they lay nearby.”

“The garden?” I said.

“What?” Haskel said.

“You know, the garden,” I said. “For fertilizer.”

“You could talk yourself to death,” Haskel said.

Leonard said, “Listen here, Haskel, that gun in your pocket, it’ll only get one of us. Maybe. Then the other one will clean your clock.”

I jerked a thumb at Leonard and said to Haskel, “Be sure you shoot him so I'm the one does the clock cleaning."

"You might find my clock hands harder to wind than you think, boys," Haskel said, then noticed his children standing around. The little girl had her mouth open and was picking her nose. The other two boys were watching Haskel as if waiting for him to offer them their medication.

"You goddamn kids run along to the house now," Haskel said. "Go squirrel huntin'. Fish. Make yourself useful. Don't make me tell you twicet. And get your fuckin' finger out of your nose, Sherilee."

The goddamn kids evaporated, though Sherilee kept her fuckin' finger in its probing position. Maybe it was latched there.

Haskel said, "Little shits."

"You always greet people want to do business with you like this?" Leonard said.

"I'm cautious," Haskel said. "You can't be too goddamn cautious these days. Consider what happened to those folks in Waco."

"You mean the religious nuts who were abusing their children?" I asked. "You know what I think, except for those poor children and the government folks, fuck 'em. Far as I'm concerned the only thing wrong with that operation was the government folks were stupid and the folks inside the compound were even more stupid. I figure you're that stupid, you ought not be in the gene pool."

"You're awful uppity for a man who's come to see me," Haskel said.

"How you know I'm not here to give you a Jehovah Witness tract?" I said.

Haskel turned to Leonard: "What can I do you for this time, colored fella?"

"Leonard's the name."

"I don't like to get too personal," Haskel said. "Fact is, I'll tell you right now, I don't shake hands. Now. Later. On the deal. Anything. I don't like being touched. I ain't one for having fingers run through my curly hair, you know what I mean."

"And it's such lovely hair," I said. "Very gritty."

“What?” Haskel said.

“Forget it,” Leonard said. “Don’t pay him any mind.”

“I tell you what,” Haskel said, “you two jerk-offs get back in that there truck and haul on out of here. I don’t like you much.”

“We’re not here to be friends,” Leonard said. “Hap here, he got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning. Had to get rolling before he had his coffee and jerked his dick. But you don’t like us, that’s okay. You can like our money.”

“Yeah, well,” Haskel said, giving me a beady eyeball, “now we got that out of the way, you know what I sell, so let’s get on with it.”

“We need some cold pieces,” Leonard said. “And not so old you load them with a ramrod and a powder horn.”

Haskel was all business now. It was like we’d never had a disagreeable moment. “Heavy work?”

“Hard to say. We don’t want machine guns, stuff like that. Simple, effective stuff. Probably close-range. One long-range weapon might be good. Maybe two.”

“Cowboy style?”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“Stuff like that, it doesn’t come cheap.”

“Let’s see what you got, then talk prices.”

“All right,” Haskel said, then nodded toward me and asked Leonard: “This guy, he gonna have anything to say about this?”

“Jes when Massa Leonard say it okay to talk,” I said.

“He jokin’?” Haskel said.

“Yeah,” Leonard said. “He does that all the time. He thinks he’s funny.”

“Well, he ain’t. In fact, I’ve already had about enough of him. Come on.”

As we followed Haskel, Leonard cut his eyes toward me. I gave him a big juicy smile. It was nice to put Leonard on the receiving end of bullshit for a change. Guy like this Haskel, I couldn’t help myself. Then again, it was me and Leonard buying from him, so what did that make us? Thinking about that, some of the humor went out of my spirit and my feet began to drag.

We went around the house, past some leaning sheds and a pen with hogs in it. The hogs came up to the fence and stuck their noses through and sniffed. The wind was picking up their scent, and I'll tell you, it was healthy.

Down past the pens and the outhouse, which had a unique and memorable aroma all its own, we entered a path in the woods, and after a while we came to a clearing, and in the clearing was a huge well-cared-for barn. Out to the right of the clearing were a number of stinking armadillo carcasses; nothing was left but the decaying shells and the ants and flies they housed.

There was a mound of dirt beyond that, and I could see something on top of the mounds, in a row, about two feet apart, but I couldn't make out what it was.

Inside, the barn was air-conditioned. Haskel flipped a switch and the lights came on and showed boxes and racks of guns and the smell of gun oil was strong and sweet, and there was the stench of gunpowder too, and it was acrid and biting to the nostrils. In the back you could see a kind of gun range with bags of sand and bales of hay and targets.

"Run everything on a generator," Haskel said. "Got to keep it a certain temperature for the stuff I carry. Not too cold. Not too hot. There's shit in here, weather got wrong, it'd go off and blow our asses all the way to Mineola. Maybe out in the goddamned Gulf."

"I don't like to travel that far unless I got plane tickets and a steward in my lap," Leonard said.

Haskel cut an eye toward Leonard. "You mean stewardess, don't you?"

"I don't think so," Leonard said, and let Haskel churn that one over. Haskel didn't seem to come to any decision. Maybe he'd look up the word "steward" in the dictionary after we left and think about it some and be real upset. I hoped so.

I was amazed at all the guns and ammo and the boxes that surely contained more of the same. On racks were things like rocket launchers and grenades and knives. I personally don't like the idea of someone as stupid as Haskel with guns. Actually, I didn't like the idea of anyone with guns. Me especially. It was one thing to own a handgun, a hunting rifle, but to have enough weapons to give the United States Army a fight went beyond desire for liberty and went over into plain ole anarchy. Pretty soon we would decide liberty also included the right to own our own personal backyard nuclear device. That goes with our right to bear arms, doesn't it? Maybe Haskel could sell us a nuke and we could use it to turn Tillie's new pimp into a mushroom cloud. That would teach him.

Haskel raised an arm and pointed around the expanse of the barn. "This has got to be the best goddamn store of weapons in East Texas. Maybe Texas. What I'm sayin' to you is, had I not done business with you before, colored fella—"

"Leonard," Leonard said.

"—I wouldn't be doing business with you now. If anything goes wrong, and things come back on me, and I get my dick in the wood chipper over selling you guns, I got connections, and these connections, they wouldn't like to find out you fucked me. You did that to me, even if I'm in a jail cell, some night you go to bed, you won't wake up. There's people I know will see to it."

"Wow," Leonard said, "I just had a little tingle all the way to the end of my big black toes. What about you, Hap?"

"My toes aren't black, but I think I felt a tingle."

Haskel said, "What I want you to do is go over to that table there, write your name on the pad, and I want you to show me your driver's license so I know you got the same name you put down. You got other identification, I want to see it. That way, something goes wrong, cops come down on my head, I got your name and identification. We all go down together."

"Last time I was here you just had guns in the trunk of your car," Leonard said.

"Business is good," Haskel said. "That Waco thing, the Oklahoma bombing. That's good for business."

We went over to the desk, got out our driver's licenses and let Haskel look at them. Neither of us had credit cards to show, but we both had ancient Social Security cards and we let him look at those. He carefully wrote down our license and card numbers and we signed the notepad.

I felt creeped by all that. Cops, FBI agents raided this place, there was my name, my address. Not only was I fucked, but so was Leonard. Once again, I had dragged him into the shit.

When we finished, Haskel went away for a moment, came back with an armload of weapons. He put them on a bare table by the door. He picked up one of them, a double-barreled shotgun.

“Apologies to you, colored fella, but they call this a nigger spreader.”

“How nice,” Leonard said.

“Twelve-gauge Remington double-barrel. Short barrels, not sawed but specially altered by yours truly. Short-range, hair triggers. Let this fucker go in a filling station shitter, it’ll kill everyone in there, wipe their asses and flush the commode. Interested?”

“How much?” I asked.

“Eight hundred dollars.”

“Goddamn!” Leonard said. “Sonofabitch better not just wipe asses, it better come on over to my house and suck my dick.”

“It might do it,” Haskel said, “but this baby sucks your dick, you won’t like it. Shit, colored fella—”

“Leonard.”

“—you was expectin’ illegal cold guns to come at Kmart prices?”

“We were hoping,” Leonard said. “I don’t suppose that price includes ammunition?”

“It don’t, but I’ll throw in a box of shells.”

“Two boxes of shells, and shave a hundred dollars off and you got a deal,” Leonard said.

“Sold,” Haskel said, and put the shotgun on the table and picked up a rifle. It was one of two. “My design. You want to cowboy, you get to cowboy.” Haskel tossed the gun to me and I caught it.

It was a Winchester-style rifle, mid-length, with a loop cock and two barrels, over and under. “Unique,” I said.

“Yeah,” Haskel said. “I call it the Haskel ’cause I made the sonofabitch myself. Got a general Winchester design, and I put that loop cock in there ’cause it’s easy and fast to handle. I always liked the old *Rifleman* show. He had one like that. John Wayne used a loop cock in the movies too. The shotgun idea I got from another show I used to watch. *Shotgun Slade*."

I turned the rifle over in my hands. I may not like them, but I know a good one when I see it.

Haskel said, "That baby holds twelve .44 cartridges, and underneath it has a shotgun shell. It's activated by that second trigger. It clicks back once, then sets, and you click it again. It's a twenty-gauge. It hasn't got the room-cleaning power of that Remington, but you get one man in your sight, let loose on him, and he'll be cool in the summer and cold in the winter.

"The top barrel is accurate, and it'll shoot a goodly distance. More than that middle-measure barrel will lead you to believe."

Haskel picked up the other rifle of the same design and tossed it to Leonard. "I'll even throw in a box of shells per rifle," Haskel said.

"Yeah," Leonard said, "but how much are the rifles?"

"A thousand apiece."

"Shit," Leonard said. "Maybe we ought to get a powder horn and a ramrod and a Hawking reproduction."

"I've got 'em," Haskel said. "Look, you take both, I'll make 'em eight hundred apiece. I'm actually selling these bastards at discount prices."

"Seven hundred apiece," Leonard said.

"Seven-fifty," Haskel said.

"Oh, all right," Leonard said, but you got to throw in one of those pistols."

Haskel looked down at the table. He had brought out three handguns. He picked up one of the snub-nose .38s and weighed it in his hands as if he could tell its worth that way.

"All right," he said. "But no shells with it."

"How much are the shells?" Leonard asked.

"Sixty dollars."

"For a box of .38s?"

"For twenty shells. They're all dum-dums."

“No thanks,” Leonard said. “Plain ole .38s will do. We want to be prepared, but we’re not trying to take on the Republican Guard.”

“All right. Anything else?”

“Shit, Leonard,” I said. “We don’t need all this stuff. Lose the shotgun and one of the rifles.”

“You never know,” Leonard said. “Give us three handguns, provided they aren’t a thousand a pop and my balls on a platter.”

“You can keep your balls,” Haskel said, “but the pistols, they’re seven-fifty apiece.”

“Jesus,” Leonard said. “You have these cut out of you, or what? That’s dear.”

“Take ’em all, get a discount.”

“How much?”

“Fifty dollars.”

“Fifty dollars! Jesus Christ, you’re really giving us the Jesse James.”

“These prices are bargain-basement, man.”

“Whose basement?”

“All right, I’ll cut you a hundred on the deal. Throw in a box of shells.”

Leonard sighed. He looked at me. I said, “I tell you, we don’t need all this stuff. I’m a man of peace.”

“Yeah,” Leonard said, “but they might not be.”

“You got you a little something planned,” Haskel said. “A job.”

“Nothing like that,” Leonard said. “All right, wrap it up.”

“Don’t you want to see this stuff work?” Haskel asked.

“Yeah, well,” Leonard said. “I reckon.”

8

“We can go outside for these,” Haskel said. “I use the range in back for the heavy shit.”

Leonard and I each carried a rifle and Haskel carried the sawed-off and the revolvers and ammunition in a cloth bag. He walked us out the door, down the trail, and over near the hog pens. He put the bag down, broke open the double-barrel and took two shells out of his overalls pocket and pushed them into the gun.

“Watch this,” Haskel said, and suddenly he turned toward the hog pen and cut down with both barrels. There was a sound like God letting a big one and the fence splintered. When the smoke and dirt and hog shit cleared, both hogs lay with their feet in the air.

“Goddamn,” Leonard said. “Wasn’t any call for that.”

“Gonna eat ’em anyway,” Haskel said, opening the shotgun and popping out the shells. “Soon as I get you two packin’, I’ll get my woman to help crank them sonofabitches up with the wrecker and we’ll scrape ’em. Scrapin’ a hog beats scaldin’ any day. Still got to use lots of hot water, but it ain’t quite the work. Come here, now.”

We followed Haskel down the trail to a spot at the base of the barn. “Ya’ll want telescopic sights for these?”

“No,” Leonard said.

“Might ought to have ’em,” Haskel said.

Leonard shook his head.

Haskel said, “See them bumps on the hill out there?”

We nodded.

He swapped his shotgun for the rifle Leonard was carrying.

“Watch this.” Haskel jerked the rifle up and fired and cocked and fired in rapid succession. The bumps on the hill went away. “Come on out with me now,” Haskel said.

As we walked we could smell yet another awful stench. It wasn't the outhouse and it wasn't the pigs; it was something long dead and rotting. It was more armadillo carcasses. They were spread at the base of the little sand hill, and at the top of the hill we saw what Haskel had been shooting. The heads off buried armadillos. We stood at the top of the hill, and all around the spots where the exploded heads stuck out of the dirt there were bones and fragments of skulls and brains, and down on the far side of the hill were wire cages. All but one of the cages was empty. It housed a frightened armadillo that kept darting from one end to the other.

"Were those armadillos alive?" Leonard asked.

"Ain't no fun shootin' a dead'n," Haskel said. "Fuckers root up everything. Figure this is how they pay."

"They're just doin' what their instincts tell 'em," Leonard said.

"Reckon so," Haskel said. "But so am I."

Leonard carefully laid the shotgun down, then I heard the wind, but I didn't see the punch. It was a right cross, I think, and it caught Haskel on the left side of his cheek and it made a cracking sound, and Haskel seemed to leap away from the hill. He hit the ground at its base, rolled and lay on his face. I was amazed to see that the rifle Haskel had been holding was in Leonard's left hand. He had snatched the weapon and punched Haskel in less time than it took to spit.

Leonard raised his knuckles to his mouth and sucked on them. I went down the hill to see if Haskel was dead. I lifted his head up and dirt fell out of his mouth. I set him up, got behind him and pulled the little revolver out of his overalls pocket and gave him a couple of whacks on the back with the palm of my hand. He coughed and rolled his eyes.

"You fugger," Haskel said.

Leonard came down the hill and got out his wallet. He looked at me and sighed, took out the bills. There were a lot of them, large bills. Hundreds. I knew he had gotten them out of the bank for this gun buy, that it was a chunk of the money from the recent sell of his uncle's old house.

Leonard pushed the bills down the front of Haskel's overalls. "Here's the money for the weapons and ammo, shitwipe. We'll pick them up on the way out. That diller in the cage down there, I've tossed in another fifty, so I'm taking him with me. Cage too. Any of your friends, or you, show up to bother us on account of this, I want you to know they're gonna miss all future meals. And I can find my way back here too, and I do, it won't be to try and sell you no vacuum cleaner. You happen to wake up when I'm through with you, it'll be with a tube in your nose and a shit bag strapped to your hip."

"Azoles," Haskel said, then stretched out on the ground and turned his head to the side and lay still.

I emptied Haskel's revolver, dropping the shells in my hand. I put the shells in my pocket and leaned down and put the gun back in Haskel's pocket. I picked up the cloth bag on my way away from there.

Leonard got the armadillo cage, carried it down the hill with one hand, the rifle in the other, the shotgun tucked under his arm. Down at the barn, we went inside and I got the notepad with our names on it and bent it in half and shoved it in my back pocket. We gathered up the guns and the ammo.

We went out to the truck. Leonard put the dillo in the truck bed. I stepped over the dead possum and got inside the truck with my weapons and ammo. Leonard went around and opened the driver's door and put the guns and ammunition he was carrying inside.

Sherilee, without her finger in her nose for a change, sort of materialized. She said to Leonard, "Ain't that our armadillo?"

"I bought him," Leonard said, closing the door and leaning against his truck.

"Pa traps 'em."

"Uh huh."

"Where's Pa?"

"He got a little tired. He's up on the hill there, resting."

"In the dirt?"

"He was sort of overcome with exhaustion."

"You hit him didn't you?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Sometimes he hits me. He knocked me out oncet with a shoe."

"Just consider that one for you," Leonard said, "and call it even."

"He ain't so bad sometimes," the little girl said.

"You ought to tell someone about the hogs. Haskel shot 'em."

"He does that sometimes," said the little girl. "When they get big."

"Well, they ain't gonna get no bigger."

"Reckon not."

Leonard gave the little girl a pat on the head and drove us out of there. When we reached the main road, we saw Haskel's two boys walking. They had cane fishing poles on their shoulders and sullen looks on their dirty faces. They didn't wave at us.

When we had gone a few miles down the road, Leonard pulled over to the side, got the cage out of the back of the pickup and walked into the woods, set it on the ground, and opened it.

The armadillo sat quietly, looking at the open space. Lovebugs buzzed around our heads and caught in our hair and clothes.

"Go on and git," Leonard said.

The armadillo did not go on and git.

Leonard picked up a stick and poked at the armadillo's rear end, but the beast didn't seem any more ready to leave. Leonard picked up the cage and gently poured the armadillo onto the ground. The armadillo landed on its feet and turned its head and sniffed the air. It appeared to be in shock, and considering what had happened to his relatives, I couldn't blame him.

"Now, you go on and stay out of trouble," Leonard said.

The armadillo moved slightly so that it stood next to Leonard's leg. It made a snuffling sound, as if smelling Leonard's socks, or maybe working up to a good cry.

Leonard picked up the cage, and we went back to the truck. When Leonard put the cage in the truck bed, we looked up to see the dillo had followed us to the edge of the woods.

"I've never seen anything like that," I said.

"No, me either. I reckon the little fella don't know he's comin' or goin'."

Leonard went around and got in the truck, started up, and drove off. I looked in the side mirror, said, "He's standing in the middle of the road."

"Dammit," Leonard said. He found a spot to pull around, went back and parked, got out and grabbed the cage. He opened it and set it on the ground in front of the dillo. The beast ambled into the cage and lay down. Leonard closed the cage and put the armadillo in the truck bed and got back behind the wheel, paused to pull lovebugs from his hair and toss them out the window.

"Damnedest thing I ever saw," Leonard said, rolling up the window. "Couldn't leave him though. He'd probably end up caught again, target practice for Haskel."

"Probably. Think Haskel is going to hunt us down and kill us?"

"You destroyed the record."

"Haskel could have memorized our names."

"Let him come see us, then."

"That was one hell of a punch you hit Haskel with."

"Actually, I must be getting old. Skin on my knuckles scraped worse than usual."

"Can you still get your pecker up?"

"I can hang an American flag on it and wave it."

"Then you're not getting old."

"What're you snickerin' about?"

"Your dillo."

"What about him?"

"Neat," I said. "You've got an heir."

9

Back at Leonard’s house, Leonard took the dillo into the woods while I made coffee. He came back a few minutes later carrying the empty trap. I watched him from the kitchen window. I thought he looked a little sad.

I poured us coffee, took the cups out on the back porch. Leonard joined me and we sat on the steps and sipped. I said, “When do we leave?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

“That’s what I figured. That’s what I told Brett.”

“I think we ought to see we can take Brett’s car. We’ll need the trunk room.”

“Done,” I said. “She’ll be glad to do it.”

Leonard nodded. He said, “You want to back out, we can.”

“I didn’t say anything about backing out.”

“I know, but I’m givin’ you the room.”

“I’m committed. I asked you to help me, remember?”

“I remember.”

“If you want to back out, you can.”

“You’ve had to bring a man down before, Hap, and you brood over it still.”

“I’d hate for there to be a time I didn’t brood.”

“What we’re doin’ now ain’t self-defense. We’re goin’ lookin’ for trouble.”

“I know that.”

“You might have to kill someone.”

“I know that too.”

Leonard sipped his coffee, took a moment to study one of his fingernails. He wasn’t looking at me when he spoke.

“There’s things I can live with. Things even you don’t know about. I'm not complainin', and I'm not apologizin'. I'm just sayin' there's things I can live with maybe you can't."

"Like killing people?"

"You got more bleeding heart in you than the whole Democratic Congress. You don't like guns. You're going against everything you believe because of Brett. You don't owe this to her. Me, if I know where there's a nest of poisonous vipers and I can stomp them flat, I think I ought to do it. I figure you'd feed the vipers, try to raise them up, maybe finance their college. I'm not saying one thing or another about this being wrong or right, I'm sayin' how you are and what you're goin' to be dealing with. If what the midget said is true, we got the Oklahoma mafia going on here. We're walkin' onto their playin' field, and we'll be expected to play. These guys, they take their money, their drug pushin', their pussy peddlin', and their murderin' seriously."

I sat silent for a while. Leonard took my coffee cup and left, came back with filled cups for us both.

"You're not altogether wrong, brother," I said. "But I love Brett. Brett loves Tillie. So I got to do it."

Leonard nodded. "Since you might stop in the middle of the action to pet a puppy dog, I figure I got no choice than to go in with you."

"You always have a choice," I said.

Leonard looked at me and laughed a strange laugh. "The hell I do."

I didn't know how to react to that. I eventually just looked away. Out at the edge of the woods, giving us a stunned look, was the armadillo.

"Your son has returned," I said.

Leonard looked up and saw the dillo. "Well, I'll be damned."

We drove over to see my boss at the Black Lace Club, which was essentially a big nasty honky-tonk on the outskirts of town where women shook naked titties on stage to bad country-rock music and sometimes slipped their briefs down to give the drunks a view of the squirrel in the tree.

Most of the time, this led to the dancers having money tossed at them or pushed into their panties, but other times it led to drunks taking it as an invitation to walk on stage and screw whatever was in front of them. That meant the girls, me, the manager, another drunk, the stage, whatever.

It was my job to see they didn't screw anyone, make too much noise, or fight each other over who could drink the most, had the fastest car and the biggest dick. It was a terrible place, a terrible job. In two weeks you could have more fights and nasty confrontations than three average persons had in a lifetime. It was one of the old-style bad places. Not the new places with clean floors and strobe lights and girls that looked as if they stepped out of the pages of *Playboy*. Not the places where the worst you had to deal with was some frat boy who thought he was tough. This was where the big bellies and the brainless collected. Guys that wouldn't fit anyone's idea of a stereotypical Hollywood tough guy, but the kind of guys who could take any one of those sleek, muscled-up ego machines and kick their asses until it bored them enough to stop.

I had come to feel working in this place was just helping it survive, and that was like feeding shit and sugar to disease-carrying flies. Why do it?

When I got there a couple of the daytime bouncers were on duty, and they knew me. They slapped me on the back and shook hands with Leonard when I introduced him. They were good guys, just shy on brains.

Day duty isn't so bad. Mostly married businessmen on business trips who had wives back home who had gotten fat. They come in for a drink and a look-see, and maybe later they could get it up enough to jerk off back at the motel.

My boss, Billy Joe James, was sitting at a table auditioning a new girl who was dancing pitifully to a tune playing on a cheap recorder. She had about as much rhythm as a stick. She didn't look bad, however. She was mostly ass, titties, and a dull expression. Looked about thirty, but a good thirty. She had a watery-looking tattoo of a red heart on her ass, and a red and blue tattoo that might have been a parrot, but could have been most anything, on her ankle.

Billy Joe saw me and Leonard, smiled at us. He waved the girl from the stage. She came down the steps like her feet hurt, which considering a large part of her outfit was a pair of tall red high heels, was likely. The rest of her had on a red G-string that was mostly up her twat.

When she came over to Billy Joe's table, he said something to her and slapped her on the ass. She shrieked like it was all in good fun, grabbed her shirt off his table, and went away. She passed us, pulling on her long shirt, and the expression on her face told me she wasn't having any kind of fun at all.

We went over and sat at the table and Billy Joe smiled at me. Billy Joe had a fat face any mother would love to hit. Many times. He said, "You ain't come for money, I hope."

"Actually, I have."

Billy Joe nodded, wiped fingers through his oil-slicked brown hair. "Figures." He looked at Leonard. "How's it goin', Pine?"

"It's goin'," Leonard said.

"You know I don't pay nothing until Saturday morning," Billy Joe said. "It's always Saturday mornin' that I pay."

"Well, you know," Leonard said, "right now, it's bound to be Saturday mornin' somewhere in the world, don't you think?"

Billy Joe laughed a little, not like he thought the joke was all that goddamn funny, but like maybe a good yuk might take some of the seriousness out of Leonard's looks.

"I got a little emergency here," I said. "And I'm quitting."

"Quitting? You can't quit."

"I just did."

"Oh, shit, man, you're my main bouncer. You can't quit."

"Just said I did."

"You can't."

"I believe you're not listenin' to the man," Leonard said. "Sounds like he's quittin' to me."

"Shit." Billy Joe looked at Leonard. "What about you, Pine? You lookin' for work?"

"Not here I'm not."

"You got a rep too. You're one hell of a bouncer."

“Not anymore. I’ve given up that profession. That and rose field worker and lay preacher are no longer on my résumé.”

“I pay pretty good, and hey, you get to look at a lot of titties.”

“I’ve seen titties and they don’t interest me much.”

“You some kind of fag?”

“Actually, I am.”

Billy Joe studied Leonard for a moment. “Yeah. Really?”

“Really,” Leonard said.

Billy Joe looked at me. “You and him? You know … you and him?”

“Only if my latest relationship with a female doesn’t work out,” I said. “Then, I got to consider it. I might even consider some bestiality. Come on, Billy Joe. I need my money and I need it now.”

Billy Joe nodded. “All right. But you decide you want to work again. Or you want to work, Pine. You come see me, okay? It don’t matter to me you’re queer. No offense. You know what I mean.”

“Yeah,” Leonard said. “I know what you mean.”

“We want to bounce,” I said, “you’ll be our first contact.”

Billy Joe pulled a wad of cash from his pants pocket, counted out the bills as if he was pulling each one from his intestines. I took my money and we left.

Out in Leonard’s truck, Leonard said, “Now I know why you take a long hot shower every mornin’ you come home from work.”

Back at Leonard’s I packed a suitcase, went into town to see Brett. I took her out to dinner on some of my money, told her our plans, then we went back to her place, sat on the couch and shared a nonalcoholic beer.

I told her about Haskel and the guns, about Leonard and the armadillo. I showed her the notepad with Leonard’s and my names on it I had taken from Haskel.

I took the pad over to her sink and set fire to it. We talked while it burned on the porcelain. When it was finally all gone, I flushed the ashes down the drain and turned on the garbage disposal. Brett got us another beer, and we sat on the couch and passed it back and forth.

"What time tomorrow?" Brett asked.

"Leonard will be by about nine. We'll leave his truck here, load our guns and suitcases into your car, and start out."

"I'm a little scared," Brett said.

"I can understand that, but there's no need for melodrama. What we'll do is follow the address the midget gave us, see we can find Tillie, and if we can, we'll take her home. I don't think there'll be any real trouble."

"You're saying that to make me feel good."

"I really don't think there will be any real trouble, but like I said before, that doesn't mean it's going to be easy. But, it'll be okay. We might have to pop somebody's nose, but that'll be the extent of it."

"Promise?"

"No. I'm not that stupid."

Brett packed her suitcase, then we got naked and went to bed. The hair on Brett's mound, as we who read erotica like to call it, had begun to grow back. Mounting her was kind of scratchy, but being incredibly tough, I went ahead with the screwing anyway. Real men don't whine over scratchy female pubic hair. We just get on with it.

Fact is, I was so tough, I made love to her three or four times.

Consequently, when the alarm went off at eight the next morning, I felt like six pounds of runny shit that had passed through a goose and been washed down-country by a flash flood. Brett opened one eye, looked grim, said, "Oh, dick."

"Not right this moment," I said. "He's tired."

Brett whacked me. "That doesn't even interest me. I love you, but right now I could maybe marry anyone got me a cup of coffee."

I didn't get her a cup of coffee.

She didn't get me one.

We lay there for another ten minutes. "All right," I said. "On the double, we get up."

We got up, but not quite on the double. We showered together, made love in the stall, then showered again. By the time we'd dried off, brushed our teeth, and dressed, Leonard had arrived.

We gathered our suitcases, locked the place, and met him outside. We loaded the guns, which Leonard had wrapped in blankets, into Brett's trunk, tossed the suitcases on the back seat. Brett let Leonard drive. She sat between us on the front seat and we started out.

"See your son anymore?" I asked Leonard.

"He rooted up the place last night. He was sleeping peacefully under the porch this morning. I've decided to name him Bob."

"That certainly took some strain," Brett said.

"I get enough strain without trying to cleverly name an armadillo," Leonard said.

We stopped at Burger King, bought some breakfast and lots of coffee, then headed for Oklahoma, minding the speed limit, minding our manners, minding our business, praying for hope, expecting rain.

10

We got on 59, headed north to 259, caught I-20 at Kilgore and went west toward Dallas. We skirted the roof of Dallas, hit 35, and except for a couple of pee breaks, we rode it all the way into Oklahoma.

We stopped at Ardmore about eight that evening and had dinner in a steak house. When we finished, we decided to find a place for the night and smoke on into Hootie Hoot early in the morning.

We got rooms at a cheap motel and toted the blanket-wrapped guns into the rooms with us, just in case someone decided to steal a spare out of our trunk and ended up with a bargain.

Brett and I had a small room that smelled strongly of detergent or disinfectant, but after brushing our teeth and washing our faces, we found the bed inviting and the smell less annoying. We didn't feel like making love, which meant we were probably on our way to a solid relationship. We just slept together, cuddled up spoon style.

When we awoke the next morning it was raining lightly. We collected Leonard, had breakfast at the same cafe where we had eaten our steaks, and set out again. The rain began to fall harder, and the storm followed us all the way into Hootie Hoot, which lay about twenty-five miles outside of Oklahoma City.

When we got there, it was early afternoon and the rain had not stopped. Hootie Hoot was, as Red had said, a burg. There was a long street with old brick buildings. A theater, a cafe, a filling station, and, strangely enough, a taxi stand, with one old battered blue cab out front. I wondered where it took people. Up one side of the street and down the other?

We didn't see any neon signs that blinked BIG JIM'S HOOTIE HOOT WHOREHOUSE, so we left town and found another cheap motel five miles out, not far from I-35. Leonard got a room next to ours. We bought some groceries at a little store across the highway, sat in

Brett's and my room laying out plans and eating store-bought ham and cheese sandwiches and Cheez Doodles.

Leonard finished his lunch, sat by the window. He held a can of Coke in one hand, held the curtain back with the other and watched the rain snap down on the parking lot. He said, "Thing is, whatever we do, we got to do it and be done with it."

"My suggestion is we find the whorehouse and start from there," I said.

"Now that's a good idea," Leonard said. "I'm glad you're along, Hap. Me and Brett might not have thought of that."

"Do we just go in and get her?" Brett asked.

"I don't think that'd work so good," I said. "Posing as a customer is probably the best way to go."

"And you'll have to be the customer," Leonard said.

"You think they'll know you're gay?" Brett asked.

Leonard laughed. "No, but they'll know I'm black."

"Oh," Brett said.

"Black or white may not matter," Leonard said, "but this is a little burg in Oklahoma. I was in Maine, I'd be thinking the same thing. It might not matter, but on the other hand it might. My guess is this is a redneck operation."

"Remember what Wilber said about Big Jim being nice to niggers," I said. "That doesn't bode well for Brother Leonard here."

"No use getting the rednecks stirred we don't have to," Leonard said.

"That doesn't sound like you," I said.

"Older and wiser," Leonard said.

"So you'll go in?" Brett asked me.

"Yeah," I said. "Thing we got to do next is find the whorehouse, and, as Leonard pointed out, maybe I ought to do the investigation work on that instead of him. They might not take kindly to a brother askin' where the white women are."

"Couldn't some of the women be black?" Brett asked.

"They could," I said, "but in redneck mentality it's okay to screw a black woman, but it isn't okay to have a relationship with her."

"And it isn't okay at all a black man screws a white woman," Leonard said. "Weird territorial stuff."

"And there's another thing," I said. "We don't even know there's a house of ill repute here."

"Ill repute?" Leonard said. "Man, you been reading those Victorian novels again?"

"Red could have lied," I said. "In fact, this is all starting to look like a big joke on us. He might not even have worked for any Big Jim. There might only be one grain of truth to the story. He knows your daughter works as a prostitute, and maybe he knows that because he was a customer."

"The old postmarks on Till's letters were out of Oklahoma City," Brett said.

"Yeah," I said, "a card mailed from here, most likely that's where it would get stamped. But it's all iffy."

"I'm prepared for it not to work out," Brett said. "But I'm more prepared to do something. It makes me feel like I'm trying."

"I'll start now," I said.

11

By the time I drove Brett's car back to Hootie Hoot, the rain had slacked and the little town looked better than before. It hadn't suddenly grown in size and had a Wal-Mart SuperCenter built out to the side, but it was shiny and nostalgic-looking.

It made me think of one of the cozy little towns my mom and dad had lived in briefly while my father worked as a mechanic for an oil and gas company. It was very Andy of Mayberry. Clean and simple, where everyone knew one another, and maybe minded each other's business too much, but where most of that business would be about little more than a secret apple pie recipe. And, of course, the location of the local whorehouse.

I pulled in at the taxi stand and got out. The stand wasn't much of a place. A little building made of brick that might at one time have been some sort of store, or maybe even an old jail.

Inside, slouched down in a plastic chair next to a card table, was an older man with a three-day growth of tobacco-specked gray beard. His feet were stretched out, resting in another chair. A TV, festooned with rabbit ears wearing aluminum foil accessories, was perched on a little stand next to the wall. The TV was playing only static. But that was all right, the man in the chair was asleep.

There was a dusty calendar on the wall above the TV. It bore a winter scene with snow-covered trees and a sled and two kids in coats, wool hats, and fat mittens. The calendar read December 1988.

There was a small refrigerator in one corner of the room, and I could hear it humming, as if to entertain itself. It was a sound that made you sleepy.

There was a stack of worn paperback Westerns on one corner of the card table. One of them was open and turned facedown.

Next to the book was a cold-drink bottle full of tobacco spit with a fly on the bottle lip and one inside too stupid to find its way out. It kept buzzing around, hitting the glass, but it never went up to the opening. The sky was the limit, but it was too dumb to know.

Finally the fly, pissed off, flew down and sat on a tobacco chunk in the bottom of the bottle, floated there on its nasty little island amidst an ocean of brown spit. It beat its wings a moment, as if to pass the time. Eventually, it stopped doing even that. Just sat there, confused, surprised, a real loser.

I sympathized.

The fly on the bottle lip, fed up with the ignorance of its comrade, flew off.

I stood watching the man for a while, trying to stare in such a way that his primitive brain would pick up my signals. I was attempting to activate that supposedly dormant sixth sense we all possess but so seldom use.

Either he didn't have a sixth sense or I was missing mine. He didn't move.

I knocked on the table.

The man opened his eyes and looked at me. "What do you want?"

"Well, I'm at a taxi stand. Say I wanted a taxi?"

"What for?"

"To go someplace."

"What I mean," said the old man, dropping his feet from the chair and sliding them under the table, "where would you be going?"

"That's a good question. And I have an answer."

"Yeah, well, good. Take this chair and sit in it while you tell me."

I pulled the chair around in front of the table and looked at the fella. He appeared to be very tired, and maybe not as old as I had first thought, but certainly no spring chicken.

"Let me tell you something," he said, "this here is a taxi stand, but I don't really do much taxiing. I take Old Lady McCullers into Oklahoma City twicet a week and do some shoppin' for her. I got a few more customers I do similar things for, though they ain't as excitin' as she is. She has a gas problem. I have to drive with the windows down all the way there. She don't even say excuse me or nothing. I look back at her in the rearview, she's lookin' at me like I cut 'em."

"So what you're saying is you drive gaseous old ladies around, but you won't drive me?"

He leaned and looked past me, through the glass, at Brett's car. "We gonna hook up your car and pull it?"

"Yeah, well, that would be a problem, wouldn't it?"

"What you really want?"

"Oh, just curious about a little taxi stand like this. In a town like this."

"Nothing else to do on a rainy day, so you just drive off I-35, come in here to talk to some local color?"

"Something like that."

"I think you're full of shit, mister."

"Well, I could use your rest room, you got one."

"Right back there, and don't make a mess of it. I don't normally allow customers back there."

"Maybe you ought to," I said. "That way they won't fart in your taxi all the way to Oklahoma City."

He laughed a little. "You might have a case there," he said.

I went to the rest room, took a leak, washed my face, studied it in the mirror. It looked as tired as Mr. Taxi Stand's. I went back and took my chair.

"Haven't had enough charm for one day?" he asked. "Here, let me give you the five-cent story. Hootie Hoot used to not have I-35 out there. That was long ago. Used to be three, four little towns around here next to us. They weren't real big, but they were bigger than we were. With one taxi I had a little business. Enough I could take care of my family. Towns around us died, and this one's dead and don't know it.

"You drive down the road a piece there, take a right first real road you come to, and you'll go through a burg used to be three times this size, but it ain't nothing now but empty buildings with the store glass knocked out by vandals. I hang on here ’cause I ain’t got nothing else to do. Wife died. Kid got married and lives in Tulsa. Me, I got a little war pension and a few bucks now and then from the farting lady and a few others, and it’s all I need. And I got a feeling you didn’t come in here ’cause you needed no taxi. I got a feeling you didn’t come in here ’cause you were curious how come Hootie Hoot’s got one.”

“You could be right. By the way, what’s with the town’s name? Hootie Hoot?”

“I’ve heard about twenty stories,” he said. “Not one of ’em worth a shit and none of them interesting enough for me to repeat, and I don’t think you really care one way or the other.”

I nodded. “All right,” I said. “I got a real reason. I thought as a taxi driver you might could help me with something. I’m looking for a place. A house of prostitution.”

“Ah,” the man said. “I should have known that. I’m losing my snap. It’s just I don’t get many drop-ins for that. Mostly they know where they’re goin’. How come you don’t?”

I studied him. There was a lot more going on behind those slow brown eyes than waiting for the Channel Nine weather report.

“I was just told it was here in Hootie Hoot.”

“Ah hah. Where you from?”

“LaBorde, Texas.”

“Ah. Texas. You drove all the way from Texas to Hootie Hoot, Oklahoma, for a good time at a whorehouse? What’s the deal? They don’t make pussy in Texas no more?”

“I wanted to be real private.”

“I don’t think you wanted to be hundreds of miles private. I think you, sir, may still be full of shit. Even if you did go to the john.”

I considered for a moment, took a flyer. “All right. I’m going to tell you straight.”

“That’s good.”

“I came here because the woman I care about has a daughter who’s a prostitute and she wants out, and a guy told us this is were she is. Me and her, and a friend of mine, we come here to find her and take her home."

"So you ain't after pussy?"

"No. Well, I mean, not that way."

"You want this gal from the whorehouse?"

"If she's there. I don't even know she's there. I don't even know there's a whorehouse."

"You don't know much, do you, boy?"

"Frankly, I don't."

The old man rummaged around in his shirt pocket and came out with a nasty-looking hunk of a chaw. He chewed off a bite and worked it around in his jaw and studied me for a while. He got up and turned off the television set. He went over to the little refrigerator and got out a soft drink and twisted the top off, said, "Want a CoCola?"

"Yeah," I said. "That would be nice."

He pushed the drink toward me and I took it. He picked up the soft drink bottle with the fly in it and spat down the bottle neck, splashing the fly off its island and into the nasty brown ocean. He shook the bottle and watched the fly go under.

We sat that way for a while, me sipping a Coke, and him chewing and spitting into his bottle, shaking that fly around in the spit. He said, "You found this whorehouse, what were you going to do?"

"I told you that."

"But you didn't say how. Let me tell you somethin'. This house you're lookin' for, it exists. It's down the road a piece. There's busloads come to that house. It's out in the sticks 'cause it don't bust up no big laws out here. That's the way they like it around here. They want stuff like pussy shacks out of sight and out of mind. There's people drive from Oklahoma City just to drop their goodies there. There's conventioneers hit that place on the way to Oklahoma City and back from. It's busy. And it's not a casual kind of place neither. Least it ain't if you really know how to look around."

"I'm not sure I follow you."

"The guys run that place, they ain't just big thugs, they got guns. They're not going to take kindly you takin' one of their whores. I think they might twist your arm behind your back, make you yell calf rope, then break your arm off and stick it up your ass. Then they might shoot you and bury you under a rosebush somewheres."

"That's what my buddy thinks," I said. "And I'm starting to believe it. The view seems to have a consensus of opinion."

"But you're going in anyway?"

"Yes."

"This ain't no daughter of yours?"

"No."

"This woman whose daughter it is ain't your wife?"

I shook my head.

"This gal ain't no stepdaughter?"

"Nope."

The old man shook his head. "I hate them pimpin' sonsabitches. I ain't got nothing against pussy, and I reckon some gal wants to sell it, that's her business, but this place ain't so cut-and-dried. I think a gal wants to leave, they don't just let her leave. I think she wants to go, they ought to let her go. It ain't the pussy sellin' bothers me, it's the lack of free will."

"I take it this place has been here a while?"

"Many, many years. Used to be run by a madam named Lilly Filigree, and I think most of the girls there chose to be there then, and from what I know, she treated 'em good. When I was a young man I went up to there myself, rode a little tail up the canyon oncet or twicet. But now, last ten years or so, it's just business. All business, and it ain't the girls' business."

"Anyone ever tried to close the place down?"

"Oh yeah, back when there were enough people in this town to fill a church, a bunch of self-righteous old biddies tried to shut it down. Mostly 'cause their men were up there getting their ashes hauled now and then."

"They didn't have any luck?"

"Sheriff, he kind of slapped the madam's wrist now and then. Ran some of the girls in around election time. But it didn't mean nothin'. But it's not that way now. Not just a bunch of ladies makin' a buck for a fuck. Folks run that show, they ain't sweet. Used to be a colored lady up there ran it. She came after Filigree. She was as mean as a goddamn crocodile. Seen her a few times in town. Always wore this big old sack dress."

"A muumuu," I said.

"You say so. She went away and there was a cowboy midget and a big bastard runnin' it. Midget liked to come to town so people would look at him. Strutted around like a banty rooster. Right proud of himself, he was."

I thought about Red and his expensive Western-cut suits. I thought about the lady in the muumuu, resting in a box at the bottom of some lake in Arkansas. Maybe still in the muumuu, shit-stained as it was.

Taxi Man spat into the soft drink bottle, said, "Figured that midget and ole bigin' was runnin' things. Then they were gone too and there's a fellow up there now scares me just to see him come into town and sit in the barbershop. He don't even pretend he does anything other than sell pussy. But hell, there ain't nobody 'round here cares. This ain't where he gets his action. It's them conventioneers and such pay his bills."

"I see."

"No you don't. You go up there and fuck around, and that monster gets hold of you, they gonna find you in some rock quarry with a .44 slug behind the ear."

"Cheery scenario," I said.

"Not really."

"Any chance you're going to tell me where this place is?"

"All right," he said. He produced a stubby pencil from his pocket, wet it with his tongue, used it to draw a map on the fly page under the title of one of the paperback books. I thanked him, took the book, put it in my back pocket.

"Had any balls, I'd go with you," he said.

"It's not your problem."

"Things like this ought to be everyone's problem."

"I guess."

“Maybe if I was younger.”

“Sure.”

I started out the door and he called out, “Hey, boy, you watch your ass.”

“Thanks,” I said.

12

At the motel I told Brett and Leonard what I had learned.

Brett said, “I don’t get it. Everyone knows it’s up there. This taxi man, he says he knows the girls are sort of prisoners—”

“Sort of,” I interrupted. “Tillie got into this by choice. This is the sort of business you don’t know who you’re going to end up with. Not just in bed, but in business. One day you’re selling your product and paying a percentage. Next day you’re owned and selling your product and you get a percentage, and sometimes maybe the customer gives you a black eye. A disease.”

“But the cops?” Brett said.

“There’s one local cop,” I said. “He probably makes more money a year than all the whores do, and he don’t make it on law enforcement.”

“So they get away with it,” Brett said.

“Yeah,” I said. “And the place has a reputation almost like a landmark. Kind of a hangover from the past. Lot of people think, well, they’re just sellin’ meat, what’s the problem?”

“So,” Leonard said, “the next step is?”

“Way I see it,” I said, “is I could go up there now, pose as a customer and try and take Tillie out. But I think it’s better we wait until tonight. That way, I pull it off, we can hustle her out of town with some dark to help us.”

Leonard nodded. “That sounds all right. You go in there, though, you go in with a gun. I didn’t haul all these weapons down here for nothing.”

“Actually,” I said, “I hope you did.”

“You know what I mean,” Leonard said. “I’m going to be nearby, and not with any handgun neither.”

I looked at Brett. She sat quietly, churning her own thoughts about.

Shortly before dark Leonard and I walked down to the Coke machine next to the motel office. I put coins in the machine and got myself a Diet Coke, Leonard a Dr Pepper, and Brett an orange drink. I gave Leonard the Dr Pepper, slipped Brett's can into my coat pocket, pulled the tab on the Diet Coke and drank some of it.

"How do you think Brett's doing?" I asked.

"I don't know," Leonard said. "She's hard to read."

I looked out at the highway. Leaves were being blown downhill by a sharp cool wind. The gold and red and brown leaves whirled and whipped above the highway in the fading sunlight like dying birds, floated down and stuck to the cement. Cars came by and tossed them up again. It began to sprinkle gently.

"You watch her," I said.

"I will."

We went back to the room, drank our drinks, and I read some of the Western Taxi Man had given me. Leonard paced, went to the bathroom numerous times. Brett lay still on the bed. Once when I looked at her and smiled, she looked at me as if I were nothing more than the nasty wallpaper behind me. It made me nervous.

It went like that for another hour, then the daylight faded. I closed up my book. Leonard handed me the little .38 and I put it in an ankle holster and strapped it on and pulled my pants leg over it. Leonard stuck a revolver under his shirt and gave Brett one. She looked at the pistol with an expression that was hard to figure. Maybe she was thinking about Tillie. Maybe she was thinking what I was thinking. I was scared.

Brett slipped the gun into the holster Leonard provided, strapped it on under her coat. Leonard rolled all the big guns back into the blankets, except for the double-barrel. He held it up and looked at me. "Honky spreader."

We gathered up our goods. Leonard carried the shotgun down close to his side. It was raining when we went out. We put the gun-stuffed blanket in the trunk, tossed the luggage in the back. Leonard put the shotgun with the luggage. We stopped up front of the office, and I went in and checked us out of the motel.

In the car I got out my flashlight and opened up the paperback

Taxi Man had written on. I studied the map and told Leonard how to go. The rain pecked at our windshield and the wet leaves slapped against it and tangled in the windshield wipers, wadded, and were tossed away.

We drove on into Hootie Hoot. Up Main Street and past the taxi stand. I tried to look and see if I could see Taxi Man at his post behind the card table, but it was dark and the street was poorly lit and it was raining hard now.

On up the street we went, out of Hootie Hoot. The rain began to die. I studied the crude map inside the paperback, and we followed it to a blacktop road that turned right. We took it, went along on that for five miles, then turned left on another blacktop. This one was narrow and wound down amongst scrubby Oklahoma trees wound tight with darkness and nesting crows.

We went along the blacktop for ten miles and the trees broke on either side and there was a great hill up ahead and the blacktop quit there and turned into a gravel road, and at the top of the hill the half moon, which had finally shone itself through fading rain clouds, seemed to be balancing, like half a loaf of round white bread, on its rim.

We kept going. Down on the other side the hill fell away into a wide pasture and in the center of the pasture was a big old white house. It was well lit from the inside and by porch lights, and on either side of the house by two tall pole lights that shone on the pasture and revealed it was full of cars and rain puddles.

The house was three stories with columns and a long wide porch that wound all around it. It had a new roof sprouting four brick chimneys. One for each side. All four were breathing smoke. You could see the smoke against the moon, which now sat just above the house like some kind of soiled halo.

“Business is good,” Leonard said, and stopped at the bottom of the hill and rolled down his window and spat outside. He took several deep breaths. I could hear music coming from the house, and I could hear some laughter and some other sounds. It seemed to be a raucous place.

“Well, brother,” Leonard said, “what’s the score?”

“Park far out. I’ll walk.”

“And when you come out,” Leonard said, “I’ll be too far away.”

"I know. But they see y'all sitting out in the car, it'll make them wonder."

"You're trying to say these boys may not like niggers?"

"You said it first, remember."

"I tell you what I'm gonna do," Leonard said. "I'm going to give you the time to get down there. Then I'm gonna give you fifteen minutes to line up things, like you've come to shop. Then I'm going to move on down about halfway and park. I'll be on the right. Where you see the gap in those cars. That's where you want to head. You're not out of there in twenty minutes, or I hear some kind of hootenanny goin' on, I'm comin' in."

"That'll just cause more trouble," I said.

"Not if they're gutting you with a knife," Brett said.

"I guess that's a point worth considering," I said.

I got out, started walking toward the house.

The wind gathered up the scent of incense and passed it on to me. It was a nice smell. Any other time I might have appreciated it. The music was country. Tanya Tucker. It was cranked up so loud it seemed to be responsible for the leaves blowing off the trees.

When I was on the porch, a guy big enough to fill a bus and stick his ass through the door came outside and made the porch creak when he walked. He was wearing a dark suit with a white shirt and a dark tie. He had a head about the size of an atlas globe and his hair was cut so short, in the porch light I could see razor scrapes on his blue-veined head. He smiled at me.

"Hello," he said. "Come on in."

"Thanks."

He walked down the porch, around it, out of sight. Inside was a brightly lit foyer, and the music was really loud. Tanya Tucker was over with and some guy whose music I didn't know was singing about something I wasn't listening to. Loud as that music was, it wasn't as loud as the thumping of my heart, the pounding of blood in my temples. The incense was so strong in the foyer it made me sick.

A woman in her sixties, carrying about two hundred pounds, and not carrying it well, wearing a multicolored, loose-fitting dress that had all the style of a horse blanket, sort of sprang up in front of me. She had blue hair and loose dentures and too much powder and rouge on her face. She looked as if she ought to be somewhere else, baking cookies.

She said, “Young man. You come for a good time?”

I hesitated, fearing she might think she was supposed to be my good time.

“Yes, ma’am, I suppose I have.”

“Well, there’s a small cover charge. Any other charges, that’s between you and the girls.”

I realized then she was a door greeter, sort of like they have at Wal-Mart. Need a shopping cart? Want to buy some pussy? Man, that was cold. A sixty-year-old woman to warm you up. Like Grandma guiding you around on your first day at kindergarten.

“How much?”

She told me and I gave her some of my bouncer money.

“You need to come into the sittin’ room, son. Look around. See if there’s anyone you like. The girls are real friendly.”

I went past her, through a half-open door and into the sitting room. It was busy in there. Lots of men, all white, were sitting on couches and lots of girls were flittering around them, as if the men were magnets and they were flecks of iron.

The men’s talk was loud, to compete with the music, to try and not show nervousness. I figured there were plenty of husbands in here who weren’t regular whoremongers, but who were trying to start out in style. Most of the men in the room looked to be either businessmen or farmers, and all but one looked to be past thirty.

The women were all young and looked to be whores, of course. You could tell from the lack of clothes. I checked each one individually, trying to determine if any of them were Tillie. Well, maybe that wasn’t why I looked so carefully, but it was part of the reason.

Over by the crackling fireplace was a Steroid Jock wearing an expensive hand-tailored suit, but that didn’t make it pretty. He had chosen to have it made out of a kind of olive green material the texture of grape leaves. His head was square, like a block, and it was topped with black hair cut close to the scalp. His ears reminded me of radar tracking devices. He was talking to a handsome blond man in another hand-tailored suit, only this one was blue and smooth and more tasteful. Then again, who was I? A fashion critic?

The guy in the blue suit was huge too, but it didn't show right off, he was so well proportioned. I realized utility instead of fashion had more to do with the hand-tailored suits these guys wore. You looked like they did, you couldn't pick a suit off the rack. The guy in the blue suit was watching me, like a bird stalking a worm. He had one hand on the mantel and he was playing with a smoking pot of incense.

I glanced around the room and saw more of the boys. Not the customers. Just these big sonsabitches. They were trying to look casual, but they looked about as casual as warthogs in jockstraps and snowshoes. There were six of them altogether, packed into those expensive suits, housing enough steroids inside their flesh to accommodate the entire Mr. Universe competition. I wondered how many more like them were upstairs. I thought about the one on the porch. Maybe he and Leonard were sitting on the steps right now, talking about the moon.

Naw.

I took a deep breath and put a smile on my face and started walking among the women, like I was shopping. A redhead looked at me and smiled. Bless her heart, I'd seen more sincerity in the grin of a presidential candidate.

I grinned at her, just to be sociable, but tried to discourage her by turning away and looking at my watch. Only problem was I wasn't wearing one.

How long had I been inside now?

Five minutes?

Ten?

Soon, Leonard would be moving the car closer, and not long after that he'd be inside looking for me.

I turned slightly and the redhead was at my shoulder. She wasn't gorgeous, but she was cute. She had a lump of a nose, good teeth, and freckles to go with the red hair, which was the color of copper and probably that way naturally. She was a little thick in the hips, but if she'd been wearing more than thin black panties that wouldn't have been noticeable. Another ten years those hips were going to give her trouble.

She had me by the elbow. She said, "You need some company?"

"Well, I'm looking for somebody."

"Here I am."

"I'm looking for someone named Tillie. I hear good things about Tillie."

She frowned. "You don't hear good things about Darlene?"

"Well, I don't hear bad things about Darlene. It's just I'm looking for Tillie."

"I don't know any Tillie."

I tried to remember the photograph I had seen of Tillie in Brett's house. "She might go by Till. Something like that. She's a redhead too. Big-breasted."

"That's it. You don't like me because I have small tits."

I knew she could care less if I liked her or her tits. She was doing what she was supposed to do. Drum up commerce.

I saw her glance toward the fireplace mantel a couple of times, looking at the guy in the blue suit. He glanced at us, then looked away, checking out the rest of his business. And I was sure it was his business. Or at least the one he was running for Big Jim. I figured he was the big guy Taxi Man had told me about.

"About this Tillie?" I asked.

"There's no one named that here," she said.

"Not even upstairs?"

"You really want this Tillie, don't you?"

"I'd like to try her. I've heard good stuff."

She shook her head. "Sorry, no Tillie. You get bored and I'm not playing the horizontal tango with some redneck's weasel, you look me up. For two hundred dollars I can make you forget Tillie, or damn near anybody or anything."

"I'll remember that."

She winked at me, went to join a couple of guys who had just entered the room, and they were damn glad to see her. One of them instantly had his arm around her, and I heard her laugh like she had just heard the funniest goddamn joke ever told.

Time was running out. Already Leonard was slipping shells into that double-barrel. Beard the lion in his den, I thought.

I went over to the guy in the blue suit. I said, “There’s a girl I’m looking for. A Tillie. She here?”

The guy studied me. The guy with him, Cement Head, studied me too. “No,” he said. “There used to be a Tillie here, but she’s not here anymore.”

“Where’d she go?”

Cement Head said, “She ain’t anywhere close. If you want loving tonight, Tillie’s out.”

Blue Suit turned his head and looked at Cement Head. There didn’t seem to be any expression on his face, but there was certainly an expression on Cement Head’s face. Fear.

Blue Suit turned back to me and gave me a smile. His face didn’t go along with the jock build. It was very suave and assured. Here was a man who didn’t have to pay for pussy and knew you did.

“There’s plenty of girls here can do it for you,” Blue Suit said.

A log shifted in the fireplace, crackled. I jumped a little.

“Nervous, aren’t you?” said Blue Suit.

“My first time in a whorehouse,” I said.

He smiled, “Well, we sure wouldn’t have figured that.”

Cement Head laughed on cue, but didn’t overdo it.

Blue Suit said, “That little redhead you were talking to can do more tricks with your dick than a monkey on a jungle gym. My advice is you latch on to her. Though it looks like she’ll be occupied for a while.”

I looked to see her going upstairs with a man on her arm. He was feeling her ass and she was smiling like there wasn’t anything better in the world to her than a strange man’s hand up her crack.

“She’s good,” Blue Suit said. “I promise you that. And they don’t come any cleaner.”

“She’s got that new car smell, then,” I said.

He smiled at me. “That’s right. She may not be new, but she smells new.”

I gave a good leer and went back into the crowd. I wasn’t sure what to do next, but the next moment, a lot of decisions were made for me.

Through the half-open door came someone I knew.

He was wearing an expensive-cut gray Western suit, little gray boots with red jalapeños stitched onto them, and he had on a white ten gallon hat big enough to cook chili in.

It was Red, the midget. Beside him was Wilber, wearing a neck brace. First thing they saw as they entered was me.

13

A lot of things went through my head right then, but none of them told me why the midget and Wilber were here. From what they'd said their lives were on the line and this would be the last place they should be.

But there they were, standing just inside the door, looking at me as if they had just sighted the Virgin Mary in see-through panties and high heels.

I think it took the midget a moment to put it together, but I could tell Wilber knew who I was right away. His mouth fell open and his eyes widened. I believe he and I were mirror images at that moment.

Wilber reached down and got hold of the shoulder of the midget's suit, trying to alert him, but there was no need. Red had figured it out. Wilber bent down and Red said something in his ear, then smiled at me. Red walked behind one of the couches and over toward the fireplace.

I stood there a moment, trying to decide what to do. One thing was certain. The pickle was out of the jar.

I started walking slowly toward the door, hoping Wilber would let me pass, and knowing he wouldn't. I tried to go wide to his right, but he said, "I don't think so."

I didn't hesitate. I kicked out hard and caught Wilber in the thigh with the toe of my shoe. It was a good shot, right where the muscles group, and he let out a grunt and bent over. I shifted slightly away from him and snapped my foot up in a back hook and caught him with my heel in the face as he was bent. I made a run for it then, but one of the big guys in the hand-tailored suits appeared. He was so large that when he stood in front of the door it disappeared.

I faked by raising my hand, and he looked up, and I kicked him in the balls, trying to make a field goal somewhere in Central Texas.

It was a good ball shot, but either this guy had nuts of steel or had used so many steroids his ’nads had gone to seed, because all he did was make with a grunt and come at me.

I couldn’t deal with his size and strength, so I tried to sidestep, but I bumped up against somebody, one of the girls, a customer, whatever, and he hit me with a glancing right that jolted me so hard the coins in my pants pocket changed denomination.

I tried to hit him back, but found it hard to do from the floor. And besides, the ceiling was falling on me.

Or so it seemed. It was No Balls coming down on me, and he had hold of my coat and was lifting me. He drew back his fist. At that moment I was so stunned, I sort of welcomed any blow he might give me, but there was still enough reflex in me, still enough of the fighter, that I responded by poking my fingers into his eyes.

He barked, dropped me. I rolled against someone, tried to get up. But the someone was Wilber. He hooked his arm over the back of my head, under my neck, had me in a guillotine choke. I stomped his foot and grabbed one of his legs behind the knee and broke his balance while I swatted his balls with my free hand hard enough for them to replace his Adam’s apple.

He let me go and I squatted and struggled for the revolver in my ankle holster. About that time the door swung wide and there was an explosion and plaster rained down from the ceiling like snow.

I glanced up, and there was Leonard holding the double-barrel, one barrel displaying smoke and sending out a gunpowder stench that temporarily masked the incense in the room.

No Balls had recovered again, and he wasn’t afraid of a shotgun. Or was too stupid to know what it was. He charged Leonard. Leonard sidestepped, swung the double-barrel and hit the big bastard so hard that guy’s distant relatives must have jumped in their chairs.

The big man struck the door behind Leonard, slamming it closed, knocking out the bottom panel with his head. He tried to pull his head back through and Leonard banged him with the barrel again, this time across the ribs, then pointed the shotgun at the other muscle guys who had stupidly made a knot over on the left side of the room. All except the guy in the blue suit and Cement Head, that is. Cement Head was standing in front of Blue Suit, ready to take whatever might come, and Blue Suit was calmly looking over his guard's shoulder.

Red, wearing his stupid ten gallon hat, was standing next to him, close to his hip, watching the events.

I shouldn't have, but I looked at Wilber on his hands and knees, trying to get up, and was overcome with rage. I swung my foot in an arc and brought it down on the back of his neck brace with a snapping motion. Wilber screamed, hit the floor and lay there holding his neck. "That hurt! That hurt! Oh, God, that hurt!"—like maybe it was supposed to feel good.

"Well, Hap," Leonard said. "Looks like you've shit in the porridge again."

"I'll say."

I pulled my ankle gun and backed toward Leonard. The big guy with his head through the door was trying to pull it out again. Leonard let him this time, then rapped the barrel over his head harder than ever. The big guy decided to lie down and rest for a moment, but I could see he was twitching already, working to get up.

Leonard opened the door and we backed through it. I heard the sound just a little too late. It was the man I had encountered on the porch. He was rushing our backs like a missile.

Leonard wheeled, cracked the bastard's head with the barrel of the shotgun, then kicked out and knocked him down. The man came up with a gun in his hand, and Leonard, casual as an angler casting a fly rod, jerked the shotgun down from where it lay over his shoulder, and fired. The man's left foot went away and he fell to the floor and thrashed like a chicken. Blood went everywhere. Leonard leaned over and casually picked up the man's pistol and dropped it in his coat pocket. He said, "From now on it's all left shoes for you, Bubba."

Leonard broke open the shotgun, put the discarded cartridges in his pocket, and reloaded. He might have been doing nothing more than looking at a splinter in his hand, he was so blasé.

The door in front of us was wide open now, and gradually the bodyguards were sliding into the room. They had guns. No more tackle and punch shit. They were going to kill us.

Red pushed in between their legs, for all the world acting like a kid who was about to see something neat in a peep show. Leonard snapped the shotgun shut. We all jumped, then froze.

There was a sound behind us. I glanced carefully over my left shoulder and saw Brett enter the room. She was carrying a pistol by her side. The old lady who had invited me to have a good time came after her, as if to claw her. Brett turned and swung the pistol against the old woman's head like she was burying an ax in a log. The old woman went down on her knees and dropped her dentures on the floor and held her blood-spurting forehead, said, "You stinkin' cunt." Or so I believe. It was hard to tell without her teeth.

Whatever it was, Brett didn't like it. She bent down and struck her again, this time behind the ear, not hard, but solid enough. The old woman hit the floor, rolled and cussed and bled all over the carpet.

Brett walked up between us. I said, "Let's back out."

I thought all the guns in the room would go off then, but they didn't.

Leonard shouted, "I pull this trigger, half the room disappears."

That got everyone's attention. Maybe that's what they'd been thinking all along and that's why no one had done anything. There's nothing like a shotgun with barrels big as subway tunnels to make you take time to consider.

"All guns go away now, or I pull the trigger," Leonard said. "Do it!"

A couple of beats as everyone looked at the guy rolling around on the floor, screaming, clutching his ankle, his foot spitting blood. The guns went back inside suit coats.

"You," Brett said to the midget. I turned my attention to the front of the room.

Red pointed at himself.

"Yeah, you," Brett said. "Shit pile in a hat. Get over here, you little cocksucker."

Red looked around for help. No one was offering any.

Leonard said, “Do as the lady says, or you’re gonna be even shorter.”

Red wandered toward us, like an amnesiac man who had just walked free of a plane crash somewhere in the Yucatan. In the doorway I saw Wilber appear, one hand on the neck brace. He looked at me with fire in his eyes.

“How’s the neck?” I said.

The fire in his eyes turned to lava.

I gave Red a quick pat-down, found a revolver under his coat. I put it in my coat pocket. I put one hand on Red’s shoulder, and we started backing. Brett deliberately stepped on the old woman’s hand as we went. The woman bellowed and her teeth, which she had recovered and replaced, flew out again. Brett kicked them across the room, and we kept backing. We backed like that all the way out to the car. The entire gang, bodyguards, whores, and johns, and the old woman who was constantly gumming cuss words, came out on the porch and stood under the porch light looking at us.

Leonard opened the trunk, told Red to get inside.

“You’ve got to be kiddin’,” Red said.

“I look like I’m in a humorous mood?”

“I can’t stand tight places.”

“You think the grave ain’t tight?”

Brett grabbed the brim of Red’s hat and jerked it down over his eyes. She whapped him a good one on the top of the head with the pistol. “Do what he says, dick-lick!”

Red hesitated almost as long as it takes to skin the wrapper off a stick of gum, then, the hat still over his eyes, he got hold of the car, climbed inside the trunk, and Leonard closed it.

Leonard gave me the shotgun, went around, got behind the wheel and started the engine. Brett slipped into the back seat. I slid in on the front passenger side, closed the door, and stuck the shotgun out the window.

We roared out of there so fast Leonard fishtailed and banged Brett’s car into the side of a pickup truck. But that didn’t stop us. With the moon at our backs, we went up and over the hill and away, rattling the midget and the guns in the trunk.

14

“I don’t like it,” I said.

“Doesn’t matter what you like,” Brett said.

“Leonard?”

“It’s rough, Hap, but far as I’m concerned, it’s the way to go. Little shit nearly got us all killed. We got to profit from him.”

We had found a road out in the boonies and Leonard had pulled off, hoping to lose any pursuers we might have gained. If anyone had followed, we hadn’t seen sight of them yet. Maybe they were thinking about the shotgun. Then again, Leonard had been driving almost seventy miles an hour on roads that were designed for thirty, so there was a good chance he lost them before they could find their car keys. His driving had been almost as scary as our time in the whorehouse.

We were standing outside the car, beside the road in the bright moonlight, about to open the car trunk. Brett wanted to pistol-whip the dwarf into talking, and Leonard was for it too. He and Brett were just trying to decide on the best pistol for the job. Brett favored a long-barrel, and Leonard thought a short one was better because you could use it up close, requiring no more effort than the snap of a wrist. I didn’t know we had a long-barrel, but somehow Leonard had come up with one of those too, a cold piece from his closet.

I didn’t like the idea, short barrel or long. I was trying to talk them out of it. It’s one thing to hit a guy in self-defense, another to deliberately pistol-whip him.

“Just enough so he talks,” Brett said. “Then maybe a little for entertainment.”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“We came all the way up here because he said my daughter was in trouble. Then we see him here. What he told us, it could mean anything, Hap. We could wine and dine him and give him a cigar, but I figure a pistol-whipping is a lot quicker and it would certainly make me feel better.”

“That’s the part worries me,” I said.

“We didn’t come here to be nice,” Brett said. “You’re the one told me it might not be pretty, and now you’re trying to make it pretty.”

“I’m trying to be human. Revenge isn’t the way.”

“People say that just ain’t never had call for any revenge,” Brett said. “Besides, I just want to loosen his tongue some.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Till it falls out of his mouth.”

Leonard rapped on the trunk with the shotgun, which I had returned to him. “Hey, turd. I’m gonna open this trunk, and if you’ve got one of those guns in there, I want you to know, all the ammunition is in the suitcases in the back seat, so don’t waste your time. Besides, I fire in there with this shotgun, we’ll be puttin’ what’s left of you in your hat and still have room for your clothes and a pound of shit. Hear me?”

“Yeah,” said a mumbled voice. “But I don’t want to be pistol-whipped.”

“Been listenin’ have you?” Leonard said.

“Yeah,” Red said. “This guy, Hap, you call him. He’s right. You ought not take your anger out on me.”

“Who says I’m angry?” Leonard said. “I just like to watch a midget take a beatin’.”

“You and everyone else,” Red said.

“I’m gonna open the trunk now,” Leonard said, “and when I do you better roll out of there pretty. You don’t, I’m gonna cut down on you.”

Leonard twisted the key in the trunk and hopped back. The trunk lid flew up and Red’s hands appeared over the edge. “Don’t shoot,” he said, and came out of there with his cowboy hat crunched down on his head, his eyes barely showing beneath the brim.

“Come over here,” Leonard said.

Red sighed, sauntered over to him.

“You want it with the hat on, or off?” Leonard said.

“What a choice,” Red said.

“The hat would cushion it some, but it’ll get all bloody.”

“This is a Stetson,” Red said, “they’re expensive.” He took it off and straightened it out and lay it on the ground, sighed, stood in front of Leonard. “Maybe we could talk before you start hittin’?”

“I ain’t hittin’ shit,” Leonard said. “Least not yet. She’s doin’ the work.”

Red studied Brett. She was walking toward him with the long-barrel revolver held by her side. Walking like a woman with a mission.

Red looked at me. “You don’t want her to do this. Stop her.”

“I don’t like it,” I said, “but you talk, you won’t have to have it.”

“Talk about what?” Red said, and suddenly Brett was there. The pistol went out and caught him alongside the head and dropped him. When he went to his knees, Brett whipped the pistol back, got some skull with it, whipped it again, like she was trying to cut a Zorro Z.

Red fell face forward and groaned and tried to rise up on his hands, but he wobbled and went down again. “Oh, Jesus,” he said. “I didn’t think it would hurt that bad.”

“Hell,” Brett said, “I haven’t even got my swing yet.”

“Hold it, for Christ’s sakes,” I said.

I went over and got hold of Red and tried to pick him up. He said, “I think I like it better on the ground. I’m gonna take a beatin’, least I won’t have to keep gettin’ up.”

I let him go. Brett said, “You told me my daughter was here.”

Red shook his head, and I saw a moonlit glob of blood fall out of his bright hair onto the ground. “I said she had been here and might still be. I didn’t say she was definitely still here. I never said that. You, Hap, you were there. I didn’t say that, did I?”

“Reckon you didn’t,” I said.

“What I want to know is where she is now,” Brett said, “and if you’re smart, you’ll tell me while you’ve still got teeth to talk around.”

“Maybe I ought to sit up,” Red said.

I got hold of him and helped him to his feet. I walked him over to the car and opened the front passenger door. He sat down, his feet hanging outside the car.

"Damn, Hap," Leonard said. "Why don't you give him a pillow and a soft drink?"

Brett said, "Maybe I should hit him some more, just for grins."

"That's enough," I said.

"It's only enough when I say it's enough," Brett said.

"Goddammit!" I said. "That's enough!"

Brett gave me a look I didn't like.

Leonard said, "He don't talk, you can hit him some more, Brett. I promise."

I looked at Leonard. "I don't want it to come to us finding out who's the toughest, brother," I said.

"Me neither," Leonard said.

"Then I advise you not make loose promises."

Leonard grinned at me. I turned back to Red.

"Red," I said, "I want you to tell your story, and boil it down to the essence. Tell it straight. We got questions, you answer them, quick like. You've caused us trouble. I'm past irritable myself. I'm damn near sick with this mess. You fuck around, we might all have pistols and a need to swing them. Hear what I'm saying?"

Red nodded, used his hand to wipe away a trail of blood that was flowing from a pretty deep cut across his forehead, a cut made from the sight on the revolver.

He said, "I knew y'all were folks would beat a midget."

"I might kick a puppy, it bit me," Leonard said.

Red made a grunting noise. "I believe you would, mister."

"My whippin' hand's gettin' itchy," Brett said. "Talk, or your brains'll see moonlight."

"Ah, a line for the movies," Red said. "Save it for when you write your life story, lady. They pick it up for film, they might even let you play the part."

Red bent forward and let blood drip off his head and onto the ground. When he sat up, he was pressing his fingers against the wound. He said, “I told you how me and Wilber had our problems with Big Jim, and how we left out of here on our way to Mexico.

“Well, me and Wilber started to have a change of heart about the time we got near the border. It was shortly after Wilber strong-armed a diner owner and cook, a Mexican. I, on the other hand, took money from the cash register and stayed away from that sort of thing, which I not only prefer not to participate in, I prefer not to witness. I only engage in violence when it’s absolutely necessary and the money’s right.”

“Would you get on with it, you windbag?” Leonard said.

Red nodded. “So, Wilber, having just told the man how much he liked his steak ranchero, reached out and got hold of him, dragged him over the counter, and commenced to kick him. I should say, however, that the steak ranchero really was good, and that sort of bothered me. Eating a man’s cooking, bragging on it, then beating him like he stole something. I’ve eaten in some of the best Mexican restaurants in the United States and nothing quite prepared me for the fineness of his steak ranchero. It was the sauce as much as anything else that made it special, though I believe the meat was of an excellent quality.”

“Fuck the steak ranchero,” Brett said.

“All right, all right,” Red said, holding up his hand. “I’m a man who likes to tell a story complete. You never know when little details might matter. You might drive through that part of Texas at some point and want a good steak ranchero. I think the man will probably recover. It was a good beating, but I’ve seen people take worse and be able to function in time. So, he’ll probably be back to cooking eventually. It behooves a person to pay attention to almost anything. You never know when something can be of use to you. I can give you the name of the place if you want it.”

Brett said, “You know, you really are an idiot.”

“Personally,” Red said, “I believe that’s a prejudicial statement directed toward my size.”

“Your head’s same size as anyone else’s,” Brett said. “It’s the brain in it that’s questionable. I’m going to ask you one more time. Where is Tillie?”

“I’m coming to that,” Red said. “We took a car from the diner man, and as we neared Mexico it struck me quite soundly that I really didn't care for south of the border that much. Everything's different down there, and frankly, my whorehouse Spanish is nowhere as good as it once was. You don't use it, you lose it. And Wilber, well, if you want someone kicked around and hammered, he's your man, but public relations, that's out. And public relations in Spanish, well, that's certainly out. The only Spanish he speaks is on the menu at Taco Bell, and he has to read that off the card. I had to order the steak ranchero at the diner for him. He thought it was a ranch hero. Some kind of steak sandwich."

"You just can't lose that steak ranchero, can you?" Leonard said, and leaned on the car as if exhausted.

"So," Red said, "we're down South Texas way, and we start to consider our options, and this whole thing with Mexico, well, it's not pulling my string and Wilber isn't fond of it either. I decide we should call Big Jim in Tulsa. I tell him that I'm sorry, and that I did skim some money, but I also remind him that I made him a lot more money than the previous operator had been making him. I made promises that if he took us back we'd do right by him. So, he lets us come back. Not as managers of the whorehouse, but as drones. Working our way up again. He's quite forgiving, actually. I admit I thought he might shoot us both, but a life on the run, living off crackers, having to manage some kind of peanut operation in Mexico where it's hot as hell on a griddle, and where they speak Spanish faster than a calculator clicks … well, it was less than alluring.

"Case like that, sometimes you have to toss your hat over the windmill, so that's exactly what we did. Big Jim let Wilber and me come back. We robbed a doughnut shop in South Texas of three thousand dollars and two dozen glazed, ate the doughnuts and used the money to catch a plane, flew on into Oklahoma City where Big Jim had a party meet us, and not with paper hats and party favors either."

Red thought for a moment, as if sorting out details. "We were given a bit of an adjustment. A punishment, I suppose you might call it. I had to take a pretty good ass kicking. Literally. Numerous boots to the posterior, and I'll attest to the fact that the gentleman administering the kicks was quite good at it. My butt is still sore. But, I took my medicine and got it over with.

"Wilber, on the other hand, resisted a bit, so they hit him with an axe handle across the neck, necessitating the brace. But, after that, Jim took us back into his graces. It was that simple. He forgave us. I must say I miss our former position of authority and wealth, but frankly, I'd rather start all over again with Big Jim than be down in Mexico trying to run a string of Mexican whores or a dice game out of the back of a greasy filling station. And one thing about Jim, he may be a pimp and a crook, but he has a sense of honor sorely lacking in some of our public servants."

"Great," Brett said. "Now we know what you've been doing these past days, like we give a shit, but you still haven't said about Tillie."

"Tillie," Red said. "Yes. I was coming to that. She's gone."

"That's it?" Brett said. "Ten minutes of your crap to tell us she's gone? Gone where?"

"After I began to feel alert from the butt kicking, and Big Jim welcomed us back into the fold, he told us we were all heading for the whorehouse. He wanted Wilber and me there. My thoughts were that in time he was going to turn the operation back to us. Though, as Wilber has pointed out, sometimes I can be far too optimistic. We drove from Oklahoma City out to the whorehouse this morning with Big Jim. He even allowed that Wilber and I might partake of the products there, so, until your arrival, I was feeling very good. As if things were back on track. Wilber and I had just come back from Winston, a little town between Hootie Hoot and Oklahoma City, having gone there for dinner without any sort of escort or threats. We had a couple of steaks and came back, ready to relax, drink a bit, and perhaps, if the customers slowed, to partake of the female delights. Then your ugly faces showed up."

"Big Jim?" I said. "He was the guy in the blue suit?"

"Yes," Red said. "He was merely visiting. The guy standing next to him is actually the manager now, and I believe I should make note here and now that he's not all that bright. Honest, because he's stupid, but bright he isn't. If his brain was a battery it wouldn't give enough energy to fire up a penlight. Beside him Wilber is a mental gargantuan."

Red took another moment to bend over and let blood drip off his head, onto the toes of his boots. Looking at him there in the moonlight, so small, the blood flowing like that, falling onto those little boots, I felt sick and sorry and sad. My father and mother hadn't raised me to beat up midgets with pistols, nor to stand by and allow it to happen. I felt much smaller than Red, even if he was a cold-blooded killer and a windy sack of scum.

"It's bad enough you came in there like that," Red said, "but you stirred Big Jim up personally, and he doesn't cotton to thugs off the street tampering with his operation or running away with his personnel."

"I think maybe Big Jim might be led to think you were in on our arrival," Leonard said. "I think he could be led to think that real easy."

"Now, wait a minute," Red said. "Why would I do that?"

"Could be that's what he's wondering," Leonard said. "Maybe he's thinking you linked up with us, and were getting back into his good graces to run some kind of scam."

"What kind of scam?" Red said. "What could I possibly gain?"

Brett cocked the hammer back on the pistol and put the gun to Red's head. "This is it, short stuff. The moment of truth. Where's Tillie?"

Red rolled his eyes toward the gun barrel, said, "Seems, that as punishment for helping me, Tillie had to service most of Big Jim's bodyguards. Except for Franklin because he seems to have trouble getting it up. He claims it's a psychological ailment, but we all know he takes too many steroids."

"We don't care about Franklin and his dick problems," Leonard said. "For heaven's sake. I'm going to have a nervous breakdown here. Will you just tell us where Tillie is?"

"Good-bye, shit sack," Brett said, and pushed the revolver hard against Red's temple.

"Tillie was passed around, then sent to The Farm," Red said.

"What's The Farm?" I asked.

"Ever heard of the Bandito Supremes?" Red asked.

"I take it that isn't one of the orders from Taco Bell," I said.

"Certainly not," Red said.

“Banditos are a Texas biker gang,” Leonard said. “They’re known to be in the drug business. The whore business. What have you.”

“No,” Red said. “Not the Banditos. The Bandito Supremes. They’re bikers too, or some of them are, or were. But they’re not even associated with the Banditos. They consider those guys sissies. They’ve fucked tougher guys than the Banditos behind the Catholic church. Could you take the gun from my head, lady? It makes me nervous.”

“It should,” Brett said, and eased the hammer down and pulled the gun back.

Red let out a deep breath. “The Bandito Supremes are modern Commancheros. Survivalist Nazis. Mostly they travel about, but they have headquarters in South and Southwest Texas, and Mexico. They have a farm, or what they call a farm, not far across the Mexican border. They do some work for Big Jim now and then. At certain types of work they can’t be beat.”

“I have a feeling that the work they do at this farm isn’t about growing vegetables,” I said.

“You are most correct,” Red said.

15

After we got Red's story we sat around and thought about it awhile. As is usual with Leonard and me, we couldn't think of anything clever. We either needed to do it or not do it.

Brett had just one thing on her mind, of course, and that was go for it, with or without us. That meant we could leave her to her fate, or we could go along. So there was really only one actual alternative. Head for Mexico and The Farm.

Brett gave Red an ultimatum. Either take us there or end up a maggot hotel. Red, being the practical sort, decided to be our guide once we got into Texas.

We hit some back roads, and finally broke out toward Amarillo, Red riding in the trunk. All the time we drove I hoped the little bastard wasn't getting carbon monoxide fumes, and every so many miles I made Leonard stop so I could check on him. Each time I opened the trunk and asked Red how he was doing, he'd give me a little wave.

Finally Brett and Leonard wore out with that method and moved Red into the back seat next to me and replaced his position in the trunk with suitcases. Brett rode up front with Leonard, and for most of the trip to Texas the two of them talked about country music. Red even had some opinions. He seemed to favor the Roy Acuff era and thought the rock sound was fucking up country music and he didn't like the way modern country and western singers danced around on stage. He thought they ought to just sing and go to the house.

One thing about Red, he was highly adaptable.

We arrived in Amarillo late that night. The town stank of slaughterhouses and stockyards. The air was absolutely thick with it. Sometimes breathing was like snorting a cow turd. It made me a little ill.

We stopped just outside of town and put Red in the trunk again, the suitcases in the back seat. Red was resigned by now and crawled inside without complaint, curled up next to the spare tire like a child crowding in close to his mother. He held his hat to his chest like a teddy bear.

We rented a cheap motel, because it had become part of our nature to do so, parked close to our rooms, and carried Red and his hat into Leonard's room with the guns and the luggage.

Inside the place looked pretty much like every other cheap motel room we'd rented. I felt as if I was in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. Like no matter where I went, I ended up in the same room.

Leonard went out then, came back about a half hour later with some groceries, a bottle of aspirin, and some children's Band-Aids with Superman on them.

Red took about six aspirin and chased them with a Coke. I dabbed his bloody forehead with toilet tissue, slapped on a few Band-Aids. I stuck a wad of toilet paper to the head wound under his hair and left it there to dry.

"This is the sort of thing we have to deal with," Red said.

"What?" Leonard asked.

"Little people. We deal with this all the time."

"Getting pistol-whipped?" Brett asked.

"Abuse in general. And humiliation." Red turned his focus to Leonard. "You thought of getting me Band-Aids, you immediately thought of children's Band-Aids because of my size. You don't take me seriously because I'm small."

"They were on sale, asshole," Leonard said.

"I take you seriously," Brett said. "I pistol-whipped the shit out of you, didn't I?"

Red shook his head. "You just don't get it. None of you. Hap here, he might understand some, but ultimately, he goes with the flow. He's not a man willing to follow his heart."

"Were you following your heart when you strangled that woman who ran the whorehouse?" I said. "If you did do that."

"Oh, I did it. But that had nothing to do with heart. That was business."

"Consider this business," Brett said.

"Are you getting paid?" Red asked.

"No," Brett said.

"Then it's not business," Red said.

"I think it is," Brett said. "In fact, I think it's very serious business. And let me add this. I don't find my daughter, you're all out of business. Know what I mean?"

"Of course I do. Being small doesn't mean I'm stupid. Nor does it mean I'm physically inadequate. Would you suspect I can bench-press two hundred pounds? I may not look it in these street clothes, but I'm well muscled. Perhaps this isn't the thing to say in front of a lady—however, considering your actions of earlier, the idea of you being a lady might be questionable, so I think I can say it, and will. I have a big schlong."

"How nice," Brett said.

"Yeah," Leonard said, "but you have to climb up on a chair to use it."

Red was infuriated. "How much can you bench-press?"

"I don't know," Leonard said.

"I bet it isn't much for your size. You consider my size and the fact I weigh far less than two hundred pounds, and you're talking about me moving some real weight."

"That's good," Leonard said.

Red began to snort and rattle on about this and that. After about fifteen minutes of nonstop bullshit we had had enough. Leonard decided to gag him, and I helped. We used a pair of Leonard's underwear to do the job. We tied the drawers in place with a belt from one of Brett's dresses. Then we tied Red to a chair with a lamp cord and one of my belts.

When we were finished Leonard gave Red a pat on the head, said, "Just be glad them ain't Hap's drawers."

Brett put Red's hat on his head. Red shook the chair by rotating his hips and kicking his feet.

"You turn that over, I'm gonna leave you there," Leonard said. "You'll be damn uncomfortable lying on your side tied to a chair. You settle down there and after a while I'll let you loose for a pee break, otherwise you're gonna be miserable. And remember this, you ain't got no extra clothes with you if you mess yourself. Though, I suppose tomorrow morning I could run over to the children's department at a thrift store and pick you up some short sets."

Red quit kicking. His little shoulders slumped.

Leonard turned on the television. There was a rerun of *America's Funniest Home Videos* on. Leonard picked up Red's chair and sat him right in front of the television set. He took the Western novel Taxi Man had given me and stretched out on the bed and began to read.

"Well, that television show is our cue to depart," I said.

I glanced at Red: he had his head hung, defeated. On the television the audience was laughing as a toddler fell over the edge of a plastic swimming pool and banged his head against the ground.

Brett and I went to our room, carrying our little bit of luggage.

"I bought him some aspirin, didn't I? Paid for it out of my own money."

"Jesus, Brett. You hit him in the head with a gun barrel. A piece of steel. Aspirin doesn't make it okay."

"Well, aspirin's for a headache ain't it?"

"You gave him the headache. And besides, you gave Leonard a couple dollars and sent him for the aspirin."

"It don't matter how the little fucker gets it, does it?"

"I guess not," I said.

"He's lucky I didn't give him a new shape to his head. And don't be so self-righteous. You were in on it."

I went quiet. We were lying in bed, the light out. We were both well on our sides of the bed, leaving quite a space between us.

Brett said, "I'm sorry, Hap. Really. I shouldn't have said that. Wasn't for me you wouldn't be involved. But you got to understand. This is my daughter we're talking about. Whatever it takes, that's what I'll do, and it's not like we're dealing with the Pope here."

"I know, Brett, it's just seeing the little guy take it. Fact is, I kind of admire him."

"Admire him?"

"Not for who he is. Or what he's done. But just the way he conducts himself."

"That prattling?"

"No, that drives me shit-crazy. But he has a sense of honor. Strength. Dignity."

"Next thing you'll be asking him to bench-press two hundred pounds and show you his pecker."

"I didn't say I liked him. I said I kind of admire him."

"I'll have to think about that one, Hap. You're pitying him, not picking up on a sense of honor. I've done the same, so I know. I'm an expert at recognizing the difference between admiring someone and pitying them. You have some of my old personality."

"How's that?"

"You see someone that's down, maybe not even someone you like, someone who's got a fucked-up life or who's taken a wrong turn, and you want to set them straight. You think all you got to do is get them on their feet. It's like the woman who takes up with the sorry man because she thinks she sees something in him, thinks she can change him."

"I know Red's worthless," I said.

"I'm not saying you're taking him under your wing and feeding him worms, but I'm saying what you feel for him is pity and it comes out of the same urge as the woman who wants to change the sorry man. You feel pity because he's a midget, or a dwarf, or whatever he is, like being small alone makes him worth a damn. He'd be sorry if he was eight feet tall. He'd be sorry if he had a nub dick and couldn't pick up five pounds. He'd be sorry if he had a dick long as a rock python and could bench-press a gorilla carrying a sackful of coconuts. He might be sorry in a different way, but he'd be sorry."

"He was sold to a circus."

"There's people been sold to circuses that didn't grow up to strangle people over money. He admitted to robbing that diner while his partner whipped up on that poor man who cooked the steak ranchero."

"Boy, that must have been some steak ranchero," I said. "Way he kept talking about it."

"Yeah," Brett said, "and I'll be honest. I started to ask him where the place was."

We both laughed.

Brett said, "So you got to accept this guy isn't worth the powder it would take to blow his ass up. Lice on the end of a dog's dick have more sense of community than he does. He's out for himself."

"I know that."

"I know you know that, but you got to *really* know it. Between my husband and you I took up with this guy lived in a shed. I mean that literally. A shed. He conned someone to let him live in their shed. He wasn't even a particularly interesting, smart, or attractive guy, but he had a way of making you feel sorry for him. Sort of like an ugly mongrel puppy that had caught on fire and wasn't nothing but bald spots and red meat. You just naturally wanted to help him. He was a piece of shit, and I met him and got hung up with him, and I let him come over to the house cold nights and warm his pecker."

"I don't think I want to hear this."

"You know I wasn't celibate before we met. I never claimed to be any goddamn nun."

"Yeah, I know, but I like to think in a little fantasy compartaient of my brain that you've been saving it just for me."

"You and a lot of others."

"Boy, that makes me feel good."

"I thought this pity I felt for him was love. I gave him money. I gave him chances. I took him out of the shed, and pretty soon he's lodged in my house tighter than a stitch. He wouldn't work. Not really. He'd piddle here and there to pick up a few bucks, but I never knew him to put in a full day's work once. He liked a good three hours and then back to the TV set, or he'd set around and play his harmonica and lie about how he used to play with Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix. Always had plans and opportunities just around the corner. He had a truck he borrowed that he was supposed to buy, and he drove it around for months, dodging the guy who owned it. And he never did buy it. He started talking about all that was wrong with it, dismissing the fact he'd been riding around in it for nearly half a year. I bought him a truck and he drove the other one over to the fella's house who owned it, got out and left it and ran back to my car and we drove out of there like thieves. But still I'm not seeing who this guy really is. He kept on complaining about all the bad breaks he'd had. How he had to live like a nigger. No offense to Leonard. That's how he put it. He complained about the shacks people let him live in, like maybe they should have fixed them up for him or moved him into their homes. These people weren't slumlords. They were helping the guy out because they felt sorry for him, and he wasn't paying a penny.

"He complained they wanted him to do work for his room and board. It was always somebody else's fault and always someone else's responsibility to get him out of his bullshit. The truck I got him wasn't good as he deserved. It had problems. He wanted better. He admitted he owed money for past hospital bills and to the IRS and said he couldn't work because they'd take what he made. I paid his bankruptcy off. And it wasn't a little bit of money. He supposedly took the money to a lawyer, but the bankruptcy never happened. I asked him about it, he got mad. Like it wasn't something I was party to at all. He came up with new excuses. All of them lame. I began to realize what I thought might be a spark of salvation down there inside of him, a sort of muted intelligence, was nothing more than stupidity and shallowness, self-centeredness and misplaced ego. He didn't really have any feelings outside of those for himself. He was a big con game. The level of his intelligence, if measured in inches, would have been just enough to get him up to where he could play in the toilet bowl with a long-handled spoon.

"I like to never got rid of him, and finally it turned ugly. I was prepared to call the police and have him removed. I dreamed fondly of my husband with his head on fire and thought maybe this guy would look good with a fire cap too. I began to think of them negative thoughts, you know. But I determined to avoid arson on another human body, not because he didn't deserve it, but because I thought I might not get off for it this time. I cut off his nookie. I cut off his food. I threatened the law. He finally got the hint. Besides, he knew it was all coming to an end. He'd been through it before. He had been working another sucker all along, some other person to feel sorry for him and to tell him how I mistreated him. So he went from my house to another shed. Last I heard was that person's hospitality played out and he went to yet another shed. Always living in sheds or garages or shacking up in someone's house on a cold night. Working all day long to keep from working.

"By now, if the sorry cocksucker had gotten a job at a filling station and put in all the effort working he put into not working, he'd be vice president of goddamn Exxon. Anyway, it taught me a lesson. There's folks out there down-and-out because of fate, but there's lots of folks out there down-and-out because they aren't worth squat. There really are bums, Hap. Not just homeless. And there's even little circus-sold fucks out there who are not down-and-out at all, but have plenty of money and work in whorehouses as pimps and strangle and kill and rob people, and yet they want you to feel sorry for them because they're short. I say, shit, riding dogs in a circus is good honest work compared to what he's become. Hell, fuckin' wood rats under a circus tent for spare change is even more honest work. You with me on all this?"

"I think I'm tracking," I said. "Except that part about the rats."

"Pretend I said chickens, or some kind of small furry animal other than a rat."

"Okay," I said. "I can visualize that."

We lay there for a while, looking at the ceiling. And finally Brett said, "Will you hold me, baby?"

I said, "Would you really kill Red he didn't show us to your daughter?"

"I'd like to. The urge would be there. But I guess not. Not just for that. But he doesn't need to know that."

"I guess I did. Does that make you feel bad toward me?"

"Nah," Brett said, rolling up close. "Sometimes I can be so mean I scare myself. And I got to tell you, he got me crooked enough, I could punch his ticket."

I took her in my arms. She kissed my ear. I turned and kissed her lips, our tongues explored. A moment later we were making love, and for a while I wasn't all that concerned about Red and his bloody head, his circus past, or even his torturous time in front of *America's Funniest Home Videos*.

16

Next morning we were tooling down Highway 87 on our way into Lubbock, traveling some of the bleakest ugliest goddamn terrain this side of the moon. It's the kind of landscape you think you'll fall off of. Every time we passed a scrubby tree—more of a bush really—I wanted to jump out of the car, hold on to the tree for dear life, lest I be sucked away into some sort of Lovecraftian cosmic vacuum.

Red, who Leonard had just quizzed for directions, was sitting in the back seat next to me eating his Hostess Twinkie breakfast. He said, with white filling on his lips, "I never claimed I knew exactly where The Farm was. I worked other locations when I was with the Bandito Supremes."

"This gets richer by the mile," I said.

Leonard said, "I suggest we kill him and just ask randomly at houses along the way where The Farm is. I think we got just as good a chance finding the place doing that as fuckin' around with this ding-a-ling."

"I think the three of you feel I ought to help you if I did know," said Red, "and I got to ask. Why should I?"

"Because we will kill you if you don't," Leonard said.

Red licked his fingers. "Well, that is some kind of incentive, I admit."

"We're gonna drive to the Mexican border," Leonard said, "and then, if you can't tell us where The Farm is, I'm going to shoot you. First in one foot, then the other. Then your hands and shoulders. I'm going to make it painful, squatty."

"There you go with the short slurs," Red said. "How would you like it if I called you a nigger, a jungle bunny, or a coon?"

"I wouldn't like it you called me honey, or even to a four-course dinner," Leonard said. "I just don't care for your sorry little ass."

“There’s that little stuff again,” Red said. He took off his hat and put it on the seat between us and shook his head sadly. The wad of bloody toilet paper was still stuck to the top of his head. He looked at me out of the corner of his eye, sadly, as if we were co-conspirators.

“Red,” I said. “I don’t want anything to happen to you. Really. But you got to cooperate. I’m not going to try and stop anyone from doing what they got to do to find this place. We want to find Tillie, and we mean to do just that, even if we have to try and read heavenly signs and directions in your steaming guts.”

“Well,” Red said, “I suppose if I don’t do something to help myself I’ll continue to spend my nights in chairs and eating Twinkies for breakfast.”

“Absolutely,” Brett said.

Red nodded. “Well, we need to see my brother.”

“Your brother?” I said.

“Yep,” Red said. “Herman. He knows where The Farm is.”

“You said you knew,” Leonard said.

“Sometimes I lie a little,” Red said.

“What’s with your brother?” I asked.

“He used to be a Bandito Supreme.”

“If he used to be a Bandito Supreme,” I said, “he may not cotton to telling us where they hole up. He might also con us a little, get us dead. You might con us a little yourself, Red. You just said you lied.”

“I might lie now and then,” Red said, “but I’m not lying right now. Herman is not only no longer with the Bandito Supremes, he’s a preacher.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask,” Leonard said, “lest this story turn out to be as laborious as the Book of Mormon without the good parts, but how did your brother Herman go from being a Bandito Supreme to being a preacher?”

“I’m not sure that’s such a big jump, from Nazi to preacher,” Brett said.

“Very funny, lady,” Red said. “You’re one of those who has no respect for anything. Not even religion.”

“Pardon me,” Brett said, “I didn’t know we were keeping you from prayer meetings.”

“I don’t claim to be a churchgoer, though I ought to be,” Red said. “But I believe in the church, and I respect my brother for what he’s doing. Witnessing to the lost souls of West Texas.”

“I got a feeling anyone lives out here is lost,” Brett said.

“It is ugly, isn’t it?” Red said.

“I don’t know why I’m persisting,” Leonard said. “But I want to know about this brother of yours, long as it doesn’t somehow lead back to that goddamn steak ranchero.”

“Herman, unlike myself, is normal-sized. Well, that isn’t entirely accurate. He’s large. Six four, weighs about two-forty, and can bench-press almost four hundred. Quite a bit of weight, I assure you, but as I explained last night, considering my size and weight and the fact I can bench-press two hundred pounds, he’s not as strong as me, least not in a relative sense.”

“Yeah,” Brett said, “but how long is his dong?”

“I happily admit I have no idea,” Red said. “We had very little boyhood together, and we spent none of it measuring each other’s equipment. Are you interested in hearing about Herman, or not?”

“I said I was curious,” Leonard said.

Red, feeling important, leaned back in his seat. “Any chance I might smoke my last cigar? I’ve been saving it, and since my incarceration by you three, I haven’t had the privilege. From previous inspection I find that it’s broken in two, so it’ll be a short smoke.”

“It’ll be shorter than that,” Brett said. “You aren’t going to smoke it in this car. It’ll make us all sick.”

Red assumed a hangdog demeanor, but he was feeling too self-important not to continue his story. “Very well. As I was saying, Herman was normal, and I was not, and our parents deferred to him entirely. He could do all manner of sports activities well, while I, on the other hand, had a good mind. I could read and quote great passages of Shakespeare at a tender age. I hoped to impress my parents, but, alas, they weren’t interested in a short Hamlet who they found embarrassing at public functions.

“At eleven years of age I ended up sold to a circus, apprenticed is the word they used, but undoubtedly, if you look at it clearly, it can only be determined that I was sold in the same manner you might sell a pup from a litter. It was purely a legality, this apprenticeship business. I was to be the circus owner's ward. The owner was a Mr. Gonzolos. A nastier, fouler-mouthed, meaner-tempered man did not exist. He's long dead now. I heard from old cronies that after I left the circus an elephant—undoubtedly brutalized and mistreated like myself—mauled, stomped, and rolled on him. I say with only the smallest bit of shame, because he did keep me clothed and fed, I feel absolutely no remorse over his death. What I remember most about Gonzolos was that he constantly complained of hemorrhoids and lack of money."

"Unless the elephant is your brother Herman," Brett said, "I believe you've veered yet again."

"It's important that you understand my position in life to understand about my brother. He and my parents, in spite of their indulgence of him, had a falling out. It was about me, sad to say. Herman disliked the idea they sold his only sibling to a traveling-circus-cum-carnival-cumsideshow, and they became estranged. Fact is, I have no idea what happened to either of my parents, and like with Mr. Gonzolos, I can't say I've pined over them much, and I'm sure there's no inheritance awaiting me. They never liked me, and they never had any money either.

"Herman fell in with some hooligans, spent time in jail, a bit of youth detention, and finally graduated to the big time. He got in with the Bandito Supremes, selling drugs. All of this he told me about, as I was not there to witness it. I was riding dogs and making a fool of myself in the circus at that time, but Herman went from being a football star in high school to selling heroin to twelve-year-olds. He did say that the bulk of his sales were to colored people, and at the time he felt that made everything all right. I can honestly say he doesn't feel that way now. He figures a colored person has just as much right to live and prosper as anyone. Herman has become quite progressive, actually."

"Yeah," Leonard said. "Speaking as one of those colored persons, I'd have to say Herman certainly sounds like a fuckin' peach."

"Would it be all right I merely suck on the cigar and not smoke it?" Red said.

"Go ahead," Brett said.

Red plucked the cigar from inside his coat. It was broken, but still together, held there by strands of tobacco. He pulled the cigar apart, returned one piece to his coat pocket, licked the end of the other, stuck it in his mouth and rolled it about as if tasting a Tootsie Roll Pop.

"I said Herman had a change of heart, became a preacher, and he did, but before that change of heart he put me on the road to commerce. An act he now regrets and that I'm most thankful for. Without Herman, at my age, I might no longer be riding a dog in the circus, but cleaning up dog droppings instead. At the time Herman removed me from the circus, my career was already in the toilet and I was heading in the direction of a flush. I had become surly, and perhaps it was my own fault that my career was eroding, but be that as it may, I was soon to be either working the dog pens or walking the street, giving blow jobs under the guise of a child prostitute, when Herman tracked me down by assistance of a private detective. When Herman arrived, I was more than willing to go in with him and start a new life and enter into his business."

"Selling drugs?" I asked.

"Herman started there, but he had graduated into a considerably broader program. Drugs. Women. Some money laundering. Getting rid of certain people. You name it and Herman was directing it or performing it. He located me at the circus, came and got me. There was a disturbance, a demand of money from Gonzolos. Herman refused. 'Hey Rube' was yelled, and Herman was forced to kick some butt.

"I had never seen anything like it. He was a human buzz-saw. I did my best, but being small, and having had little experience fighting, and being accustomed to losing all my fights, I doubt my contribution was of any significance other than to find myself tangled in Herman's feet. But he maintained his balance and survived the encounter by giving an astounding account of himself. Of course Herman was carrying a tire iron at the time, and this proved considerably to his advantage.

"Eventually everyone wore down and those with broken bones gave up gratefully. Even Bilbo the Strong Man, who I'm sure must have suffered a hernia after taking a full kick to the groin, not to mention a thumb in the eye, gave in and even cried a little. Size and strength certainly didn't intimidate Herman. As he told me later, no matter how big they grow, balls and eyes stay soft and a tire tool has no friends."

"Sounds like a motto to live by," I said.

Red nodded. "Herman took me with him, bought me my first tailored suit and got me laid. Also a first. There I was in my late twenties and I had never had the delights of a woman. She wasn't the best-looking whore. A fat lady with bad skin and an ill sense of fashion, but she was fairly quick-witted for a heavy drinker. She was a native of El Paso and for forty-five dollars she serviced me from head to foot. That is still one of my fondest life experiences, even if it did take place in El Paso and in the end she vomited on my knees."

"Spare the details," Brett said.

"It isn't my style to discuss sexual escapades, even if they were paid for. I was merely giving a general view. Herman put me to work for him. Oh, there were problems at first. My size caused some snickers among the Bandito Supremes, and Herman had to mess up a few people, but eventually I was accepted, and became good at the work. It was certainly better than riding a dog in the circus, and far better than shoveling droppings. It got so I could take care of myself quite well. Herman gave me some tips, see. And besides, as the old story goes, all men are created equal, but Samuel Colt makes some more equal. If one wants to be accurate, in my case it was Smith and Wesson that made me equal. I never cottoned to a Colt. Perhaps it's all that cowboy legacy. I hate that business. Can't even watch a Western on television."

"I think you protest too much about the cowboy stuff, shorty," Brett said. "Way you dress, you look like a regular Stick Horse Harry to me."

"There you go again, that demeaning manner. Television cowboys and fashion are quite different, lady, and I use that word loosely in your case. I'll have you know this is quite the fashion in some places."

"Yeah, some ranch on Mars," Brett said.

"So," Leonard prompted, "your brother took you in and trained you and …”

Red rolled the cigar to the other side of his mouth. “That’s correct. Then, one day, after a long and particularly tedious job involving the nailing of a little girl’s hand to a boat oar to show her father that business was meant involving some money he owed the Bandito Supremes for nose candy, Herman just cracked. I’m not sure why. He didn’t do the actual nailing. He held her hand and I did that, but it did him in. He ceased to look at his work as business. He saw it as something personal. Always a mistake. You have to keep the two separate.

“He wandered off the job and disappeared for a year. No one could find him at first, but by the second year his trail was picked up and certain Bandito Supremes were assigned to talk to Herman. It wasn’t so much they were worried about his welfare, but he had taken money up front for the job, and though the mission had been completed, Herman had kept all the money to wander on. None of it went to headquarters so to speak, and not even I had been paid my share. It wasn’t the money bothered them so much, it was fear of a trend. You know, Bandito Supremes bailing out on them and going on their own. Ignoring protocol.

“I was, of course, as you would suspect, willing to pass on my fee, but the big bosses were most unpleasant about it. I was able to slide out of working for the Bandito Supremes, and kept only a loose connection with them when I went to work for Big Jim. They were understanding. Herman having been my brother, they could understand why I might not want to continue with them, and honestly, they didn’t care that much for midgets anyway. Eventually, I lost all track of them and their work except for when it crossed Big Jim’s path.

“In Herman’s case, they were less understanding. After he refused to pay them, they began to send hit men after him. Only problem for the Bandito Supremes was Herman was better than they were. He killed them all. I heard all of this through the grapevine, you understand. It got so it was a pride thing with the Bandito Supremes. They kept sending out these men to do Herman in, and he kept killing them, leaving a mark on them that could be identified as his signature.”

“What kind of mark?” Leonard asked.

“It wasn’t the best choice, but it was memorable. He took to cutting off the heads of their penises and putting them in their front right pants pocket. The police thought they had some kind of weird serial killer case. I read about it in the papers having no idea it was Herman at work. I suspected a mad Jewish rabbi. Later, as the story drifted back to me through old connections, I realized what it had been about. It was Herman’s way of thumbing his nose at those who had been sent to kill him. A sort of manhood rite.”

“Mine’s bigger than yours?” I said.

“Exactly,” Red said. “After three years of this, evading the cops and the Bandito Supremes, Herman began to seek out the Supremes directly, killing them on their own turf.

“Well, this would not do, but the Supremes had no luck killing Herman off. He was like a shadow. A ghost. A blood truce was made. People cutting their hands with knives and pressing them together like adolescents. Herman paid back the money and made an apology, and all was forgotten. As long as he never had anything to do with the Bandito Supremes again. This mean he couldn’t even cross their territory without a threat of death hanging over his head. He agreed, got a job selling vacuums door-to-door, but never could move the super models, and that’s where you made your money, so he dropped out of that, and next thing I knew he was a preacher. I’ve visited him several times, and he’s tried to bring me into the fold. Though it’s tempting, and Herman certainly gives a good fiery sermon, I find money and sex with average-size women more appealing than future paradise.”

“You said average-size women,” Brett said. “That mean you won’t fuck a midget? That what you’re sayin’? That sounds prejudicial to me. Not wanting to fuck a midget, and you being one your ownself.”

Red refused to answer. He glared at her.

“This brother of yours?” I asked. “Where is he?”

“Southwest Texas. Near a little town called Seminole. But I advise you to make your presence known gradually. Preacher or not, I doubt Herman would welcome a surprise introduction.”

“We’ll keep that in mind,” Leonard said.

17

When we got to Seminole Leonard steered us through a drive-through, bought some hamburgers, then we cruised out of town to the west. It was a fair enough day, with cumulus clouds riding high and giving shade. Mesquite trees stubbed the ground all about, and behind barbed wire fences there were little patches of greenery mixed with prickly pear stands and dirt the color of dried peas. Sheep, goats, and windmills dotted the land, and the world seemed bleak and sad to me. All I could think of was getting back to East Texas. Back to greenery and creeks and rivers and the sky as seen through pine tree limbs.

After a while Red asked us to slow down, so that his memory might have time to work.

Finally, he said, "This is it. I remember now. This is it."

Leonard slowed, turned right, drove a great distance, came out on another highway, was directed by Red to the left, went along that way for some distance before Red said, "On the right."

On the right was a red windmill that had seen better days, but was still turning. There was a sign next to the road that read THE CHURCH OF THE BAPTISTS, and about an acre's distance behind the windmill in a clearing spotted with scrubby weeds was a little church made of plyboard, green lumber, ill-fitting windows, and hope. The church was warped due to the cheap lumber, and seemed as if it were about to pucker up and explode. The windows had cracks in the glass or no panes at all, and behind the glass I could see plyboard, and in one case some kind of thick yellow paper. The north end of the church touched the ground, while the south stood on dissolving concrete blocks, as if rearing up for a peek across the vast expanse of West Texas. The cross on the roof peak was weathered gray and starting to strip; it leaned a bit to starboard.

Out to the left was a wet-looking green slush hole that had to be the end result of a broken sewage line. Not far from that, like the husk of a great insect, lay an aluminum camper shell.

“Seems to have gone downhill,” Red said.

We turned down a dirt drive. Dust rose around the car in white puffs thicker than the cumulus clouds above us. We parked out front of the church and got out.

Red was almost jovial. He coughed the dust away, started calling: “Herman! Herman Ames. It’s me, Red.”

After a moment the front door of the church moved, then caught, then burst open. A stout Mexican woman of about thirty came out and stood on the porch in a position that made me think of a wrestler about to get down and to it.

Red said, “Herman Ames. He here?”

She just stared at us.

“I don’t think she speaks English,” I said. “You got any Spanish, Brett?”

“Just rice, but it’s back in the cabinet at home,” she said.

“Herman,” Red said again. “Herman.”

The woman shook her head and moved into the yard, such as it was, ambled to the side of the church and pointed to the field out back.

“ ’erman,” she said, “ ’erman.”

“Gracias,” I said.

The woman tugged on the swollen door again, pulled it free, disappeared inside the church. We walked around the side of the building and started into the field.

“Remember,” Leonard said to Red, “I’d rather not poke a gun in your neck all the time, but you do anything fancy, or Herman thinks he’s going to do anything fancy, I might have to shoot somebody and tell God he died.”

Red grunted and we kept walking.

The field sloped gently downward, and on the other side, in the middle of it, we saw an elderly black pickup and next to it an apparatus perched on big wheels with thick transparent hoses attached to the main body. The thing, whatever it was, looked like a visiting Martian. The hoses were stuck in the ground, and a huge bearded man who had gone to fat was standing next to the odd device, watching us come.

"Is that him?" Brett asked.

"That's him," Red said. "Porked up a lot, but that's him," and before we knew it, he took off running.

The man by the apparatus recognized him, of course—aren't that many redheaded midgets around. Red ran right up to Herman and leaped. Herman caught him, lifted him above his head.

As we neared we could hear laughter, and Herman said, "Red, you old sonofagun."

"And you're an old sonofabitch," Red said. "Oh, forgot, Herman, you're a man of God now."

"The word couldn't be any worse than the sonofabitches themselves," Herman said, lowering Red to the ground.

Herman looked up as we came. He spent a little extra time looking at Brett. I didn't blame him. She was worth it. She wore a loose blue shirt and jeans tight enough you would have thought she had Levi legs. The wind had taken hold of her thick red hair, and the way it whipped around her head she looked like a goddess. Herman may have been a man of the cloth, but right then I don't think he was thinking about Bible verses, unless they were designed to give him strength.

Red said, "These are, I suppose you might say, associates of mine. It's a little complicated, actually."

"You in trouble, Red?" Herman asked.

"Kinda sorta," Red said.

Herman shook his head. "Well, let me finish up here, then we'll go up to the church and talk about it."

"What is this?" Brett asked, nodding at the apparatus.

"Well, lady," Herman said, "it sucks prairie dogs out of the ground."

"Any reason you're doing that?" Brett asked. "You don't stuff them, do you?"

"No. Ranchers around here hate 'em. Always digging holes for stock to get their legs into, and to keep them from shooting and poisoning the little boogers, someone came up with this device. I bought one, modified it to suit me. Church offerings weren’t that good, so I needed a bit of a profession.”

“Sucking prairie dogs out of the dirt is a profession?” Brett asked.

Herman grinned. “As a matter of fact, it is.”

“Seems to me a device like that would cost more than it was worth,” I said. “You aren’t a rancher, are you?”

“No, but I got the dogs on my land.”

“What you going to do with all them dogs when you get ’em?” Leonard asked.

“Sell ’em,” Herman said.

“Who buys them?” Red said.

“Japanese are a big market. They pay up to five hundred dollars for the little suckers.”

“Do they eat ’em?” Leonard asked.

“Oh, no,” Herman said. “They make pets out of them.”

“Hell,” Leonard said, “for five hundred dollars them little suckers ought to clean your house and turn down the sheets.”

“Just pets,” Herman said. “There’s Yankees do the same, only they pay about half that price.”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Leonard said. “Now I’ve heard of everything.”

“Watch this,” Herman said, and flipped a switch on the device. The motor whined, there was a sound like someone clearing their nose, and suddenly, riding up the transparent hoses, speeding along like bullets, came dark shapes.

“Wow!” Red said.

“Yeah,” Herman said. “I think we got three of them that time.”

“Christ,” Brett said. “Don’t that hurt them little dudes?”

“Just ruffles their hair, lady,” Herman said. “And I doubt Our Savior enjoys his name being exploded like that for the sake of prairie dogs.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Brett said, “I was him I’d want to take a look at something like this.”

Herman smiled, walked us around to the other side of the machine, showed us a transparent plastic cage where the dogs had been delivered. There were three all right, and they looked puzzled as all get out. I suppose I would too, I was sitting in my living room, was suddenly sucked up a hose and into a plastic container. I reckoned prairie dogs were developing a rather interesting set of stories about alien abduction.

“Well, ain’t they the cutest little things,” Brett said. “You don’t just box ’em up and send them to Japan, do you? I mean, I can’t see a bunch of them dogs in a box with air holes cut in the sides.”

“I sell them to a distributor,” Herman says. “He has them shipped. Big business, actually. After everyone gets their cut, I make about a hundred and fifty a dog. Most of the time. Sometimes the market’s a little less.”

“Looks to me like you’d run out of dogs,” Leonard said.

Herman waved his hand expansively. “This is seven hundred acres, and it’s all mine,” Herman said. “Got it for a song.”

I looked out over the land. Bleak and gray and ugly, with splotches of mesquite. I hoped he got it for a short song. A ditty maybe.

“Place is riddled with dogs,” Herman said. “I farm ’em. I come out here and watch ’em some afternoons. Kind of educational, really, watching them pop out of their holes and look around. You get so you know when the babies are grown up enough to suck out of the ground. I don’t like to get no little bitty dogs. I want them to grow up. Then I’ll suck ’em up. If I was to run out of dogs here, there’s plenty of ranchers be glad to see me coming with this baby.”

Herman detached the cage from the vacuum and slid a perforated top over it. He sat it in the bed of the pickup. The dogs rose up and pressed against the plastic and pushed their noses to it.

The vacuum was hooked up to a little motorized device. Herman fired it up with a jerk of a cord, sort of steered it to the pickup by holding on to the back of it. At the pickup, he cut the motor back with a switch, pulled a wide piece of plyboard out of the bed of the pickup and fixed it so one end was in the truck and the other slanted to the ground. Pushing the throttle switch, steering the device with his hands, Herman guided it up the ramp and into the truck and killed the motor. He pushed the board up alongside it, said, “Y’all climb in somewhere.”

Leonard got in front beside Herman, leaving me and Red and Brett to ride in the bed. We sat with our feet dangling over the open tailgate and Herman drove us slowly to the church, bouncing along the hard ground.

“I don’t know why Leonard didn’t let me sit up front with Herman,” Red said.

“I do,” I said. “We don’t want you telling your brother a line of shit before we got time to lay things out.”

“Don’t think ’cause you’re with some family,” Brett said, “that everything is hokey-dokey. You’re still our prisoner, and we still got guns under our shirts, and I’m just dyin’ to hit you on the other side of your little punkin’ head.”

“There’s that little stuff again,” Red said. “There’s just no peace from it.”

18

The inside of the church lived down to expectations. It was ripe with the smell of sweat and boiling pinto beans and something baking. It was very hot inside, and Herman shoved at the swollen door until it hung open and a shaft of sunlight fell through it and hit the dirt floor and gave the cigarette butts there a sort of royal glow, as if they were floating in God's own butter.

There were four long pews to the left, and the closest one had a cot mattress on it with a sheet and a pillow that drooped over the side. The edge of the mattress, where it touched the ground, was brown with dirt. There were plastic cases with perforated tops in one corner behind the pews, stacked on top of one another, and in the cases were water pans and food pans and prairie dogs and newspaper lining and piles of prairie dog shit, both fresh and dry. The dogs reared up against their clear plastic cages and took note of us.

There was a wooden stove with a big iron pot on the top, boiling away, and the heavyset Mexican woman was stirring the contents of the pot with a long wooden spoon. She watched us with the same lack of enthusiasm she had showed us in the yard.

To the left of the stove was a doorway so narrow you'd have to turn sideways to go through it. The door itself was open, and I could see an ominous-looking shitter in there, stained black and green with a stack of newspapers by it, and on the other side a cardboard box.

Herman strolled over to the window with the yellow paper, pulled at the shade. It rolled up and light came in and made the place look worse.

Another step deeper and I could smell the prairie dogs and their offal, and it wasn't something that went with pinto beans and baked goods.

Red looked about, took off his hat and held it in his hand as if acknowledging the dead. "Kind of let the place go, haven't you,

Herman?”

“Reckon so,” Herman said. “People quit coming.”

“You always gave a good sermon,” Red said.

“Yeah, but I didn’t give it so good in Spanish and most of the Mexicans around here are Catholics anyway.”

“The woman?” Red said. “She a working girl?”

Herman laughed. “Girl. She hasn’t been a girl since the Mexican Revolution. She works for me. Don’t even know her name. She takes a hundred dollars a month. Comes in and cooks for me, and if she’s in the mood, sweeps the place out. She’d service me for an additional fifty dollars a month, but I’m not interested.”

“You still preach?” Red said.

“Just to myself,” Herman said. “I hope I can convince you and your friends to stay for supper. Don’t worry. She’s clean. The woman, I mean. And the food. The place could use some work.”

“Perhaps a fire,” Red said.

“Yeah, well,” Herman said, sitting down on the edge of the pew with the mattress, “I call it home. How’s about you tell me what your problem is, Red. You still doing … the work?”

“I was, up until the other day,” Red said. “I was pulled out of it by this lady and these two gentlemen. They’ve kept me company these last few days, and let me tell you, it’s been an experience.”

Herman was looking at the wad of bloody toilet tissue on Red’s head. “What happened to your noggin?” Herman asked.

“Oh, the lady here took a pistol to my skull,” Red said. “And she made quite a time of it.”

Herman stood up. Leonard said, “Sit down, Herman. You need to hear the whole story before we start hitting each other.”

Brett pulled her pistol from under her shirt, said, “Hell, who’s hittin’?”

“Everybody ease off and lighten up,” I said.

Herman turned to the Mexican woman and said something quick in Spanish. She let go of the spoon, walked past us, right out the door without so much as a change of expression.

I said, “I hope you just told her to go to the house.”

Herman nodded. “Go on, let’s hear it.”

“Red here says he’s done some bad stuff and you got him into it,” I said.

“True,” Herman said. “I’ve abandoned that kind of life myself. I wish my brother would. If you’re looking for me to give you connections, I can’t.”

“Nope,” Leonard said. “We’re looking for directions to The Farm.”

Herman looked at Red. Red said, “Well, they said they’d kill me if I didn’t show them where The Farm was, but I didn’t know where it was, so I had to tell them about you.”

“You’re still involved with Big Jim?” Herman asked.

“I was,” Red said. “These three may have queered me there.” Red told Herman what had happened from when he and Wilber had put the bite on Brett for money, on up to the moment. I thought his telling was accurate, if overly long, and that goddamn steak ranchero came up again.

Herman sat with his head down for a long while, thinking. We let him think. I looked out the door and saw the Mexican woman trudging down the road, dragging little clouds of dust behind her heels.

“I don’t know,” Herman finally said. “This is some kind of situation. You’ve abused and humiliated my brother, and yet you ask me for help. You ask me to violate a trust, an agreement to never step foot on Bandito Supreme property again. I’d be tossing my life away.”

“Directions will do,” Leonard said. “You can stay here and suck prairie dogs out of holes.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” Herman said. “But then I’d be tossing your lives away.”

“My suggestion,” Red said, “is you let them toss their lives and just save mine. They hit me a lot, you know?”

“Yes, I see that,” Herman said.

“It hurt,” Red said. “They’re capable of anything. I saw this one,” he indicated Leonard, “shoot Moose’s foot off. You remember Moose, don’t you?”

“You do that?” Herman asked Leonard. “You shoot Moose’s foot off?”

“Yep,” Leonard said. “Thought it was kind of funny actually.”

“See,” Red said. “They have no conscience. You should have seen her pistol-whip me. I’ve never seen anyone happier.”

“And I suppose you want me to do something about it,” Herman said.

“It crossed my mind,” Red said.

“In case you haven’t noticed,” Herman said, “the lady has a gun, and my guess is there are guns under the shirts of these two men, and you just finished telling me how ruthless they are.”

“That’s right,” Leonard said. “And we’re just full of whup ass too. And we got shotguns in the trunk, we need ’em.”

“Lots of ammunition,” I said.

“That don’t do it,” Leonard said, “we’ll use rude language too.”

Herman nodded, turned to Red. “We got a problem here, Red. First off, you’re my brother. I love you. But you’re a piece of shit. I used to be a piece of shit, and may still be one, but you are definitely still one.”

“A matter of opinion,” Red said. “But the words are particularly foul coming from the mouth of my own kin, and a man of God at that.”

“They are neither foul or not foul,” Herman said, “they’re the truth. And I haven’t been a man of God in some time now. There’s also the fact I’m fat and not nearly as tough as I used to be. Or maybe I don’t want to be tough anymore. Do you want me shot, Red?”

“Of course not,” Red said.

“Then relax a little.” Then to Brett: “This girl, this Tillie. She’s your daughter? I understand that right?”

“That’s right,” Brett said. “And I want her back.”

“She chose the life,” Red said.

“She didn’t choose to be taken to The Farm,” Herman said. “You know what that means.”

“I don’t see how it’s my problem,” Red said.

"You wouldn't," Herman said. "I did you a great disservice, Red. Bringing you into the business. If I could undo it I would. You might have been better off with the circus."

"Don't say that," Red said.

"You're saying you'll help us?" Brett asked Herman.

"Maybe," Herman said. "I don't know."

"We could make you," Brett said.

"Maybe," Herman said. "Maybe you couldn't. Neither pain nor death scares me much these days."

"I might could show you a side of pain you haven't visited before," Leonard said.

Herman grinned at him. Leonard grinned back. It was great to see two sweet fellows bond.

"We don't want to make you do anything," I said. "We want to find Brett's daughter and bring her home. That's the end of it."

"For you, maybe," Herman said. "It wouldn't be for me."

"You keep talkin' like you got to really do somethin'," Leonard said. "All you need to do is give directions. We'll keep your brother just to make sure your memory's good. We find what we're looking for, we'll let him go and he won't even have to be involved in the ruckus."

"It's not that easy," Herman said. "It's not like I can give you highway numbers, simple landmarks." Herman paused for a moment. "Let's eat. Let's stay friendly. Let me think about it some."

"Eating's okay," Brett said, "but you got to think about it a lot. We can't let it drag into tomorrow. I don't know what kind of situation she's in. I don't know what's happening to her, or for that matter, what may have happened to her already."

Herman looked at the floor, then out the door. It wasn't the answer Brett wanted. I saw her swallow hard. She went outside and I followed her but gave her space. I leaned against the side of the church and watched Brett walk about in the yard as if she couldn't decide on a direction. I could see the Mexican woman too. She had really made some distance. She was down the road and to the highway. I watched her cross the highway, duck and crawl through a barbed wire fence, and walk out into a plowed field. She started across the field, dragging more dust clouds behind her. After a while I could only see the dust. It was as if the woman had disappeared into a cloud of sand.

Mexican ninjas.

Brett walked out to her car and leaned on the hood with both hands, as if trying to push it to the center of the earth. I saw her body tremble, her head shake.

I went over and put my arm around her shoulders and didn't say anything. After a time her hand came up and went behind my waist. She held me and began to sob.

Later, we had pinto beans and slightly burned cornbread and ate it off paper plates with plastic forks. We sat outside on Brett's car. This was much better than inside the church, except when the wind blew and picked up the smell of sewage or blew dust into our food.

I was watching Herman and Red carefully, lest Herman decide to break loose and try and shove Leonard, Brett, and me into a prairie dog hole. I was perhaps giving Herman too much attention, actually being prejudicial. Red was right. Something about him being small caused you to underestimate him. Maybe it was his way of talking. Here was a man who had strangled a woman and nailed a little girl's hand to a boat paddle, and he consistently looked dazed and confused and about as dangerous as a wet newspaper.

I had to remember these guys weren't just a couple of goofballs, no matter how goofy they seemed.

We sat so that Herman was on the hood between me and Leonard, and Red sat on the trunk with Brett, who sat far enough from him to use the gun she kept in her lap. She was very nervous, anxious, and I was hoping Red didn't make a sudden dive to scratch his nuts or pick his nose, or he might end up with a .38 round in his teeth.

After a bit, Red finished his meal, slid off the trunk, and came around front. He said, "Do your facilities function, brother?"

"More or less," Herman said. "You got to flush it twice or three times, and if it overflows there's a plunger in there and a mop. Stinks some. It hasn't been cleaned in, oh, two years."

“Goodness,” Red said.

“And you got to wipe on newspapers and throw them in a cardboard box.”

“Maybe I’ll just walk out in the field some,” Red said, “do it down a prairie dog hole. I have some Kleenex in my suit pocket.”

“No,” I said. “Don’t think so. I don’t want you going that far.”

Red looked at Herman. Herman shrugged. “There wouldn’t be a gun or anything in the house, would there?” Leonard asked.

“I disposed of them all long ago,” Herman said.

“I hope so,” Leonard said. “Don’t go out the back, Red.”

“There’s no rear exit,” Herman said.

“Then see you later,” Leonard said to Red. “Happy bowel movements.”

“Crude,” Red said. “I’m the one being chastised here for my lifestyle, and the four of you are crude. Very crude. I can assure you, if one of us was invited to tea with the Queen of England, it wouldn’t be you two or the woman, and I am sorry to say, it wouldn’t be you either, brother.”

Red went away then, trudging toward the church and the toilet, his head held high, his bowels contained.

“He’s kind of prideful,” Herman said.

“Hell,” Leonard said. “He’s just full of shit is all.”

19

I suppose it was midnight. I hadn't looked at a clock in some time. I was sitting on the hood of Brett's car with my back against the windshield. I had my hands under my shirt, on my revolver, just in case I needed to blow Herman's brains out.

Above me was a great and beautiful canopy of stars. They seemed different stars from East Texas stars. They were brighter and closer. They looked sharp enough to cut your hand.

On the far side of the hood, stretched out, his feet dangling over the front of the car, was Herman. He had his hands behind his head and his eyes open. His belly heaved like a great turtle sleeping.

Leonard was in the front seat, stretched out, catching a catnap. Red was in the back seat. Red thought Leonard was awake watching him, so when Red went to sleep, Leonard took advantage of it. Brett was in the house, lying on the dirty mattress and the pew. She had spent two hours cleaning the prairie dog cages, feeding and watering the critters. Somewhere, buried inside her, was a housewife with an apron and fuzzy house slippers. Of course, in Brett's case, that internal woman wasn't wearing anything but the apron and slippers, and there was a shovel, lighter fluid, a box of matches, and a revolver nearby.

Herman spoke suddenly, "It's strange how a man perceives things. Once, I felt nothing. Then I felt everything. Now I feel nothing again, except remorse. I can't lose remorse."

"Not sure you should," I said.

"It's odd. I went my way and did the things I did, and one day I began to think about my brother. I hadn't missed him until that moment. Hadn't thought of him at all. I was like our parents. He was just an embarrassment. Then one day I'm in Dallas. I was there to kill a man because I had been hired to kill him. He was not an important man, but he had insulted a man who had the money to have him killed, and I was the man to do it. I had gotten the job through the Bandito Supremes. They are something, Hap. Once they were nothing more than a two-bit motorcycle gang, running a few drugs, selling whores. Now, they have little to do with motorcycles. They are a large clearinghouse for disaster, and they get a slice of every disastrous pie they bake. Part of that pie went to me. Anyway, I'm in Dallas and I'm not thinking about this guy I'm going to kill at all. I had already made up my mind how to do it and make it messy the way the client wanted it, and I'm waiting for nighttime when I'm going to do it, and I see these kids playing in the park, and one of them is little and ugly and redheaded and these other kids are picking on him. Hitting him. Tossing rocks. Yelling at him. Stuff like, 'We'd rather be dead than red on the head,' and the kid's running, and they're busting him from every side, and there's a kind of frenzy going on. I believe, down deep, in each of us, especially males, there's a hunter-killer switch of sorts, and sometimes odd things can set it off. We still have a pack mentality, and this kid was wounded, and the pack smelled blood, and they were all going for this kid, and though I can't say he would have died from it, he would certainly have been hurt. And it wasn't that I was particularly moved by children prior to this, but the redheaded kid pulled something inside of me, another kind of switch, and I could see my brother in this child's place, and suddenly I'm up screaming and I chased the boys off and helped the redheaded kid up. He ran away from me as fast as he could. That was it. End of story. But something moved inside me. It felt strange, and it felt good. Where the freezer had been, there was suddenly this wave of warmth, an open oven. I had never really felt that before. I didn't know exactly what it was. You know what I did, Hap?"

"No."

"I went ahead and killed my man. Then I went home to my parents. I hadn't seen them in years, and I shot them both with a twelve-gauge pump shotgun with remarkably smooth action. A Remington, to be exact, and if I were still in the business, it's a tool I would highly recommend."

I felt the hackles move on the back of my neck. I made sure I had a good hold on the revolver under my shirt.

"Very methodically I shot them, making sure they knew it was me doing it. I went down to Mexico and stayed there for a while, on The Farm, but the law never put anything together. The shotgun was cold. The crime was spur-of-the-moment. Nothing was taken and I moved on immediately. A fine method of operation I might suggest if you should ever suddenly decide to be a serial killer.”

“Well, I am still trying to put a career together, so I’ll keep that in mind.”

“They were my parents, Hap. They were Red’s parents, and they had sold him to the circus. Me, they had raised me with some kindness and respect, but I hated them. I knew when I saw that redheaded kid being chased and hurt that I hated them. It was because of Red that I hated them. They had sold him with no more hesitation than they might a pup from a litter, and they had gotten away with it. Somehow none of this had meant a thing to me before. Red had meant nothing to me, but that day I had a sort of epiphany. I sought Red out.

“It was quite easy to track him down. I went to the circus and bought Red back.”

“I thought there was a fight.”

“Red tells people that. I think it makes him feel less like a piece of meat to have someone fighting over him. Buying him back is only a little better than selling him. There was no fight. In fact, he could have left at any time. He just didn’t have any place to go. I could have taken him away without money crossing palms, but I wanted to keep Gonzolos happy about the arrangement. I didn’t want to draw any unnecessary attention to myself or Red. You’ve got to consider the business I was in.”

“Red claims an elephant rolled over on the owner. Any truth to that?”

“I don’t know. It could have happened. Red likes to put frills on his life. I don’t blame him. It hasn’t been a very special life. I took Red into business with me. He had the mind for it. He had been used for years, so now he was willing to use others. He was a natural, as I had been. Then one day, in Galveston, it became necessary to nail a young girl’s hand to a boat paddle to make her father pay a debt, and in that moment, I had another feeling. I don’t know how better to describe it. In the girl’s eyes I saw myself mirrored, and somehow, where before I had been able to see people like paper cutouts, this time I could see this was a living, breathing child, and when she screamed it was more than a sound. Something snapped inside me.

"I just walked off. Went into hiding. The Bandito Supremes sent men after me. I killed them. Finally we reached a kind of peace. I got religion, but religion worked only for a short time. It allowed me to say, 'Yes, I have done these horrible things, but now I am saved in Christ, and I am a good man now, and I'm leading others to salvation.' Then, one night, like tonight, I looked up at the stars and knew in that moment there was nothing out there. Just like that it came to me. There's no God. There are just stars. And the stars are nothing more than dying lights, and between them is dead darkness. From time to time I still try and believe in God. I use his name. But now I know there's nothing there, and I can't hide behind God. I know who and what I am and it's very hard to face. And Red. He's like I used to be.

"It's strange really. Sometimes I look at a tree, or a bush, or whatever, and I see it for what it is. Something dying. Everything that lives is just something dying. It's not a wonderful revelation. I no longer feel the need to bathe or to even clean my surroundings. I want them as foul as I feel. Does that make sense to you?"

"I suppose," I said.

"I am bathed not in the blood of Christ, but in the darkness of lost revelations. A pompous way of saying there is nothing to my life but emptiness. Do you ever feel that way?"

"Sometimes," I said. "But it passes. As Leonard has pointed out, I'm like the guy goes out in the yard and steps in a pile of horse shit, and where he or someone else would say, goddamn, I've stepped in horse shit, me, I'm looking for the pony."

Silence for a while. Then: "What I will do," Herman said, "is I'll take you to find this girl. I'll help you find her and take her away."

"Brett will appreciate that," I said.

"I will appreciate it myself," Herman said. "Perhaps I'm no less selfish than before. I'm not doing this for Brett. Or you. Or even to save my little brother. I'm doing it for me."

20

Next morning I rode with Herman in his truck to drop his prairie dogs at his distributor's ranch. Money changed hands, the dogs were unloaded, and we drove back.

When we got to the church and parked, we saw Brett out back of the place running a water hose over her naked body. In the rosy morning sunlight, her wet red hair cascading over her pale freckled shoulders, the thin line of fiery hair on her pubic mound, her breasts swaying as she bent beneath the water hose, I had a feeling I had just glimpsed what heaven must offer twenty-four hours a day. With maybe a fifteen-minute break for some kind of tonic.

With the water running hard, Brett hadn't noticed us. She swished, turned and bent and showed us her bottom, then turned and saw us. She frowned, shrugged her shoulders and went back to it.

We just sat in the truck, not knowing what to do. Finally, I opened the door and got out and Herman did the same. We walked around to the front of the church.

Herman said, "I just remembered why I like women."

"Yep," I said. "Me too."

"She's your woman, isn't she?"

"She's her own woman, but she lets me hang out with her."

"For the first time in a while, I want to take a bath."

"Just a few kinds words, Herman," I said. "You need it."

The door to the church was open, and when we looked in Red was tied up and gagged and lying where Brett had been. Herman went inside and began untying him. I didn't try to stop him.

When the gag was removed, Red began to sputter. "That nigger did this."

"Ixnay on the iggernay," I said. "I don't like it, and Leonard, he likes it less."

"He tied me up for talking too much," Red said. "He said I was a nuisance."

"You are a nuisance," Herman said.

"Et tu Brute?" Red said.

"Where is Leonard?" I asked.

"I don't care," Red said. "I can't believe this. He tied me up like a prize pig and left me here. He'll pay for that. My mother used to put me in the closet, lock me in when she wanted to be rid of me. I told myself I would never allow another person to do what she did."

"We've been doing it for days," I said.

"That's right," Red said, "you have. And I promise there will be reprisal."

"I'm going to help them," Herman said.

"What?" Red said.

Herman nodded. "That's right. I haven't done much with my life, Red, and you've done nothing with yours. Let's do something constructive for a change."

"Rescuing a whore?" Red said. "Are we saving her from a fate worse than death? I have news for all you knights, Tillie's cherry has long been removed from the box and the cherry's consumed and the box is trampled, if you get my meaning."

"That has nothing to do with it," I said. "We're not rescuing her from sex. We're trying to rescue her from abuse."

"She's been abused so long she thinks it's foreplay," Red said.

"I think perhaps one day she figured out it wasn't," I said. "That's why she wants to come home."

Brett appeared in the doorway wrapped in a towel that didn't cover too much. Another towel was wound around her head and hair. She was carrying a bar of soap. "It's hard to have privacy here," she said.

"Wow!" Red said. "Lady, may I say you could be serious money on the hoof if you wanted to trade professions."

"No thanks," Brett said. "I borrowed some soap and some shampoo, Herman. My suggestion is you take advantage of it as well. And these towels could use some soap themselves."

“Herman and I were just discussing his body odor,” I said.

“I hope you weren’t discussing anything else,” she said.

“Sorry about that,” I said. “We had no idea what you were doing.”

“And you spent a while making sure you had no idea,” she said.

“We couldn’t move,” Herman said. “The blood had sunk to our lower extremities.”

“I know where it sunk to,” Brett said. “Leonard tied the turd here up so I could shower and he could nap in the car.”

“Herman is going to help find Tillie,” I said.

“That right?” Brett said, and for the first time in days she looked excited.

“Yes,” Herman said.

Brett walked over to the end of the pew where her clothes lay. She took hold of her panties, and very deftly put them on without losing the towel or giving us a sideshow.

“When do we start?” she asked.

“Today,” Herman said. “The sooner the better.”

Brett slipped on her jeans. It was like the reverse of a snake wiggling out of its skin. “That’s good,” she said. “That’s real good.” She turned, pulled the towel from her body, tossed it on a pew. With her naked back to us she pulled on her shirt while we held our breath. She removed the towel from her head, shook her hair, and when she turned the shirt was half buttoned and her hair fell against it and dampened her breasts. She pulled a long comb from her back pants pocket and began carefully dragging it through her wet hair.

“How long after you three get through looking at my titties are we going to do this thing?” Brett asked.

“We could look a long time,” Red said.

“But we won’t,” Herman said. “We’ll do this soon as the three of you are ready.”

We talked briefly and made some general plans. Brett recovered her revolver where she had hidden it outside under an overturned bucket, stuffed it in her pants, and while Herman stripped off out back and bathed, we went out to see Leonard.

I opened the back seat door and tapped him on the leg. He squirmed, and I tapped him again. When he rolled over, he had a pistol in his hand.

I said, “Howdy.”

He put the gun away, mumbled something and sat up. He rubbed his neck and the back of his head and finally said, “First thing I want to do when I can is jack off, take a good shower, and sleep in a good bed. Maybe eat a steak and a bag of vanilla cookies. I need some cheering up.”

“I don’t feel so spiffy myself,” I said.

“Me neither,” Brett said.

“Sorry about that masturbation line,” Leonard said.

“That’s all right,” Brett said. “I’d like a good fingering myself.”

“Herman is going to help Brett find Tillie,” I said.

Leonard nodded, got out of the car and leaned against it. He said, “That’s good. I’m glad. When are we going?”

“Pretty quick,” I said.

“Those two,” Leonard said. “Can we trust them?”

“Herman, maybe,” I said. “Red, not at all. There’s other problems. We got to go to Mexico sneaky like. We can’t just walk across the border with our guns and enough ammunition to start a revolution.”

“Any idea how we’ll do that?” Leonard asked.

“Herman claims he has a border connection,” Brett said. “But it’ll cost us some money. A thousand dollars. I got the money, so if Herman’s telling the truth, that’s done.”

“I don’t know,” Leonard said. “I wouldn’t trust either one of ’em far as I could throw ’em. Though, the midget I could probably toss pretty far.”

“I hate that little shit,” Brett said. “Far as I’m concerned, I’d put up a hoop and watch you make baskets with him.”

“What’s it going to be?” I said. “We going to trust Herman or not?”

“I have to,” Brett said.

“No you don’t,” Leonard said. “We go Herman’s way, but we don’t trust him. We keep our eyes open and don’t get too lax. I say we put Red in the trunk again.”

“Suits me,” Brett said.

“Not me,” I said.

“Always the fuckin’ humanitarian,” Leonard said.

“He could get gassed, die on us.”

“Your point?” Brett said.

“Amusing,” I said. “But it could happen.”

“He’s right,” Leonard said. “Then we got a dead midget to explain. Another point, we do this thing Herman wants, pay this guy to get us across the Mexican border with our weapons, what then? What about The Farm?”

“I asked him that,” I said. “The Farm is a way station and pleasure house for the Bandito Supremes. Where they are, they feel pretty safe. Got authorities paid off, and there aren’t any immediate authorities anyway.”

“Recreation,” Brett said. “That’s what they’re doing with Tillie. She’s just meat for them. These Bandito Supremes want a little R and R, well, Tillie’s there for them. Sort of like a piece of equipment in a rec room. It’s disgusting.”

“Way you got to look at it, Brett, is like this,” Leonard said. “She ain’t doin’ nothin’ she wasn’t already doin’. She’s doin’ more of it and maybe in rougher circumstances, but it’s not a new experience, so it’s not necessarily a worse life than before. Important thing is, we’re gonna go in there and get her.”

“Herman says the place really isn’t guarded that well,” I said. “There’s so many of them they don’t worry much.”

“How many?” Leonard asked.

“It can vary from time to time,” I said. “Depends.”

“So there could be fifty or a hundred?”

“It’s possible. But there could be three.”

“That’s my man,” Leonard said. “Still looking for that pony.”

“Pony?” Brett said.

“Tell you later,” I said.

“Anyway,” Leonard said, “we’re going to cross the border with all our little guns, then we’re going to waltz in there and shoot the shit out of fifty, maybe a hundred guys. Or maybe three guys, and we’re going to take Tillie with us, get back across the border, and head for the house. That doesn’t sound like much of a plan, Hap.”

“Herman thinks we can maybe do it at night,” I said. “Go in and get Tillie and not cause too much of a ruckus. He knows the place well, and he knows the country around there fairly well.”

“Here’s the good part,” Brett said. “Herman’s connection, he hasn’t seen in ten years. That doesn’t work out, then we have to figure a way to get ourselves across the border.”

“Then, if we managed to do this thing,” I said, “we got to deal with the Bandito Supremes coming after us.”

“I don’t know that’ll amount to much we get a good lead,” Leonard said. “These guys are a bunch of thugs, not the Deerslayer. I doubt they could track sperm on their legs.”

“Herman says the Bandito Supremes are vengeful,” Brett said. “They’ll follow us if they know who to follow. You’d think one little whore wouldn’t be worth it.”

“It’s got nothing to do with that,” I said. “It’s that old macho mentality about crossing the line, and holding the line. Herman was lucky once. If they know it’s him this time, they aren’t going to make any pact. And besides, there’s another reason Herman wants to go. He doesn’t want to come back here even if they don’t see him. He wants to start over. Sort of remake himself.”

“He tell you that?” Leonard said.

“No,” I said. “Not exactly, but that’s what I get from him.”

“He’s got some kind of fantasy going he can take Red away from the life of a thug,” Brett said, “turn him into something better.”

“Yeah,” Leonard said, “and a kind word to a crocodile will get you a smile.”

“It all boils down to this,” I said. “Do we still want to go in?”

“You know what I have to do,” Brett said.

“Then you know what I have to do,” I said.

“I don’t have to do shit,” Leonard said, “but since I got nothing but laundry waiting at home, let’s do this thing.”

21

We drove away from there just before noon, right after Herman set fire to the church. It caught quick and went up like oiled cardboard. Herman left a note and a hundred dollars on his truck seat next to the title for the vehicle. The note gave the title and the land to the Mexican woman. The hundred dollars was back wages. The prairie dog machine remained in the truck bed to go the way of fate. I wondered if the Mexican woman would take to it, start sucking dogs out of the ground to sell. My guess was it beat cooking beans and cornbread for a hundred dollars a month.

I was driving, Leonard was in back with Herman and Brett. Red was sitting up front with me, sullen and quiet for a change. I glanced in the rearview mirror and watched the church burn. For a moment, it looked as if it were wearing a flaming hat, then the whole thing was fire and falling lumber.

“So much for God’s house,” Herman said.

Man, this was something. An East Texas bouncer, a black queer, a ex-sweet potato queen, a six-foot-four overweight retired hit man and former reverend, and a redheaded midget with an attitude. The only thing we needed to top our wagon off were a couple of used-car salesmen, a monkey and an organ grinder.

Late in the day we reached the Mexican border. We stayed in a motel on the Texas side that night in a little town called Echo. Herman made a phone call to his friend, some guy named Bill Early Bird. I listened to the talk, trying to pick up on any code words that might mean bring about three hundred bad guys with shotguns and a lawn mower, but I didn’t detect anything like that. Herman explained what we wanted in simple terms and hung up.

“We wait,” Herman said.

Leonard decided to sit outside in the car with a shotgun, just in case the wrong crowd showed up. I loaded a shotgun myself, sat inside to the left of the door. Brett had her pistol and mine. Two

Gun Mama. Red and Herman watched television.

About nine P.M. there was a knock on the door and I had Red open it up. Standing outside was a big, dark man who almost filled the doorway. He was dressed in a T-shirt, paint-splattered blue jeans jacket, blue jeans, and boots with paint splotches on them.

He looked down at Red, over at Herman, then around the door at me and Brett.

“Come in,” I said.

He glanced at my shotgun, which I had moved slightly to the side so as not to look too unfriendly. He looked at Brett for a while. She held the handguns against the tops of her thighs like little lap warmers.

The big man came inside. Herman stood up and stuck out his hand. The big man took it. There didn’t seem to be any great enthusiasm in the greeting on either part, just formality.

“Herman,” he said. “How are things with the Lord?”

“Rocky,” Herman said.

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

The man had a kind of singsong quality to his voice. His face was pocked.

“This is Bill Early Bird,” Herman said. “He and I used to run together.”

“Long ago,” Bill said.

Herman introduced me and Brett and said, “This is Red, my brother.”

“Red,” Bill said, and stuck out his hand. Red took it and Bill pumped the entire midget like a water pump handle.

Leonard appeared in the open doorway with his shotgun.

Herman said, “And this is Leonard.”

Leonard shut the door, said, “Glad to meet you.”

Bill nodded. “I take it, Herman, these men and this woman are not friends of yours.”

“Not exactly,” Herman said. “They are not friends of Red. I am caught in the middle. Please, sit down.”

Bill started to sit, but Leonard said, “No hard feelings, my man, but I’d like you to come over here and put your hands on the wall.”

Bill looked at Herman. Herman shrugged.

“I don’t suppose while I have my hands on the wall you want me to lower my trousers, do you?” Bill said.

“Only if you want to,” Leonard said.

Bill did as he was told. Leonard held the shotgun to the back of Bill’s head with one hand while he patted him down with the other. Leonard removed a lock-blade knife from Bill’s front pocket and a little revolver from a holster at the small of his back.

“You can sit down now,” Leonard said. “Do that and we’ll get along.”

“We’ll get along all right,” Bill said. “All you got to do is treat me good and don’t call me Chief.”

“He doesn’t like being called Chief,” Herman said. “Bill here, he’s a Kickapoo Indian.”

“Long way from your original stomping grounds, aren’t you?” Leonard said.

“What about you?” Bill said. “My people at least came from this continent.”

“Actually,” Leonard said, “my people come from East Texas.”

“That might as well be another continent,” Bill said, and sat on the bed.

“Story is you can get us across the border into Mexico,” I said. “Carrying guns and ammo.”

“Maybe,” Bill said. “There’s something I must get straight. I am not a great friend of Herman’s. I know him. We have done some work together in the past. Smuggling. I want it understood up front that I’m my own man, and I’ve got my own help, and that’s who I’m taking care of.”

“Help?” Brett said.

“Two men,” Bill said. “One is a pilot. The second man will help in other ways. I want five hundred dollars for each of us.”

“Herman said a thousand,” Brett said.

“Herman has no idea what I want,” Bill said. “Prices change. And I don’t do this much anymore. I have to make it worth my while. And frankly, that’s pocket change.”

“I can write you a check,” Brett said.

Bill laughed.

“I can give you a thousand in cash,” Brett said. “I thought I might need money for something like this. I have that much. A little more, but I’ll need what’s left for food and such.”

“All right,” Bill said. “You give me a thousand cash. Write me a check for five hundred, and put down on the check it’s for car repairs. You get asked, I had to fix your brakes and balance your tires, do a tuneup. All kinds of things. You understand?”

Brett nodded.

“I have to talk to my men,” Bill said. “I don’t even know they’ll do this. I didn’t tell them anything. I wanted to see you first. I want to see some money now.”

“You can see it,” Leonard said, “but you aren’t taking it with you.”

Bill gave Leonard a strained look. “I have to advance my partners some.”

“Why don’t you advance them your best wishes,” Leonard said. “They’ve worked with you before. Right? They trust you. Or do they?”

“Yeah, they trust me, but I don’t trust any of you.”

“But we’re supposed to trust you?” Leonard said.

“I’m the man you asked to see,” Bill said. “Not the other way around.”

“This entire expedition from start to finish has been misguided,” Red said to Leonard. “I suggest you let Herman and I go, cut your losses, and accept that Tillie is a whore and she is going to be busy at the quick-stop five-minute lube for the rest of her life. At least until she’s too ugly to draw customers.”

“I advise you to shut up,” Brett said. “Or you’ll draw flies.”

“Another word out of you, Red,” Leonard said, “and I’m going to see I can flush a midget down the crapper.”

“Lay off,” Herman said.

“I hope you don’t think you scare me,” Leonard said.

“I know I don’t,” Herman said. “But know this. The feeling works in reverse. You don’t scare me. It won’t be worth it for either of us.”

“You people going to do business or what?” Bill said. “Personally, I don’t care who’s got the biggest dick here.”

“Keep talking,” I said.

“I say, five hundred now,” Bill said, “five hundred when we actually start out, and you give me the check when we finish.”

“Here’s how it is, Bill,” I said. “We give you two-fifty now. That’ll keep you in paint thinner, but I advise you not use any until we finish up things.”

Bill’s eyes shifted away from mine.

“And I thought he was just messy,” Brett said.

“There’s paint all over his coat,” I said. “He sniffs a little paint with thinner. They used to call it doing the bag. Sometimes it’s glue instead of paint and thinner. But with Bill here, it’s thinner. Am I right, Bill?”

“I’m not addicted,” he said.

“I really don’t give a shit,” Leonard said. “You don’t touch that shit until we’re out of your life.”

“Five hundred now,” Bill said.

“We don’t even know you’ll follow through on things,” I said. “Two-fifty now. Two-fifty when we get going. Rest of the cash and check when we finish the job.”

“Things are hard,” Bill said. “I need the money.”

“Hell,” Leonard said. “My thing is always hard, but you don’t hear me whining about it.”

“You don’t know what life is like for me,” Bill said.

“Oh shit, here we go,” Leonard said. “Let me guess. You’re displaced Kickapoos. Your culture is all lost. You don’t get to hunt the sacred deer. You know what, that’s sad. Really. But, on the other hand, I don’t give a shit. I’m fuckin’ tired of the whining and the excuses for not getting on with life. I could sit here and give you my poor-little-nigger speech, but I won’t. Because I don’t see myself that way. My people came from a bunch of ignorant farmers, and so did Hap's, and he's white, and that's his drawback. Way I see it, I'm black and I'm human and I don't beg nobody for nothin'. So, you believe whatever you want, but it's not my problem."

"All right," Bill said. "I see where this is going. Take care of yourselves."

"We will," Leonard said. "Try not to track anything on the carpet on your way out."

Bill didn't move. He fumbled inside his jacket for cigarettes.

"Don't smoke that," Brett said.

Bill pushed the cigarette back into the pack. He just couldn't win. He hung his head. He sighed.

"Very well," he said. "I'll take the two-fifty now, and talk to my partners."

"I'll go with you while you talk to your partners," I said. "Then maybe you'll take two-fifty."

Bill didn't even try to argue this time. He merely nodded.

"You, Leonard," Bill said. "One word of caution. Watch yourself. Your mouth could easily write a check with me your ass can't cash."

Leonard grinned at him. "I can write a damn big check, Early Bird."

Brett opened her purse, peeled out two hundred and fifty dollars and gave it to me. I put it in my wallet. I took one of the handguns and put it in the holster I had clipped under my shirt. I said to Bill, "Can we find your friends now?"

Bill nodded.

"We'll keep your weapons here," Leonard said to Bill. "A word of warning. Hap there. He's one of those intellectuals, and he likes poor folks and puppy dogs, niggers, injuns, kikes and rednecks, white trash and midgets. He probably even cares you're a poor little Kickapoo done lost your culture. But you fuck with him, he will stomp your ass into next Sunday."

Bill looked at me. "That true, Hap?"

"Most likely," I said. "But just so you won't think I'm a complete humanitarian, I don't have any kind of thing for cats."

22

Bill Early Bird drove an old Ford pickup that looked as if it had been in a meteor shower. It had gray filler plastered all over it, and what wasn't filler was blue paint and not very good blue paint at that. Every time Bill stepped on the brakes the truck sounded as if it were in pain. The tires were so thin on tread you could almost see the air inside.

We drove through the little town of Echo, Texas, to the outskirts, crossed over a large overpass, went off the highway and down a dirt road and around a curve to where there was no real road, and still we drove. Eventually the overpass loomed above us, and beneath it I could see a fire, and when we parked and got out, I could see the fire came from an old fifty-five gallon drum. The air was cool and the flames leaped and crackled and most of the heat went up and away. There were some cardboard and plywood shacks under the overpass, and there were people to go with them. Four were visible, all Indians, squatting down, passing something between them, and as Bill came up and called out, two others drifted from the hovels and squatted with the others.

"Uncle," Bill called out to one of the men. "It's Billy."

An elderly man, built along the line of five coat hangers with two teeth and lots of gray hair, slurred back Bill's name.

Bill bent down and hugged the old man and the old man patted him on the back. When Bill stood up, he said, "This is my Uncle Brin."

Uncle Brin tried to stagger to his feet, but had to sit down. Not on his haunches this time, but on his ass.

"He's sniffed a little too much," Bill said. "Don't think he does this all the time. Just sometimes he gets down, you know."

From the looks of Uncle Brin, I had an idea that the only time he wasn't sniffing thinner and paint was when he was drinking liquor or was asleep.

Only one of the other men was elderly, or perhaps he just looked like hell. He had more meat on his bones than Uncle Brin, and his head was shaped oddly in front, a little like a pumpkin. The others were young and tough-looking, but wobbly. What the men out front had been passing between them was a paper sack containing a plastic bag containing paint and thinner. I saw Uncle Brin take the sack and put his face in it, and sniff.

I looked at Bill. He looked nervous, even ashamed.

Uncle Brin said, “Hey, Bill, go get us some smokes and some beer, huh?”

Bill nodded. “I will.”

We walked back to the truck. I said, “It’s nice to meet your relatives, but what’s this got to do with anything?”

“Uncle Brin isn’t a uncle by your standards. I suppose he is a cousin. But we call many male relatives uncle.”

“Still, what’s with him?”

“He’s one of the men I want to use.”

“No disrespect here, Bill, but he’s skin and bones. What you going to use him for? A lock pick?”

“He’s not always messed up.”

Bill started up the truck and we drove off. Bill said, “He knows the other man I need. This other man, he won’t do it for me. He might lose his pilot’s license, but he’ll do it for Uncle Brin. And some money.”

“And Uncle Brin will do it for you for some money?”

“Uncle Brin will do it for me anyway, but he needs the money. This man who flies the plane, he owes Uncle Brin a favor for a favor done for his grandfather.”

“Is it an old favor?”

“Yes, and one he has to continue to pay whenever Uncle Brin asks. He would do it without the money.”

“He’s that close to your uncle.”

“They hate each other. This man, this pilot, he honors my uncle for what he has done, not for who he is or if he likes him.”

We drove to the liquor store. I waited while Bill went inside and bought some cigarettes and beer. We drove back to the underpass and Bill carried the case of beer and the carton of cigarettes and set them down by the blazing fifty-five gallon drum. The men swarmed on the hot beer, opened it, drank it as it foamed. After a few sips, the carton of cigarettes was opened and packs were passed around and Bill produced a lighter and lit up one himself.

Bill turned to me. “I must talk to my uncle in private. We must speak in Kickapoo. Will you let me do that?”

“I suppose.”

“I give my word I’m not trying to cheat you.”

“I’ll take it,” I said, having no real choice. I went back to the truck, leaned against the front of it and watched to see if guns might come out. I also checked a good running route and something to hide behind. There didn’t seem to be any good route, as there wasn’t much vegetation or any real rises in the scenery. The best obstruction seemed to be the truck. I put my hand under my shirt and held the pistol butt and watched the men in the shimmering light of the fifty-five gallon drum.

Bill bent down next to Uncle Brin and they talked. Now and then Uncle Brin looked out at me and puffed his cigarette, each puff sucking his cheeks in, making them look as if they were touching inside his mouth. After a time I saw Uncle Brin nod. Bill hugged him, stood, and walked back to the pickup.

“He will talk to this man tomorrow,” he said.

“You know the man yourself?”

“I do. But I told you, this man will not do it for me.”

“You call him this man. Don’t you know his name?”

“I do. But it doesn’t matter. He will not do it for me if I know his name or not … Uncle Brin needs his money now.”

“All right.” I took the two hundred and fifty out of my wallet and gave it to Bill. He gave it to Uncle Brin and we drove back to the highway.

Bill and I made some plans and he dropped me off at the motel. Inside, Leonard turned off the TV, said, “Do we trust him?”

“I think so,” I said. “Don’t know we got a lot of choice if we didn’t trust him.”

I told everyone what had gone on. Herman said, “Bill and I did some business now and then. He was never on the really bad side, like me.”

“You were doing business,” Red said. “That’s all.”

Herman ignored him. “Bill helped me run some guns and some grass. He helped me haul a few of the Bandito Supremes out of the U.S. and into Mexico. He arranged for an airplane. Some cars. He’s trustworthy.”

“He got paid, though, correct?” Red asked.

“He got paid,” Herman said.

“That I can understand,” Red said. “That makes Bill a professional. That’s what’s important. Professionalism.”

“What kind of world is it where you got to do business with a crook?” Brett said.

“Kind where if you want to get something done illegal, you got to ask a crook,” Leonard said. “Think about it, we’re riding around with a crook and an ex-crook.”

“I guess that makes us crooks,” Brett said.

“I suppose it does,” Leonard said.

“Seems to me,” Red said, “I’ve served my purpose. If my brother is set on helping you, then he must, but I suggest you let me go.”

“I don’t think we want to deal with Big Jim right now,” Leonard said. “We got a lot on our plate.”

“Big Jim may not be all that interested in helping me,” Red said. “In fact, I fear he thinks I was in on all this, and I would not be surprised if Wilber were not fostering that belief.”

“How’s that?” I said.

“Wilber has his good qualities, but loyalty isn’t one of them. He likes money, and if he feels he can discredit me, put himself in the catbird seat, then he will. My guess he’s making me responsible for all that business in Oklahoma City as well. Painting himself as a victim. That’s my take.”

“So if we cut you loose, where would you go?” I asked.

“I’m uncertain, but I would rather face that problem as it came to me than be with people who pistol-whip me, tie me up and humiliate me. I’m surprised I haven’t been asked to perform some circus tricks. Some flips and handstands. Perhaps a cartwheel.”

“Shit, that’s not a bad idea,” Leonard said.

Red gave Leonard a firm look, then slowly dropped his eyes. My guess was he feared Leonard might be serious, and that he would be forced to perform. Red picked up a can of Coke, swigged from it, then eased into sullen silence.

That night was not a good one. Herman was supposedly helping us. We didn’t want to alienate him by tying him to a chair, and we felt it might be bad form to tie Red to one. Leonard and I, by unspoken plan, stayed awake with the shotgun. Herman and Red watched TV most of the night, dozing on the floor from time to time.

Brett slept all night on the bed and snored loudly. Who says it’s a man’s world?

23

Next morning Bill called and we made arrangements for him to come over before dark and lead us to our airplane ride. When he came we followed his pickup through town and out.

The town where we had slept, Echo, wasn't much. There were lots of tractors parked about and all kinds of yellow equipment that might have been designed for most anything. Farming. Tank warfare or prairie dog removal. In fact, Echo seemed little more than a town of old cars, old people, and huge yellow machines.

We drove out where there were no houses, no mobile homes, and no beauty, only long miles of dirt and brushy growth and soaring buzzards.

Miles later, we dipped down into an area between great hills and rocks and the falling shadows of the late afternoon. Beyond the hills, stretched out on a flat expanse of land that went for so many acres the eye could not follow, was a long tin shotgun building in front of which grew an oak that looked as if it might suddenly shed its sad sunburned leaves, keel over, and die. There was a relatively new blue pickup parked by the tree.

A man was sitting in a lawn chair under the oak, and when we pulled up close to the shed we saw he was drinking from a can of beer. There was a Styrofoam chest beside his chair. He looked to be a Kickapoo, or certainly to have a lot of Indian blood. He had on blue jeans, boots, and a leather jacket, which seemed inappropriate for the heat. His hair was oily and combed up high and flies had found it; they circled it, looking for a solid place to land.

Bill got out of his truck toting a pack of gear and four canteens strapped to the outside of it. We got out of the car, holding our guns. The man in the lawn chair didn't seemed surprised by any of it. He sipped his beer. Bill nodded at him, and the man nodded back.

When we were gathered around the chair, the man crushed the empty can, tossed it on the ground, pulled back the lid on the Styrofoam chest, clawed another beer out of the icy water, closed up the chest and said, “You got the money?”

“We got the money,” I said.

He popped the tab on the can, drank from it, held out his free hand, palm up. I took two hundred and fifty out of my wallet and put it in his palm. He folded his fingers over it and the money disappeared inside his jacket faster than a teenager can stuff a fuck-zine into a sock drawer.

“We leave when it gets dark,” he said.

“Since that might be an hour or so,” Brett said, “why don’t you quit suckin’ them suds. I don’t want a drunk flyin’ me nowhere.”

“You can stay here, lady,” he said.

“Not hardly,” Brett said. “I’m the one financin’ this little shindig.”

“I keep the money, and I drink the beer,” the man said.

Leonard kicked the ice chest over, used his leg to sweep the chair out from under the man, who hit the ground, came up rolling, reaching inside his jacket. By then I was on him. I hit him with a backhand. It wasn’t a hard strike across the jaw, but it wasn’t gentle either. He went down on one knee and said, “Shit. I think you loosed a tooth.”

“What the fuck you doin’?” Bill said to him. “They all got guns.”

“I didn’t mean nothing,” the man said. “What’s everybody so jumpy for?”

“Too much coffee,” I said.

Leonard, who was carrying the shotgun, said, “You must have had one too many beers already, fuckin’ with a bunch of folks got guns.”

“I’ve had one beer,” the man said.

“Must be one too many,” Leonard said. “And it’s rude not to offer us some. Everybody get a beer.”

We did. We popped the tops and sucked on them. I didn’t drink beer much anymore, but I enjoyed this one.

Leonard said, “And keep your hand out of your jacket, asshole, or you'll wake up with it in your ass."

The man smiled. "All right. All right. You're all tough guys. And one tough broad. Where'd you get the midget?"

"There they go again," Red said.

"We bought him off a souvenir rack," Leonard said. "But we lost the funny hat came with him."

"That's enough," Herman said.

"And you got a giant to go with him," the man said. He laughed and brushed the seat of his pants off, uprighted his chair, found a fresh beer on the ground and opened it.

"Where's the plane?" Brett said.

"In the hangar," the man said. "I'm not supposed to fly it. I'm not supposed to have it. I had my license taken away. I used to fly puddle jumpers for the U.S. Mail."

"And why did you have your license taken away?" I asked.

"I crashed one," he said. "Killed the motherfucker with me, which was no loss. I didn't like him anyway. I don't think that bothered them so much, but I lost a lot of mail. Burned up. 'Course, I kept some things and they found out, and I ended up nearly going to jail big-time. They didn't want the scandal, so I gave back the courier packet."

"What was in it?" Brett asked.

"Money," he said. "By the way. They call me Irvin."

The shotgun building was long and dark and hot. When Irvin hit the lights dust motes swam around like little sponges underwater and dust rose up from our feet in billows, and as our eyes adjusted we saw our ride. It looked like something you'd wind up with a rubber band and toss.

"Them wings glued on?" Leonard asked.

"It's better than it looks," Irvin said.

"I sure as hell hope so," Brett said. "When's the last time you flew it?"

"Not so long ago that you no longer recall how to fly, I presume?" Red said.

"Month ago," Irvin said. "But it's gassed and ready, and safe, long as you don’t make too long a flight or get in too big a hurry.”

“Or want to get airborne,” Leonard said.

“It’ll get up there,” Irvin said. “It just heats up some you fly too long. Unfortunately, it’s the engine heats, not the cabin. Not unless it catches on fire. Which, if we push too hard it could.”

“Oh, that’s good,” Brett said.

“It’s warm now, but come nightfall, up there, you best have some long jammies on under your clothes. It’ll freeze your balls off. And in your case, lady, whatever’s hangin’.”

I turned to Bill. “This is it?”

Bill shrugged, “I didn’t say I could offer you Air Force One.”

“This is Negative One,” Brett said.

When night came it turned cold as Irvin predicted. We helped push the plane out of the hangar, then boarded. It was crowded in there, us with our guns, and Red ended up sitting on the floor.

The plane’s outside lights were dim, the inside control panel lights a sickly green. The motor sounded as if it would really rather not do this. The runway was bumpy. We left out of there with a bang and clatter and a sickening lurch.

We bobbed into the night sky and the engine coughed and sputtered and the propeller on the left wing stopped and started, eventually caught as it cast the remnants of a wasp nest away. Directly below us there was nothing but the dark land, and way to the left were lights, clean and clear and bright, like fallen stars. I assumed they were the lights of sleepy Echo.

We rose higher, but never really gained much altitude. The night grew darker, and Irvin was right, the plane was cold. It bit through our clothes and filled our socks and shoes and circled about us like a wraith.

Red said, “This is most unpleasant.”

“Can we drop you somewhere?” Leonard said.

“Quite amusing,” Red said.

“Yeah,” Leonard said, “well I’d like to hear you laugh on the way down.”

"Leave him alone," Herman said.

"All of you shut up," Irvin said. "Let me concentrate. Mexican Border Patrol, they spot us, they'll take a shot at us. Had a bullet come through this ole rotten floor once, ran up my trouser leg, come out through the skin on my knee. Close call. Didn't need any more than a Band-Aid. I got an iron plate under the seat here now, don't want to catch one in the balls or up the ass."

"How are the other seats fixed?" Leonard asked.

"Just cushions," Irvin said.

"Hell," I said to Leonard, "your balls are iron anyway, aren't they?"

"You know, you're right," Leonard said.

We continued to fly low, trying to stay under radar, if there was any, trying to take a straight line to where we were going, which, according to Herman and Bill, was on the edge of the Great Plateau and the Western Lands, some of the most inhospitable terrain in all of Mexico.

We flew for some time. How long I can't say. Couple hours at least. I nodded off to the hum of the motor, Brett and I falling together for warmth. When I awoke it was to a coughing engine.

"Is the engine playing out?" I said.

"No," Irvin said. "I'm lowering us. I make a change up, down, or sideways, the engine farts. I got to get some work done on it one of these days. Everybody grab your asses, we're going down."

Irvin cranked the plane into a steep turn, and down we went at an angle so tight we were temporarily lying on the side of the plane, then suddenly we were straight, being tossed about the cabin like jumping beans. Next thing we knew, the ground was coming up fast. I took hold of Brett and tried to remember my plan about going out between her legs, but there was no time for that.

The plane sputtered and spat and leveled out. We came in hot as a flaming hard-on, the nose down a little too much. At the last moment Irvin righted us and we smoothed out and the wheels hit and the plane hopped a few times and came to a jerky stop.

We got off, pronto. I bent over and lost what I had last eaten, which only reminded me I was hungry. Or maybe what I felt gnawing in my stomach was fear.

Leonard gave me some water from one of the canteens Bill had brought. I rinsed my mouth, then drank a sip. I looked around. There was nothing. Just a flat expanse of land, some rolling night-shadowed dirt, some brush clumps here and there.

Bill came over, said, “What you do is, you walk five miles that way.” He was pointing to the west.

“Five miles?” Brett said. “Why the fuck not ten? Shit, you could have gotten closer.”

“They’d have seen us come in,” Irvin said. “May have already. I’ve run some stuff for them, and I don’t want to lose jobs in the future. More than that, I don’t want them to find me. I want to keep my balls, they give me ballast. You walk that five miles and you’ll come to a place where there are lots of things growing. That means you are nearing water. Next you will come to an oasis. At the oasis is The Farm. You can’t miss it.”

“And if we walk five miles and there’s nothing?” Leonard said. “We’re in the middle of the desert and you’ve got our money, and come morning our asses are burnt crackers. I don’t think I like this plan.”

Herman and Red came over. Herman looked very big in the moonlight. Red seemed oddly smaller than ever.

“Bill’s right,” Herman said. “This is the area. We go in, we get the woman, we go out.”

“You head southeast,” Irvin said. “You meet the plane there.”

“Seems to me it would still be easier to come back here,” Leonard said.

“It would be easier, but it will be easier for them as well,” Irvin said. “And like I said. They know this plane. I’m not putting myself or money I might make in the future on the line with these guys for your lousy money or your lousy asses. Though, lady, I must admit, you got an ass worth lining up for.”

“That’s enough of that,” I said.

Irvin held up his hands. “Hey! Peace.”

“This is rough country,” Leonard said. “How we gonna know we’re going the right way to meet you? What if they follow us? They’re gonna see your plane then, aren’t they?”

“They follow you that far then my ass is dead,” Irvin said. “But truth is, you’ll be lucky to make it that far. You’d be lucky to make it to the plane if I kept it where it’s sitting. You’ll be lucky you bring your asses out at all. I’m not sending you in there. You want to do it. It’s your problem, and it’s my rules for flying you back.”

“Bill knows his way around?” Brett asked.

“Hey,” Bill said, dropping one of the canteens and a small pack over my shoulder. “I’m not going. Me and Irvin will be waiting on you. I don’t owe you a fuckin’ thing. We’ll give you till tomorrow night, late, then we fly back to Texas. You don’t show up, may I now extend my best hopes and wishes that it all ends quickly.”

“I know the country,” Herman said. “I can lead you through it. I know where Irvin wants us to meet. It’s maybe ten miles on foot.”

“Ten miles!” Leonard said. “I say the goddamn plane waits for us here.”

“If you can find transportation, take it,” Bill said. “You people have a change of heart, I’ll take you back. Now. But no refunds.”

“I just want to get Tillie,” Brett said.

“That’s what we do, then,” I said.

“Red stays with the plane,” Herman said.

“Capital idea,” Red said.

I looked at Leonard and he shrugged.

I looked at Brett. “Whatever,” she said.

“Good,” Irvin said. “It’s decided. Good luck and all that.”

Bill said, “There’s some food in the pack, some blankets to put around you if you get cold. A knife. Matches. Some odds and ends. Light stuff. Don’t worry about returning it.”

Bill and Irvin started back to the plane.

Red said, “Take care of yourself, Herman. If it is you or these people, make it you. I think you and I can start our own business when you come out of this. To hell with Big Jim. We both have the experience. What do you say?”

“I say we talk later,” Herman said.

Red shook hands, hugged his brother, and went back to the plane.

Herman pulled the pack off my shoulder. “We’ll take turns with this.”

Herman started out across the wasteland.

We followed, carrying our guns.

24

We hadn't gone very far when we heard the plane lift off. We looked back and saw it make a half circle and head south, a great shadow against the night sky, a couple of weak red lights burning.

"We won't see them again, will we?" Brett said.

"Probably not," I said. "We just got to do this as best we can."

"Bill will make Irvin wait the allotted time," Herman said.

"Your brother?" Leonard asked. "He going to make him wait?"

"Red … I can't say," Herman said. "Red has feelings for me when I'm present, but I suspicion out of sight out of mind to some extent."

We walked for a long time, eventually began to notice there was more foliage. It was sparse at first, like a few pimples on a teenager's face, then it became thick as acne, dark and full in the moonlight. Finally there were scrubby trees. We came to a slight rise, and just before topping it, I took the pack and canteen from Leonard, who had been carrying it, and we all shared water. Satisfied, we started over the rise and stopped suddenly.

Down below in a place not deep enough to be a valley, but lower than the land we had crossed, there was a very green expanse and there was a log cabin built ranch style. The logs had obviously been hauled in. There wasn't a tree anywhere big enough to hollow out into a canoe, let alone build a house.

The cabin was brightly lit and there was a lot of activity inside. We could hear someone singing. Badly. And there was laughter and loud talk.

Off to the right of the cabin was a great pool of water and in the middle of the pool was a huge water pump under an open shed. There was a bridge that ran from the shed to the cabin. The water looked like ink in the moonlight. To the left of the cabin was a corral, and in it were horses and mules; the mules easily distinguished by their tall ears.

Further left was a huge tank, heating fuel most likely, and beyond that a satellite dish, and further left a barn like you would expect to find somewhere in Iowa. There were two jeeps parked out front.

To prevent being outlined in the moonlight, we all hit the dirt and lay on top of the rise. Leonard said, “This has to be it.”

“This is it,” Herman said. “I’ve been here. I came by plane and was driven in by jeep by a slightly different route. I remember it well. It’s kind of a country club, if what you like to do instead of golf is drink, pill, and screw. You’d be amazed how well equipped it is. Television. Movies. Horseback riding.”

“We put one of the vehicles out of commission, take the other,” Leonard said.

“What we do first,” Herman said, “is slide down there and see what’s happening. Try and locate Tillie. There’s a chance she might not even be here. If she isn’t, we slide right on back, head to the plane on foot, and they never know we’ve been here.”

“He has a point,” I said.

“I’ll snoop down there, see if I can locate Tillie,” Leonard said. “I see her, I’ll come back and report. Then you disable one of the rides, Herman, hot-wire the other. Being a former career criminal, I assume you know how to do that.”

“I can manage,” Herman said.

“Then it’s you and me, Hap,” Leonard said. “We go down there and open up a can of blazing whup ass with a lava chaser.”

“You and Hap and me,” Brett said.

“If you insist on being modern,” Leonard said. “Me and Hap and you. One thing though, I go down there and you hear gunfire, don’t think I want to do the noble thing. You know, like have you leave my ass so you can escape. You come down there with guns blazing.”

“They’ll think it’s the Battle of the Bulge,” I said.

“I’ll take the honky spreader,” Leonard said.

I had been carrying it. I traded it for the standard pump shotgun. Brett was carrying one of the modified Winchesters. We had given Herman the other one. With some reluctance I gave him ammunition to put in it. I gave Leonard shotgun shells, fixed me and Brett up with loads.

"I'm so goddamn scared I'm shaking," I said.

"I get scared," Leonard said, "my dick gets hard."

Leonard slipped the strap of the shotgun over his shoulder, went quietly and quickly over the rise on his stomach and began to crawl toward the ranch house.

Herman said, "I hope he knows what he's doing."

"Trust me," I said. "He did this in Vietnam. He's got a houseful of medals to prove it. He's forgot more about stalking than you and me and Natty Bumppo ever knew."

"Yeah, well," Herman said, "let's hope the stuff he's forgotten isn't the important stuff."

The ground was pretty flat, but the brush grew thick now and was full of shadow. Leonard used this as his protection, crawling close to the ground.

I was starting to get giddy. Perhaps I needed a nap. A long vacation. Maybe Tillie was better off where she was and I was better off back at the house with Brett. I began to hanker for my bouncing job. I began to view working in the rose fields as a good time. I tried not to think too much about what I was doing. I didn't want to shoot anybody, but I didn't want to get Brett, Leonard, or myself killed by not shooting anyone.

I tried not to think about it. Trying not to think about it turned out to be a lot like thinking about it. I looked at Brett. She was peeking over the rise, watching Leonard slither down there. The moonlight fell across her face, and normally moonlight softened it, but now, without makeup, it looked hard and harsh, almost corpse pale. Her eyes were narrowed and her mouth, normally full and inviting, was a thin line. Her hair was bound back severely with a black ribbon. She held the Winchester like someone who wanted to use it and might be disappointed if she didn't get to.

I thought she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

"He's up to the house," Herman said.

“Someone comes out of the house, points him out, we got to start shooting right then,” I said. “Maybe we should trade guns, Brett. Modesty aside, I can shoot the ass off a fly at a hundred yards.”

“I’m a good shot myself,” Brett said.

“Yeah, but I’m going to venture I’m better,” I said. “Leonard says I’m the best there is.”

“Like he knows everything,” Brett said.

“Don’t let him hear you say I said it, but about some things he knows more than anyone has a right to. Like how well I shoot. You get inside, maybe you should have the shotgun. Easy to handle, spreads people all over the place. It’s alternately loaded with buckshot and slugs.”

Brett thought a moment, traded weapons with me.

“You start getting heated up,” Herman said to Brett, “mind where you’re firing that thing.”

I eased up slightly on the rise, lay the dark-barreled Winchester on the dirt mound, and pointed it down there. I saw a man come outside lighting a cigarette. Behind him, through the open door, came the sound of music and laughing. I saw a woman in a red dress walk by. She was long and lean with big breasts and reddish hair. I couldn’t see her face.

Tillie?

I drew a bead on the man. He closed the door, clung close to the wall, finally fell away from it, staggered into the foliage, shook his head, slapped the back of his neck as if to wake himself. He opened his fly and started pissing while he smoked.

A shadow came off the ground and fell down on him and the cigarette shot out of the man’s mouth and the man went down. A moment later he was dragged into the foliage.

“Leonard must have knifed him,” Herman said.

“Strangled him,” I said. “Leonard can constrict those arteries, crush your windpipe while you’re still trying to decide what’s happening. That’s one down.”

“But the question is,” Brett said, “one of how many?”

“I don’t think there’s a lot,” Herman said. “You can’t judge by the transportation, ’cause a lot of people get dropped off here. They hang out two or three days, then back to work. Kind of like a company picnic. Except for the whores. A lot of them get on the wrong side of these guys while they’re drinking and boozing. Throw in sex and the fact these people don’t have to pay for anything they do … Bad combination.”

“These people?” Brett said.

“Yeah,” Herman said. “I was one of them. But not now.”

I saw Leonard move out of the brush and over to a window, then away from it. He peeked in another, went around the side of the house and past the corral. The horses and mules rumbled about, then he was behind the house and out of sight.

We waited and watched a long time.

No Leonard.

I was beginning to get worried when I heard him speak softly behind us. “It’s me,” he said. “Don’t anybody shoot.”

“Goddamn, Leonard!” Brett said. “I damn near threw a turd.”

“Sorry,” Leonard said, squatting on the ground.

“You’re good,” Herman said.

“Yeah,” Leonard said. “I know.”

“What’s it like?” I said.

“Bad,” Leonard said. “In the front room I counted ten. It’s a big house. I went all around it. The windows at the back are covered. I could hear activity in the back room. Sex.”

“Did you see Tillie?” Brett asked.

“I think so,” Leonard said. “I saw three women. There’s one looks something like Tillie’s picture, but I think maybe she’s had some work done.”

“Work?” Brett said.

“I think she … or they … had her lips filled with collagen, or whatever that stuff is makes women look like they just got punched in the mouth. She’s got red hair. A red dress on.”

“I saw her pass the doorway,” I said.

Leonard nodded. “I think maybe she’s had something done to her nose and cheeks too. Sort of Barbie-dolled up. But I'm pretty sure it's her."

"Maybe we wait awhile till everyone's good and drunk or drugged," I said.

"You never know when a new group comes in," Herman said. "The girls down there, they don't get much rest. Truth is, they keep 'em so hyped on pills, they lose a lot of 'em. They keep 'em fired up because the traffic is constant. But one of 'em keels over, there's plenty of sand to put them under out there, and there's always a new one to bring in."

"I don't need to hear any more," Brett said.

"I take the front," I said. "Leonard, you take the back. I assume there's a back door?"

"Yeah, but the hot action is up front," Leonard said. "You and me ought to go in together. It'll take both of us. We maybe can surprise them and take Tillie out without having to get too active. In the meantime, Herman has to put one of the vehicles out of whack, and hot-wire the other. Unless you can do that, Brett."

Brett shook her head.

"Then you got to go in the back, Brett," Leonard said. "You got to go in there meaner than a junkyard dog with a hot poker up its ass. What you see that ain't Tillie, ain't one of the working girls, you may have to shoot."

"And you have to watch the working girls," Herman said. "They have odd loyalties sometimes."

"You got to grab Tillie if you see her and take her out whichever way is out," Leonard said. "You got to try and grab the ride Herman's wiring. And Herman, you got to protect that ride and cover our asses when we come out."

"Done," Herman said. "I'll go down now. When I wave, one jeep's dead and the other is hot-wired. Get the woman, and we're out of here."

"When Herman waves," I said, "you go first, Brett. Go wide and around back. You don't enter. You don't do shit until you hear us up front. When we let loose, you count to three. Slowly. Then you go in the back. If it's locked, blow off the lock and kick your way in. Remember, when you crank down on that baby the first shot will cover half the room. The second, the slug, will knock a hole in someone about the size of your fist.”

Leonard gave Herman his lock-blade knife.

“Luck to us all,” Herman said, and he went over the rise and down.

25

Herman made it, poked a knife in the tire. We could hear the air go out of it all the way up the hill. But no one came out of the house. The music was loud and no one was on guard. It wasn't a place they thought they had to be on guard.

Herman cut the rest of the tires. We could hear the air from them as well. Herman waved at us. Brett took a deep breath. I said, "Remember, it gets down to brass tacks, hon, you cover your ass."

"I will," she said, and kissed me.

"Go wide," Leonard said. "No hurry. Take it easy. We'll watch till you get behind the house before we make a move. Find some place to lay down back there and wait for our noise. When you hear it, let it be a starting gun. Don't think about it. You come through that back door like you're ten feet tall and bulletproof."

"I think I can do this," Brett said.

"You can't," I said, "just hold your position out there somewhere. We'll do what we can."

"I can do it," Brett said. She turned and ran wide along the low ridge, went over it stooping, making a wide circle toward the back of the house.

Leonard rolled over on his back and stuck out his hand and I shook it. He said, "Good luck, brother."

"Ditto," I said.

"When this is over, Hap, what you say we make something of our lives?"

"I'd like that."

"I mean it this time."

"I mean it every time."

"But it don't change."

"I mean for it to."

“We got to do more than mean it this time. It’s got to happen.”

“Maybe I don’t know how to change.”

“We’re going to learn how. Got me?”

I saw that Brett had gone wide and was now behind the house. Herman was out of sight. Most likely in the jeep. I said, “Watch your ass, Leonard.”

“You too,” he said, and grinned at me. The moonlight made his teeth seem magnificently white, as if they were lit by blacklight. I gave him a pat on the arm and we eased over the rise on our bellies, made a Y. Me to the left, Leonard to the right. We were about thirty feet apart, crawling toward the thick clusters of brush in front of the house. It was slow go and hard on the body, especially since I was toting a few more pounds than I needed. The air seemed clean and sharp as a knife inside my lungs. My mouth was dry. My body seemed disconnected from my mind. As if I were standing up on the hill watching myself ease down toward the house. I tried not to think beyond the moment. The moment was all that mattered now. I had to be alert. I had to be ready.

Quit thinking about the moment, goddammit, about being ready. Just be ready. Keep crawling. An inch at a time. Eyes open, ears alert. Reach down inside yourself and find that primal part of yourself. The old reptilian brain. The part of the mind that is nothing more than motor response; the part that’s pure survival. Don’t think, just do.

The brush was sharp with thorns and bristles and it tore at my light jacket. I slipped out of the jacket, took the Winchester shells from it, and put them in my right back pocket. I took the pistol out of the jacket and slipped it in my left back pocket. I crawled on.

A sidewinder rattlesnake slithered in front of me and went into the brush. It was all I could do not to leap up and start running. All I could do not to open fire on it.

I thought, you’re going to run like hell from a snake, but you think you’re going to kick open the front door of a house full of bad-asses and go in there shooting?

Reptilian brain, my ass.

You are one crazy sonofabitch, Hap Collins.

Finally I bellied within twenty feet of the cabin. Around the door the vegetation was cleared. I could smell food coming from under the crack of the door. Steak maybe. My stomach rolled over. It was loud and rambunctious in there. They were playing ZZ Top's "Legs." Just a bunch of guys having a party. Drinking and doping and dancing and banging whores. Who was I to interrupt them? I didn't make Tillie a whore. I didn't ask her to run with the wrong crowd. I didn't even know her.

I turned my head. I couldn't see Leonard, just brush. After a moment he raised his hand above the brush. We both rose and darted toward the door. I stopped on the left side of the entryway, Leonard on the right. He looked at me. I took a deep breath and nodded.

Leonard turned the knob, swung the door open, stepped in and I went in behind him. He fanned right, I fanned left. At a glance I saw eight men. One of them, a black man, was lying on the floor in a pool of blood. Another black man was sitting in a chair beside him holding the dead man's head, saying over and over, "That nigger's dead. I killed that nigger."

As everyone turned to look at us, the black man kept repeating himself. "That nigger's dead. I killed that nigger." Apparently he and his buddy had had an altercation, and now his buddy was gradually assuming room temperature. No one else seemed in the least bothered by this.

There were two women in the room, and one of them, a pretty black girl, naked except for a T-shirt that almost covered her breasts and none of her bottom, wobbled over to the wall, stepped in the dead man's blood and sat her naked ass in it. "Wow," she said. The other woman, whose hair was so bleached it looked like cotton candy, was completely naked and being held up by a man so small his head was just under her left breast. As she wobbled, his greasy hair kept lifting it as if it might be trying to wave.

"Who the fuck are you?" said one of the men. He wore leather pants and work boots and was shirtless. He was balding and bearded and had a big belly. Tattooed on his belly was a blue and red eagle with a stick of lit dynamite clutched in its beak. On his chest was tattooed I LICK PUSSY LIKE A DOG. In green letters. Very festive. I didn't worry about what was tattooed on the knuckles of both hands. Too far away. But I figured it was easily on the intellectual level of the chest tattoo.

"Everybody shut up," I yelled over the music. "We're here for Tillie."

"Tillie?" said another man. "Who the fuck's Tillie?"

"It got to be one of the whores," said the black man.

"Man, y'all ain't none of us?" said another.

"No shit," Leonard said. "All you got to do is give us Tillie, and we will be on our way."

"You can get right back to cutting one another, fuckin', and dancing," I said. "Just as soon as we take Tillie out that door. By the way, you need to bury that motherfucker on the floor. That stuff running out of him isn't prune juice."

The guy with the tit on his head said to the woman he was holding up, "You Tillie?"

The stoned woman shook her head. "I don't think so."

That was when one of the men in the back, either less stoned than the others or more so, produced a handgun quick as a bunny fucks and fired it. The shot hit me in the shoulder, and without really knowing how, I was on the floor. Then I heard Leonard cut down with the shotgun and the middle of the room went away. Lick Pussy Man had a hole in his eagle and a couple guys were lying on the floor in his blood, moaning. The gun roared again and the guy with the handgun spun around and landed face first. What was left of his head flowed across the floor.

Time stood still. I got hold of the Winchester and used it to help myself up. Now I felt pain. There was a roar at the back of the place, followed by a yell, then another roar. The door at the rear flew open and there was Brett, followed by the stench of gunpowder. A wreath of smoke circled around her head, blood was sprinkled on her face, blood was on the wall behind her. One hand was clamped on Tillie's elbow, the other held the shotgun pushed up against her hip. Tillie was zonked and completely naked. Like her mother she was a real redhead. Leonard had been right, there had been some work done on her face, but it was her.

"Out of the way!" Brett said. "Fuck out of the way. I'll shoot any fucker in my way."

Those still standing parted. Brett and Tillie went between us and out the door. Brett's face looked demonic. Tillie looked as if she might be trying to add up a hard math problem.

A couple of men, half dressed, but holding heat, rushed out of the back room. A woman peeked out between them, then turned and went away. The men were in the room now, both zonked as lords, but trying to sober. "What the fuck?" one of them said. "What the fuck?"

"Avon," Leonard said. "And we mean business."

Then I suppose it all came together for everyone, what was really happening. Pistols snapped out of back pockets and ankle holsters. I cut down the Winchester, cocking and firing. Metal bees buzzed by me, and I kept firing. People seemed to leap away from me, and I saw the girl who had been using her tit for a hat go back in a blaze of flesh and bone as one of my wild shots hit her in the chest. I pivoted to look at the woman sitting on the floor. She was pulling a pistol out from under the dead black man's shirt and pointing it at me. I turned and fired and the shot drove her head back into the wall and the other black man yelled something at me and I saw he had a gun and I fired. I had gone prehistoric, sniffing that swamp gas and tar. I think I shot him three times. All I know was a moment later I was cocking and pulling the trigger on an empty rifle. I heard Leonard letting fly again, realized he'd been blasting all the time, then through the back door, out of other rooms more men began to pour. They had shotguns and pistols and no sense of personal safety.

I cut down with the shotgun barrel and it was as if a great and invisible wave tore through the fresh recruits, then I was yelling to Leonard to back out of there, and out he went, and me after him, the wall splintering behind us, the men from the back rooms falling over the bodies of their comrades, slipping in their blood.

I said we backed out of there. Hell, we ran out of there. The jeep came whipping up to the door. We jumped in and Herman lifted his rifle with one hand and fired at the doorway, then he dropped it, grabbed the steering wheel, and away we went.

Just as I was easing myself to a sitting position, there was a blast and I felt stings all over my lower left side. Leonard cut down on those behind us and Herman stabbed the accelerator through the floor. We bolted up and over the ridge where we had hidden earlier, and turned south. Behind us more bullets popped and hissed, but now we were running on the other side of the ridge and they couldn't see us and their shots were striking the dirt.

"Holy shit!" Brett said. "Holy fucking shit!"

"Shit," I said. "We killed a bunch of people, Leonard. We killed a bunch of people."

"Of course we did," Leonard said, putting a hand on my shoulder, pulling it back as he felt the blood. "Of course we did."

"Oh, God," Brett said. "They weren't so tough, were they? Were they?"

My thigh began to ache. I looked down. It was bleeding, turning my pants wet. My side hurt. I reached over and felt it. Small wounds. Pellets under the skin. I felt limp.

Behind us I saw a blur of white. Leonard saw it about the same time.

A horse.

A man riding bareback.

One of the men had bridled a horse and was trying to chase us down.

"Fuckin' Lone Ranger," Leonard said.

The Lone Ranger was unsteady on the horse, but he was firing at us with a handgun. A bullet whizzed between us, just missed Herman's back and webbed the windshield.

I reached in the front seat and picked up Herman's Winchester, cocked it, aimed and shot. The horse went down and rolled over, throwing the man. The man stumbled to his feet. The horse didn't move.

"You missed," Brett said.

"No, he didn't," Leonard said. The jeep left the man far behind us, a little fleshy dot against the great landscape of the desert. "Shit, Hap, what did that horse ever do to you? I can't believe you spared that fucker's life and shot the horse. You are some kind of work, brother.”

I dropped the Winchester and lay back against the side of the jeep, my head tilted upward. I held my bleeding shoulder and watched the stars bound and bob to the jerks and surges of the ride. Dust came up from the desert and lashed about us and filled my nose. I thought I could still smell blood and gunpowder. The roar of gunfire was in my ears. My legs were starting to shake. I felt as if I might suddenly burst out crying. My ass hurt. I reached around and pulled out the Winchester shells and the revolver that were riding in my back pocket, dropped them on the floor of the jeep. I lay back again and felt weak, so goddamn weak.

Leonard took off his jacket, then his shirt. He gave the shirt to Tillie, who just looked at it. Brett took it and slipped Tillie into it, buttoned it as if she were dressing a small child. It was large enough to make Tillie a short dress.

“Are we going somewhere?” Tillie said.

Brett patted her. The jeep bounced us painfully over rough terrain. I was growing colder. Leonard moved over next to me and turned his coat over and tore out the lining on one side. He stuffed the lining under my shirt, into the shoulder wound. He tied his belt around my leg and pulled it tight by winding the barrel of my revolver in it. He slipped his coat over me, sat with his arm around my shoulders.

“You gonna be all right, Hap,” he said.

“Rumble tumble,” I said, remembering what Red had called a bad fight. “Rumble tumble.”

26

We came to a little road that seemed oddly placed out in the middle of the desert. We drove down the road a ways and came to a little town that looked to be out of an old Western movie. It was at least sixty or seventy years back in time. There were very few lights and there was only one place open, a cantina.

“You sure this is it?” Brett asked.

“Yeah,” Herman said. “The airstrip is on the other side of town. It’s used for smuggling. Lot of drugs are run from here. The town isn’t much, but it’s what’s out here and it’s reasonably close to the border.”

Herman drove over to the cantina and parked.

“What are you doin’?” Leonard asked.

“I know Bill and Red,” Herman said. “They’re more likely to be here than sitting out at the airplane. I got a feeling Irvin isn’t far different. They aren’t here, it’s a short trip to where the plane’s supposed to be.”

“Make it quick,” Leonard said.

Herman went inside. Leonard adjusted the belt on my leg. “Guess it wasn’t a major artery,” he said. “Stopped bleeding for the most part. I think we can take this off.”

“Yeah,” I said. “All the blood’s on the floor of the jeep.”

“How you feelin’?”

“Not good,” I said. “I had some moments there where I drifted off. Didn’t think I was coming back.”

“I knew you were comin’ back,” Leonard said. “You still gotta get all your shit out of my house.”

I turned my head and looked at Brett. The movement was incredibly draining. “Brett?”

She had her arm around Tillie, who had fallen asleep. Tillie had her thumb stuck in her mouth like a baby.

“I’m all right, hon,” Brett said. “I’m never gonna forget what you two done for me. Never.”

“Ain’t over yet,” Leonard said. “Hand me that shotgun, just in case there’s someone in there got a different plan than the one we made.”

Brett handed him the gun. Leonard reached in the coat draped over me, took out a box of shells, carefully loaded the shotgun.

“One thing is,” Leonard said, “we can’t sit around here. Them people gonna know where we’re goin’. Ain’t no other place to go south other than this. We put a dent in them ’cause we had surprise on our side and they were fucked up. But when they get straight, ain’t gonna be so easy. ’Specially Hap here havin’ holes in him.”

“Can’t believe these shits are hanging out in a saloon,” Brett said.

“Irvin and Bill didn’t think we’d be coming back, that’s why they wanted far away as they could get,” Leonard said. “Red, he didn’t give a shit. I don’t know he cares all that much about Herman, even. I think his mouth could say all kinds of things he doesn’t mean. I may kill all of ’em on general principles.”

“Been enough killing,” I said. “I don’t want no more of it.”

“You don’t always get to choose, Hap.”

Herman came out. He had Bill with him. Herman leaned on the jeep, said, “You won’t be flying out tonight. Irvin is so stoned he’s passed out on the floor next to a jukebox. He got in some kind of fight with a Mexican and got his block knocked off pretty good too.”

“Shit,” Leonard said.

“What about Red?” Brett asked.

“He’s pretty drunk himself,” Bill said.

“I was just hoping he was dead,” Brett said.

“Hap needs a doctor,” Leonard said. “Got any ideas?”

“I can ask around,” Bill said. “I think I can find enough Spanish in my memory to do that.”

“You do that,” Leonard said. “And that doesn’t mean drink more first. I want Hap with a doctor. I want him with one pronto.

I don't hear from you quick, you're gonna need a doctor. Comprende, amigo?"

"I don't like to be threatened, black man," Bill said.

"It ain't no threat, red man, it's a promise."

Herman got in behind the wheel, started up the Jeep. "We'll be out at the plane," he said.

I passed out somewhere between the little town and the plane, and when I awoke I was lying across the plane's seats, stripped down to my underwear. A little Mexican man with a wart on his cheek about the size of a doorknob and a hairdo that looked to be about three-fourths Wesson oil was poking at me with a pair of long bloody tweezers. There was blood all over the tweezers. He was dropping pellets from my side into a coffee can. When he saw I was awake, he nodded, smiled, poked the tweezers into my side, pulled out another pellet.

He carefully rolled me on my back and started probing at my shoulder and thigh wound with his fingertips, which didn't look all that clean.

"You have to do that?" I said.

"He doesn't speak English," Herman said.

I turned my head. Sitting nearby were Leonard, Brett, and Herman. Bill was standing up, smoking a cigarette. I didn't see Tillie, Red, or Irvin.

The Mexican turned and spoke to Herman. Herman nodded, said to me, "He says you're not too messed up. Lead went through your shoulder. There's a piece in your thigh that'll take more work than he's willing to do. He's stuffed some gauze in the wound, and he's picked out all the buckshot you got in your side. None of it went in straight on. Just the pellets from the shotgun, and you caught the far edge of the spray. Still, you need blood."

"Then let's get him some blood," Leonard said.

"This guy, he does abortions mostly," Herman said. "Delivers babies. He's not a real doctor."

"Me and Hap had a veterinarian work on us once," Leonard said. "We're not proud."

"He doesn't have access to blood," Herman said. "He's just telling you so you'll know."

"Shit," Leonard said. "I could have told him that."

"What we got to do is sober Irvin up," Brett said.

Bill shook his head. "I don't think so. We're not talking a little drunk, we're talking about being so fuckin' drunk he'll wake up speaking in tongues. Thing we got to do is let him sleep it off, lay around tomorrow, fly out when it's solid dark. Then, if the Border Patrol doesn't catch us, and my guess is they won't because they never have, we end up back at the hangar. You folks go your way, and I go mine, and we never do business again."

"But we can send you a Christmas card?" I said.

"A little candy on Valentine's would be all right too," Bill said.

"All this sounds like a lot of waiting for blood," Leonard said.

"I can make it," I said. "Leonard's just scared I'm going to die and leave my dirty underwear under his couch. Where is Irvin?"

"He's outside under the plane," Bill said. "Me and Herman went and got him. He was still passed out, so we stretched him out there."

"And Red?"

"He was at the cantina, pretty drunk. Doing handstands and stuff. He was trying to make the Mexican drunks in there understand he wanted a big dog to ride and he was showing them his dick, dipping it into a glass of tequila. He passed out on the way here. We left him in the jeep."

"This sitting around bothers me," Leonard said. "Those assholes will change tires on the other jeep, and someone in town will talk."

"They might change tires," Herman said, "but they're going to have hell going anywhere with all the dirt I put in the gas tank. Pissed in it too. And it won't do them a lot of good with the wires ripped out from under the hood and the gear shift bent."

"Good for you, Herman," I said.

"They could come by horse or mule," Leonard said.

"They could," Herman said. "I think they're so stoned they'll do good to stand up, let alone saddle and ride a horse. My guess is they got to wait about as long as Irvin's got to wait."

"From your mouth to God's ear," Brett said.

"Where's Tillie?" I asked.

"At the back of the plane, sleeping," Brett said. "They had her on something strong. Or she had herself on it. She's really wiped out."

"I think we take turns at watch," Leonard said. "I don't like being surprised."

"Very well," Bill said. "I'll go first."

The Mexican held out his hand, said something to Herman. Herman said, "He wants money."

Brett picked up her purse, opened it, gave him a ten dollar bill. "That's pretty close to tapping me out," she said.

"Gracias," said the little Mexican, then fired off something very fast in Spanish, got up, and left.

"What did he say?" I asked.

"He hopes you don't die," Herman said.

It was late at night when I awoke, hurting like holy hell. Brett was sitting on the floor with her head next to the seat where I lay. When I turned to look at her, I saw she was awake.

"How you feeling?" she said.

"Shitty."

"I've got some aspirin. I can get you some water."

"I'd appreciate that."

Brett disappeared for a moment, came back with aspirin and a canteen. She had to hold my head up. I took ten aspirin and a sip of water.

"I owe you, Hap Collins," Brett said.

"Hope you don't think so," I said. "Except in sexual favors, of course."

"I'd give you a blow job, but frankly my guess is your dick stinks and you've bled all over it from your thigh. On top of that, you haven't had a bath in a while."

"Neither have you," I said.

"Yes, but I brought perfume and I never soil my underwear."

“Not even when I make you hot?”

“I guess that’s an exception.”

“How’s Tillie?”

“She’s still out. I think she’ll be all right, though. It’s you I’m worried about.”

“I feel weak, but all right. I get something to eat, a big glass of ice tea, and I’ll be ready to rock and roll. After a month of bed rest.”

“Soon as you get better, what you’ll be doing in bed won’t pass for rest.”

“You’re going to have your work cut out for you with Tillie, Brett.”

“I know.”

“You don’t just come out of a life like that and take up choir practice and run supermarket errands.”

“I don’t know. Maybe Tillie would love that sort of thing now. Maybe she’s through rebelling.”

“At her age, she’s not rebelling, Brett. She’s living a lifestyle.”

“Don’t depress me. Not after all we’ve accomplished.”

“Sorry, baby. I didn’t mean to.”

27

I slept painfully, but the next morning, just before daylight, I was a little stronger. Out of the pack Bill had brought he produced some tins of sardines. We opened the cans and ate the fish with our fingers. I found that I not only had an appetite, but was feeling better. Not strong enough to jerk my dick, maybe, but at least strong enough to hold it and think about the motions.

After I had eaten, Leonard helped me get into my clothes and shoes. I tried to stand, but couldn't. Leonard went outside and came back carrying Irvin in a fireman's carry. He put Irvin in one of the seats, propped him up and started slapping him.

Not too hard at first, but he picked up the pace.

"Easy," I said.

"You just relax," Leonard said, "and leave the slapping to me."

He slapped Irvin some more. Irvin opened one eye and tried to grab Leonard's wrist, but Leonard grabbed his, bent Irvin's arm at the elbow, and put a reverse gooseneck on his wrist. It was enough to make Irvin sober for a moment.

"Goddamn!" Irvin said. "You're hurtin' me."

"Man, I hate that," Leonard said. "You done had you a good night's sleep, so what we want for you to do is fly us out of here."

"Fly you out," Irvin said. "I can't even see!"

"What I want," Leonard said, "is for your vision to improve dramatically."

"I'm sick," Irvin said.

"I don't give a shit," Leonard said. "Fly us out."

"In broad daylight!" Irvin said. "You can't do it in broad daylight."

"Is there another place we can park for the day?" Herman asked. "Some place away from this village?"

"I know one or two," Irvin said. "But we're not that well fueled.

We'd be stretching it."

"Is it possible?" Leonard asked.

"Yeah, it's possible," Irvin said, "but we might have to fart in the tank to finish out the ride. We make it, it'll be by a cunt hair."

"Where is this place?" Herman asked.

"It's not a landing strip," Irvin said. "It's not even a field like this. It's just a place. I put down there once because I had to. Ground's flat enough, I suppose. It's south of here. But it's stretching the fuel, I'm tellin' you."

"Sittin' here is stretching our odds," Leonard said. Then he called to the back. "Any sardines left?"

"Yeah," Bill said.

"Feed this asshole, and let's go."

"Fuck the sardines," Irvin said. "Don't talk to me about sardines. I can't eat that shit, way I been drinkin'. I don't eat that shit when I'm sober."

"Then you do whatever you need to do short of another drink," Leonard said. "Lift us out of here. Go where you need to go. And come dark, you fly our asses back to Texas. Herman, you want that midget, I'd load him on board now, and get all his little cowboy suit accessories too. And let's keep things like they been. Meanin' people got guns keep guns, and those don't got guns don't get guns. And Herman, I don't much like the fact you got a gun."

Herman didn't respond. He was still carrying the Winchester we had given him. He put it down on the seat next to Leonard, went outside to get Red out of the jeep.

We flew to the spot Irvin had told us about. It was a short and scary flight. Bolts in the plane rattled and we jerked about a lot in the wind. When we landed the day turned very hot and by afternoon I was covered in sweat and sick to my stomach and could only sip water. Inside the plane was like being inside a heated pottery kiln, but I was too weak to go outside, and Leonard assured me it was worse out there.

Red had come out of his drunk talkative as ever. He spent a lot of time complaining about how he felt and what we had done to him and how we had messed up his plans.

Tillie hadn't moved, and if it weren't for Brett checking on her from time to time, I would have thought she was dead.

I propped myself up in the seat, and Brett sat down beside me. "She's really out," she said. "I think I get her home, I got to start her with rehab. I just hope to hell I got money to do rehab."

"Just keep your spirits up," I said.

"Honey, my spirits are so far down they got to look up to see my socks. And then they need binoculars."

* * *

As nightfall came I began to get a chill. Leonard put his coat on me again, and Brett sat close, holding me. When it was dark enough, Leonard gave Irvin a little encouragement. "Let's go, shitwipe."

"Leonard missed his calling," Brett said. "He should have been in the diplomatic corps."

"Yeah," I said. "He's got a way with words."

Irvin groaned, got up, and wandered into the open cabin. He sat down behind the controls. Leonard sat in the navigator's seat. Irvin said back to us, "Remember, we don't make it, it's 'cause this bully made me fly without enough fuel."

"We don't make it," Brett said, "it's because your ass was drunk last night when we should have flown out."

Irvin threw up his hands, shifted in his seat to face the controls. "All right," he said. "Contact."

The plane clanked across the rough ground, and when it lifted off it went up fast and at an angle so sharp I thought we were on our way to the moon. The windshield clattered like cold teeth rattling. The engines sounded like a chef chopping cucumbers into slices. The sides of the plane warped and waved.

The air had turned cooler, and up there it was cooler yet. I got the impression the wind was coming in through places that hadn't been there when we left. As we climbed up, so did my sardines, but I fought them down just below my jawline, and when we finally leveled, I looked out my little window and saw the great blackness that was space and the fine white spots that were the stars.

"Jesus Christ," I heard Herman say behind us. "Run this fucker smoother!"

"What you think you're in?" Irvin yelled back. "A 747?"

We flew on and I drifted in and out, mostly out, as the jerks and drops of the plane would bring me awake as soon as I dozed off. I felt cold and feverish at the same time. I looked out the window and saw the night earth running along under us, the plane a great shadow against the moonlit ground.

"How are we?" I asked Brett.

"Good," she said. "I'm glad you were asleep. You missed being scared to death by a land rise, or as we say in East Texas, a mountain. We nearly ran into it. Someone, possibly Mexican Border Patrol, took a shot at us too. There's a hole in the floor near the tail and we think the wing took a shot, and maybe one of the engines. You know that stuff I told you about never soiling my underwear. Well, I was wrong."

"Got any more aspirins?"

"Yeah." Brett pulled her pocket purse out of her coat and got out the aspirins and gave them to me. She went away then and came back with the canteen. I took a handful of aspirins and drank some water.

"What about Tillie?" I asked.

"Still out," Brett said. "Had the shot been another three feet forward, she would have taken it. Shit, Hap. Is this going to end?"

I patted her leg and gave her back the canteen. I turned and looked toward the back. Bill and Herman were sitting in one of the long seats together. Red had one of his own, looking out the porthole, biting his nails. Somewhere along the way he'd lost his cowboy hat and his string tie. There was just him and the soiled suit now. I saw Tillie on the floor, still as the dead.

"Reckon if the Mexican Border Patrol took a shot at us a ways back, we're in Texas now," I said.

Irvin, having overheard us, called from up front. "Actually, we're about to enter Texas. There's a kind of gap in surveillance here, and if we fly low enough, we're okay on radar."

"So how much further to the landing strip?" Red called.

"Not much," Irvin said. "We'll be passing into Texas pretty soon, then we got to do a half circle away from where the law is thick, come into the airstrip low enough to pick vegetables, then I got to land this baby without wadding it up. Which, by the way, takes pretty good skill. The landing strip doesn’t have any lights, just a handful of reflectors.”

The moment Irvin finished his speech there was a sound like someone had fired a shotgun inside the plane. Briefly, I thought that’s exactly what had happened. We were tossed up and back down. I banged my head against the side of the plane, slid halfway to the floor, got my hands under me, pushed myself back into the seat, wished to hell there were seat belts.

Brett was on her knees in the aisle.

“Goddamn!” she said. “Goddamn!”

I reached out and got hold of her and pulled her into the seat, feeling my shoulder tear, my injured thigh stretch. Brett and I looked over our shoulders for Tillie. Tillie had somehow gotten turned longways and was sliding down the aisle toward us on her belly. I glanced at Leonard. He was turned around, riding his seat like a horse.

I heard Irvin say, “Oh shit,” and out of the corner of my eye I caught something, jerked my head for a better look. There was a flash of red and yellow on the wing and it swelled and turned orange and licked blue flames at its tips. The plane yawed and coughed and sputtered. The port engine was on fire.

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Either one of the shots Brett said were fired from below had damaged the engine, or it had finally had all the dust, wasp nests, and lack of maintenance it could stand.

The plane pitched and bucked as if in a carnival ride, lost velocity, then suddenly it was as if you were standing on something you thought was solid only to discover it was actually made of quicksand.

We just dropped.

The flames were wild now and in their glow I could see wisps of black smoke and the smoke coiled and curled around the wing and past the glass.

Brett was in the aisle. She had hold of Tillie, was lying across her. I clung to my seat, glanced up, saw Leonard through the open cabin door. His face looked horrible, his eyes wide.

The plane filled with a noise like a pride of lions roaring, and I realized it was the wind and flames. The fire was licking all along the wing now, tapping at the glass, asking us to invite it in. The wing was melting, becoming a tatter that resembled something made out of chicken wire and blazing toilet tissue.

Then the plane went quiet, except for the roar of the flames, the hiss of the wind. We seemed to float, just float. The right side of the plane jumped and there was a whirling noise. We leaned starboard slightly, started moving forward and down, but at a calculated pace.

I don't know much about planes, but it occurred to me that Irvin had cut the engines. Maybe to stop the gas to the port engine. The flames were still there, but they weren't as high as before. The right engine was all that was working now, and Irvin was using that to bring us down.

I looked out the window, saw the ground was way too fucking close. The plane went silent again, the right engine out of play, the propeller whirling to a stop.

“Out of fuel!” Irvin yelled. “Coasting in. Grab your asses.”

Smooth and quiet we went, but like a bullet. I looked out the window at the flames on the wing, saw a stand of dark gnarly trees below us. And I mean just below.

Ahead of us was a clearing, a metal hangar. It was the strip we had departed from. I had a moment of hope. I looked at Brett. She was still lying on top of Tillie, who to the best of my knowledge had yet to twitch an eyelash.

I looked through the cabin doorway. Leonard continued to cling to and ride his chair like a horse. I could see the ground through the windshield. Big hard ground. The plane hit and bounced. It went way up, nose pointing at the sky, then it went back down, bounced again, not so high, bounced some more, then we were darting along the runway.

The wheels screamed, bent under us. Next thing I knew the plane flipped, spun sideways, and skidded up a dust cloud, and finally, after what seemed about two weeks later, stopped upright, leaning.

I wasn’t in my seat anymore. I wasn’t sure where I was. I discovered I had hit the wall next to the cockpit. My wounds had opened up. They were running freely. Except for a slight pain in my neck, there didn’t seem to be any new injuries.

I looked into the cockpit. Leonard was getting off the floor. Somehow, Irvin had maintained his seat. Then I saw how. He had on a seat belt. He sat there with his head bent forward. Red was getting up between two seats and Herman was sitting on the floor holding his head. Bill was lying on the floor, and from the way part of him was wrapped around the stanchions of one of the seats, I knew he wasn’t doing well. Brett and Tillie had slid up under a seat, and I went over there and pulled Brett out. She had a banged forehead, a little blood. I sat her down in a bent seat and pulled Tillie out from under there.

Tillie was snoring. I carried her and lay her across the seat so her head was in Brett’s lap. The plane was becoming very warm. I looked out a port window. What was left of the wing was blazing and the side of the plane was starting to catch.

I pulled at the exit door, but it was stuck. I kicked at it and it came open. I got hold of Tillie and tried to lift her, but the wounds, the loss of blood, the crash, it had taken everything out of me. I had to sit down on the floor with her.

Leonard appeared. He picked Tillie up and carried her out. Brett got hold of my arm and helped me out of the plane, onto the ground. Herman and Red followed. Leonard went back in. He came out carrying Irvin, who was unconscious. He went back in and brought Bill out. When he laid Bill on the ground Bill's body moved like mercury flows. The foot on one leg faced the wrong way.

"He's dead," Leonard said.

"No shit," I said. "What about Irvin?"

"Unconscious."

"I want everyone to relax now," Red said. We turned to look at him. His head was bleeding and his suit jacket was almost ripped off. He was holding one of the Winchesters, pointing it at us.

"From here on out," he said, "we do as I say."

Leonard moved incredibly quick. He grabbed the Winchester by the barrel, snatched it away from Red, whirled it around his head and cracked Red a solid one over the ear. Red decided he had to lie down on that one. He held his head with one hand, said, "Oh God, I think something is broken."

"I advise we get away from the plane," Leonard said. "And if anyone else has any ideas about guns or fighting, let's get it over with now."

No one did.

Leonard kicked Irvin a few times. Irvin grunted, opened an eye. "You can lay here, or you can get up," Leonard said. "Personally, I think what's left of your plane could blow."

Leonard picked up Tillie. Brett gave me a boost and helped me walk. My injuries only hurt now when I walked, breathed, or batted my eyelashes.

I looked back. Herman and Red followed, Red holding his head. Irvin rolled to his hands and knees, crawled, finally made his footing and began to stagger after us.

The plane didn't exactly blow. It just burned and gave off a few muffled pops. It lit up the night sky like an oil well fire.

29

We made our way to the big tin hangar. We had parked our car and Bill's truck in there. Irvin finally caught up with us. He had a key to the shed and he unlocked it. When he pulled the bolt back, Leonard put Tillie down, gave me the Winchester, helped Irvin open the huge doors. Leonard picked Tillie up again, and we went inside.

When we were just in the door, the lights came on.

The shed was full of very large men in very nice suits that had dust on them. One of the very large men was Wilber. He was the only one that didn't have on a nice suit. He had on a cheap suit. He was still wearing his neck brace. He looked like a whiplashed Kodiak bear that had just finished shopping a Sears sale.

One of the men wore a charcoal gray suit with a dark gray shirt and gray and blue tie with red highlights on it. His hair was combed down tight and he had the faintest touch of whiskery shadow. He was smoking a cigar, sitting on an old stool that came with the shed. He had a handkerchief draped over the stool and his ass was on that.

It was Big Jim, and his expression was somewhere between amused and amazed. He had his legs crossed just right so as not to ruin the crease. His shoes appeared to be brand-new. He was looking past us, out the open doors at the blazing plane.

All the big men, except Jim, had big guns. They closed in behind us and pointed their big guns and took the Winchester from me. I didn't try to fight. That would have been useless. Red, bleeding slightly from the head wound Leonard had given him, smiled, limped over, and stood by one of the big men. He looked as happy as an erect dick.

We were searched then. The man who searched Brett spent too much time at it. Leonard had been forced to place Tillie on the ground, and the same man went over and pulled up her shirt and looked at her for a moment.

I said, “They call them women.”

The big man grinned at me and held the big automatic he was carrying against his leg and tapped it there, as if trying to decide if shooting me would be more fun than beating me to death.

Big Jim got off the stool, walked past us, stood at the open door and watched the plane burn. He said, “We heard it, but I hate to say we missed it. Anyone get killed?”

“One,” I said.

“Ah,” Big Jim said, “I’d say that’s pretty good odds. One out of all of you. ’Course, you look like hell, and surviving that isn’t going to do you any good.”

“Red told you we’d be here, didn’t he?” I said.

“That’s right,” Big Jim said. “He called us from someplace in Mexico. Some cantina, wasn’t it, Red?”

“Yes, sir,” Red said, still a happy erection.

Big Jim went back to his stool. He sat down on it and puffed his cigar. He pulled the cigar from his mouth and pointed the red end in Leonard’s and my direction. “You know, it took some balls, you guys to come into my whorehouse like that, shoot Moose in the foot, take my midget. Real balls. I respect that. Really. But, it pisses me off too. Red here, he says he wasn’t part of it, but you know, I got to wonder.”

Red suddenly looked considerably less erect. “I was kidnapped, Big Jim. Really.”

Big Jim looked at Wilber. Wilber didn’t move a muscle, didn’t flick an eyelash. Big Jim pursed his lips and turned his attention back to Red. “Wilber thinks maybe you were in with them.”

“What!” Red said. “No way. No way, Big Jim.”

“That’s Mr. Big Jim to your little red ass,” Big Jim said.

“He wasn’t in on anything,” Herman said.

“Herman,” Big Jim said. “Good to see you. Been a long fuckin’ time. I think the Bandito Supremes should have blown your brains out a long time ago. I think maybe they’re not as tough as they say. Don’t know how much longer I’m going to associate with them. Red here called to tell me he was down in Mexico. He didn’t expect you folks to return. But just in case, he wanted to tell me all about you so he could weasel his way back up my ass. I see you folks got Tillie back. My presumption is you found The Farm, and they were all ripped to the tits. Am I correct?"

"Correct," Herman said.

"That's no way to run a business. Personally, I don't allow my men to indulge like that. These Bandito Supremes, they been trading on their reps too long."

"I didn't do anything," Red said.

"I wasn't talking to you, Red," Big Jim said. "Way I see it, I got a whole nest of rotten eggs here. I got the stoned whore who wanted out of my business, then didn't finish her punishment at The Farm. I got the guys came into my whorehouse and shot the foot off Moose. Moose!"

The man Leonard had shot limped from the back. His expensive pant leg was cut back and he was wearing a cast on his foot with metal braces.

"See Moose there," Big Jim said. "He's got to wear that … what is it, Moose? Six weeks?"

Moose nodded.

"That's a bad thing to do," Big Jim said. "You guys coming in there like that, causing a ruckus, shooting Moose. He had to rip up some good pants. What, two suits, Moose?"

"Two suits," Moose said.

"Antics like that do not encourage business. That wasn't enough, you go down and get my whore from associates of mine who I was letting use her. I don't like that. And you take my dwarf."

"Midget, sir," Red said.

Big Jim glanced at Red, turned back to us. "You took my dwarf. I don't like that. He may not be worth much, he may even be a traitor—"

"No sir, Big Jim," Red said. "No, sir."

Big Jim turned and looked at Red again, said, "Red, I hear your mouth without asking you to say anything, I'll have you killed. Maybe I'll stuff you, put you in my office for a hat rack. Got me?"

"Yes, sir," Red said.

“Now, where was I? Oh yeah, you come and get my gnome. You maybe convinced him to help you out. Could have been working with you all along. I don’t like that. Can’t let shit like that go. And look what you done? You’ve implicated others. I got to kill this other guy now. Who are you, anyway?”

“Irvin. I flew the plane. I’m just someone they hired.”

“Too bad, Irvin. The whore, she goes back to work. The woman here, maybe she and me could work something out. I think she could pull some change.”

“Not likely,” Brett said.

“All right,” Big Jim said, “then you get popped too. And Herman, I got to kill you, man. You know how it is? Once you start letting people get away with shit, well, it goes wild. Red here, and Wilber. I forgave them. Let them come back, and it’s been nothing but dog shit and piss water ever since. In Wilber’s case, that’s okay. He’s a moron. Right, Wilber?”

Wilber’s face jumped slightly, but he nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Yeah, a moron. But the leprechaun here, he knew what he was doing and he talked the moron into it. I shouldn’t have let the little shit come back, you know. Like midgets are bad luck anyway, and now, I don’t know. Maybe Red had something to do with all this, maybe not. Maybe he’s just trying to snake back in ’cause things didn’t go the way he wanted. Like with the Tulsa whorehouse. I think wiping him out, that’s a way for me to correct an old mistake I should have fixed some time ago. Sometimes I’m too big-hearted, you know?”

I glanced at Red. He was trembling inside his ruined cowboy suit. It was the first time I believe I had actually seen him afraid.

“Well,” Leonard said. “You gonna do it, or just talk us to death?”

“Ooooh,” Big Jim said. “Feisty. You been watching too much TV, my man. You been seeing too many talky niggers. Where I come from a nigger is still a nigger.”

“Where you come from, fuckin’ your dog and your mother are legal,” Leonard said. “Or having your dog fuck your mother. It’s all the same, ain’t it?”

“Boy,” said Big Jim, “you really want to die, don’t you?”

“Beats having you bore me to death,” Leonard said.

“Like I was sayin’,” Big Jim said, “you and this fella here, you got balls. But, unfortunately for you, they aren’t bulletproof.”

“I didn’t do anything but fly them,” Irvin said. “They paid me and I did it. I didn’t know what they were going to do.”

“Shut up,” Big Jim said. “You think it matters? This shed, it’s going to look like the St. Valentine’s Day Massacre, I get through here. I got more bullets here than all of you got brain cells. What I got here? Eight guys? Lots of guns. All you dipshits got are your asses.”

“Excuse me, Big Jim,” said one of the men, “but that fire, it might draw someone.”

Big Jim nodded. “We’re far out, Hector. But you’re right. Might as well get this over with. I believe Wilber would like the opportunity to kill … what’s your name?” Big Jim pointed to me.

“Hap,” I said. “Hap Collins.”

“He didn’t like the way you treated him in a hotel room,” Big Jim said. “That right, moron? A hotel room, wasn’t it?”

Wilber said, “Yes, sir.”

“Yeah, I bet he didn’t,” I said, “ ’cause I whipped his ass. And I kicked it at the whorehouse too.”

“There you are,” Big Jim said. “Wilber didn’t like that. Go ahead and shoot him, Wilber.”

“I could have taken you, you hadn’t had a gun on me,” Wilber said, and he pointed his automatic at me.

“You and about ten like you,” I said.

Big Jim said, “Whoa! You really think you could take him, Mr. Hap?”

I nodded.

“What about you, Wilber,” Big Jim said. “What do you think?”

“I could take him,” Wilber said.

“You really want to fight him, don’t you, Wilber?” Big Jim said.

“Yeah, I’ll fight him,” Wilber said. “Right now.”

“I guess you would,” Leonard said. “Hap’s hurt. He wasn’t hurt, he’d wipe your honky motherfucker’s shit on the wall.”

Big Jim looked about at his entourage. He grinned. They grinned. Red couldn't decide if he ought to shit or go blind.

Big Jim settled his gaze on Leonard, said, "You want to take Wilber instead?"

"Yeah," Leonard said. "I've just traveled from here to Mexico, fought it out with a bunch of would-be bad-asses, eaten badly, slept badly, crashed in a plane on my way back, so I ought to be tuckered just enough to make it a little more of a contest for fat boy here."

Wilber steamed.

Big Jim chuckled. "Hey, you're on."

"What for?" Leonard said. "Just to get shot afterward? What's the point?"

"You win, I let you go," Big Jim said.

Leonard shook his head. "You a man of your word, Big Jim?"

"You trying to gamble with me?" Big Jim said.

"You let me and this walking stack of dog shit fight," Leonard said, "and I win, you got to let me and my man go here. You got to let the woman and the whore go too. Toss in Irvin here 'cause he's stupid. Herman too. The midget, I don't give a shit."

"I give you your life," Big Jim said.

"Not good enough," Leonard said.

Big Jim shook his head. "I'm going to hate myself in the morning. Okay. I give you Hap, the pilot, the woman, and the whore. Take Herman too. Red, I got plans for."

Red studied Big Jim's face, hoping to see some sign that the plans were positive, but the expression he hoped to see just wasn't there.

"What I say," Big Jim said, "is this. You two fight. One can't stand up when it's over is the loser. My man loses, I let everyone but the troll go."

"I'm not going anywhere without Red," Herman said.

Big Jim turned to look at Herman. "Have it your way." Then back to us. "You lose, colored fella, I got to shoot you all. But I'll make it quick. Promise. I got to tell you, gambling, it's my vice. You got me by the short hairs on that. My wife tells me I'll bet on anything and that I’m too good-hearted. She’s right.”

Leonard said, “Let me speak to my people.”

“Snap it up,” Big Jim said. “This plane fire, it could cause problems. Another minute, this offer’s no good.”

Leonard eased over to us, unbuttoned his shirt, tossed it on the ground. He and Brett helped me to stand. Leonard said, “I don’t know he’ll keep his word or not. It’s all we got, though.”

“You’re bushed,” I said.

“It’s not like we got a choice,” Leonard said. “Right now you couldn’t whip a three-year-old in a straitjacket.”

“Come on,” Big Jim said. “Enough whispering. Do it.”

30

They closed the back door and two suits stood there as guards. The others spread out in a circle around us and Big Jim moved his stool back a few paces. Red slid up against the wall, trying to blend his molecules with it so that he might pass through.

Wilber took off his cheap jacket and tossed it over the side of Bill's pickup bed. He unbuttoned his shirt at the neck and rolled up his sleeves. Wilber gestured at me, said to Leonard, "It's not gonna be as much fun hittin' you as him."

"I'll try to make you laugh," Leonard said.

"He's twice Leonard's size," Brett whispered to me.

"If Leonard isn't too tired, it'll be all right," I said.

Wilber had his legs spread wide and his fist clenched. I could tell then he didn't know shit about technique. Probably never had to use any. When you're that big and strong you can get away with lack of technique.

Leonard didn't adopt any stance or posture. He just sort of eased toward Wilber. Wilber suddenly kicked out with his right leg, a stiff, but hard and fast kick. Leonard scooped it up with his left arm and lifted and pushed backward. Wilber flopped to the dirt floor, rolled and came up. Leonard slid into a loose stance, bobbed a little like a boxer.

Wilber grinned at him. This was all great fun. He eased in and threw a wild right. Had it hit Leonard, it would probably have knocked his head somewhere just south of Mexico City.

But Leonard went under the punch, stuck a right in Wilber's ribs, whipped a left to the kidney. Wilber took it well, came around with a backhand swipe that brushed the top of Leonard's head. Leonard hit Wilber with a right uppercut, but Wilber hit Leonard with a left, a chopping blow just over the ear. It sent Leonard to the ground. Wilber kicked him then. Hit him in the face, full blast. Leonard rolled with it as much as possible, but it was a good shot and a spray of blood went wide in the dull lights of the hangar.

Leonard lay on his back, his face bleeding. Wilber planted kick after kick in Leonard's side. Finally Leonard rolled into a kick, got hold of Wilber's leg, and pushed him down. They rolled on the concrete for a moment, then Leonard stuck a finger in Wilber's eye, got loose, got up.

Wilber had a hand over his eye. "You sonofabitch," he said.

He came at Leonard with a wild football kick. Leonard scooped the kick up, twisted, rolled Wilber on his stomach. Leonard stepped over Wilber's leg while he held it, pushed his chest against it and went down. There was a cracking sound like you might hear from a china vase just dropped from an aircraft. It was Wilber's knee going out. Wilber screamed, and Leonard, still locking the leg, bent forward and slipped his arm around Wilber's neck, around the brace, slid his hand into the crook of his other arm and locked that behind Wilber's head.

Wilber was strong and the neck brace kept Leonard from cutting into Wilber's throat with a forearm. Wilber got his hands under him, pushed up enough to roll on his back. But it didn't matter. Leonard lost the leg lock somehow and the ruined leg thrashed out to Wilber's side as Leonard rolled on his back and hooked his heels inside Wilber's thighs and kept choking.

Wilber thrashed and clawed at Leonard's arms so hard he drew blood, but Leonard didn't let go. He just lay on his back with his head pressed tight against the base of Wilber's head, and he kept squeezing. You could see the muscles in his forearms and biceps swell. Leonard moved his foot once, just enough to pop Wilber in the testicles, enough to weaken him. But by that time he didn't really need it. Wilber wasn't clawing anymore. His eyes were sticking way out of his skull and his tongue was skating over his lips. A thin trickle of blood was running out of one nostril and there was a bead of it on his bottom lip.

Leonard flexed even more. The brace was past working for Wilber. Leonard had put so much pressure into it, the brace was beginning to bend, making an indentation for Leonard's forearm.

Leonard turned his head slowly and looked at Big Jim on his stool. Big Jim studied the situation for a moment, made a cutting motion with his hand.

Leonard let go of Wilber, rolled out from under him. Wilber lay on the ground heaving, trying to get his breath back.

Leonard stood up and looked at Big Jim.

Big Jim looked around the room, at us, at his men. He put his cold cigar back in his mouth and pawed around in his suit for his lighter. He lit the cigar and puffed.

“How much money you got?” he asked Leonard.

“What?” Leonard said.

“How much money you got, all of you?” Big Jim said.

Leonard and I had some change, Brett had a few dollars, and Irvin had what was left of the money we had given him. Most of it he had pissed out on the ground after it had turned to beer and then pesos at the cantina.

I said, “Bill’s body’s out there. He might have some money on him.”

“No,” Big Jim said. “We’ll leave him like he is.”

Moose clunked over on his braces and cast, took all our money, bundled it up in one hand, and carried it to Big Jim.

“I got to have something for my troubles,” Big Jim said. He counted out the money, frowned, put it in his coat pocket. “I don’t like to do a deal where I lose completely. I drove all the way down from Oklahoma for this, and now I’m just going to let you go. But this way I make a little money, and I got Red. Which is what I really wanted. And, I guess I got Herman. Herman, you still have your chance too. I give you that. Red stays. You go.”

Herman nodded. “I can’t go without Red. You still want to gamble, I’ll fight anyone for Red’s life.”

“Nope,” Big Jim said. “That didn’t work out so good. Once a night is enough. Someone go over there and get Wilber up. Get his coat. Put him in the car. We’ll stop in town, get him a soda.”

Two of Big Jim’s men picked up Wilber’s coat, got hold of Wilber. He screamed in agony when he was lifted. As they carried him along, his leg dragged behind like the tail of a dead animal. They opened the front door and helped him outside.

“This whole thing,” Big Jim said. “It’s soured my stomach. You know, I’m really a pretty nice guy. I like to give breaks. I’m forgiving. But sometimes, well, you got to know when to cut your losses."

Big Jim reached inside his coat and took out an automatic, said, "Hey, dwarf!"

Red looked at him and Big Jim pulled the trigger. Red's head slammed against the tin wall and the wall went scarlet and Red melted to the floor like butter running off the side of a griddle.

Herman bellowed, charged at Big Jim. Big Jim swiveled slightly on his stool and shot Herman in the head. Herman's charge knocked Big Jim off the stool and Herman came down on top of him.

Two bodyguards leaped forward, grabbed Herman, yanked him off of Jim, rolled him on the ground and shot him several times.

Big Jim said, "He's dead, you fools. He was dead when I shot him."

Big Jim got his feet under him, put his automatic back inside his suit coat and began to brush himself off. One of the bodyguards came over and helped him. Big Jim let him. When he was brushed off he took the handkerchief off the stool and used it to wipe his shoes. He gave the handkerchief to one of his men, turned to us.

"I shouldn't have made a deal like that with you guys," he said. "It was stupid. I thought Wilber could take you, colored man. I thought he'd wipe the place up with you."

"Maybe he had an off day," Leonard said.

Big Jim grinned. "No. I don't think so. All right, ya'll get the whore, get your asses out of here. I don't want to see you no more. I hear from you, I see your faces, whatever, all bets are off. Got me?"

We nodded.

Leonard put on his shirt without buttoning it, picked up Tillie and carried her and put her in the back seat of the car. With Brett's assistance I went after them and leaned against the hood.

Irvin walked past us. He said, "I don't want to never see any of you again. Ever."

Outside, the two bodyguards were putting Wilber into the back of a black Cadillac. There was another black Cadillac parked under the tree next to Irvin's truck.

Irvin got in his truck, started it up, and drove away.

Brett sat with Tillie's head in her lap. I used the car to brace myself and got around to the passenger's side. Leonard got behind the wheel. He said, "Shit, no keys."

"There's a spare in a magnetic box," Brett said. "It's stuck up under the dash there, to the left of the steering wheel."

Leonard found it and we drove out of the hangar.

I turned to look back. Flames from the plane were licking up higher than the hangar. The big men in their nice suits were escorting Jim out to the Cadillac under the tree. He got in and they closed the door. A few of the men got in the same car. The others opened up the trunk of the Cadillac where Wilber waited, then went back inside the hangar.

As we eased away, I saw them come out of the hangar carrying something. The sun shone brightly on the red hair of that something. They dumped Red into the trunk and returned to the hangar.

"Drive very fast," I said.

31

The field across the road was frozen and the ice on the dead grass was very pretty in the moonlight. It was mid-December and Leonard and I were sitting on his front porch looking across the road through barbed wire out where forty acres of cleared land lay. It was a hay field, but for some reason none of it had been baled that year. Bad hay maybe. Perhaps the owner died.

We sat on Leonard's front porch in the porch swing and drank hot chocolate. Bob, Leonard's son the armadillo, was curled up on the edge of the porch, staring out at the night, perhaps thinking about gunfire and shattering dillo shells, relatives gone to that great armadillo den in the sky, or perhaps he was seeing the leering face of Haskel. I wondered if it would matter to Bob if he knew I had given an anonymous tip to the FBI about Haskel's location and vocation. Maybe for armadillos, unlike humans, the past was the past, gone away, completely forgotten.

Whatever, Bob had it cushy now. He followed Leonard about and Leonard shared his vanilla cookies with him more frequently than he did me.

I shifted in the porch swing for more comfort. My right thigh still gave me trouble, and my shoulder was a little stiff. I hadn't gone to the doctor for any of it. Not even blood. I had stayed in bed for a couple of weeks eating steaks and drinking some godawful tonic Leonard made me take. I think I got well so I wouldn't have to drink that tonic.

Brett came out to see me from time to time. I had only actually talked to Tillie once since the events, and all she had said was hi.

We read in the papers about the wrecked plane and the one body found. Bill's. The papers called it a real-life mystery. We had no idea what Big Jim had done with Herman's and Red's corpses, but my guess was they were feeding a mesquite bush in the desert somewhere. Bill's death was attributed to bad flying, and someone believed, or wanted to believe, he had crawled free of the wreckage and died.

Of course, Bill hadn't had a pilot's license, and it had been Irvin's plane. Or at least the one he was using. No future newspaper articles followed. No policeman came tapping at our door.

I think the truth of the matter was the authorities knew who Bill was, had dealt with him before, and didn't give a shit he was gone, just as long as he was out of their hair.

But Bill hadn't been so bad. I thought about how Bill had called that old man uncle, had given him money, bought him beer and cigarettes. I wondered how Irvin had answered to the old man for Bill's death. Or if he had.

I said, "It's funny way it is. I haven't even seen Brett but a few times since October. We only been to bed once. On my birthday. And it wasn't too good, you want to know. I think I'd rather have had a pair of socks or a billfold."

"Maybe you're taking it too personal."

"The bad pussy?"

"How she's treating you, you moron."

"I don't want to say it, but I got to say it. I feel I sort of did something for her I wouldn't have done for nobody but you. And now she's got Tillie back, I'm like last year's used Kotex."

"Tillie needs a lot of attention," Leonard said.

And she did need attention. She was in drug rehab, but she was back to hooking. This time out of LaBorde's two main hotels when they didn't catch her and run her off. Then she'd go to Tyler for a while to hook up with some of the church crowd there, bang them silly.

"You think she's really going to change?" I asked.

"Nope," Leonard said. "I could have told you that from the start. She wanted out of what she was in, but she's not a new person. It could happen I guess, but I wouldn't tie a rubber band around my dick till it did. Do that, your whang will fall off."

"You knew from the start it would turn out like this, didn't you?"

"You didn't do what you did for Tillie, Hap, you did it for Brett.

This has got nothing to do with Tillie, far as I'm concerned. Brett for that matter. I did it for you."

"I hate I asked. I hate you had to do it."

"I hate it. But it doesn't matter Brett isn't having anything to do with you now."

"I didn't say she wasn't having anything to do with me."

"Whatever. That doesn't change things. I did it for you and you did it for her because you thought you should do it. We've done it. It's over. What do you want, to be cheered? Have a little parade or something?"

"That would be nice," I said.

"Well, you ain't gonna get it."

"I killed people, Leonard."

"You knew that could happen."

"There were a couple of women back there. I didn't mean for them to die."

"I don't know they had much of a life, Hap."

"And that makes it okay?"

"No, but you think them being women makes anything any different? It makes it done. War's hell. You think shit like this is without consequences, man?"

I pushed against the porch with my foot and the swing moved back and forth for a while. I said, "Would you have strangled Wilber if Jim had let you?"

"In a heartbeat. I'm glad I didn't have to, but I certainly would have. I even liked the idea at the time."

"What about Bill?"

"What about him? He took a chance for money and it didn't work out. I didn't make him do it. He wasn't lied to or convinced. He didn't care, long as he made money. He shouldn't have gone along."

"Well, maybe, but the one bothers me is Herman. Red a little. Herman had turned. Really. He risked his neck and he helped us get Tillie back."

"Yeah, he did. But you know what, Hap? I'm an asshole about it. Guy like that, he'd done enough evil in his time, there weren't enough candles for him to light, enough Hail Marys for him to say. He did all right by us, but he wasn't someone I saw as a future poker buddy anyway. As for Red, he could talk up a good steak ranchero, but he should have died at birth."

"How do you sleep at night, Leonard?"

"I sleep like always. Good. I don't even have Nam flashbacks. I went to do a job I believed in, and I did it. You didn't believe in it, you didn't go. Do you have nightmares about not going?"

"Of course not."

"You would have; had you not done the thing you believed in. It wouldn't have been the same kind of nightmares, but it would have been something. If not a dream, something hollow. That's the way I'd have felt had I let you do that business without me. So, far as I'm concerned, I did what was right. Period."

"And Big Jim gets away scot-free."

"Looks that way. It happens, man. The world don't shake out fair all the time."

"Gets right down to it, I guess it's just you and me, brother."

"Give Brett time."

I nodded.

"I'm going to bed, Hap. Good night."

Leonard stood, gave me a pat on the shoulder, and snapped his fingers at Bob. Bob got up and trotted after him into the house. I'd never seen anything like that. I didn't think armadillos could be domesticated.

"You keep that big armored rat out of the living room," I said. "I don't want him trying to get on the couch with me."

"He thinks it's his couch," Leonard said, and went inside the house.

I sat for a while, nursing chocolate that had gone cold in my cup. The moonlight moved over the field of frozen hay and made it look metallic and sharp. I pulled a deep breath of cold air into my chest and let it out. It felt and tasted like the air that night in the desert some three months, some ten centuries ago.

I thought about the gunfire and the smell of blood and smoke, the strange and horrible passion that had come over me during that time. I think I feared guns and violence because they were so much a part of me. Perhaps no one is more aware of and is enticed by and frightened of violence than the man whose brain is a bomb.

I remembered what Herman had said about the blackness of space, the nothingness between the stars, about the stars being nothing more than dying light.

Bad line of thought, I decided.

I drank the rest of the chocolate, shook out my cup, and went inside.

BOOKS BY JOE R. LANSDALE

LEATHER MAIDEN

After a harrowing stint in the Iraq war, Cason Statler returns home to the small East Texas town of Camp Rapture, where he drinks too much, stalks his ex-wife, and takes a job at the local paper. There he uncovers notes on a cold-case murder. With nothing left to live for and his own brother connected to the victim, he makes it his mission to solve the crime. Soon he is drawn into a murderous web of blackmail and deceit. To make matters worse his deranged buddy Booger comes to town to lend a helping hand.

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In the middle of a cyclone, beautiful, red-haired Sunset Jones shoots her husband, Pete, dead when he tries to beat and rape her. To Camp Rapture's general consternation, Sunset's mother-in-law arranges for her to take over from Pete as town constable.

As if that weren't hard enough to swallow in Depression-era East Texas, Sunset actually takes the job seriously, and her investigation into a brutal double murder pulls her into a maelstrom of greed, corruption, and unspeakable malice. It is a case that will require a well of inner strength she never knew she had. Spirited and electrifying, *Sunset and Sawdust* is a mystery and a tale like nothing you've read before.

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The Hap and Leonard Novels

SAVAGE SEASON

Hap Collins and Leonard Pine are best friends, yet they couldn't be more different. Hap is an East Texas white boy with a weakness for Texas women. Leonard is a gay black Vietnam vet. Together, they stir up more commotion than a firestorm. But that's just the way they like it. So when an ex-flame of Hap's returns promising a huge score, Hap lets Leonard in on the scam, and that's when things get interesting. Chockful of action and laughs, *Savage Season* is the masterpiece of dark suspense that introduced Hap and Leonard to the thriller scene. It hasn't been the same since.

Crime Fiction/978-0-307-45538-3

MUCHO MOJO

Leonard is still nursing the injuries he sustained in the duo's last wild undertaking when he learns that his Uncle Chester has passed. Hap is of course going to be there for his best friend, and when the two are cleaning up Uncle Chester's dilapidated house, they uncover a dark little secret beneath the house's rotting floorboards—a small skeleton buried in a trunk. Hap wants to call the police. Leonard, being a black man in East Texas, persuades him this is not a good idea, and together they set out to clear Chester's name on their own. The only things standing in their way are a houseful of felons, a vicious killer, and possibly themselves.

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THE TWO-BEAR MAMBO

In this rollicking, roller-coaster ride of a novel, Hap Collins and Leonard Pine take a break from their day jobs to search for Florida Grange, Leonard's drop-dead gorgeous lawyer and Hap's former lover, who has vanished in the Klan-infested East Texas town of Grovetown. Before she disappeared, Florida was digging up some dirt behind the mysterious jailhouse death of a legendary bluesman's son, who was in possession of some priceless merchandise. To Hap and Leonard, something don't smell right. With murder on their minds, Hap and Leonard set out to investigate as only they know how . . . chaotically.

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BAD CHILI

Hap Collins has just returned home from a gig working on an offshore oil rig. With a new perspective on life, Hap wants to change the way he's living, and shoot the straight and narrow. That is until the man who stole Leonard Pine's boyfriend turns up headless in a ditch and Leonard gets fingered for the murder. Hap vows to clear Leonard's name, but things only get more complicated when Leonard's ex shows up dead. To the police it is just a matter of gay-biker infighting, but to Hap and Leonard murder is always serious business, and these hit a little to close to home.

Crime Fiction/978-0-307-45550-5

RUMBLE TUMBLE

Even though a midlife crisis just hit Hap Collins like a runaway pickup truck, he's still got his job as a bouncer at a local club, he knows his best friend, Leonard Pine, will always be there for him, and of course he's got his main squeeze, ex–Sweet Potato Queen Brett Sawyer. Things go downhill, however, when Brett's daughter, Tillie, who has been walking on the wrong side of the law—doing drugs and turning tricks—suddenly stands in need of a rescue. It won't be easy— it never is—but nothing is going to stop Hap and Leonard as they hit the road destined for Hootie Hoot, Oklahoma, to shake things up. And with Hap and Leonard at the wheel, this promises to be a wild ride.

Crime Fiction/978-0-307-45551-2

CAPTAINS OUTRAGEOUS

When Hap Collins saves the life of his employer's daughter, he is rewarded with a Caribbean cruise, and he convinces his best friend Leonard Pine to come along. However, when the cruise sails on without them, stranding them in Playa del Carmen with nothing but their misfortune and Leonard's ridiculous new hat, the two quickly find themselves drawn into a vicious web of sordid violence. When they return to East Texas, they find that trouble has beaten them back, and when trouble's around it doesn't take long for Hap and Leonard to find it.

Crime Fiction/978-0-307-45552-9

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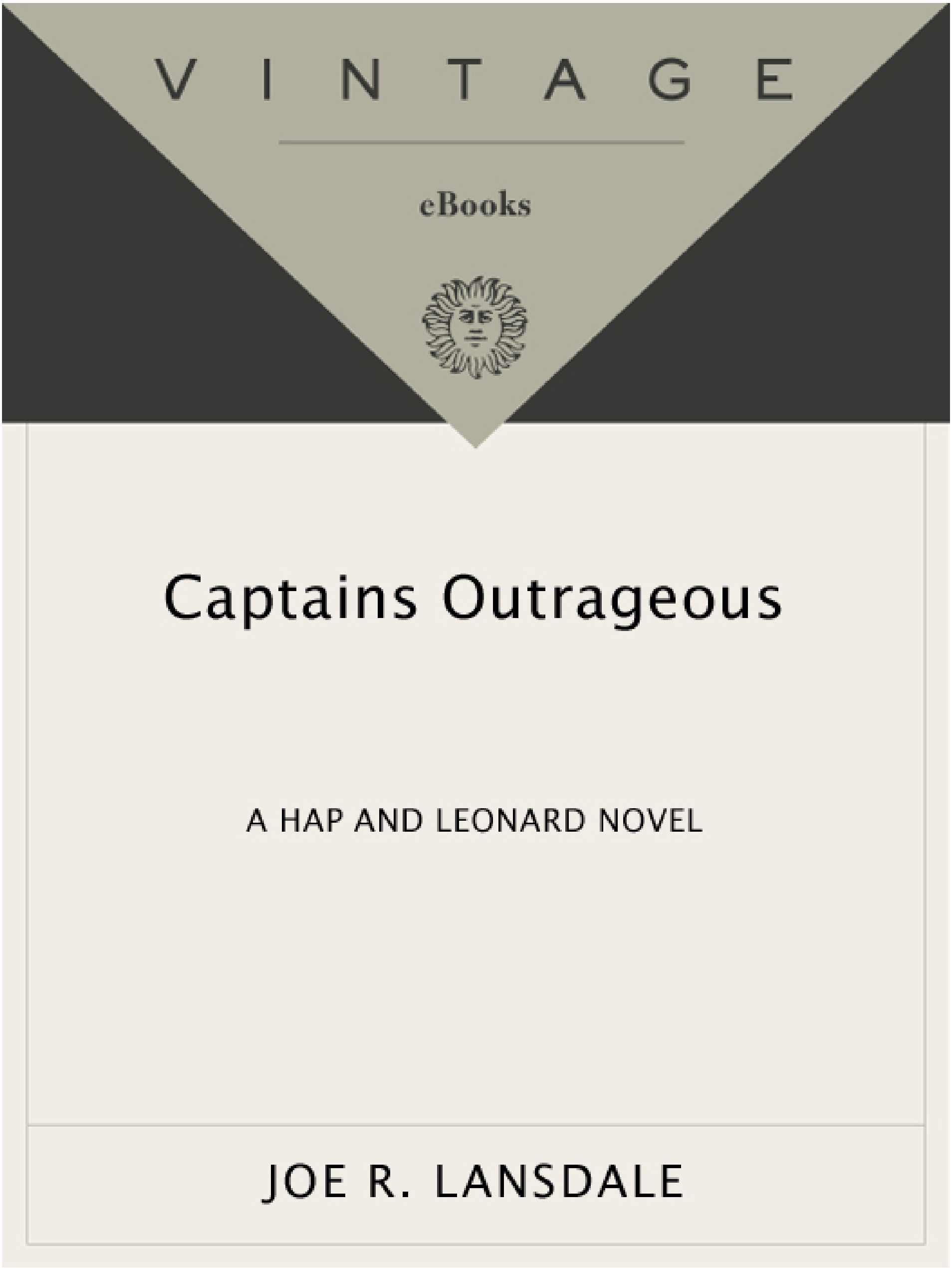

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JOE R. LANSDALE

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Joe R. Lansdale is the author of more than a dozen novels, including *Sunset and Sawdust, Lost Echoes, Leather Maiden*, and *Vanilla Ride. The Bottoms* and *Mucho Mojo* were *New York Times* notable books. He has received the British Fantasy Award, the American Mystery Award, the Edgar Award, the Grinzane Cavour Prize for Literature, and seven Bram Stoker Awards. He lives with his family in Nacogdoches, Texas.

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Books by Joe R. Lansdale

The Bottoms
Leather Maiden
Lost Echoes
Sunset and Sawdust
A Fine Dark Line
Freezer Burn

In the Hap and Leonard Series
Savage Season
Mucho Mojo
The Two-Bear Mambo
Bad Chili
Rumble Tumble
Captains Outrageous
Vanilla Ride

Captains Outrageous

A Hap and Leonard Novel

Joe R. Lansdale

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This one's for Eugene Frizzell and Coy Harry,
friends and brothers.

> This is the worst trip, I ever been on.
>
> *"Sloop John B,"*
> *New England Maritime Song*

Author’s Acknowledgments

The second chapter of this novel is loosely based on a true incident involving my friend and martial arts student Paul Britt. Hap’s fictional adventure is just that, a fictional adventure. Paul Britt—policeman, martial artist, master instructor of Shen Chuan—is a real hero, responsible for saving a young woman’s life.

I have tremendous respect for those who are true exponents of law and order. My best thoughts and wishes go to you, Paul, and to the young woman whose life you saved. May your magnificent breed multiply and may the likes of the savage you fought diminish and in short time vanish from the face of the earth.

Also, acknowledgments to Betty Ann Taylor and the fearless crew from the Nacogdoches Humane Society who decided a cruise would be nice. It wasn’t.

A small part of this novel is loosely based on my short story “Master of Misery.”

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Books By Joe R. Lansdale

1

I MADE A LAST ROUND and met Leonard in the break room. He had his security guard cap cocked at a jaunty angle and was standing in front of the soda machine, counting out change.

When I came in he said, without looking up, “You got a quarter?”

I gave him a quarter.

“Any chickens try to break out?” I asked.

“Nope. None tried to break in either. How about on your side? Any trouble?” Leonard pushed the button on the soda machine and a Dr. Pepper dropped out.

“No chicken problems. I saw a suspicious wood rat out by the trees, but he didn’t want any part of me.”

“Well, I can see that.”

I went over and made myself a cup of free decaf because I’d just given Leonard my last quarter. I put lots of free creamer in it. The coffee at the chicken plant needs lots of creamer so it doesn’t taste like something dead.

I stirred the coffee in the Styrofoam cup with a plastic swizzle stick and sipped it. It still tasted like something dead, only with creamer in it. I dropped the full cup in the trash and we went out to Leonard’s pickup.

We had been working at Deerstone’s Chicken Processing for about six months, and it wasn’t so bad. We had the three-in-the-afternoon-to-midnight shift. Mostly you just walked around and made sure there weren’t any holes in the fence and nothing was out of place and you didn’t see workers packing their car trunks with frozen chickens.

It beat one chicken plant I tried to get on at. They didn’t want me as a security guard, but thought I’d be great out at their farm, masturbating roosters for sperm to impregnate hens. No joke.

They really did that, or so they said. I tried to imagine if they had you do it with tweezers and gloves, or if you had to do it with a naked thumb and forefinger. Perhaps it was better for the chickens that way.

When you spent a lot of time walking around outside a dark building and inside where chicken slaughter was going on, you thought about all kinds of possibilities. And in the middle of the night, edging on toward the big twelve, a lot of dumb ideas seemed reasonable.

The guard job had come through an acquaintance who was quitting and said they needed two. I had to get gun-certified, way it's offered in Texas, and Leonard, who already had the certification, got the job with me. We were the last hard bastion between the chickens inside the processing plant (most of them already dead, headless, de-feathered, and on hooks) and the outside world who wanted them.

Let me tell you, these chicken people aren't messing around. They're serious about their fowls. They got all kinds of processing methods they hold dear and don't want stolen.

Processing plant across town, the one wanted me to jack off chickens, lived in mortal fear of spies from Deer-stone's. So fearful, in fact, Leonard and I liked to imagine they would send their own chickens over for secrets. You know, dressed in black ninja outfits, going over the fence and the wall, with metal cleats on wings and feet, climbing through ventilation shafts, ready to pluck out secret information after formidable nunchaku battles in elevators and dark places with Deerstone's own chickens.

Yes sir, sort of made you feel proud when you went home at night, put your dark green guard suit, hat, and holstered handgun on a chair, lay down in bed, smelling of chicken, knowing you kept the world safe from meat processing thieves. That and the fact you got a decent check every two weeks and a sexy uniform to dazzle the female population.

Well, decent money depends on what you've been doing before. Bouncing sometimes paid better, but you had to hang out with a bunch of drunks in a smoky joint full of naked women, and after a while the naked women were just bothersome. You wanted them to put clothes on. I can't explain it. It's just one of those strange things in life. You start to think you wouldn't have to bounce in the first place, throw drunks in the parking lot, if they didn't serve alcohol in there and have naked women running around shaking their tits and sticking their bush in everyone's face.

Then you realize if the place wasn't like that, you wouldn't have a job. It's a bit like being a preacher. If there wasn't any sin you'd be hosing down oil at a filling station. Which, come to think of it, in either case, bouncer or preacher, was sure to be a more honorable profession.

Way I felt lately, naked women were one of life's miseries. I hadn't seen my woman, Brett, naked in some time. Fact was, I wasn't sure she was my woman anymore. And what I had done for her had changed my life, made me blue and sorry and sad about the needs of the flesh. It was my feelings for her, both emotional and physical, that had got me in some business that had resulted in deaths. I dreamed about those people at night. They came to me in bursts of gunfire, powder smoke, and screams. Their faces were huge and they howled at me with mouths open so wide I could see fillings in their teeth, and beyond that, the abyss into which we all go.

What I had done had a certain justification, but certain justification and justification aren't the same thing. I had been on the edge of violence before, and had acted in self-defense before, but in this case I had gone in with the full understanding and the design that I might have to take human lives, and had. I had left there wounded with blood on my shoes.

Since Leonard had been with me on this horrid escapade, I asked Leonard if he had the same problems, the same dreams. His answer was simple. The dead people were assholes.

As for dreams? No.

After it was over, me and Brett kept in touch, made love a few times, had dinner together, went to movies. But there was something missing. Like a hamburger without the fixings. Part of it was the fact she was trying to bring her daughter, Tillie, back to normalcy.

Problem was, Tillie liked being a whore, just not a whore against her will. I guess it beat wanting to grow up and work as a politician.

Truth of the matter was, Tillie was one hell of a good whore. She was pulling down big change over in Tyler, where the Baptists liked sex good as anybody.

I liked sex too, but Brett wasn't for it anymore. Not really. Last few times I had felt as if I were having a kind of desperate aerobic workout. You do it 'cause you think you're supposed to and it's good for you, but you don't like it, and you end up sweaty for little to nothing.

I felt as if Brett ought to have a light on, be reading a magazine, have a pair of scissors at hand so she could clip coupons. Making love to her was kind of like I was trying to beat something to death with my pelvis that was already dead.

Frankly, it wasn't the kind of loving made a man feel hard as steel, or even firm as Greek Age bronze.

Unspoken, we bled sex out of our relationship, and pretty soon we bled the relationship out of it. I had talked to her by phone a few times. She dropped by the plant at dinner break with Kentucky Fried Chicken once, but it was all pretty uninspiring. If I remember correctly, we talked about KFC's biscuits most of the time. They're good biscuits, by the way, but they can't beat Popeye's, and neither's biscuits quite match up to a loving relationship.

After that, I saw her once more. Then all went quiet on that front, and I had pretty much decided from here on out it was the bachelor life for me.

Sex and chicken processing. Two of life's great mysteries.

Leonard drove me around the big chicken plant lot to my car. We did this every night. I parked on one side, he on the other. If we went out the front door, he gave me a ride to my car. We went out the back, I gave him a ride to his. We could have parked side by side, of course, but we liked to add a little adventure to our lives. And it gave us a few minutes to talk about whatever we felt like talking about. Most of it just stupid stuff about the chicken plant, a quick survey of our present lives.

Since I had moved out of his place, we only saw each other at the job site these days. Weekends I enjoyed punching the heavy bag, skipping rope, and feeling sorry for myself. It had one side benefit. I had lost weight. I hadn't been so trim since I had a stomach virus and a full week of vomiting and diarrhea. Only now I felt better and wasn't gaining it back and I could live life without having to always be near a commode.

Leonard had a boyfriend he was seeing, and that kept him busy. I had met the guy and he seemed all right. He was a lead man at the aluminum chair factory. He wasn't quite as macho as Leonard, but he wasn't a skipper, as Leonard called the more effeminate gays. He was black as tar, flat-nosed and thick-lipped, balding, solid built and a little younger than Leonard. Or as Leonard liked to joke, he's big and way black, likes slow walks in the park, and he's got a eight-inch dick.

Leonard, as always, liked to cut to the chase.

This guy, John, he liked to just hang out mostly, and that's what Leonard liked. That and the sex. They went down to the gym, lifted weights three times a week, went to movies and read books in bed. Probably talked about chickens and aluminum lawn furniture now and then. When it came to John, Leonard was pretty free with his vanilla cookies. I guess being a best friend and damn near brother you don't get vanilla cookies so easy. With Leonard, you got to be like a date or something, a lead man at the aluminum chair factory, eight inches of dick and a willing disposition.

John was probably the best thing that had happened to brother Leonard, but it sure put a cramp in my life. No woman. No friend. Just a heavy bag to punch and lots of cheap food eaten with spoons out of cans.

I didn't have a TV either and I had read all my books and didn't have money for more. I was putting what money I had into paying for my new domicile and keeping up my half-ass pickup. I had traded in a banged-up Chevy Nova with hardened gum stuck beneath the dashboard and a rotting pack of rubbers in the glove box for it. Those rubbers and the gum had come with the car, and I had been more than glad to pass them on. The pickup was only better than the Nova in the pollution department. The Chevy Nova had damn near been a mosquito fogger.

All I had of my old life was an ancient stereo and a few playable records I'd rescued from the mess of my home after a tornado. I had one CD that had been given to me, but no CD player.

As Leonard drove me around to my car, we were heavy into a philosophical conversation. He was telling me about his love life. I said, "You like John 'cause he's got eight inches?"

"Yeah."

"That's kind of shallow, ain't it?"

"Yeah."

"You're jerkin' me again, aren't you?"

"I'm tellin' you it's the same as when you buy a burrito. Big is better than small."

"Size doesn't mean a thing."

"You say. What would you know? You ain't a dick man."

"No, but women say it doesn't matter."

"Women are liars. Hey, you like titties?"

"What?"

"Titties?"

"Yeah. And I see where this is going. I like any size tittie. Long as it's a friendly tittie."

"But you like big titties?"

"Yeah, but you're not roping me into some bullshit here. I don't think a woman's got to have big hooters to be worth something."

"Yeah, but if she's worth something and has big hooters, you like that, don't you?"

"Well, yeah, but that doesn't prove anything."

"It proves you like big titties."

"It doesn't prove that big titties are important."

"I say this. I say you could maybe, at least for thirty minutes, like a woman you didn't really like long as she had big titties and was willin' to shuck drawers. Am I right?"

"Leonard …"

"Am I right?"

"I don't think I'm that shallow."

"Let's say you're in the mood, and she's in the mood, and she hasn't got visible scars or oozing sores, and she looks pretty good and she's got them big titties. We're not talkin' marriage here, or takin' advantage. We're talkin' she's willin' and she's not too damn smart—"

"Whoa!"

"Just listen. Say, she's got like an IQ of, oh, I don't know. We won't put her in like some kind of home for folks can't figure left from right, but let's say we're talkin' someone's not gonna challenge Einstein in the smart department."

"That's most of us."

"All right. You get that one. Say, she's not any smarter than, say, a postal worker. You know, ones at the counter with their mouth open, always put up a sign says NEXT WINDOW when you walk up to their slot."

"I can see that."

"Say, she's, you know, that kind of dumb. And she's willin'. Let's even say she ain't the best-lookin' thing. I don't mean she's got her nose on the back of her head. She doesn't scare people. But she's got this shape, and them big ol' titties. She wants you to throw her the sausage. Now, you're tellin' me, even if she ain't so pretty, and not so smart, she wanted you, you wouldn't fuck her?"

"All right, I might."

"Might, hell. You'd be on that stuff like a duck on a June bug."

"But I might do it if she didn't have big breasts. I mean, she's pleasant-looking enough."

"Then you're sayin' you'd bang anything?"

"I'm not sayin' that."

"All right, you're not sayin' that, then you're sayin' you like big titties."

"I think this conversation is rigged."

Leonard pulled up next to my car.

"Well," he continued, "I like a big dick. Think about it. A big tit really doesn't do you any good. You get to suck on it, or whatever you heteros do. Roll it around in your palms or rub your head with it. Whatever. Frankly, the thought of it kind of disgusts me. You're not accomplishing anything there. Just buy a beach ball."

"It's not like that, Leonard."

"Now, a dick, there's somethin's got a purpose."

"I'll be going now, Leonard."

I opened the door, got out of the pickup. Leonard punched in his Johnny Cash cassette, waved at me, and drove off to the sounds of "Delia."

Just as I unlocked my car door, tossed my cap on the seat, and was about to climb inside, I heard a weak voice in the nearby patch of woods beyond the fence.

"Help me."

2

THE VOICE HAD COME from the trees beyond the great chain link fence that surrounded the parking lot. Nothing else was said, but I could hear a whimper, as if a puppy were dying under an automobile tire.

There wasn't much of a moon, but besides the whimper I could hear and see movement in the trees. I just couldn't make out exactly what it was. I opened my truck door and jerked on the headlights, and what I saw horrified me.

Between two trees a young man was looking at me, startled, like a deer caught in headlights. His hair was mussed and full of pine straw and leaves, his face was smeared with something. He had hold of a woman's wrist. She was on the ground, nude, her head turned slightly toward me, her dark hair spread out like a stain on the leaf mold. After a moment of glaring at me, the guy turned his attention to her and began stomping her, like he was trying to smash an insect. It was a horrible sound, way his booted foot came down on her soft face.

There wasn't any way to get through the fence, and it was too far to go around. I thought about pulling my gun, but I'd done the gun thing already and was wearing scars from that, filling my head nightly with dark bad dreams. I was determined not to do it again. I leaped at the fence, climbed over, dropped to the other side.

No sooner had I landed than he came for me. He was hot to trot, and in my headlights he looked like a bad dream. What I had seen on his face was blood and dirt, and I figured the blood wasn't from him. I caught a glimpse of the woman—a girl, really. One of her hands quivered like an animal in a trap.

He charged me and I sidestepped, slapped at the back of his head with both hands. He went past fast, slammed into the fence, turned, came at me again. I side-kicked him and knocked him back, but he didn't go down. He leaped at me and I brought an elbow up and under his chin, but all that did was make him fall back a pace.

He jumped on me like a spider. I spun around, bent forward, and he flipped over my shoulder. He hit the ground, came up as if he had bounced off a trampoline. I hit him repeatedly, but he kept coming. The only thing I had fought before with this much tenacity and ability to absorb damage was a rabid squirrel, but the squirrel had been much smaller and Leonard had been there to help kill it.

I got him by the back of the head with one hand, the chin with the other, stuck my index finger in the soft spot on the side of his neck. He went around and down, but pounced up. We hammered at each other and I caught a good one over the eye. He came in for a tackle, and I hooked my arm under his neck and let his momentum carry me back. I stuck a foot in his balls as we went. He went up high and came down hard on his back. I rolled him over on his stomach, still holding on to his neck, trying to choke him out.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the girl, lying there in the pool of yellow from the headlights. She was covered in blood, and one eye was nothing but a dark wet hole. Her head had literally been driven into the ground.

I kept choking him, but it didn't seem to be bothering the bastard. I didn't get it. This guy was half my size, not overly strong-looking, and I knew what the hell I was doing.

Up he came, and out of the choke, and wheeled on me. I started kicking his shins and inside his thighs and his groin, but he kept struggling.

I kicked him one last time and decided I liked the gun after all. If just to discourage him. I pulled it, an automatic. It didn't slow him down. He charged and I jammed it forward into his face, hitting him with the barrel. I struck him with such force the barrel slide was knocked back and it ejected a shell, but still he came, trying to get the gun. I should have shot him, but didn't. I avoided him and tossed the gun over the fence.

He bellowed like something out of hell, came on hard again, and I wished now I hadn't been so ethical. In that moment, had I had the gun, I would have emptied it into him. I was so frightened I thought of trying to break away and climb the fence for the automatic. But there wasn't time for that now.

I hit him with a slipping elbow to the side of the face, dropped my arm and hit him with a hammer fist in the balls, went for a hammerlock, but that was like trying to put a lock on a rubber hose. I couldn't hold him. I jabbed a finger into one of his eyes, and for the first time I got the right response. He went back, holding his face. In an act of desperation I leaped up sideways with both feet and hit him in the chest with the force of my entire body.

I at least succeeded in knocking him down. I got up, scared. In this rare moment of breathing room, I considered again going for the fence and the gun, but he went for it instead, leaped, grabbed the links, began to climb over.

I grabbed the fence, started scuttling too. He beat me over by a second or so. I threw myself over the top and landed in front of my pickup. The automatic had fallen on the far side of the truck, and he was going for it. I put a foot on the bumper of the pickup, sprang onto the hood, pushed off with my foot and rolled over the roof, hit in the bed on my feet, leaped from the truck onto him, hit him hard in the back just as he was reaching for the gun. He missed his grab, went forward, getting a parking lot full of asphalt across his face and chest. He got up with me on his back, my arm around his neck. He whipped me off of him like a dog shaking off water.

He turned, and since we were away from the headlights, and there was only a little light from the parking lot, I couldn't see his face well, but there was asphalt hanging from his raw cheeks and his lips looked to be nearly scraped off. He began to beat his chest like Tarzan and yell. He turned, put both hands on the tailgate of my truck, and sprang into the bed, made the roof of the truck, yelled, "I'm a swinging dick," and did a back flip onto the parking lot, hit hard. He hopped up from that and ran between me and the truck. I picked up the automatic, jumped into the truck. I was hoping the lights hadn't run down the battery. It cranked. I backed out and went after him.

He was bearing down on Ella May. Ella May was a heavy black woman who worked in the department where the chickens were run through a neck slicer. On her shift she wore a hooded yellow slicker and high black boots, sat on a throne surrounded by a lake of blood, and it was her job to slit the throats of the survivors with a little hooked knife. She didn't have her yellow slicker and boots on now, but that knife was her own.

As he charged her, she jumped back slightly and the knife came out and she cut him, deep. I could see blood fly up between him and her in my headlights. He ran right over her and kept running. He could have rushed around the building and out the open front gate where the shift was changing, but he charged the fence, ready to climb over. I put the pedal to the metal and bore down on him. He was already near the top. I hit the fence hard enough to knock him loose. He fell backward, smashing my windshield. I jerked open the door, leaped out, grabbed him off the hood, slammed him against the side of the truck, and kneed him in the balls two or three times.

He still succeeded in hitting me in the face. I wavered consciousness but didn't go down. Ella May had come up on the other side of the truck and she was scrambling across the hood. She got him around the neck and stuck that curved knife in his cheek and pulled for all she was worth, splashing blood and exposing his teeth.

The guy reached up, grabbed the blade and tore the knife away from her. I got on that knife quick, latched a figure-four on his arm, swung him around and down, and butted his nose with my forehead.

"I teach you to jump on me, motherfucker," Ella May said. She came off the hood and landed on his legs, then came around and started kicking him in the head.

I was beginning to swoon. Black spots swirled in my vision like gnats in the river bottoms. The two security guards who were my and Leonard's replacements showed up and everyone dog-piled the bastard. We got him rolled over and handcuffed. One of the guards, a black guy I didn't know, said, "You all right?"

"There's a girl," I said. "He was attacking a girl. Other side of the fence there," and I pointed.

"I'll call some law," the black guy said.

I leaned against the truck. Ella May was kicking the guy still.

He lay on the ground and took the shots without so much as a grunt. “Motherfucker, run over my ass. I’ll teach your cock not to stand up.”

One of the guards got hold of her and pulled her back, but she kept fighting. He finally pushed her up against the fence and held her arms behind her back and used his handcuffs on her. All the while, she was screaming.

“Handcuffs! Handcuffs! I’ll kick your dick over the fence, cocksucker.”

“Calm down, Ella May,” he said.

“Calm down, my ass. Motherfucker run over me … You’re hurtin’ my arm, goddamn it. I’ll remember your ugly face.”

The headlights from my truck, the lights in the lot, the darkness between and around them swirled together and I remembered feeling hot, trying to bend over to breathe better, trying not to faint, but when I bent forward I just kept going.

3

Ouch," I said. "Take it easy."

Leonard was poking at the deep cut over my eye with the tip of his finger, examining the stitches.

"One of 'em looks to be sewed too loose," he said.

"It'll do," I said.

I was sitting on a gurney in a little room just off of the emergency room hall. An intern had just sewn me up and left. Now there was just me, Leonard, and John.

A cop, a friend of mine, Charlie Blank, had been in earlier to take my side of the story. He left shortly after Leonard's and John's arrival.

The young woman who had been beaten was in intensive care, and word was she wasn't doing too well. One thing was certain, she had lost some teeth and an eye.

"Well," Leonard said, "you did say you saw a wood rat out by the trees."

"I just didn't know he was so mean."

"Yeah, he wasn't as afraid of you as you thought."

"I don't think this sonofabitch was afraid of anything. I tell you, Leonard, he was the toughest dude I've ever fought. I'd rather fight three guys than fight him again, and me with a pipe wrench. I think Ella May wants a piece of him, though."

"Ella May," John said, "hasn't got the sense of two nickels rubbed together. I've known her all my life. Before she was cutting chicken throats, she worked at the aluminum chair plant with me. She put the damn riveter through her fingers two or three times. I'm surprised she hasn't cut her own throat at the chicken plant."

"I'm not accusing her of intelligence," I said, "just her willingness to fight. Come to think of it, her and this guy, they'd make a great tag team they wanted to get together. They'd be unbeatable."

"Good thing she wasn't on his side tonight," John said.

"She hadn't been there," I said, "that sonofabitch would have gotten away. I wonder how bad messed up he is. I'd feel better he looked worse than me."

"Well," Leonard said, "it ain't like you got to worry about your native good looks."

"What I'd like to know," John said, "is what's this guy's story?"

"Whatever it is," I said, "it isn't a fairy tale. More like a horror story, I figure."

"Speakin' of horror stories," Leonard said, "that shirt Charlie had on, where in hell did he find that? It looked like it had been used to wipe up paint."

"It's colorful," I said.

"Colorful is a nice word," John said.

In that moment I realized since Leonard had been seeing John he dressed nicer himself. Nothing fancy, but a little slicker. John always dressed that way, like he was going to a casual prayer meeting.

"Charlie just looked like hell in general," Leonard said.

"He's divorced and not happy about it. He gave up cigarettes because his wife wouldn't give him any unless he did. Turned out she was seeing a guy on the side who smoked. It really got his goat. Worse yet, now he finds he can quit smoking. Thing bothers him most, besides the wife gone, is he's gotten hooked on this shitty *Kung Fu* television series. He said when he got to taping it while he was at work, looking forward to it at nights, he knew he had crossed the line into dark depression."

"I don't know," John said. "Nothing to do, it's not so bad."

Leonard and I looked at him.

"I mean, I watch it sometimes," he said. "I got nothing else on tape, you know. Now and then."

We kept looking at him.

"Jeez, guys. I'll quit. Promise. Really."

I took a couple days off from work, enjoyed being a hero for about fifteen minutes. Me and Ella May. I wondered how she was doing. Probably still cussing and wanting to fight.

Night it happened I was so wired I didn't sleep, and the next day I was still wired, and the next night too. I was not only wired, I hurt too. I felt as if I had been wrapped in duct tape and rolled down a rocky mountainside into a brick wall with my nuts in my teeth.

Friday some of it passed and I got a good night's sleep, slept in late without the bad dreams, and was a lot less sore. Saturday morning, near eleven, I was up in my sweat pants, T-shirt, and bare feet, making coffee.

My new place was in town, a duplex. It was upstairs with a connecting kitchen/living room, a small bedroom, and a bathroom with a toilet that sagged into the floor when you sat on it. I figured some morning I'd be in there taking my morning constitutional and find myself flying through space, down to the bottom floor, having firemen dig my corpse out from under busted ceramic and a pile of shit.

There was some good news. The duplex was cheap. Mostly because the bottom floor was burned out. Before I moved in, according to the landlord, some drunk had left a frying pan on the stove and it and the grease and the chicken leg floating in it caught on fire and the blaze spread through the kitchen/living room like a yeast infection. The drunk had been sleeping on the couch at the time. He was in some kind of burn center, probably wishing he'd just opened a box of crackers and pulled the tab on a can of beanie weenies.

The place wasn't going to be rented for a while, not until the landlord fixed it up, so he let me store some stuff down there in the only rooms that weren't burned, the bedroom and the bathroom. Long as there wasn't someone under me, the duplex wasn't so bad, though now and then the burn smell would come up through the floor and stink the place up, make my eyes water, wake me in the middle of the night, and I'd get up to make sure I hadn't left something on the stove myself.

All in all, it was all right, though living in town wasn't my preference.

Anyway, I was making coffee and thinking about toast with jelly for breakfast, when I heard a car drive up. I went to the kitchen window over the sink, looked out. It was Charlie Blank. He was getting out from behind the wheel of a clean white Ford. A middle-aged, gray-haired guy in a brown suit got out on the passenger's side. He looked up at the duplex as if he were observing some prehistoric hovel. Of interest, but surprised people once lived there, even more surprised to think someone might be squatting there now, perhaps supping on mastodon marrow.

Charlie, as usual, was wearing a colorful Hawaiian shirt, slacks, tennis shoes, and a sports coat the color of mustard, or if you really want to get technical, baby shit. A straw boater had replaced his felt porkpie. The new hat, I presumed, was part of his spring ensemble. The shoes he had on were the kind you might dress a juvenile Frankenstein monster in, black, thick-soled, and solid enough to drive a nail. He had a greasy brown bag in one hand.

I listened to them clunk up the stairs and opened the door before they could knock.

"My man," Charlie said.

"How are you, Charlie?"

"All right. I got someone needs to see you. Can we come in?"

"What's the password?"

"I'm throwing out your old parking tickets."

"I don't have any."

"Well, if you had some."

"Come on in. Sorry about the place, maid's day off."

The guy in the suit hadn't cracked a smile, not even a sly grin. I couldn't tell if he was humorless or if Charlie and I were just boring. Probably the latter.

I motioned them to the couch. It had come with the place. It had one spot that nearly sagged to the floor. I had slipped a piece of plywood under the cushions there, and though it no longer sank, it was seriously hard on the ass.

"Coffee?" I asked.

"I could use some," Charlie said, then to the man in the suit. "You?"

The man shook his head.

Charlie gave me the bag. I put it on the table and opened it. Doughnuts.

"The stitches come out soon?" Charlie asked.

"Pretty soon."

I pulled down nonmatching cups, poured coffee. Charlie sat on the couch and drank his, I leaned against the sink. The man sat by Charlie with his hands in his lap, looking around. It was as if he was avoiding placing his arms or hands on the sofa for fear of contamination, or a possible attack from a rat hidden in the cotton.

"I'm just living here till they get my condo built," I said.

He turned toward me. This time he did smile. Nothing to get excited about, but teeth were involved.

"This is Elmer Bond, Hap," Charlie said.

The name hit me. That had been the girl's name, the one that had been stomped by the maniac. Bond. Sarah Bond.

I switched my cup to my left hand, stepped over and shook his hand. "I presume you're kin to Sarah Bond."

"Father," he said.

"I'm sorry about what happened. How is she?"

"Not good. But better. She'll live. She lost an eye. There'll be extensive plastic surgery. But, thanks to you, she'll live, and the bastard who did this to her is in custody. I hope he decides to hang himself, but if he doesn't, I hope they give him the needle. I'm not very sympathetic to him."

"I wouldn't expect you to be," I said.

"Mr. Collins," he said. "I—"

"Hap. My dad was Mr. Collins, and he didn't like being called that either."

"Hap. I came here to thank you personally for saving my daughter's life."

"You're welcome."

"I want to show my appreciation by giving you a check for a hundred thousand dollars."

"Do what?"

"A check, for a hundred thousand dollars. I'll write it out now."

"Hey, you don't owe me anything for that."

"I'd like to give it to you anyway."

"That's a lot of money."

"Not to me. It's a drop in the bucket. I'm wealthy, Hap. Money is not a problem. A hundred thousand is not a problem. I'm not paying you for doing what you thought you should do, I'm showing my appreciation. Thanks and a handshake is very nice, but a hundred thousand dollars is better. I did the same for Miss Drew."

"Drew?"

"Ella May," Charlie said.

"I don't want to be paid, Mr. Bond."

"Elmer. If you're Hap, I'm Elmer."

"I don't want to be paid, Elmer."

"Certainly, I can't wrestle you to the floor and make you take it and spend it on yourself, but hear me out. My daughter is sixteen years old, Hap. Sixteen. A baby. She was attending a church function. Just got her driver's license. Has hardly been driving at all. This … human … No … this animal, this thing. A man named Bill Merchant, he knew my daughter. They went to school together, though he dropped out his junior year. He's a few years older. Did you know that he's only eighteen?"

"I knew he was young. One of the reasons I was amazed at the way he fought."

"Drugs," Charlie said. "Pills. Alcohol. Ritalin. Lots of Ritalin."

"I thought that was a medicine for hyperactivity," I said. "Attention deficit."

"It is," Charlie said. "If you have those problems. But if you don't, it works like speed. Bruce Lee couldn't have beat that guy that night, Hap. He was on that and everything else."

"I want to finish," Elmer said.

“Sorry,” Charlie said. “Please.”

“He had just been released from a juvenile facility. He was there for rape. This happened shortly after he dropped out of LaBorde High School. He’s been a problem kid all his life. When I say just released, I mean the day before. For whatever reason, he parked his mother’s car outside the church and began to drink and take pills, or whatever it was he took. When Sarah came out, he spotted her, and perhaps because he knew her, or because she’s pretty—or was pretty—he went over to speak to her, pulled her in the car in front of half a dozen witnesses. He drove her to a little stretch of woods on the edge of town, pulled her out of the car, into the woods, and raped her. She escaped. He chased her. The woods came out against the chicken plant fence. He caught her there. He raped her again. He bit … Do you hear me, Hap? He *bit*, one of her nipples off, then he began to beat her and stomp her. He stomped her face in, Hap. In! Just like it was made of cardboard. Crushed her jaw, her cheeks. Knocked out teeth, and he stomped out her eye. Stomped it out. She’s going to have to have a glass eye. A fucking glass eye.”

“Easy,” Charlie said.

Elmer had started to tremble. Tears were running down his cheeks, and I was just about to cry myself.

“My daughter was beautiful, Hap. She wanted to be a model. They’ll fix her some. Her face will probably be all right, for the most part. She’ll have a glass eye, a false jaw and teeth. That’s just one bad side. Worse, she’ll have this asshole who did this to her inside her head the rest of her life. But you know what?”

“What?” I said.

“She’ll remember you too. You’ll be there too. When she gets well she’ll want to see you. She said you’re her knight in shining armor. You came over that fence when she had given up all hope. She knew her life was gone, and you saved her, Hap. You fought the dragon, and you defeated him.”

“With help,” I said.

“You laid him low. I only regret you didn’t kill him.”

“It crossed my mind,” I said. “I had it to do over, I don’t know what I’d do.”

“But you saved my baby, Hap. I want you to take the money. God, may I use your bathroom to wash my face.”

“Sure.” I pointed it out to him.

When the water was running in the bathroom, Charlie said, “Take the money, Hap. It would make him feel better. And it’ll make you feel better. You could use it. This is a break you deserve. For Christ sake, take it. And hand me one of those doughnuts.”

A moment later Elmer came out of the bathroom. He reached in his pocket and took out a small photograph of a beautiful young woman. “That’s Sarah,” he said. “Before the beating. Look at her. She was beautiful. And inside, she’s even more beautiful. More than her face, he stomped on her spirit.”

“I can’t find the right words,” I said. “All I’ve got is I’m sorry. And I’m glad I was there. I only wish I had been there earlier.”

“And I have to wish you had killed the sonofabitch, but what you did stopped him from killing her. That’s the important part, Hap. You saved her life.”

Elmer looked at the photo once more, put it back in his pocket. He looked teary again. He said, “I’ll take that cup of coffee now.”

I got down a cup and poured him some. When I gave it to him, he said, “I want you to take the money. I want you to go on vacation, or buy something for yourself, take a month off from the chicken plant. Take that buddy of yours”—he turned his head to Charlie—“what’s the name?”

“Leonard,” Charlie said. “Leonard Pine.”

“Charlie told me all about you, Hap. About you and Leonard. I want you to take the money. Please take the money.”

“I’ll take the money, Elmer. But as for the vacation and the month off, I don’t think so. The chicken plant frowns on that sort of thing.”

Charlie grinned.

Elmer said, “No it doesn’t. Not in this case. I own the plant.”

4

LEONARD AND I were shooting pool with John at the LaBorde Rec Center, which in spite of its name is not for kiddies. It was a place where you could buy a beer, shoot some pool, see football games and boxing matches on a huge television, and watch guys scratch their nuts and try and pick up women. And from time to time guys try to pick up guys and women pick up women.

The bartender, Marlie, was a bull dyke with a flattop and a body the size and shape of a small sumo wrestler, or if you prefer, a three-hundred-pound potato. Fortunately, she didn't dress like a sumo wrestler or a potato. She always wore gray coveralls with the sleeves cut out, so you could see her big biceps and tattoos, like: MOTHER NEVER LOVED ME, AND SO WHAT?

Marlie owned and ran the place. She was noted for her uneven temperament. I had seen her use a taped axe handle to subdue rowdy customers, and she had a mean left hook and she didn't mind kneeing a man in the balls either. Saturday nights, the Rec Center could get pretty rowdy, and so could Marlie.

Marlie always looked as if she were about to break out into a string of obscenities. Which, of course, she often did. Stuff like: "Quit fuckin' up that pool cue, you limp-dicked cocksucker," and "Do that again, motherfucker, gonna wake up peein' through a tube."

She had a girlfriend who looked like a *Vogue* model.

Leonard and I were the lousiest pool players ever produced. We were playing colored and stripes. I was stripes, Leonard was colored. He thought that was funny.

I took a shot and knocked my last striped ball in the hole, eased around to shoot in the black one. Leonard had two colored balls left, red and green, and neither in a good position. I grinned at Leonard as I lined up the shot, an easy one.

I boosted the ball with the stick. It went in the hole. I said, “That’s another ten cents you owe me.”

“Damn,” Leonard said. “What is that now, forty cents?”

“Fifty.”

“You’re not countin’ the first game, are you?”

“Why not?”

“That was a warm-up game.”

“You didn’t say anything about a warm-up game. Did he say anything about a warm-up game, John?”

John shook his head, said, “And you owe me all the games I beat you, Leonard. Don’t try and weasel.”

“I’m not weaslin’.”

“I call it weaslin’. Hap?”

“Weaslin’.”

“I just think you ought to have least one warm-up game,” Leonard said.

“John, we do that, does that mean I don’t owe you first time you beat me?” I said. “Could that be a warm-up game? You want to do that, I’ll go with Leonard.”

“Everybody owes,” John said.

“Yeah, you say that,” Leonard said, “ ’cause you’re the only one hasn’t lost a game.”

John said, “My turn. It’s you and me, Hap. Loser racks.”

Leonard fed some quarters into the slot on the side of the table and the balls were released. Leonard gathered the balls, racked them.

It was my break, but I let John go first. He burst, and I never so much as picked up my stick after that. He ran the table. When he was finished twenty minutes later, he said, “Ten more cents.”

I looked at Leonard. “Give him a dime out of the money you owe me.”

John held out his hand and Leonard gave him the ten cents.

“That’s a beginning,” John said.

Leonard bought beers for himself and John, got me a Sharps. We sat at a table and watched some women shoot pool. One of the women, a blonde with black roots, had a large but well-formed butt, like the kind R. Crumb draws. The other one was tall and thin with brown hair and big doe eyes. They were in their thirties, attractive. They were interested in two guys at the bar, however, and they were playing pool with them in mind, moving their butts so that those two got a good view.

I kept an eye on them, just in case I might pick up a few pool-shooting tips.

Leonard said, “It’s so interesting to watch a straight guy work. The way you casually observe those women, check the men out over at the bar, know they are the object of those two gals’ attention. Then I get to see you feel sorry for yourself because the women don’t know you’re alive. It’s all so … curious. And pathetic.”

“Yeah,” John said to Leonard, “like you haven’t been checking those guys out over there.”

“I suppose,” Leonard said, “I did turn an eye in their direction.”

“I think it was both eyes,” John said. “Don’t turn it there too often, okay?”

“Okay,” Leonard said. “Besides, those guys are straight.”

“Well, don’t overdo the looking anyway,” John said.

Leonard reached out and gave John’s hand a pat, then turned his attention to me. “So he offered you one hundred thousand dollars and a month off from the plant? And a month for me?”

“Yep.”

“He didn’t happen to offer me a month off from the aluminum chair factory, did he?” John said.

“Sorry, John,” I said. “He doesn’t own the aluminum chair factory.”

“Maybe he’ll buy it,” John said.

“It could happen,” I said.

“I’m guessing since the owner’s name isn’t Deerstone, then there isn’t a Deerstone,” John said.

“There was. He sold out to Bond nearly twenty years ago,” I said. “But they kept the name because it had commercial value.”

“We get our jobs back when the month’s up, I reckon,” Leonard

said.

“Of course,” I said. “Frankly, I feel funny taking his money. You know, I didn’t intend to, and I tell myself I did it for the guy and because Charlie convinced me, but I know deep down, hell, not that deep, that I did it because I wanted the money.”

“Hap, you’re about the least money-oriented sonofabitch I know,” Leonard said.

“That’s because winning all your dimes, I don’t have to worry about money.”

“You don’t worry about money,” Leonard said, “because you’re goodhearted and haven’t got enough brains to worry about it. Hell, you didn’t do what you did for money. That was just an unexpected end result. You don’t need to feel guilty because you took it. You’d have done it had you known the girl was a pauper and that motherfucker was not only going to fight you like a tiger, but was going to win. You’d have gone on ahead anyway.”

“I’ll take all that as a compliment. Except the lack of brains part.”

The blonde with the black roots and the big firm butt was on our side now, the rear of her white shorts pointed in my direction. They were not only short shorts, but they flared dangerously and I could see some of the soft meat up there and a hint of pubic hair. I shifted subtly in my chair for a better look.

“Your turn to buy,” Leonard said to me.

I took a last look at the shorts and what was in them and went over to the bar. Marlie came up, “What’ll it be?”

I sat on the bar stool, said, “Two Miller Drafts, a Sharps.”

“You drink the Sharps, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“What for?”

“I like it.”

“It ain’t a diet thing?”

“I like it.”

“It ain’t a diet thing and you drink it?”

“I like it.”

"Why?"

"There's no alcohol in it."

"Hell, I thought that was why you drank beer, 'cause there's alcohol in it."

"Sharps isn't beer. Not really."

"You're tellin' me."

"Can I just have the Sharps?"

Marlie finally got the beers and the Sharps. She said, "Those two gals, the one with the big ass, she's making my clit hard."

"Oh," I said.

"Them's the facts," Marlie said. "Problem is, the blonde, the one with the dirt in her part—"

"Dirt?"

"The black roots."

"Oh."

"She's interested in the guy at the bar there, one turned toward her, smiling. She's interested in his tuber, which, from the looks of those pants, is about the size of a banana."

"I didn't think that sort of thing interested you."

"It don't, but I check out the competition."

"Well, no offense, but you can't compete with that if that's what she wants. I mean, you know—"

"Hap, you can't compete with that either."

"How would you know?"

"Like I said, I check out the competition. I first saw you, I just passed my eye over you. You don't worry me none."

"Oh, thanks, beat up on the heterosexual. Besides, aren't you with Miss *Vogue?"*

"Hey, what can I say. I got a rovin' eye. I get older, I'm startin' to realize I like my women a little trashy. I don't even mind they smell a little."

"On that note …"

I carried the drinks back to the table.

"I'm glad you took the money," Leonard said, "because now I get to go on vacation, and I say we go on a real one.”

“What about me?” John asked.

“See you when I get back,” Leonard said, smiling, patting John’s hand again.

5

I ACTUALLY WENT BACK to work at the chicken plant for a couple weeks, made arrangements for time off. I felt guilty about the whole thing, taking off a month with a hundred thousand dollars because I had saved someone's life. I felt more mercenary than heroic. Leonard, who had done nothing, felt great. He wanted a vacation.

A week into my two-week notice of vacation, me, Leonard, and John made plans at my duplex while I cooked, and slightly burned, a pizza.

John's suggestion: a cruise.

"A cruise?" Leonard said. "You mean, hang out with a bunch of rich old people who want to look at countries from a boat so they don't have to deal with other cultures? Man, you know I saw somewhere one of those cruise lines is making their own island. You know, like *Fantasy Island* meets *Love Boat*. This way you don't have to deal with those pesky locals. Don't have to have a nigger rub up against you."

"They're not all like that," John said. "Most of them stop in different countries for a day or two. Thing is, it would be relaxing. And you could actually go some places you might not go, might not could afford to go to. These cruise lines, you can pay a thousand apiece, plus some expenses, and you get all your food and lodging provided. It comes out about like a good hotel with room service."

"Maybe just a month off around here is good enough," I said. "It'll save me money."

"Yeah," Leonard said, "this place is swinging. Besides, I've spent enough money on you, now it's time you spent some on me."

"Oh, that's nice. That's very friendly."

"It's true."

"Didn't I just give you a quarter for a soda the other night?"

"Yeah, and I'm forever grateful."

"Look, I got some stuff here." John, who was dressed in a sports coat, as usual, took a folder out of his inside pocket. "This isn't one of the big cruise lines. In fact, the boat is an old Argentine Navy boat that's been revamped for cruises. It's not real expensive."

"Man, you been thinking about this cruise stuff yourself," Leonard said.

"For years, to be honest."

"Go with us," I said.

"Hey, I'm not fishing," John said. "I couldn't go if I wanted. No one's giving me time off where I am. I spent that time already. I got to be around. But you could maybe go on the cruise and tell me about it. Turns out all right for you two, I might could take one. Me and Leonard might could take one. Something romantic."

"Leonard's about as romantic as a hand job," I said.

"I'll ignore that," Leonard said. "So, John, we're the cruise guinea pigs."

"Kinda," John said.

I eyeballed the brochure. I had never really considered, or even thought about a cruise, but now the idea was starting to appeal. "Maybe it's too late to get on this one, it leaves, what? Two weeks?"

"You could call them," John said. "Their number is on the brochure."

I'm not exactly sure why I was convinced to do the cruise, maybe because it was so alien to me. The closest my family had ever come to a cruise was a rowboat down the Sabine River with fishing poles.

At first I thought spending a few thousand dollars for such was foolish. That was a good chunk out of the hundred-thousand-dollar check, but the more I thought about it, the more I wanted it. I wanted to step outside my life and enter into another. I wanted to leave chickens and disappointment behind. It wasn't like I was leaving anything of importance, even Brett was out of the picture. It might be nice to masturbate in an exotic location for a change.

Growing up, my parents had continually put aside things like trips, vacations; only rarely went to movies and ate out at Dairy Queens to save money. Maybe they had to. But they had never had a hundred thousand dollars in their hand at one time. What would they have done?

I knew what they would have done. They'd have thought first of me, second about survival, and last about a vacation. They'd have banked the money, kept working, and maybe driven over to Tyler to visit relatives. My dad might have gone fishing.

I wanted to do different. I wanted a radical change.

But I hesitated, and I knew why. Brett.

Last week of work before my vacation started, on a blue Monday, early morning when I should have been sleeping off the night shift, I called Brett. If nothing had changed in her schedule, she'd be home from the night shift at the hospital.

She answered the phone.

"It's been a while," she said.

"Yeah. I don't know exactly what to say, but I miss you."

"I miss you too, Hap. It's just … Well, I don't know. My head's all confused. It's not like I'm seeing anyone else. It's not like I really want to see anyone else. Life is just a mess."

"Yeah."

"I feel guilty too."

"How?"

"After what you did for me. I thought things would be great, back to normal. They aren't."

"Yeah."

"It's not you. I promise. I still feel for you, it's just that what I feel is so buried in shit. So buried in all manner of stuff. Can you understand that?"

"I think so. We did discuss those Kentucky Fried Chicken biscuits pretty good. I thought we had a moment there."

She laughed. “Oh, Hap. That’s what I miss most about you.”

“My humor?”

“The stupid shit you come up with.”

“Oh, thanks.”

A beat.

“Don’t forget me,” she said.

“I won’t.”

“Let’s don’t say it’s over.”

“Sure.”

“Bye, Hap.”

“Bye, Brett.”

A couple minutes later, I called the cruise line. They had space. Me and Leonard would soon be on our way to Mexico, Jamaica, and the Caymans.

Yeehah.

Brett. Brett. Brett.

6

IT WAS A PRETTY INTERESTING WEEK. I paid off the little bit I owed on my worthless truck, had my stitches taken out, went by the hospital late morning to see if I could look in on Sarah Bond, and they let me. She had just been out of intensive care a couple of days, still in serious condition, able to see visitors, but not long.

I slid in there and saw her sleeping. Her head was swollen, her face was dark blue, and her lips were puffed and cut and there were stitches all over and wire contraptions and tubes and such. Her hair was oily and pulled up and clipped. A portion had been shaved and in that spot was a red swelling in the shape of a boot heel. Her eye was patched over with a large gauze pad.

It hurt me to see her.

"Thanks for coming by."

I turned. It was Elmer Bond. He was entering the room, had a Styrofoam cup of coffee in his hand. He was wearing a charcoal gray suit this day, a colorful tie, a kind of off-color white shirt. He looked like what he was worth. Several million bucks.

"Elmer," I said. We shook hands.

"She's actually much better. They keep her pretty doped. The pain. Then she's got to deal with the recovery, therapy, you name it. It could go on for a damn long time. Bless her heart. Her mother can't even look at her. She goes into hysterics."

"I just wanted to drop by and see her, you know."

"Yeah."

"I'll be checking from time to time."

"I kind of wish she was awake," Elmer said. "I think she'd like to see you. I'll tell her you came by."

"Sure. Like I said, I'll check back. Maybe when she's out of the hospital. Now that I think about it, it's best she doesn't see me, anything to remind her of the other night might not be so good."

"She'd want to see you."

"Give her my best, will you?"

"Sure. You enjoying your time off?"

"Just starting. I'm going to pay off some bills and go on a cruise."

"Something you've always wanted to do?"

"No, not really, but I got talked into it by a friend of a friend. I'm going to take Leonard with me."

"Have the best time possible. And Hap …"

"Yeah."

"You ever need anything. Anything. Come to me. I'll do the best I can."

"Thanks."

"Enjoy every penny."

"Sure."

I took a last look at Sarah and went out of there, on down the elevator, out to my car, her shattered image in my head, tears in my eyes. In that moment I wished I had just gone on and shot and killed the cocksucker.

* * *

I drove over to Charlie Blank's place. He was off that day and had invited me to lunch. Marvin Hanson was going to be there. Former lieutenant on the LaBorde police force. He had been in a terrible car accident, then a coma, and had finally come out of it. After months of rehabilitation, he was much better, but in a wheelchair. The only time I'd seen him since the accident was at his house, and he was comatose then. I regularly asked about him, kept up with him through his best friend, Charlie.

After their separation, Charlie had let his wife have the house. He was living in a trailer on a couple of acres he was buying. It was a pretty nice area, actually. Out by the lake with some trees. When I drove over there it was a warm day and Charlie was sitting in a lawn chair by an outdoor grill and a picnic table. Hanson, looking very thin and pale for a black man, was sitting in the wheelchair. He was wearing a baseball cap that said ASTROS on it. When he saw me, he gave me a kind of sly grin.

“You and Leonard burned anything down lately?”

His voice was a little weak, and he talked out of the side of his mouth, as if his face and lips were too tired or lacked the muscles to form words.

“No, haven’t had any matches,” I said, shaking his hand, which was surprisingly strong. “How’re you feeling?”

“Like I drove my car into a goddamned tree, that’s how.”

I sat down in a spare lawn chair. I could smell meat cooking on the grill.

“What are we having?” I asked.

“Steaks,” Charlie said.

“Man, that’s uptown.”

“Not where I bought this meat. I said we were having steaks, I didn’t say they were any good. I got a feeling this meat might have come off horses found dead at the pony rides.”

“You’re looking pretty good,” I said to Hanson.

“Liar,” Hanson said. “But had you seen me before, you’d know I really am.”

“I did see you before, but you were, to put it politely, sleeping.”

Hanson nodded. “It’s been hell. Good thing about it, me and my wife have reconciled and the feeling’s come back in my dick lately.”

“Then your worries are over,” I said.

“Not quite. I want to have sex, it’s an ordeal to get situated, and though I got the feeling back and the ol’ weenie has got some steel in it, I haven’t got any thrusting power. By the time me and Rachel get set, I’m worn out.”

“He’s getting some tingling in his legs,” Charlie said, getting up to fork and turn the steaks. “That’s a good sign.”

“That’s great,” I said.

“I’m working with a physical therapist, and I’m studying martial arts. Shen Chuan and Combat Hapkido. There’s a guy here teaches both systems to the disabled. I'm a little too weak right now to learn much, but it's helping me out. It's building strength in my wrist and arms. My physical therapist recommended it."

"That's good," I said.

"I won't be going back to work at the cop shop, though."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not. Not the least little bit. I wasn't all that loved anyway."

"I hear that."

"And, Hap, I suggest you watch the kind of trouble you get in from now on," Charlie said, " 'cause I'm quitting myself. Turned in my notice. A month from now, I'm on my own."

"No shit?"

"No shit."

"Me and Charlie are forming a business," Hanson said. "Private Investigations. Charlie's the legs, I'm the brains."

"Ho ho," Charlie said.

"Damn," I said. "Real private eyes. Charlie, does this mean you're gonna get sapped a lot and fall into dark tunnels and get laid all the time by strange blondes with long sleek gams?"

"I can do without the sap part," Charlie said, "but the rest of it sounds all right."

"You guys are serious?" I said.

"Hanson and Blank, Private Investigations," Hanson said. "Has a nice ring to it, don't you think?"

"Blank and Hanson, Private Investigations," Charlie said, "has a nicer ring to it. Don't you think, Hap?"

"You're not getting me in on this."

"We'll flip for the name," Hanson said.

"Not if you're flipping the quarter," Charlie said.

"I think that's great, guys. Really."

We ate the steaks, a salad, and some bread Charlie had warmed in the trailer oven. They drank beer and I drank ice tea.

Charlie had been joking. It was good meat and well prepared, medium rare with a touch of salt and pepper. We ate, talked, and laughed a lot. When the meal was over Charlie went inside the trailer and made some coffee. Me and Hanson bullshitted a little. Charlie made a couple of trips out. First he brought coffee for Hanson and me. Then coffee for himself and a Tupperware container filled with Hostess Twinkies and cupcakes. “I damn near pulled my thumb out of joint trying to open this damn Tupperware lid.”

“Childproof,” Hanson said.

“Probably,” Charlie said. “You know, I shouldn’t eat this shit, but I got like a serious problem about it. I like it.”

We ate Twinkies and cupcakes and even though Charlie had told Hanson about my adventure at the chicken plant, I told it again, then I told them about the cruise.

Charlie said, “Well, finally, you and Leonard are off to do something where the worst trouble you can get into is cutting a fart in the dining room.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Ain’t it grand?”

7

JOHN HAD TO DRIVE us over to New Orleans to catch the ship. We got there a day early and took a hotel near Bourbon Street and walked along and watched people wander about. I had once been there during Mardi Gras, and the place was nuts. People everywhere, women exposing their breasts, yelling, floats, the whole nine yards. But this night was not a total waste. We did get to see some guys wearing makeup, hear some great jazz music over at Preservation Hall, and we ate some good crawfish at a place called Mike Anderson's Seafood.

On the way back to the hotel a drunk naked man took a leak against a wall and staggered into a bar and didn't come out.

"Do you think he just went in and ordered a drink?" Leonard asked.

"I wouldn't doubt it," I said, "and I wouldn't doubt they gave it to him. He's probably in there sitting at a table sipping whiskey with one hand and playing with his ding-dong with the other."

"For an old Baptist boy," John said, "this is just a little too close to Sodom and Gomorrah for me."

"Yeah, Hap," Leonard said, "we better get John back to the hotel before he wakes up naked in an alley with a black leather whip handle up his ass."

We went to the hotel and took our rooms. Me in mine, John and Leonard together. Where we were staying was in the French Quarter, and because of that, we were paying more for location than convenience. The joint was clean and not nearly as primitive as my place, but then again, I was paying one third of my monthly rent for one night in this cracker box and down below I could hear drunks who seemed more than happy to collect like crows and sing show tunes beneath my window.

I even went to the trouble to open my window and yell at them once. One of the drunks, wearing a gold lamé shirt and pants so tight his dick looked like a cucumber in Saran Wrap, looked up at me and said, “Oh, honey, lighten up.”

He was right. I was tense. I also hated hearing those morons sing under my window. He and his crowd moved on, and across the street I saw a tired black prostitute trudging along in a red dress that started just below her navel. Her wig was slightly askew and her shoes looked designed to hurt her. She walked in a manner that didn’t invite business, but appeared more an invitation to a fist-fight. She clicked on down the street and out of sight.

I watched TV for a while and thought about Brett. The last thing I remember was seeing the first fifteen minutes of the remake of *Cat People* and wishing it was the original, and then it was morning.

We met in the lobby, went over and had bignets and coffee at the Café du Monde, and took a short cruise on a riverboat that took us past the place where the tour guide told us *Hard Times* with Charles Bronson had been filmed.

We arrived back at the dock early afternoon, had lunch at a hamburger joint, went back to the hotel, got our luggage and John drove us to the dock. When we saw our ship, the *Sea Pleasure*, sitting in the water against the dock, it was a little disappointing.

“I was expecting something bigger,” Leonard said.

“It’s big enough,” John said.

“Well, it isn’t like on TV,” I said. “You know, like those commercials where everyone is dancing on board and fish are jumping and there’s a rainbow and stuff.”

“It’s a smaller cruise line,” John said.

“You mean cheaper,” Leonard said.

“Does that mean we don’t get the dancing fish and the rainbow?” I asked.

“We get a fish floating belly-up under a rain cloud is my guess,” Leonard said.

“You guys are always such pessimists,” John said.

“That’s because pessimistic things happen to us,” I said.

"Yeah," Leonard said. "Like our cruise boat is smaller than everyone else's."

We were standing outside John's car with the trunk open. A couple of guys in white steward suits and hats had come over to take our bags. Leonard and I didn't want them to. Considering we only had one apiece, we figured we could handle it. They stomped off without our bags or the tips we might have given them.

"They look disgruntled," I said.

"Long as they keep it to themselves," Leonard said.

Leonard reminded John how to care for his pet armadillo, Bob. Bob had been with Leonard for a year now, and the damn thing was like a dog. It stayed in the house during the day, holed up under the bed or on the tiles in the bathroom right by the toilet. By night Bob roamed the woods and rooted holes in Leonard's yard. It came when Leonard called and would curl up in his lap. I always liked to remind Leonard armadillos were the only animal that could carry leprosy, other than man, but this had no impact on him. Leonard liked that big armored rat.

"Well," John said, "have a good time."

Leonard and John kissed. I felt a little uncomfortable. Two men kissing still sort of jacks me around, especially with me standing next to them. Too much East Texas Baptist background, I guess.

Leonard, knowing this, said, "John, give Hap a little peck on the cheek."

"No," I said, holding up a hand. "I wouldn't want to steal any of your sweetness away from Leonard."

Leonard cackled and John smiled. Leonard said, "At least we didn't give each other blow jobs in the lot here. Isn't that what everyone expects of queers? Blatant sexuality in public places?"

"That, smooth dancing, and interior decorating abilities," John said.

Leonard and John hugged and kissed again. John got in his car and drove away and Leonard and I hauled our bags into the terminal. We stood in a long line there, showed our passports and papers, got our room key, eventually boarded the ship.

Our room wasn't quite as small as a Lilliputian clothes closet.

There were two very narrow beds and a wound-colored curtain that opened on a solid wall. Since we were in the middle of the ship, I should have expected that, but somehow I had hoped for a porthole and a sea view.

Then again, since I didn't really like water that much, especially the ocean, I decided I was better off without the porthole. Then I started to wonder what in hell I was doing on a ship. Just reading *A Night to Remember*, I had gotten seasick.

How had I talked myself into this? I had done some dumb things, but outside of agreeing to rescue a whore and kill people in the process, this was the dumbest thing I had ever done.

Well, there was the time I talked Leonard into going to Groveton during a flood to deal with the Ku Klux Klan. And there was the time we tried to get a stolen treasure out of the Sabine River bottoms. My idea again.

Come to think of it, my life had sort of been a series of dumb ideas. Some of them mine, a few Leonard's. Hell, I had even voted Republican once in a Texas governor's election.

We put our suitcases on the bed and took out our clothes and hung them in the closet, which was a gap in the wall with a metal bar for a clothes rack.

We put our suitcases in there too. It was a tight fit. We put our shaving kits in the bathroom. I took time to brush my teeth and put the book I was reading, along with my reading glasses, on the nightstand, which was bolted to the wall.

We sat on our beds across from one another. I looked over the itinerary they had given us as we entered the ship.

"Well, here we are," Leonard said.

"Yep," I said.

"We haven't left dock yet, have we?"

"Nope."

"Are you bored as I am?"

"Reckon so."

"They have movies on this ship?"

"I read how they did when I got the original stuff from the cruise line, but this itinerary they gave us, I was just glancing through it. Looks like we don't have movies. Wait a minute. Here's a few, but you watch them on the TV."

"TV?"

"I don't believe I stuttered."

"I heard they had theaters, regular movies, you know."

"John tell you that?"

"He did."

"Did he say they had them on this ship?"

"He don't know from this ship."

"There you are. We got the tub of cruise lines. Our luck is still in, Leonard. Only it's bad luck."

"Oh well. What are the movies?"

"The Postman."

"Oh Jesus."

"Harley Davidson & The Marlboro Man."

"I seen all this shit and didn't like it on the big screen. I could get my money back on that *Postman,* I would. Least the other one had some good fistfights. Or was it gunfights? It kind of runs together. But that *Postman,* I thought maybe I was in some kind of purgatory with popcorn. Someone had locked the door there would have been suicides. What else is there?"

I read off the two remaining movies.

Leonard said, "That last one sounds promising."

"It says it has subtitles."

"God. Next to sitting next to someone wants to talk about crystals and astrological signs and the nature of their diseases, I like subtitles better. But just."

"French subtitles."

"Guess that beats subtitles in Ebonics."

"Hey, we didn't go on a cruise to watch television or movies, did we?"

"I did."

"That's not the proper spirit."

"What kind of spirit is proper? I thought I'd just hang out, read, and watch movies."

"You can. On TV."

"Yeah, maybe one movie out of four."

"You git what you git."

"I wanted a big screen, Hap."

"People in hell want ice water."

"How long before dinner?"

I glanced at the clock on the nightstand, then the itinerary. "Two hours. You hungry?"

"No. Not really. Anything else going on?"

"Shuffleboard will start shaking in about half an hour."

"Want to go up on deck?"

"Sure, maybe we can swim back to land before we actually disembark."

"There's a thought."

We locked our cabin, went up a flight of stairs, then another, and finally onto the deck. It was a pretty afternoon out, starting to gray some, but there was still plenty of light. Our ship had started to sail.

We leaned against the railing and watched the New Orleans dock retreat.

"Didn't a ship run right into this dock once?" Leonard said.

"Yep," I said. "Couldn't stop."

"In a hurry to get back to land, I figure."

"Think it's too late to swim for shore?"

" 'Fraid so."

We stood on the deck until the dock and New Orleans were out of sight and the brown water turned blue. Then there was no more dock or New Orleans visible, just the water and our ship pushing into the Gulf and the night coming down soft and the Gulf air sweet with the occasional bite of dead fish, and there was the Gulf itself, washing hard against the ship, washing us steadily with the assistance of a great engine, on out to the deeps.

8

WE STOOD OUT THERE by the rail and talked and watched the night fall on the blue water, first making it purple, then black. The wash of it against the side of the ship was hypnotic, and once we got past our initial sensation of feeling like mice trapped in a tin can, we began to relax.

We finally went back to our room to wash up and brush our teeth and shave. It was just something to do. We were finishing up this when there was a singsong whistle on our cabin's intercom. It was followed by a voice telling us all to meet on the deck to find out which was our lifeboat and to learn what to do in case the ship sank, other than drown.

We went out on the deck for our words of wisdom. Essentially, the wisdom was, the big boat started sinking, in an orderly fashion, you got in a smaller boat that was supposed to be lowered over the side of the larger sinking boat. That was about it.

A little later, back in our room, the whistle sounded again, this time with an invitation to all passengers to have dinner, and it ended with the words: “Bon appétit.”

We wandered outside and saw the cattle call moving in the direction of the dining room. According to our information, there were two dining rooms. One that served more formally, and presumably better food, and another that was a kind of buffet.

The menu that came with our cabin information said the meal in the main dining room was lobster this night, and we both wanted that.

When we got to the dining room, a fellow in a white coat, white pants, white shirt, and a black bow tie was kind enough to tell us we couldn't come in without coats.

“Why not?” Leonard said.

The door usher, or whatever his title was, was a tall man with dark skin and dark hair with a bald spot at the crown. He looked about thirty and wore his uniform with all the grace of James Bond in a tux. He said, "It's required."

"What's it required for?" Leonard said. "Are we gonna spread it on the ground and eat off of it?"

"Leonard," I said, "let's just go back to the room and get coats. It's easy to solve."

"You'll need a tie as well," said Mr. White Coat. Then, after a moment's reflection: "There's no use coming back without a tie."

"What if I borrow yours?" Leonard said.

"We have security on board," said the man, finally showing a bit of nervousness.

"It's all right," I said. "We'll put on a coat and tie."

I took Leonard by the elbow and turned him around. We started down the corridor, back to the cabin.

"Let's eat in the buffet area," I said. "They don't require anything but that you don't go naked."

"You sayin' we're not good enough to eat in there?"

"No. They're saying that. Leonard, everything is not personal. Them's the rules. You're one goes on about rules all the time, and those are the rules."

"Yeah, but those are stupid rules. And since when am I one for the rules?"

"All that Republican shit," I said.

"I just don't think I ought to be made to wear a coat for a meal I paid for."

"I paid for it."

"Whatever. But it's paid for. It didn't say anything about a coat and tie in the brochure."

"It said evening wear is suggested."

"Ah ha! Suggested."

We were back at the cabin. I unlocked the door and we went inside and sat on our beds across from one another.

"I'm hungry," I said. "I want to eat. Where are we going to eat?”

“I want my lobster.”

“Then let’s put on coats and ties.”

“I didn’t bring a tie.”

“Now that you mention it, neither did I.”

We put on sports coats and went back. Leonard had the brochure with him. White Coat stopped us at the door. “I see you have coats, but you still need ties.”

“No, we don’t need them,” Leonard said.

White Coat said, “Those are the rules, sir. I did not make them up.”

Leonard showed him the brochure. A line was forming behind us. The man looked at the brochure. He said, “Yes.”

“It says coats and ties are suggested,” Leonard said. “You can suggest it, I can choose not to do it.”

“And you can choose to go to the buffet.”

“I paid—he paid—for us to go on this cruise. Let us in.”

A Filipino fellow in white shirt, black pants, and black bow tie came over. He asked what the problem was. White Coat told him.

“It’s suggested, Phileep, not required.”

White Coat grew red-faced.

“Thanks,” Leonard said, walked past White Coat and I followed. Leonard said to White Coat, “Dick cheese.”

I told the Filipino who was showing us to our table, “We’re not trying to be a pain—”

“No problem,” he cut in, leaning close to me. “He’s an officious little fuck. All the staff wishes he’d fall off the boat and get eaten by sharks.”

We wound our way between tables of mostly elderly people and were placed at a table with four other diners. Wine was served and menus were brought.

The Filipino was headwaiter on the cruise. His name was Ernesto. He was a short solid-looking guy with black hair well combed except for a sprig that was determined to hang down on his forehead.

Ernesto stood at the table and smiled and talked to us all about what specials were being offered. It was kind of cool really. They didn't do that at Burger King. He leaned down and spoke to Leonard and Leonard, smiling big, talked back to him in a whisper. I caught the words "Thank you" in there somewhere.

Ernesto went away and our actual waiter came and took our choices and left. Ernesto showed up again three or four times. Talked to us all, talked to Leonard a little more. Just chitchat stuff. I finally got a line on it. He was gay and somehow knew Leonard was. What was it? A secret handshake? A mark in the middle of the forehead only gays could see?

When Ernesto finally went away and the food came, I leaned over to Leonard, said, "What would John think?"

"We're just talking. He's friendly."

"Is he gay?"

"I think so."

"You look pretty happy."

"We queers just love to make contact. We have secret messages about the nature of the universe that we only pass along to one another. Sorry, Hap."

We ate. The food was not as good as I had hoped, and the lobster was downright awful. I thought it might be a big boiled cockroach.

We chatted with our table partners. One of the men was wearing neither coat nor proper tie. He was a big white-haired Texas guy with a Western shirt and bolo tie. Fit the stereotype. So did his wife, who was about fifty, maybe ten or fifteen years younger than he was. She wore a kind of Western-cut dress, which didn't look bad on her. She was attractive in a plastic surgery kind of way. Her hair looked like a beehive wrapped in a bleached blond sweater. They looked rich. Their names were Bill—he went by Big Bill—and Wilamena. Right out of Central Casting, both of them. I liked them immediately, even if he was a little loud. I asked him how he had gotten past the coat-and-tie Nazi.

"I gave him five dollars. I figured it wasn't worth five dollars to walk back to the room."

“They haven’t got the right to keep you out anyway,” Leonard said.

“Yeah, but five dollars keeps him happy, me happy, and no animosity.”

“This here is our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary,” Wilamena said, “and we ain’t gonna let no suit-and-tie monkey throw it, ain’t that right, Big Bill?”

“That’s right, honey.”

A plump matronly looking lady with glasses said, “The ship has Argentine papers, so they’re allowed to sail in Cuban waters. We’re going to go right by Cuba. Won’t that be interesting?”

We agreed it would. Bill said, “We can buy Cuban cigars too, in Mexico and Jamaica, but we got to smoke ’em on board.”

“Frankly,” Leonard said, “I ain’t buyin’ nothing from them commies.”

Things went quiet for a moment, then Big Bill, who obviously wanted to defend Cuban cigars but didn’t want to be thought a commie or mess up a wedding anniversary, said to me: “Pass that wine bottle, will you, son?”

After dinner, on the way out the door, Leonard leaned over to White Coat, said, “You work cheap. Five dollars is no kind of money. I think you ought to go up to six-fifty, and give a blow job with it.”

White Coat did not respond. He just looked as if he had eaten a persimmon and it was caught tight in his bowels.

Down the hall on the way to our room, I said, “Commies?”

“Did I sound like Joe McCarthy?”

“A little.”

“Well, you know what, Cuba is a communist country. They haven’t ever given us anything but the back of their hand. Fuck them and their goddamn cigars.”

We went back to the room. It had been made up in that short time. The TV was on the floor.

“Why’s that?” Leonard said.

“Guess he dusted and forgot to put it back.”

I put it back and we watched *The Postman* for a while. It put

Leonard to sleep. I got up and took off his shoes and covered him, turned off that Flying Dutchman of a movie, undressed, and went to bed.

I lay there for a while and looked at the ceiling and thought about Brett. I thought about other women in my past, two of them dead. I certainly had the touch.

About midnight the ship began to pitch and I realized why the TV had been placed on the floor.

9

LEONARD AND I were up at the same time. I flicked on the light.

Leonard said, “Oh God,” and dashed for the toilet. I heard him in there upchucking, which prompted me to do the same. I let fly into a trash can all my bad lobster, wine, and culinary accouterments. It wasn’t all that good going in, but it certainly had smelled better than it did now, and it had looked better too.

The ship leaned way port and I felt as if it would never right itself. I let out with an involuntary cry. I heard Leonard yell in the bathroom, then I heard him upchucking again.

The ship came up high and went starboard and it was all I could do to hold the trash can so the contents didn’t slop out.

A little later the commode flushed and Leonard came out and lay on his bed and moaned.

He said, “Oh, God, kill me. Kill me now.”

“Fuck the seasickness,” I said. “I’m scared to death.”

I managed to set the TV on the floor, and by bouncing off the wall, I made it to the bathroom where I poured the glorious contents of the trash can into the commode and flushed it. I sat the trash can in the little shower stall, but it rolled out and I hit the wall and banged the back of my knee against the commode.

I lodged the trash can between the wall and the commode and tried to make it back to my bed. I understood what was meant by sea legs now. I didn’t have some. In fact, I’d have given anything for us to have run up on a spit of land, a reef, any damn thing solid.

I just knew we were going to flop so far to one side we’d never right ourselves. I kept thinking about that movie *The Poseidon Adventure,* where the ship turned over and trapped people underwater.

I swear, at times it felt as if that damn ship were actually lying completely on its side, then it would fling itself upright and go the other way. You could hear the ocean banging on the sides of the ship. It made you realize how fragile, what a paper cup the thing was, and it made you realize even more how fragile you were as a collection of blood and bone. All I could think about, after that realization, was just how dark and deep the goddamn ocean was.

I managed to wobble, fall, and crawl over to the closet, reach in a side pocket of my suitcase, and pull out Dramamine tablets. I punched a couple out of the aluminum side and gave Leonard one. I took the other. No less than two minutes later Leonard said, “Hell, give me another one of them sonsabitches.”

I did. I took another. It wasn’t easy swallowing them dry, but now that I had found my bed again, and was clinging to it like a raft, I couldn’t bring myself to let go and make for the bathroom.

Frank truth of it was, I was scared blind, shitless, and paralyzed. No argument. When it comes to the baddest sonofabitch on the block, nature wins hands down every time. Well, nature and that eighteen-year-old guy I had fought.

It wasn’t until early morning that the ship ceased to pitch. I had felt horrible all night, slept fitfully, even whimpered a bit. Leonard had whimpered too, so I felt better about it. My manhood was still intact, because he wouldn’t tell if I didn’t.

Leonard slept while I washed up, brushed my teeth, and started for the deck. On the way up, I discovered a middle-aged woman and two children sleeping on the landing near the hatch door that led outside. The woman sat up from the pallet she had made and looked at me as I reached the door.

“We nearly sank last night,” she said. “I thought it would be better if we were close to the lifeboats.”

“It was scary,” I said, “but not that bad.” I was braver, now that it was all over.

“Oh, yes it was,” she said.

One of the children, a little girl, lifted up on an elbow. A teddy bear tumbled out of her covers. She looked about nine. She said, “Mama said *fuck.*”

"Dear," the woman said. "Ssshhhhh."

"I said it several times last night myself," I said. "Some other things too."

The woman gave me a nervous grin. The little girl smiled. The other kid, girl or boy, I couldn't tell way the kid was wrapped up in the covers, didn't wake up. I went out on deck.

It was clear now. The water was bright blue and so was the sky and the sun was a great fat wafer of burning gold. The shadow of the ship lay on the clear water like an organized coat of oil. It fled with us as we pushed onward, probably running about twenty-two knots.

There were others on the deck, leaning against the rail like me, and there were some in lawn chairs against the wall of the deck, and there was a young couple with chairs close together, kissing, looking as if at any moment they might strip and go for broke. No one looked as if anything had been out of the ordinary last night. And truthfully, it probably had not. For a landlubber like me, a big wave seen at a distance is frightening enough, let alone knocking and swinging about a ship I'm in. For all I knew, the crew might well have found it relaxing, like a rocking chair.

While I was standing there, looking out at the water, Big Bill came up and lit a cigar. "That was some night," he said.

I turned and smiled at him. He was dressed in blue jeans, a cowboy shirt with the sleeves rolled, and house shoes. His gray hair coiled and rumpled in the wind like some invisible hand wadding up stringy cotton.

"I'll say it was some night. I lost my lobster."

"Not much of a loss. Sort of ruined the honeymoon atmosphere in our cabin, that's what I'm trying to tell you. We were just down to business when all that started. Pretty soon were just two naked bodies rolling around on the floor clutching at each other saying *shit.*"

"Worse ways to go," I said.

"I suppose that's true. I got upset, got dressed, came out for a look, like it would do me good to know. Waves were washing all along the deck here. Scary. I went back in and up front and outside. Waves were jumping over the deck, way up there. It was one spooky experience, I guarantee. Cigar?"

"No thanks."

Leonard came on deck then. He greeted Bill, who offered him a cigar.

"Is it Cuban?" Leonard asked.

"Nope. Not this one."

Leonard took it and lit it. He said, "You know there's a woman behind the door there, on the stair landing with two kids?"

"Saw her when I came out," I said.

"Me too," said Bill. "She was there last night when I came out for a look. I was surprised they hadn't locked the doors. Safety seems a little scant to me."

"Her little girl informed me Mama had said *fuck,"* I said.

"Yeah," Leonard said, "she told me the same thing."

"Me too," Big Bill said. "You know, this cruise stuff sucks. I'm excited for when we get to Mexico and dock. I want to get some land under my feet and an enchilada in my mouth, wash it down with some tequila. Me and Mama might like to dance too. You know, I was out here early to smoke, and they were pushing a covered body along the deck in a wheelchair, took it through that door over there."

"No shit?" Leonard asked.

"No shit. I asked one of the crew what happened. He said an old guy died last night. Apparently the old fella had taken this cruise several times, thought he'd like to do it one last time, and last time it was."

"I can't believe anybody does this on purpose twice," Leonard said.

"He croaked in all that high seas business," Bill said. "My guess is it scared him to death. They got him in a meat locker or something down below."

"I can see it now," Leonard said. "A sheet-covered corpse in a wheelchair in the food freezer with our dinner lobster and a bag of green peas in his lap."

"Maybe it wasn't the rough seas killed him," I said. "Maybe it was the food."

On that note, we went to eat breakfast in the buffet dining area.

* * *

Later in the day we shot skeet off the back of the ship. If there's one thing I can do it's hit a target with almost any kind of long gun. Leonard did fair, but I was really on, and me and Leonard got to betting with Big Bill and this other guy, a Yankee named Dave who looked to be about sixty and turned out to be my and Leonard's age, late forties.

I made about ten dollars off the deal, and Leonard made five. We used our gains to buy drinks for all of us in the bar. I was the only one not drinking liquor. We sat and drank and talked for a while. It wasn't anything special, just talk. Bill and the Yankee were all right if you didn't have to see them on a daily basis. Then again, there's days I feel that way about all Yankees, but I promise I'm trying to get over it.

Later in the day Leonard and I walked around the ship, bored to death. Finally we holed up in our cabin and read. I read from a good Larry McMurtry book about the size of a cement block. Leonard read from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and laughed out loud a lot.

We had dinner in the buffet room that night. Leonard had made his point and didn't care if he pissed the doorman off again or not.

The food wasn't any worse or any better than where we had eaten the night before, just more casual. I couldn't help but think about that dead guy, maybe in the food locker. Did they have a morgue on board? Maybe. Surely people died on these things now and then. Perhaps more than now and then.

We went to a bad floor show later. I had seen better high school productions. It was a tribute to rock and roll with a Filipino rock and roll band that had probably learned its material that afternoon. Little Richard would have had a heart attack, and I bet Buddy Holly was rolling over in his grave.

The singers were so awful they hurt my feelings and their dancing was a bit more like contained stumbling to music. I noticed however that I kept my eye on one of the female dancers who wore only feathers and had big tits, and I got to thinking about what Leonard had told me, and I had to sit there and do some deep soul searching. I kept my eyes on the tits just the same. I can get over bad dancing.

That night the sea was rough again, but not as rough as the night before. I went up once to check the night seas, and on the landing was the lady and her kids and the teddy bear. The kids seemed to think this was all great fun, but the mother had her back against the wall and she had carried a trash can out with her and she had that in her lap, puking. The teddy bear was hanging tough.

I opened the door, but when a mist of sea washed into my face, I closed it. Wasn't anything I wanted to see out there. I had taken to carrying a packet of Dramamine in my pocket, and I gave it to the lady and her kids.

"It takes time to work," I said, "but it does work. It won't do anything for being scared, however. You know, you'd really be more comfortable in your cabin."

"No," she said.

"Yes, ma'am. You're the boss."

I went downstairs and to bed. About midnight I began to think the woman had the right idea. Perhaps I should get our trash can and go up and join her to be close to the lifeboats. The sea really began to pitch us.

When morning crept up the sea still tossed but the day was bright and things seemed less frightening. About midday we came to the coast of Mexico. It was a thin strip of brown in the distance.

The sea was bad and the ship could not go into shore, as there was no proper place for it to dock. The ship anchored and they sent out from shore what they called a tender—a small boat to haul us tourists in.

While we were waiting on the tender, we saw the snotty doorman from the dining area. He looked at us, then stuck his hand out to Leonard.

"I'm sorry about the other night."

Leonard nodded, stuck out his hand to accept the apology.

They shook. No one offered to shake my hand. I felt kind of left out.

The guy said, “Going ashore, huh?”

“Oh yeah,” Leonard said. “What time do we need to come back?”

The man paused as if remembering.

“Four-thirty.”

“Okay. Good.”

“Yeah. Well. Have a good time.”

“Sure.”

The guy went down the corridor.

I said, “He’s all right, I guess.”

“No, he’s still an asshole.”

I had been to Mexico many times, but never this spot, so I was reasonably interested in going ashore. Besides, I was ready to do anything to get off the ship, and I thought maybe Leonard and I might get a good meal in a restaurant or café. We went to the purser’s desk, signed up for a tour to some Mayan ruins called Tulum, then got in the departure line.

The tender tossed up alongside the ship and we had to walk out to the side of it on a rickety collapsible dock and try to jump on board when it wasn’t leaping too high or too low on the waves. A woman nearly caught her leg between the boat and the ship but pulled it back just in time to the delighted screams and yells of those on our little platform and those who had already boarded the tender.

More screams and sighs came when a kid, eight or nine, tore lose from his parents and leaped when the tender went down and landed on deck with a thud and got up laughing. When his mom and dad got on board the tender they promptly whipped his ass to the delight of us all.

An elderly man vomited over the side and a young woman I had my eye on lost her straw hat to the wind. It hit the ocean, the waves leaped on it, and it was gone. I could have jumped in the water to save it so I could be her knight in shining armor and maybe get laid.

I balanced the idea.

Big waves.

Pussy.

Big waves.

Pussy.

Naw. Waves too big. Pussy uncertain. She might just thank me. And the idea of drowning with a woman's straw hat in my hand didn't appeal to me.

One thing, though, she didn't have big tits. I'd have to tell Leonard that later as an example of my maturity. I wouldn't mention the dancer from last night and what I had thought about her.

On board, Leonard and I seated ourselves next to Big Bill and his wife. We were then borne by a chugging motor and churning waves toward shore, tailed by black diesel smoke.

There were lots of folks throwing up over the side and one idiot thought a log floating in the water was a whale and started screaming about it. When the log bumped against the boat he shut up and looked straight ahead like maybe he had spotted an important smoke signal in the distance that only he could translate.

Our tender pilot seemed oblivious to it all. Logs. Whales. He didn't give a shit. He was probably more concerned about capsizing. Two guys with blankets and trinkets wandered about trying to sell them to us. No bites from anyone, but that didn't stop them from making the rounds several times, the prices dropping dramatically with each tour.

I looked back at our ship. A real cruise ship was anchored not far from it. It looked twice as big as the *Titanic*. Our ship looked like some kind of fishing lure next to it.

I wondered if that poor woman and her children on the landing were coming ashore with their trash can on the next tender. I wondered why I had ever thought this would be fun.

I wondered what Brett was doing right now. I wondered if she wondered what I was doing. I wondered if Tillie was making big bucks pulling the train in Tyler. I wondered about that poor girl in the hospital with her face stomped in.

Hell, I didn’t have it so bad.

10

IT WAS A SHORT ROUGH TRIP in high seas but we finally edged alongside the dock and got off to the sound of one woman praying.

The two guys with the blankets got off too and walked alongside us. They hadn't even noticed the pitch of the sea. You would have thought they had been on a rocking horse. The price for their goods, which was in American dollars, continued to drop dramatically as we walked.

Still, no bites from us or anybody. Their wares were damn near free by the time we stepped off the dock onto land. They went away with their stuff, dissolved into the crowd as if they had never been.

Tough way to make a buck.

It felt funny standing on solid land after being at sea for a couple of days. Funny, but good.

Leonard and I walked along looking at people and sights like the tourists we were. We stopped in a cantina and had some food. When we got up to leave, I saw the woman from the boat who had lost her hat. She had her dark hair tied back and was tall and quite lovely in white shorts and a blue halter top, had one of those Audrey Hepburn necks.

On the way out I put on my best smile as we walked by her table, said, "I saw what happened to your hat."

A string of hair had fallen out of her 'do and across her forehead. She looked up at me with dark sensitive eyes, said in a voice that even in Brooklyn would make you wince, "No shit. Who didn't?"

Guess she wasn't looking for love.

We went out and along the boardwalk by the sea. I had sort of hoped, foolishly, of course, that Leonard would let it slide.

"Well sir," he said, "it's good to see you haven't lost your touch with women."

Playa del Carmen is a fishing village on its way to becoming a resort spot, a kind of Mayan Riviera, but not quite. Underneath it all, behind and betwixt the new hotels, is still the small Mexican fishing village that it has always been.

We did the Tulum tour. Went out there by bus. It was about an hour from Playa del Carmen. There was lots of scrubby land and little shacks with tin roofs along the way. All I could think was there wasn't enough shade. It wasn't like where I came from, East Texas, wooded and wet. It was like South or West Texas. Bleak. Why had this land become populated? Had someone actually thought: Hell, ain't this great. Let's just stop here. To me, it looked like the spot where the devil went to shit.

Far as I'm concerned, any place you can see unobstructed by trees farther than you can throw a rock makes me nervous.

Maybe that was it. It *had had* trees, then some industrious types had come along, cut down the trees, killed the wildlife, fucked what they couldn't kill, and stayed because they were too tired to do anything else. Or a wheel came off a cart or something.

We stopped at a couple of places where you could buy straw sombreros and the rare artwork of the area: little carved trinkets that said MEXICO on them. They were turned out in droves for all of Mexico and shipped across country by truck, but when you talked to anyone there, they were, to hear them tell it, the only ones who had these little items and they had of course all been made by hand, their very own hands. Since two or three feet away was another vendor with the same stuff, you had to wonder if they actually thought anyone really believed this.

They had some pretty neat chess sets carved out of obsidian, and I looked at those but didn't buy. I didn't need it and didn't want to carry it. Leonard bought a sombrero. It had a big wide band that read: MEXICO. He insisted on wearing it, even on the bus. He looked like an idiot.

Tulum was neat. It was built by the Mayans on a cliff overlooking the Caribbean. It was a fortress city, and you could certainly see how it served its purpose. A mountain goat would have needed grappling equipment just to start up the side of the cliff next to the sea. Before time took its toll, the city must have been quite snug with this barrier at its back and the great buildings of solid stones all around to protect it.

There was a temple called El Castillo that had two columns depicting serpents, and a real serpent, a large lizard that looked as if he might do close-ups for dinosaur movies, was crouched on the stone floor next to one of the columns. He looked at us in that slow lizard way, seemed to say, Hey Mack, you're invading my home.

Or maybe, like us, he was just a tourist and thought we were one of the sights.

We spent a couple hours there looking at the ruins, thinking about how the people there must have lived, then we took the bus back.

We still had a couple hours till four-thirty, so we went walking, looking at the sights, such as they were. Leonard needed to go to the local post office to buy a card and stamp so he could mail a little note to John. It was a real chore just getting one of the two workers there, a man and a woman, to come to the desk. They had a private conversation going and appeared in no hurry to stop it. They turned and looked at us like we were intruding, and went on with their conversation.

"How do you say, Hey dickhead, in Spanish?" Leonard asked me.

Finally the guy came over. Leonard made a few gestures, indicating what he wanted. The worker spoke to him in English, grinning as he did it. He then explained how to say dickhead in Spanish.

Leonard paid him, got pesos in change.

The guy said, "Someone give you the hat?"

"Bought it."

"With your own money, señor?"

Leonard didn't respond to that. He went over and wrote a short note to John using a windowsill as a desk. He gave it to the guy behind the desk and the guy dropped it in an out box and smiled at Leonard's hat some more. We left.

“It’s a good hat,” Leonard said.

“For what?”

“Keeping the sun off.”

“It’s more like an eclipse, Leonard. It looks like something goes on a stick over a table by poolside.”

“You wanted one.”

“Did not.”

“Did too.”

“I wouldn’t be caught dead in something like that.”

“It’s just that I’ve got the balls to do what I want and you don’t, that’s what’s got you irritated.”

“I’m not irritated.”

“Are.”

“Are not.”

It was just one of our usual goofed-up days. We might as well have been home in the States. We were unpopular and pissed off wherever we went.

About four we went down to the dock to catch the tender back to the ship. The tender was there with our original pilot standing on the deck, helping people on board, but out in the bay, no ship. Least not our ship.

We talked to the pilot. Our Spanish sucked. His English was good. He told us the *Sea Pleasure* had left at three-thirty. For a moment I thought we hadn’t changed our watches, crossed a zone or something, had lost an hour. But we had the right time.

Leonard said to the pilot, “You’re sure?”

The guy, who was short and gold-toothed, said, “You see the ship you want, señor?”

Leonard took a theatrical look out at the water.

“Nope.”

The pilot shrugged.

“Could it have sunk?” Leonard asked.

“Funny, you are, señor. I got to take people out to the real cruise ship now. And whatever you pay for that hat, it is too much.”

We walked back up the dock, stunned.

“That lying little ferret,” Leonard said. “I gave him an opening and he took it and told me the wrong time. I see him again, I’m gonna beat him until he has flashbacks.”

“Of what?”

“Me beatin’ him.”

“Can I hit him a couple of times?”

“If there’s anything left, of course. You are my best friend.”

11

WE DECIDED we might as well plan on being in Playa del Carmen for a day or two, so we ended up at a little pink stucco hotel where we rented a double. The room smelled of damp carpet and the bathroom smelled of urine beneath the warped linoleum.

Upstairs we sat on one of the beds and sorted our money. Most of what I had gotten for my heroic deed was back home in the bank, but I had more in traveler’s checks in my luggage on the ship, right next to my clean underwear and socks. I had some bucks in my wallet, two hundred dollars in traveler’s checks, and a charge card with a low limit on it. Leonard had a hundred dollars in assorted bills and a very ugly hat.

“Okay, we got enough for a couple nights, maybe three we need to spend them,” I said. “That also includes food, phone calls we need to make, and maybe some clean underwear.”

“I didn’t know you changed yours,” Leonard said.

I ignored that, said, “Okay, so what’s first?”

“I vote on the underwear for you, but I suppose the thing to do is call John, get him to arrange some plane flights, nearest airport and all that, then we find a way to get to the airport, fly to New Orleans, get a cab to where the ship will dock, get our luggage, cripple the asshole who lied to us about the departure time, break his dick in three spots, cover his balls in peanut butter, pack his asshole with a pound of pure cane sugar, and hold him down in an ant bed.”

“Might I point out this is all your fault.”

“That so?”

“If you hadn’t fucked with him in the first place this wouldn’t have happened. All you had to do was put on a jacket or go to the buffet.”

“I didn’t want the buffet, and I didn’t want to wear a jacket.”

“And you see the results.”

“That pompous motherfucker just thinks he got off scot-free with me. Besides, you said you wanted to hit him some.”

“I want to hit you some too. But we’ll make a phone call instead.”

We looked around the room. No phone. Downstairs they wouldn’t let us use the one in the office and there wasn’t a pay phone. Suddenly there was a language barrier. The desk clerk indicated he had no idea where we might find a phone.

I asked him if there was a Holiday Inn anywhere near. He just grinned at me. Now I was the Ugly American.

We went outside and around the corner and started walking in the direction of the post office. Had we seen a pay phone in the post office? We were uncertain. As we walked, Leonard’s hat provided me with a lot of shade. Which I needed. I was pretty warm. Not as humid as East Texas, but still warm, and by this time it was late afternoon.

The post office was closed.

“What the hell?” I said.

“They keep their own hours,” Leonard said.

We walked along the littered beach a ways and actually found an old-fashioned phone booth. But the phone was missing. Someone had torn it out. Some of the phonebook was there, though, just in case it was needed.

“Maybe we could just put a message in a bottle,” I said. “Toss it in the ocean.”

“I’m game,” Leonard said.

The beach was nice, and we decided for no good reason at all to just keep walking along it. I think, subconsciously, we were trying to get away from town, as if that would take us away from our miseries. There was a long wooden dock, and we walked on the sand next to that and watched the boats, some with sails, some without, bobbing in the slate-colored water like tops. Above us seabirds soared, made noises like insane laughter.

As we walked, no phone booth materialized but we saw three men coming toward us. They were stocky guys. One of them wore a coat, which seemed odd for the weather. We veered left around them and they turned and spread out and said something in Spanish.

One of them, a guy with a thick mustache, showed us a knife and a big grin. He said something in Spanish we didn't understand, but the big knife was speaking loud and clear and needed no translation.

It was at that moment that I remembered some of the literature I had read on the boat: Don't wander off from the main areas. Play del Carmen is a beautiful, quaint little town with the amazing ruins of Tulum nearby. But off the beaten path, thieves often rob tourists at knifepoint on the outskirts.

"Bad day for this," Leonard said to the trio, but they just smiled at us. I watched carefully. The other two didn't pull knives, but one of them did pull a machete from under his coat. I had sort of thought that coat was suspicious.

I didn't feel up to fighting a machete, but I didn't feel all that inclined to give them my money.

"Dinero," one of them said.

"We've already eaten," Leonard said.

"He means money," I said. "Not dinner. Dinero."

"I know that."

"I think we should give it to them."

They were circling us, waiting on us to make some kind of decision.

"What if we give it to them and they cut us anyway?" Leonard said.

"It's still going to work out the same, they're going to end up with the money. We give them the loot, we got a chance."

"That what you want to do?"

I watched the guy with the machete ease around in front of me. Leonard and I had now ended up back to back, sort of rotating with the guys as they went around us.

All three were speaking Spanish, and shaking their hands at us like we should fill them.

"What I want," I said, "is to stick that machete up his ass, crank it around like I'm trying to start a prop plane."

“Stop moving, and let them make their move,” Leonard said.

“It’s the machete worries me,” I said.

“What, the knife don’t bother you?”

The guy with the machete grunted and his arm went up, brandishing the weapon. I went to him, got under his arm before it dropped, got a hand on his elbow, one on his wrist. I had tried to move to his outside, but couldn’t, so I was inside. I held the wrist with one hand and shot my elbow into his face, flicked his wrist, and the machete went away and we went down, him on top. He tried to choke me, but I rolled out from under him and pushed him aside. He came up and had both hands on my shoulders. I kicked at his balls, but he moved his leg in the way, so I kicked to the inside of his legs a couple of times, real quick, and the second shot made him go down. I kneed at his face, but he grabbed my leg and we were rolling on the ground again. I flipped him over, landed on top, bit a chunk out of his ear and pounded him a couple times and got up.

I caught a glimpse of Leonard out of the corner of my eye. He had lost his hat and the mugger with the knife was standing in the middle of it. Leonard knocked the guy with the knife down, but the man still had the knife. The other guy grabbed Leonard’s arms from behind, and Leonard stomped his feet and shins, and the guy was letting go as the man with the knife leaped forward and the blade went into Leonard’s stomach. I let out a scream, then the guy I had been fighting was on me again.

I flicked my fingers against his eyes and he groaned and got out of my way.

Leonard was down and the guy with the knife was stabbing him again. I got there just in time to slide behind the guy, reach around, and rake both hands across his face, gouging one eye deeply.

The guy shrieked like a rat with a boot heel on its back. He turned, lunged. I went sideways and he went past. I hit him with everything I had, right behind the head with a hammer fist. He went down and didn’t move. The guy who had been holding Leonard had him down now and was punching. Leonard brought a leg up and over the guy’s head, swept him off, got up holding his stomach. He said, “Watch out!”

When I turned, the machete man had recovered his weapon. He was coming toward me. The other guy came at Leonard. Leonard scooped sand, threw it in his eyes, sidestepped, and shot out a sideways kick that took the guy's knee out. It cracked as loud as a bullwhip. He yelled even louder as he went down.

The machete man charged me.

He was so wild, all I had to do was move and he went stumbling past me. When I turned, Leonard had gone down from his wounds, was lying in the sand, bleeding, unconscious. Maybe worse.

I had done all right the first couple of times, but a machete is a machete, and all it took was for him to make one correct move and for me to make one mistake.

Somehow I was aware of the sun turning red, dying somewhere behind the city. A gull shrieked loudly overhead, cheering us on. Then the guy with the machete began to stalk me, slow and steady, the machete cocked at his side.

I glimpsed something in my peripheral vision. Another man. He wore a blue baseball cap and also carried a machete.

I was about to reach for my wallet, throw it to the guy, hope for the best, when the second machete bearer ran past me. I ducked, but he didn't swing. He just kept going, right to the other man with the machete.

Machetes clanged together. The man who had joined the fray on our side was good. He was not swinging wildly like the other guy. He was warding off the man's strikes with the flat of the blade, using his free hand to slap and grab. Pretty soon he had the other man by the arm and was pulling him down. Using the flat of the blade, he knocked our attacker unconscious.

Our rescuer promptly marched over to the two downed men. One of them was out, the other was clasping his knee with one hand, holding the other hand up as if to push our savior away.

Our fella said something in Spanish and the man on the ground began to crawl away, leaving his unconscious buddies.

The man turned toward me, the machete held by his side. I wondered if I were his next victim. He might have merely been eliminating competition. I eyed the machete lying on the ground, judged if I could reach it quickly.

Nope. Too far away.

The man grinned at me. He had a gold tooth and the sun caught the tooth and made it sparkle. He had on a thick white cotton shirt and pants, and sandals. Although he had moved well and looked younger while in motion, I could see now that he was seventy if he was a day. The hair under his baseball cap was gray, nearly white, and he had gray stubble on his face.

He turned to Leonard, knelt beside him.

I rushed over. Leonard was bleeding. He opened his eyes.

"Have they gone home?" he asked.

"In a manner of speaking," I said.

The man said something in Spanish, and neither Leonard nor I responded. He came back in English.

"Policía. Not good."

"They're police?" I said.

He nodded. "Off duty."

"Oh," I said. "That's good, Leonard. They're off duty."

"Oh good," Leonard said. "You know, this hurts. Bad."

"They are corrupt," said the man.

"No shit," Leonard said.

"They are from Cozumel. They come here to make extra money."

"Nice," Leonard said. "A part-time job … Look, I'm gettin' kind of queasy here."

"Come," the man said. "We must go. My boat."

We got on either side of Leonard, helped him up, carried him toward a fishing boat tied at the dock.

"What about my hat?" Leonard asked.

"Well," I said, "if you want it with a hole in the crown. One of those fuckers' feet went through it. If you had ears like a mule, you might want it."

"Typical," Leonard said.

We climbed on board the boat with some difficulty, stretched

Leonard out on the deck and opened his shirt.

“Not so bad,” the man said. “Had worse.”

“Yeah, but it’s me that’s got this one,” Leonard said.

“I will fix it. Beatrice!”

A very attractive, slightly heavy, thirtyish woman with shoulder-length hair dark as a miner’s dream came onto the deck. She looked miffed. She wore a black short-sleeve sweatshirt, earrings with silver dangles, blue jeans, and black canvas shoes. She smelled like fresh soap and had a look on her face made me think she could have beaten puppies to death and enjoyed it. I noticed that the tip of her right pinkie was missing and the skin was puckered there and visible was the faint shine of yellow bone.

The man said something in Spanish. The woman looked at us, sighed, went back inside the cabin, reappeared with first-aid gear in a plastic box. She squatted beside Leonard, opened the kit.

The man took out some alcohol, some other disinfectants, and went to work. As he worked, he said something to the woman. She went away. A moment later the anchor was up and the motor was humming. We were moving out into the ocean.

The man turned to me suddenly, smiled, said, “Ferdinand.” He stuck out his hand. I shook it.

“How is he?” I asked.

“Oh, he is good. Got good skin.”

“Haven’t I always said I have good skin, Hap?”

“Always,” I said.

“One wound pretty good in the stomach,” said Ferdinand. “But it is not so deep.” He pulled a large needle and thick thread from the box.

“Oh shit,” Leonard said.

“Hold his head,” Ferdinand said.

“You don’t have to do that,” Leonard said. “Just sew.”

Ferdinand started right in. After the first pass, Leonard said, “Hold my goddamn head, Hap. Hold my legs. Sit on me. Do something.”

I held him as best I could, and Ferdinand made eight stitches.

12

TIME FLIES when you're having a big time.

I don't know exactly when I fell asleep, but I awoke lying on the cabin floor by the bunk where Leonard lay. The woman was asleep on the bunk across the way. I barely remembered us going inside the cabin. Nothing like a good fight and a knifing of your best friend before dinner.

'Course, we might not get any dinner.

I got up, went out of the cabin, onto the deck. It was dark and the moon was up. The sea was a giant basin filled with ink. The boat lifted up and down like a carnival ride. I had never been so sick of water in all my life.

The old man was up top at the controls. I climbed up there and he turned and grinned at me.

"You sleep a little?" he said.

"Yes sir," I said. "Thank you. Thank you very much."

I could see a string of lights out in the distance, along the shoreline. They looked like lightning bugs pinned to a display board coated with black velvet.

"I didn't even know I was sleepy," I said.

"It is fear, my friend. I do not say you are a coward. But we all have fear. It exhausts."

"Been there before," I said. "How bad is he really cut?"

"Not so bad. Not good. Not bad. No cut is good. It did not go deep."

"I appreciate your help. Can I ask why you helped?"

"Why not? I do not like many men on two. Though, you two do pretty good. I think they not have the machete, the knife, you might have been all right."

"You saw it all?"

"From my boat. I was coming in, I saw it. I pulled to the dock. I've seen them do that before. Take money from tourists. They try and rob me once."

"How'd that work out?"

"They did not have a knife. I did not have a knife. But I am strong."

"They're really police?"

"I recognized them. Cozumel. They come here, do what they like, go back across the water."

"Won't they know who you are?"

"I do not think so."

"Well, I hope not. Are you out here to hide from them? I mean, out this late. It must have been some hours now."

"It has been a few hours. I went out to sea some. To fish."

"You went fishing?"

"It is what I do."

"Catch anything?"

"No. That is sometimes what I do. Catch nothing."

The lights of the shore grew closer. I started to say something about having a room rented in Playa del Carmen, but then decided to hell with it. It didn't matter.

As we neared the lights, Beatrice came up the ladder. Other than the fighting chair where Ferdinand sat, there were a couple of deck chairs up there. Beatrice took one of them, and I took the other.

She said, "Your friend is sleeping good. I believe he will be okay."

"Thanks to you two."

She made a kind of grunting noise. "My father, he is always helping someone. He gets no help from anyone else, but he is always helping someone."

"That is what it is about, Beatrice," the old man said. "Is that not the way of God?"

"If it is, let him do it."

"Beatrice!" Ferdinand said.

She sat quietly for a while. She said, "I'm sorry." Then to me: "I fear for my father. The police, they are very corrupt here in Mexico. If they know what he did, he could be imprisoned. Hurt. Here, the police, they do as they please."

We cruised the water for what seemed like a long time, and though the lights came closer, they did not come close enough fast enough. It seemed as if we were perched on the lip of forever, unable to move forward.

Finally we arrived at the dock in Playa del Carmen. A young, shaggy-haired boy, maybe twelve, in blue jeans and a dirty Disney T-shirt with Mickey's head faded into nothing, ran out to the boat and climbed on board. He started when he saw me, but Beatrice spoke to him and Ferdinand laughed.

"He has been taught that all Americans are dangerous," said Ferdinand. "His name is José and he works a little for me. He waits for the boat to come in and helps me carry the fish and do little chores. Tonight, I have no fish. Just you two. You are my fish. Go ashore. I will lock up the boat. José and his brothers will stay with the boat."

"What brothers?" I asked.

"They will be along. You best look after your friend. Beatrice will help you."

Beatrice and I went inside the cabin and stirred Leonard. He groaned when we woke him. We helped him up. He tried not to act like someone in pain, but he couldn't help it. I said, "Maybe he needs a doctor."

"That could be," Beatrice said. "I have some antibiotics. I can give him those. It will be a while before we are where I can get them."

I considered this. I asked Leonard what he thought.

"Well," he said. "I've felt better. But I've had a lot worse. I think if I get some antibiotics, some rest, I'll be all right."

Beatrice helped me take Leonard off the boat and onto the dock. I had no idea what was going to happen from there. Neither she nor her father owed us anything. They could have just turned us loose in the night. Fact was, they had put themselves in considerable jeopardy to aid us. But I was relieved when Beatrice said, “We’ll take your friend to our home for tonight. I want you and him to leave tomorrow. Do you understand that?”

“Sure,” I said.

“I am sorry for your friend, but we do not need enemies. My father makes enemies often.”

“I bet he makes friends often too,” I said.

“Enemies seem a little more determined than friends,” she said. “Friends have a way of going away when you need them.”

“That isn’t my experience,” I said. “It depends on who you call friend.”

She had one of Leonard’s arms draped over her shoulder, and I had the other. He was groaning as we walked along.

I followed Beatrice’s lead. We ended up out back of a stucco building where there were cars sitting in a dark lot near a sign painted on the side of the building. The sign was for some kind of Mexican pastry and the moon made it shiny and white and surreal there in the night.

Beatrice unlocked an old white van and we got inside. The interior was well worn, seats ripped up, patches of cloth hanging from the ceiling. The van had no back seat and was empty of possessions, except for some tow sacks in the back. We placed Leonard on those. I made as comfortable a pillow as I could for him out of a spare sack. He said, “I lost my goddamn hat.”

“Just goes to show,” I said, “the day hasn’t been a total loss. But we’ve discussed what happened to the hat.”

“We have?”

“You weren’t feeling too good at the time, but yes, we discussed it. One of our muggers stepped through it.”

“Oh yeah. I remember.”

I climbed in the passenger’s seat and Beatrice started the van. I said, “What about Ferdinand? He said he was coming.”

“He always says that, but he does not come. He stays with the boat with José and his brothers. I think he likes it that way. He loves that boat. If he were coming, he would have come.”

The van coughed and sputtered and rolled forward with a protesting lurch, banged into a couple of potholes, crunched gravel, and off we went.

We drove along bad roads for an hour or so. It had grown very dark because clouds had bagged the moon. There was just the van's headlights on the road, and a little glow from the dash light that shone against Beatrice's face and gave it a ghostly appearance and made her little silver earrings float about her ears like spectral fish swimming in the ether.

We talked a little, but nothing to take note of. We just rode on into the night until we came to some sparsely wooded hills that swelled on either side of the road, and we were swallowed by them. Somewhere along there, without meaning to, due to the rocking of the van, the kind of day I had had, I drifted off to sleep, and it was the dying of the motor that brought me awake.

It was a simple house, part adobe, part thatch, just like you see in the movies about Mexico. There were scrubby trees in the yard and an old white Ford without tires or wheels sitting out to the side of the house. Prickly pear had grown up all around it and the moon was out from behind the clouds again and I could see the car was stuffed with all manner of junk.

Beatrice helped me wake Leonard and get him into the house. I held Leonard up while she lit lamps. I didn't see an electric light or refrigerator. The house was very small. Three rooms. Two of the rooms were bedrooms, the other was a kitchen of sorts with an old wooden stove. After we got Leonard stretched out on a bed in one of the bedrooms, slipped off his shoes, she took me outside and showed me where the outdoor convenience was. It was a leaning rectangle of graying slats with a tin roof and it smelled just like what was under it. Beatrice seemed a little embarrassed by it all.

We went back inside and she got a large jar of pills and brought them out. "Antibiotics," she said.

"Jesus, that's certainly the economy version," I said.

"You can buy them like that here. Not like in the States."

"Do you go to the States often?"

"Not anymore," she said. "I lived there once. I studied archaeology at the University of Texas. Austin."

“I’ve always been interested in archaeology.”

She gave me a curious eyeballing.

“Seriously,” I said, and told her about having done some digs here and there when I was young, Caddo Indian stuff in East Texas mostly. I had been the shovel boy for a nice amateur archaeologist named Sam Whiteside. She talked about going to the University of Texas, then the University of Mexico, and how she had graduated with a degree in anthropology and archaeology.

She got some water and the pills and took them to Leonard. He was sweating slightly and had a fever. He was only partially awake.

“These,” she said, shaking the jar of pills, “should get the infection down. He has not lost much blood. Tomorrow, he rests some, eats, then you go.”

“Okay,” I said, trying not to think too far ahead.

“We’ll give him the pills now,” she said.

“But not all of them?”

She smiled. “Not all of them. Just a few.”

“Leonard,” I said, waking him. “Time to take your medicine.”

I supported his head on my arm while Beatrice gave him the pills and held the glass so he could sip water. When that was finished, I lowered Leonard back onto the bed and he went to sleep immediately. Beatrice blew out the light and we went out of there.

In the kitchen she lit the lamps and poured some water from a pitcher into a basin, gave me a bar of lye soap. I used it to wash my face and hands. When I was finished, she handed me a towel.

“We do not have many conveniences,” she said. “I had nice things in the States, but here my father is very poor and he lives as he has always lived.”

“That’s quite all right,” I said. “I thank you for helping us.”

She opened a metal box on a shelf and took out a loaf of long, brown, home-baked bread. She split it down the middle, made slices from that. She removed a big cake of flaking cheese from the storage box, cut slabs from it, put them on the bread. She poured wine from a bottle into two fruit jars and gave me one of the jars. I don’t really like wine, but I wasn’t about to be rude. Not after all she and her father had done for us.

We sat in some old but comfortable chairs at a cheap table supported by wobbly aluminum legs and ate our bread and cheese and drank our wine.

The bread was full of flavor, and the cheese was sharp. I even found I liked the wine. At that point, however, having not eaten in some hours, I think I might have enjoyed a steaming slice of dog shit on a roof shingle.

As we ate, we talked. “I earned my degree,” she said, “but I never used it. I came back here when my mother died to take care of my father. I have been here ever since.”

“Your father looks like a capable man to me,” I said.

“In many ways he is, but he cannot take care of himself at home.”

“Maybe he can,” I said.

She smiled at me. It was a lovely smile. “You don’t understand what’s expected of me.”

“By your father?”

“By my past. I have been raised to do the woman’s work.”

“You went to the university. That’s certainly a modern enough approach. Does your father expect it of you? Staying home, I mean?”

“No. But I expect it. I feel I’m failing if I do not do it. I know I do not have to, yet I do.”

“Maybe you should change your thinking.”

“My thinking is changed, but my doing is the same.”

I smiled at her. “That’s one way to put it. Do you work on the fishing boat?”

She nodded. “And do other things. I go on the boat to keep from staying here. No one lives near here. There is nothing to do. I do not like the boat, but I have my father there, and I can keep busy with the baiting, the cleaning of the fish.”

“I assume you sell the fish.”

“Yes. What do you do? Are you on vacation?”

“I’m a security guard at a chicken plant.”

She grinned wide, and she looked very beautiful when she did that. It gave her deep dimples. Her eyes were bright in the lamplight. I loved the way she spoke English, the way her accent curled around the words and made them sexy.

We talked for a long time. She poured more wine. I meant not to drink it, but I was geared up and nervous. By the time I finished the second jar of wine, I was beginning to feel a little sleepy.

She told me about her life and her disappointments, and they were all tied to tradition and how her mother had lived and how she had tried to break away from it, but couldn’t. It had stayed with her like a disease. She loved her mother and what she had done, but didn’t feel it was for her—and yet, here she was, in many ways taking her mother’s place. A woman over thirty and not getting younger and feeling she was missing out on the world.

“There is never any money,” she said. “My father cares little for money. He works. He makes enough to feed us, to get oil for his lamps, a few items here and there. He wants nothing else. He sells his fish too cheap. He does not have money, he does without. It does not bother him.”

“But it bothers you.”

“I do not ask to be rich, but I would like to have nice clothes. Some things. Is that so bad?”

“No,” I said. “It isn’t. Fact is, I haven’t had all that much myself. It’s my fault. You can want too much, but you can want too little as well. I think I’ve wanted too little. Your father, he seems content, and that’s fine. But it’s all right you want something more. I think he could do without you, he had to. He seems independent.”

She smiled at me, reached to take my glass, touched my hand. She leaned forward, stared at me. “Would you kiss me?”

It didn’t seem like a chore. “Yes I would,” I said, and did. I liked it so much, I did it again. I don’t know exactly how it happened, but the next moment she was out of her chair and in my lap, and we were kissing deeply. She smelled good, her hair was soft, and her lips were sweet.

Still, part of me felt bad about the whole thing. Sort of like I was cheating on Brett. But Brett had gone her own way. I had no reason to feel guilt. No reason at all.

Another part of me felt as if I were taking advantage of a lonely woman who had had too much wine, but that part wasn't speaking too loudly. Hell, I had had too much wine.

I kissed her deeply. She ran her hand between my legs and took hold of me and squeezed, and soon I had her in my arms and was carrying her to the empty bedroom. I laid her on the bed and helped her undress, pulling her shoes off, her jeans, her sweatshirt over her head, unfastening her bra and removing her panties.

I stood by the bed and removed my clothes and removed my wallet and took out a prophylactic and gave it to her. She laid it beside her. I climbed onto the bed. She stroked me and finally took the rubber from the package and slipped it over me, then she spread her legs and took hold of her knees and pulled them up so that they were damn near touching her ears.

I entered into her, and in spite of the prophylactic, it felt so good, and it had been so long, I almost came on the spot. It was tempting to just go ahead and let it go, but I fought being selfish. I did the times tables for a while, till they got beyond me, then I tried to remember how to cook a couple of Mexican dishes and thought about the theme songs from favorite TV shows, finally got hold of myself. Then I was relaxed, making love, keeping control on my needs, administering to hers. She knew just how to coax me along, knew what to whisper in my ear, where to put her fingers, how to touch me.

We did it in that position for a while, then she rolled over and I took her from the rear.

Finally, to both our satisfaction, we finished in the traditional position, her letting go first, then me.

It wasn't as wild as it was with Brett, who could do more tricks with a six-inch dick than a monkey could with a hundred feet of grapevine, but Beatrice's love-making was slyer than Brett's, calculated as if by script.

She was certainly a woman of experience, and it was exactly what I needed, and from all observation, what she needed as well. As that ol' Merle Haggard song goes, "It ain't love, but it ain't bad."

We lay together and I thought about the day. I had been on a cruise, off a cruise, seen famous ruins, been in a fight. My best friend had been knifed, we had been saved by a wild old Mexican with a machete who turned out to be very nice and had a lovely daughter, and Leonard's awful hat had been destroyed. The lovely daughter had fed me and fucked me, and now I lay me down to sleep.

I wondered what Brett was doing.

Maybe what I had been doing.

Wrong approach.

I closed my eyes.

I pulled Beatrice close.

And wondered again what Brett was doing.

No future in that.

Finally, I slept.

13

NEXT MORNING I ROSE while Beatrice slept, dressed, went in to check on Leonard. He opened his eyes when I walked into the room.

“Morning,” I said.

“Morning. My, you look happy. Been poundin’ the possum, ain’t you?”

“Now that you mention it, yes.”

“I can always tell. You have that smug look and the eyes get hooded, like Robert Mitchum.”

I sat on the edge of the bed. I said, “Now what?”

“Well, now that you’ve had what you need, have taken advantage of a poor peasant girl—”

“Hah.”

“—I don’t think we want to stay here.”

“Very good. But that isn’t exactly a plan. How’re you feeling?”

“Like I’ve been wiped, flushed, and I’m on my way out to sea. I’m bored enough to collect farts and name them, yet I don’t feel like I could do much. I’m lucky I had good stomach muscles, or I’d be dead.”

“You’re lucky he had a short knife,” I said. “Your stomach muscles aren’t that good.”

“And yours aren’t good at all.”

“What I have are table muscles. They’re more subtle. Look, I’ll see if Beatrice will take us into town. Maybe we can make a phone call there.”

“How would we get out of here? Get back to the U.S. Pontoon boat?”

“I haven’t a clue. Question is, are you up to it?”

Leonard tried to rise, said, “You know what? I’m not up to it.”

“Then we better not arrange a way out yet. You don’t need to travel, you feel that bad.”

“You don’t hear me fighting with you.”

“Then you are hurt,” I said. “I’ve never known you to give in to me that easy.”

“You got a point, bucko.”

“Lie down. I’ll see I can rustle you up some breakfast.”

I left out of there, discovered Beatrice was up and moving toward the kitchen. I followed. She smiled at me.

“Last night was very good,” she said.

“Yes it was.”

“It meant something to me, but I do not want you to think it meant everything. Do you understand?”

“I do.”

“Good. Are you hungry?”

“I am. And so is Leonard.”

“How is he?”

“Better, but not up to snuff. I know you want us to leave out, Beatrice. And we will. But maybe another day or two for Leonard to rest.”

Suddenly she became very hard. “One more day. No more than that.”

“Fine,” I said. “One more day.”

She put some grounds in a pot and started coffee. It was so dark and rich with aroma it made my nose hairs quiver. I had a feeling it wasn’t decaf. She located some more bread and cheese and took it to Leonard. We sat in the room with him and ate the same. Beatrice brought us cups of coffee. After two cups I felt as if I had been blackjacked and ass-kicked.

In spite of the food and coffee, Leonard drifted back to sleep. Beatrice smiled at me. She wiggled her finger for me to come, stood up, and went out of the room.

We went back to her bedroom and went to bed. We made love one more time. I was lucky she wasn't like Brett. I wouldn't have had enough rubbers.

At least it had been that way for a while.

After we lay together for a while, Beatrice led me out on the back porch and showed me how a shower was set up there with a pull chain. The water was in a big tin reservoir. It was put there by the rain and sometimes brought in from outside, but there was only so much water, she said, so we showered together. Which wasn't something I considered a drawback.

As I soaped her up in the pink morning light her breasts, damp with the water from the homemade shower, were dark and slick under my touch, and the thick nipples were tantalizing. I liked the way the soap foamed over them and the way the water plastered her hair to her head, which in the light of day I could see held streaks of gray. I liked the way the water beaded in her pubic hair. Her eyes were deep and dark, her face was full of an expression that showed me there was plenty to like and a lot that was hard to understand. She was a real mystery. I liked that. I liked it so much I kissed her.

* * *

About two that afternoon I helped Leonard make it out to the outdoor convenience, stood by outside while he finished, trying to stand far enough away I didn't have to hear the usual bathroom sounds.

"It's great to have a valet," Leonard called through the toilet walls.

"Yeah, well, just don't ask me to wipe your ass for you."

"Hap?"

"What?"

"There's a Mexican catalogue in here."

"It's Mexico, you moron."

"I mean, that's what you wipe your ass with. Pages from it."

"Ouch."

Back in the house, Beatrice, dressed in a simple white cotton dress with red and purple flowers stitched on it, searched through her shelf of books, found Leonard a book in English, Andrew Vachss's *Dead and Gone*, left it with him along with a bottle of water, bread and cheese, and a cup of coffee.

She and I drove into town so I could try and make some kind of arrangements to get home. As we drove along with the sand blowing up and making clouds on the road, she said, "I was supposed to be at the boat this morning, to help."

"What are you going to tell your father?"

"I will not tell him that I was servicing you."

"I hear that. Hey. Wasn't I servicing you too?"

"You were. You did good."

"Great. Good dog. Want me to fetch your slippers?"

Beatrice laughed her musical laugh.

"Will he be mad?" I asked.

"No. He does not make me work on the boat. It is as I said last night. I feel obligated."

"Thanks for going against your obligation this morning."

"That is all right. Even the obligated must have, how do you say it, ashes hauled?"

"Close enough. But, you know, I hate it for your father. I mean, he helps us out, then we mess up his schedule. I make love to his daughter."

"He likes to take José out. José goes with him often. José or his brothers. He enjoys being able to give them a little money. They are even poorer than we are. Father catches quite a few fish. But if he caught all the fish in the ocean, he would only make so much money. It is not a rich life, the life of a fisherman."

"I hear that."

In town we stopped at a little café near the dock. Outside the café the smell was briny and strong of fish. Inside the café there was the smell of cooking fish, and that unique smell of hot sauces and fresh tortillas.

I used some of the money I had to treat Beatrice to lunch, reminded myself to stop by later and get something for Leonard.

We had spicy fish with beans and rice and tortillas. As we ate, I halfway expected one of the cops from across the bay to come in, but that was probably just fearful thinking. Even though the towns of Playa del Carmen and Cozumel were separated only by water, it was enough water unless the renegade cops made regular pilgrimages here.

When we finished, Beatrice had coffee while I found a pay phone that worked near the restaurant and called John's number using my calling card. I got the answering machine. I left a message outlining briefly what had happened. Where we were.

I called Charlie.

"Yes."

"Hey, Hap. You gettin' any cruise ship pussy?"

"No. Actually I'm in Playa del Carmen, Mexico."

"Hey, getting any señorita pussy?"

"Actually, yes."

"Female chihuahuas don't count."

"You're just as funny as clown shoes."

"Hey, I know it."

"Listen. I got a little problem."

"Oh, shit."

"No. Nothing like that. Not the usual."

"Anybody dead?"

"Not yet."

I gave him the shortened version of events.

"Damn. Is Leonard bad?"

"Not bad, but hell, he took a knife. No little thing. It could have been a lot worse. It's a small cut, not too deep. Which is a good thing. This isn't exactly a medical Mecca here."

"You guys. You're somethin'. You could fuck up a wet dream. What do you need?"

"Well, mainly I wanted you to know what happened to us. And I think I'm going to need some money wired until I can get to my money on board the ship. Then I can pay you back."

"How much you need?"

“Well, we’ll have to arrange for plane tickets. Stuff like that. I’ve got some money. But, since I’m not certain how long Leonard’s going to have to recoup, if we’re going to have to take a hotel or not, maybe a couple thousand. Three would be better.”

“Shit. Ask for ten. Same thing.”

“I know, Charlie. Maybe you could loan me some, a little from Marvin—”

“—Marvin’s in a fuckin’ wheelchair. What’s he gonna do? Run a little soapbox derby for extra bucks?”

“You know my deal. I’m actually good for it for once. And besides, even when I’m not good for it, I pay it back, don’t I?”

Charlie sighed. “I can ask.”

“Brett might loan you a little for me. Between the three of you, you might could scrape it up. Shit, man. A thousand would probably do it, we had to. Oh, and John, of course. He’s probably got the whole thing.”

“Why didn’t you call him?”

“I did. He wasn’t home.”

“So I was second choice?”

“Pretty much.”

“Look. I’ll see what I can do. Give me John’s phone number.”

I gave it to him.

“You know Brett’s?”

“I do.”

“I wouldn’t count on much there. I’m just being wistful. John’s probably the best bet.”

“All right. Who else?”

“I think that’s about all the people who like me. And some of them are a mixed bag. There’s a lawyer friend named Veil, but I have no idea where he is these days. And besides, I’m not sure he and Leonard truly like one another.”

“I know Veil,” Charlie said.

“You do?” I said.

“Everyone knows Veil. You got a number I can call you?”

“No. The lady we’re staying with doesn’t have a phone.”

“She the one you’re doing the hole punch with?”

“That’s an indelicate way of putting it. But yes. We’ll only be there today, though. Tomorrow, we have to head out.”

“Didn’t turn out so good, huh? Bad in the sack?”

“She was fine.”

“Hell, I meant you.”

“I was quite good, actually. She told me so.”

“Now there’s something you can depend on.”

“Charlie, I don’t know where to wire the money. I guess what I’ll do is call you back tomorrow, see if you could raise it, then I’ll let you know where to send it. I get the money I can book a plane flight.”

“Haven’t you got a credit card?”

“I do. But it’s one of those that has a low credit limit.”

“A kiddie card.”

“Pretty much. Something like three hundred dollars. I might even have enough with that and my cash and Leonard’s to put together two plane flights, but if we need to eat, anything goes wrong, well, we’d be screwed. Besides, I need to slip these people a little something. They didn’t ask, but the old man literally saved our lives. He patched Leonard up good and just in time. Without him and the antibiotics his daughter gave us, Leonard might be deceased.”

“All right, Hap. Give me a call tomorrow.”

“Done deal,” I said.

I went back to the café and joined Beatrice for coffee. The coffee was rich and black and almost took my breath away. Same as Beatrice’s eyes.

“When does your father come in?”

“Usually midday. And then he goes back. He used to stay on the boat all day. But now he fishes very early, comes back, goes out again late. He does not go too far. He does not have to. He seems to know where the fish are. This is one of the places he sells the fish to, this café. Perhaps the fish we ate is one he caught.”

“Doesn’t it bother you to eat a fish you know personally?”

“Not at all.”

“That seems inconsiderate.”

“Fuck the fish,” she said.

She saw me glancing at her little finger, the one with the tip missing.

“You wonder what happened?”

“Yeah. I guess so.”

“Fishing line. A shark was caught. He jerked, the line tangled. It took off the tip of my finger.”

“I didn’t mean to stare.”

“It is all right.”

We wandered around Playa del Carmen, looking at the tourist shops. Actually, after one shop I was pretty much worn out. The rest were the same ol’ same ol’, but I put up with it because Beatrice seemed to think she was showing me a good time.

She suggested a ferry over to Cozumel, but I wanted to be available when her father showed and I didn’t want to give those cops the chance to see me again. I told her so.

“Of course,” she said. “I wasn’t thinking.”

All I could think about was Leonard back at their home, wounded, with nothing but bread and cheese to eat. I ought to get back there, and maybe it would be best to get him closer to town right away, one of the hotels. I might even be able to find a doctor, provided Charlie could rouse enough money.

I said, “Since you need us out tomorrow, we could walk around and see if I can find a hotel for me and Leonard. We actually had a room rented, but we didn’t show last night. We might can get a room there again.”

She didn’t hesitate. “Very well.”

We ended up at a different, cheaper, but nicer hotel. It was white stucco with a large palm near the front and a sign that translated something like the House of Siesta. Out front was a medium-sized yellow dog that looked croaked. It lay in the hot sun like a flapjack on a griddle. When we stepped over the dog, it wagged its tail, just to let us know it didn't need burying.

Inside, Beatrice spoke Spanish to the man behind the desk. He had rooms.

"Shall I set you up?" she said.

I had been watching a couple of very large cockroaches practice sumo style shoving in the corner of the room. Kind of made me feel homesick, actually.

"Yes. Make it two nights. I want to give Leonard a little time to rest, time for the money to get here."

She talked to the desk clerk. I gave him my charge card. Signed some papers. When he gave me back my card, Beatrice said, "Tonight, you two stay with us. I arranged for you a night after that. That is enough, is it not?"

I was surprised after what she had told me about wanting Leonard and me out, but I said, "Should be. If not, I can extend it. It doesn't look as if people are knocking the doors off this place to get in."

"It's nicer than our home," Beatrice said.

I felt bad, but didn't know what to say, so let it go.

As we left the hotel, I said, "Why are you letting us stay tonight? I had the feeling you needed us out."

"You are why. I thought maybe we do tonight what we did last night. As for why I want you out, well, I have personal reasons. They are not your fault."

"I can live with that," I said.

We wandered around for a while, but her father didn't show at the dock. We finally went back to the café and bought some coffee and sat at a table and talked.

"Have you ever wanted something so bad, and you had it in your hand, and you let it slip away," Beatrice said. "Just one decision, and everything changed."

"Beatrice, it's the story of my life."

"I had my chance in the States. But I came back here to be a Mexican woman in the tradition of my mother. Why? I know better. Why did I do that?"

"Perhaps you were worried about your father?"

“I like to think so. I told you that last night. But it is more. It is like I am imprinted, and I keep doing the same thing. I cannot go backward now, not easily. I have squandered so much, so much time. I would like the big score, you know?”

“I know. I’ve tried that myself. It can happen, the big score. Win the lottery. Gamble and hit the jackpot. But most likely you don’t win the lottery, you don’t hit the jackpot. Slow and steady wins the race.”

“I am nearly thirty-five, and I have not begun my race. I ran it for a while, but in the wrong direction. Correct that. I ran in the right direction, but like an idiot I turned and came back the way I had run. Now I am at the starting line again. And I am tired, Hap.”

“I’m not trying to get into your life. I don’t know your life that well, Beatrice. But why not go back to the States? You’ve got the education. There are opportunities there. You said your father doesn’t expect you to be here. He’d understand. He’d want the best for you.”

“Too hard,” she said. “I would have to get more education to actually get a good job in archaeology. That takes money. I do not have money.”

“Work and earn money. Then take the courses you need.”

“Work at what?”

“You have enough education to get a job. At a small museum maybe.”

“It takes too long. I need the money right now, so I can take the classes. So I can have freedom. I am sick of having nothing, Hap. Physically sick.”

“Maybe we want too damn much,” I said.

“That could be,” Beatrice said. “But you know what? I want it just the same.”

14

LATE THAT AFTERNOON the old man's boat came in. We were at the dock waiting. When the boat arrived and was tied at the dock, the kid, José, jumped off, Spanish tumbling out his mouth so fast you could almost see the words.

"It is Father," Beatrice said. "He has been hurt."

We both rushed to the boat, climbed on board.

Ferdinand was lying on the bed in the boat cabin. His leg was bound up in white cloth and there was a lot of blood.

He and Beatrice spoke to one another in Spanish. When they finished, she sat beside him on the bed. I leaned against the door frame. The old man smiled at me.

"Señor. How are you today?"

"I'm good. But you're not. What happened?"

"Stupid accident. I do this all my life, and now I do this stupid thing. I hooked a small shark. I brought it in, and in the process of hitting it in the head, it came off the hook and wiggled on the deck and bit my lower leg. It is not bad. It was a very little shark."

"He cannot walk," Beatrice said. "I consider that bad."

"No, señor. It is not bad."

"Bad enough. I hope you doctored it as well as you doctored my friend."

"I stitched it up myself."

Beatrice leaned over and looked at the bloody bandage. She started removing it.

"It is fine," said the old man.

Beatrice let out her breath. "It is not fine. My heavens, Father. It is terrible. You need to see a doctor."

Ferdinand spoke to her in Spanish.

She looked at me. “He says he cannot afford a doctor.”

“Do you know where one is?”

“Yes.”

“Then let’s get him there.”

José had come back onto the boat. He looked in at the old man, his eyes wide. The old man spoke to him. The boy immediately began to unload their catch.

“José and his brothers will help sell it in the marketplace. Father will give them nearly half of it. They do not deserve half of it. Only the boy went out.”

“He works hard,” said Ferdinand. “His family is poor.”

Beatrice barked a laugh. It wasn’t a happy laugh.

“Father, you are something. Come, let us get you up from there.”

The doctor wasn’t home. I sat on the doctor’s porch with Ferdinand while Beatrice went to find him. It was nearly dark when she finally came back, an old man plodding along beside her.

He looked like something out of a Humphrey Bogart movie. He wore a white linen suit that looked as if he had slept in it. Scuffed black shoes run-down on the sides and a shirt that had been last washed during the Mexican Revolution, and then only because he had been caught out in the rain. He had salt-and-pepper hair and the front of it hung down on his forehead as if it were too ill to consider being combed.

I heard him call Ferdinand by name, then the rest of it was in Spanish, which left me out. They apparently knew each other well.

I helped the old man up. He was stiffer than before. As the doctor came to help me, I could smell liquor on his breath.

We got Ferdinand inside the house. There were clothes piled up and a couple of men’s magazines on the couch with naked señoritas on the cover. One was open to a centerfold and there was a German shepherd in the picture with a lady one could no longer describe as young. In fact, she looked as if she might have been more at home with a horse.

The doctor paused long enough to flip the magazine closed and toss it off the couch.

I glanced at Beatrice. She looked at me and shook her head. We sat Ferdinand on the couch. The doctor disappeared into the other room.

Ferdinand said, “They are not his magazines. He has a very crazy son. He is my friend’s shame. He lives here with his father.”

“The question is,” I said, “does the son have a German shepherd?”

“I do not think so.”

The doctor came back carrying a bag. He pulled up a chair in front of the couch, sat in it, carefully lifted the old man’s leg, placed the foot on the chair in front of him and began removing the bandages.

The injury was pretty bad. You could see where the old man had poured some kind of red stuff over the wound, and it wasn’t bleeding badly, just sort of oozing, but it was too deep and too wide for stitches, though the old man had tried.

The doctor clucked over it for a moment. He got a bottle of whiskey out of his bag and gave it to Ferdinand. Ferdinand unscrewed the cap, took a snort. The doctor took the bottle back, took a snort himself. He offered us some. Beatrice and I declined.

The doctor went away, came back with a pan of water. He went to work on the leg, cleaning it, snipping away the thread where the old man had tried to sew what couldn’t be sewed.

I went out on the front porch. The smell of the wound bothered me. I had smelled far too many wounds in my lifetime. Beatrice came with me.

She said, “He will be out of work now.”

“What about the kid, José? Or his brothers? Can’t they work for him? Help you out.”

“They would expect to be paid.”

“If you catch fish, pay them. If you don’t—”

She laughed. “It is so easy for you, is it not. Being an American.

There is always money.”

“I don’t know what you think you know, honey, but one thing is for damn certain, I haven’t got any money. Leonard and I own a dime and we let each other carry it from time to time, but heaven forbid we should spend it.”

Beatrice shook her head. “My father owes money, you see. He has to make it back. He will pay the doctor from his catch. Give him fish. We need every fish to make every peso we can. Not only to live, but to pay back his debt.”

“He borrowed money?”

She looked at me with those beautiful, soulful dark eyes.

“He borrowed for me … It is not your business, Hap.”

“Very well,” I said.

She studied me for a moment, as if trying to make certain I wasn’t going to wrestle it out of her. When she decided I wasn’t, she told me anyway.

“He borrowed from a man who adds much interest. He borrowed so that I could go to the United States, to the university. He has been paying it off all along. And I, well, I did nothing with my time there.”

“You chose to come back. You could have done something with your education if you wanted.”

“Let me put it this way. One night I am in the U.S., and I am out with friends, and they order fish. And I am looking at the fish, and thinking, this is what my father does, and he is doing it every day so I can be here. I decided to come home, help him earn the money back. This was more important. I knew he would never pay it off. The debt would be there. It was right for me to assume the debt.”

“What about what you told me before? Being like your mother. Or feeling obligated to be that way.”

“That is part of it too, Hap. If I were smart, I would have got a job and helped pay off the debt. My degree would have helped do that. Instead, I come back and live like a peasant to pay off this big loan by helping him fish. What kind of thinking is that, if it is not the thinking of someone who believes they are trying too hard, and wrongly, to rise above their station.”

"If you'll forgive me, Beatrice. It's stupid thinking."

"I know. But I do it just the same. Let me tell you why I want you to leave tomorrow. My father has a charter. A big important charter. Men who want to fish. They have agreed to go out three days. They will pay a lot for this. Far more than the cost to fish. They are rich Americans and my father has guaranteed them each a trophy fish. There is a place where there are plenty of great fish. My father knows it. If the fish are not there, we do not make as much. And I must be very kind to one of these men."

"I don't think I like the sound of that."

"I am not yours, Hap."

"I didn't mean it that way. I don't like the idea of any woman having to be nicer to a man than she wants to be."

"I have met this man. He is not my favorite. But this money, it could pay off our debt to this other man I told you about."

I was liking the sound of it less and less. But Beatrice was right. It was not my problem. And she was not my woman.

"What happens if you don't find the fish?"

"This man my father owes. He is a man with much pride. More pride than the need for money. He can be unpleasant."

"Jesus, Beatrice. Your father is in to a loan shark?"

"He is more than a shark. He is a school of sharks. One time a man owed him and did not pay, and this shark, Juan Miguel, he had the man killed, the body skinned, boiled, and sold his skeleton to a medical school."

"That sounds like a story to me, Beatrice."

"This is Mexico, Hap. Stories like that are real here. The final word is this. We owe him money. We are behind in our payments. He has threatened my father. He and his thugs."

"Your father doesn't seem worried."

"He is worried. But he keeps it to himself. He will seem even more congenial now than before. It is his way of dealing with disaster. Tomorrow he will lose the big charter because of this, and then there will be no way to pay the money."

"My God, how much could he owe?"

"In American money, it would be eighty thousand dollars."

“Christ. A fishing trip, even if these guys catch ten trophy fish apiece, won’t pay for that.”

“But it will keep him at bay. We have managed to pay some of the debt already.”

“He loaned a fishing peasant eighty thousand dollars? He’s an old man. How would he think he’d ever pay that off?”

“The debt is his, then it passes to me. He pays what he can, and I continue to pay throughout my life. With interest, of course.”

“You should have stayed in the U.S.”

“Then they take it out on my father.”

“Then he should have come to stay with you.”

“It is his debt, and he feels obligated to pay it. It is not like for you, Hap. He could not just go to a bank and get a loan.”

“Hon, I couldn’t get a bank to loan me the time of day.”

She studied me carefully, to make sure I was serious. She sighed abruptly and looked off toward the ocean. I had the uncomfortable feeling she might be waiting for me to offer her money.

I said, “Seems to me it would still be worth sharing with José and his brothers. That would be the best way, wouldn’t it? Have them help you fish, pay as you go.”

“My father does not want to give away his place to fish. José and his brothers, they are good boys, but they would tell others. They work for whoever they have to work for. I do not blame them. But this place, my father needs to keep it secret.”

“If it’s so full of fish, why does he often go without fish? Today he didn’t come back with fish. Except the shark that bit him.”

Beatrice didn’t answer.

“Listen, Beatrice. I’m just an ol’ East Texas boy, but I’m not dumb. And I mean no disrespect, but what you’re telling me, it doesn’t add up. I hate to be one to talk about welshing on a debt, but in this case, where your life is in danger, why don’t you just run for it. Go to the States and forget it. Pay it back later if you feel you owe it. When you can.”

“You cannot run from Juan Miguel. Don’t worry, Hap. I have told you more than I should. Really, this is not your business.”

It never is, I thought.

We walked back into the main part of town and ordered some food for Leonard. They wrapped it in brown paper and put it in a sack. I went back to the doctor's house. The doctor loaned the old man a pair of crutches, and he used them to go with us back to his boat.

Beatrice and I helped him secure it, then we made our way to their car, and Beatrice drove us to their place.

On the way, the old man talked very pleasantly to me. You would have thought nothing had happened to him. That this injury didn't matter. He acted like someone eccentric and wealthy who didn't worry about money.

Beatrice, on the other hand, was quiet. A cloud seemed to have descended over her. Or perhaps I should say a darker cloud. From the moment I met her there hung about her a grimy aura of disappointment, as if all her ambitions were living things that she had seen slaughtered.

At their place I checked on Leonard first thing. He said, "It's about time you came back. Hell, I'm bored. I read the Vachss book. Great. I got up enough energy to look for more books I wanted to read, but there wasn't much in English that interested me. Where's Beatrice? The old man? What's his name?"

"Ferdinand. By the way. He had an accident."

"Accident? What kind of accident?"

I told Leonard all about it. Gave him the details of the day.

"I'll be damned. Where is he?"

"With Beatrice in the kitchen. Fixing some food. I brought you some. I thought we'd be back a lot earlier. Sorry. Hope you weren't too hungry. I was going to get you some vanilla cremes or wafers, but couldn't find any. Actually, I didn't look that hard."

"Gee, thanks."

I sat down on the edge of the bed and handed Leonard the grease-stained sack. Inside were burritos and tacos.

"Think you got enough?" Leonard said, peeking into the sack.

“I figured you’d be hungry.”

“You’re right. I ate the bread and cheese right away. Got bored. This smells great … What about us going home? You made a call, right?”

“Right. Go ahead, eat.”

“Something’s wrong? It always is, so why wouldn’t it be now.”

“I didn’t say that.”

While he ate, I said, “You know, I heard a joke the other day at the chicken plant.”

“Oh no. I don’t want to hear it. Your jokes suck, Hap. And that means things aren’t going well. You always try and soothe me with a joke. It only makes it worse. So just cut to the chase.”

“I didn’t say I had bad news.”

“But you do. I know you well enough to know something’s come up.”

“All right. I have some bad news.”

“I knew it.”

“Well, considering I have some bad news, you might want to hear my joke.”

“Just skip the joke and go straight to the news.”

“Then you’ll never hear this great cowboy and Indian joke.”

“I can see now you’re going to tell the joke. No matter what I say or do, short of killing you, you’re going to tell me this goddamn joke. Am I right?”

“I heard it from a fella out at the chicken plant.”

“You said that. How bad is the news on the other side of it?”

“Not that bad.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake. Go ahead … Wait. Why me, man? Can’t you just save these for someone who cares? I hate jokes. You always do this when I’m sick or injured. Which, come to think of it, when I’m around you, is pretty frequent. I got to tell you, Hap. I been thinkin’ I want to put my feet up some. Know what I’m saying?”

“You want to put your feet up.”

“I mean, I love you, brother, but there’s something about us, when we mix together, it makes shit. Know what I'm sayin'?"

"I do."

"Maybe we could call one another, have lunch, go to a movie. Double-date. Me and John. You and whoever … But man, we plan something big together, I seem to always get shot, knifed, beat, et cetera. And come to think of it, you look pretty good. You aren't cut up or banged up."

"I got a few bumps. And hey, I been on the bad end before. Don't make yourself too special. Now the joke. There's this cowboy—"

" 'Shit. Go for it."

"—and he's captured by Indians. The chief says, It's the custom of our tribe to give the condemned man three days of granted wishes. Stuff besides 'I want to go home.' That kind of thing."

"This sucks already. You can't tell a joke to save your life."

"So, the chief says, Cowboy, you got three days and a wish a day. Use them wisely. What do you want first? Cowboy says, Let me talk to my horse.

"Cowboy calls his horse over, whispers in the horse's ear, horse thunders off, and just before sundown the horse shows up with a beautiful redhead on its back."

"Man or woman?"

"In my story it's a woman. Has to be for the story to work. You'll see."

"All right."

"Cowboy takes the redhead into the tent and they make love, he puts her on the horse, and the horse thunders off, taking the redhead back to town. Or wherever.

"Next day. Oh yeah. The horse has come back. That's important."

Leonard sighed.

"Chief says, This is your second day, your second wish. What'll it be? Cowboy says, Let me talk to my horse. He whispers in the horse's ear, and off thunders the horse.

"Near dark, horse shows up with a beautiful blonde on its back. Cowboy and the blonde go into the tent where he's held captive, and make love. He puts the blonde on the horse, and the horse takes her away.”

“Don’t forget the horse comes back again … Am I right?”

“Yeah. The horse comes back. So, the horse is back, and it’s the last day, and the chief says, Pick this wish wisely, cowboy, because it’s your last.

“The cowboy sighs, says, Let me talk to my horse. He calls the horse over and grabs it by the ears and puts his face close to the horse’s face. He says to the horse, Listen, stupid. Read my lips. POSSE. POSSE.”

I paused.

“Yeah,” Leonard said. “So.”

“Think about it …”

“Oh, I get it. Now isn’t that funny. The horse thought he was saying pussy. You heteros are just full of fuckin’ fun. Hap, I want to go home. Tell me what happened with the phone call.”

I told him.

“You got us a room in town, though, right?”

“That’s right.”

“So the worst is a little delay?”

“Well, yes. But …”

“Oh, shit. No.”

“Don’t panic.”

“Don’t hesitate.”

“I’m supposed to call Charlie tomorrow. He’s setting things up. But way I see it, Ferdinand saved our lives. You’re out of it anyway. Why don’t I sort of help them out on the boat.”

“You can’t even float a paper boat, Hap, let alone go out on the ocean and fish. Didn’t you learn anything from our short cruise?”

“Yeah, don’t insult the guy at the ship’s restaurant. You’re blaming me, but think about who really got us into this mess.”

“It was your idea to go on a cruise.”

“Actually, it was John’s.”

“You’re right. When we get home we’ll kill him.”

"I bet he's watching that *Kung Fu* thing right now."

"Could be. Or he's taping it. Him and Charlie probably call each other up and talk about the characters."

"You see, Leonard, way I see it is, I can at least volunteer to be a deckhand till the old man gets better. It's a bad wound, worse than yours, but he can probably get around in a few days. Beatrice and I can take care of business till then. And there's another thing."

"There always is."

"Ferdinand owes some money."

"Define 'owes some money.' "

"I think I should help you to the outdoor convenience."

"I didn't ask to go."

"I think you should go anyway."

"Well, actually, I do need to go."

"Good, that way I can tell you in private."

Leonard rolled to the side of the bed. "Hell, I can walk by myself. I feel a lot better."

"But you'll humor me."

"If I must."

Leonard put on his shoes. I put my arm around him and helped him outside. It was fairly dark and the moon was up and it was a fragmented moon. Clouds scuttled across the sky and in the distance I saw sheet lightning rage across the horizon. You could smell rain in the air, but it was still some distance away.

As we walked, I told Leonard the story Beatrice told me. He went inside the outhouse, and I stood outside, leaning on it, talking to him, finishing up my story through a split in the walls.

"Let me see," Leonard said. "She went to the States, and her father provided the money with a bad loan. She got a degree, but then felt sorry for her father. She was being driven by an inner force to return and do traditional Mexican woman things. And now she's in a tight spot with someone named Juan Miguel who might kill her and sell her bones to research, and she's going to pay a big chunk of the money by sponsoring a three-day fishing trip to a secret place where fish live, but the old man doesn't seem to go there on a regular basis even if he is living on crumbs and owes a gangster thousands of dollars. Duh."

"Maybe it's just worth more to him to go there when he's got rich tourists. It could be like that."

"And when I come out of this outhouse I could be white, bowlegged, and have a vagina, but it isn't likely. Bottom line is, you're gonna help her, aren't you. And, of course, you would like me to help."

"That sounds about right. Hurry up, man, it stinks."

"You think it's rough out there, you ought to be in here."

"What d'you say, Leonard? Shall we help?"

"I say when it comes to women you are so goddamn dumb as to make a box of tenpenny nails seem high on the IQ scale."

"You think she trained a shark to attack her father so she could get me on their boat and make a work slave of me?"

"No. It's broader than that. Damn. This catalogue is not a good idea. Maybe they could at least spring for some toilet paper. I think I ripped myself."

A moment later Leonard came out of the outhouse. I put my arm around him and started helping him back to the house, even though he didn't need the help. We went slowly so we could continue talking.

"You will wash your hands at the house, won't you?" I said.

"Just the one I wipe with. Which, by the way, is the one I have around your shoulder right now."

There was one little sad tree in the yard, and we went over to that. It was only a little taller than we were. Its limbs were gray and scaly, like a snake shedding its skin; they were spread out wide, like gapped fingers in the moonlight.

Leonard leaned against the tree's bent trunk. He said, "As your queer friend, I don't have the same blind side to women you do. A queer can look at things head-on, my honky. Least as far as men and women go."

"How is Beatrice, a woman I just met, giving me the screw? Outside of the actual screw, I mean."

"She's one of life's victims. Woe is me. Everything happens to her. I think her father, nice man that he is, may not have his head on just right either. Call it a hunch.

“Look. Don’t get me wrong. I’m glad she and her father helped us, but I say tomorrow morning we head into town and get that hotel room and plan our way out of here.”

“Well, she hasn’t exactly asked me to help. Maybe she doesn’t even want me to help. She even told me she wants me and you out of here tomorrow. Probably because all of this coming down. But I think with her father on crutches, she might need some help. That’s all I think there is to it.”

“If she doesn’t want you to help, then don’t. Don’t force it.”

“I just hate to see anyone bullied.”

“I promise you, this whole business she’s telling you, it’s got a light coating of slime on it. Maybe she doesn’t intend for you to get involved. Maybe she knows the whole thing sucks the big old donkey dick. I don’t know. But it’s not our business. So let’s just walk away.”

I stood quiet for a moment. I looked at Leonard leaning against the tree. He wouldn’t be much help anyway. Not by tomorrow. Did I really need to run off and help Beatrice and her father pay a debt that wasn’t mine? She wasn’t even my woman. Not really. She had said so herself.

“You know what, Leonard? I’m gonna fool you. I’m gonna do just what you say. For once. You’re right. This isn’t our problem.”

15

EARLY NEXT MORNING it was very humid and I awoke sweaty. I had been given a pallet on the floor in the room where Leonard slept in the bed. Beatrice had slept on a pallet in the kitchen, and the old man had slept in her bed.

In the middle of the night I awoke to see her standing at the open doorway of the room where Leonard and I slept. She wore a thin white thigh-high nightgown. Her legs were dark and sexy in the shadows. She smiled when she realized I was looking at her. I could smell her perfume from where I lay. It smelled dry and earthy.

I got up, she took my hand. We went to her pallet in the kitchen. Beatrice was soft and sweet and I only thought of Brett a little.

Before daylight, I returned to the room where Leonard lay wide awake.

“You’re so bad,” he said.

“You said it,” I said, and lay down on my pallet and went to sleep.

It wasn’t a good sleep. When I awoke I was exhausted and my bones felt as if they had been sawed up, put in a blender, then poured back into my body. I was sweaty. I rose and wrapped up my blankets and pillow and put them on the bed next to Leonard. Who, of course, was snoring like a man who had just won the lottery.

I slowly moved my body, heard my knees and ankles and hips pop. I got up and limped about. I didn’t find Beatrice.

The old man was in the kitchen. He was on his crutches by the stove. The kitchen smelled of coffee and something baking. The aroma filled my head and made my stomach growl.

“I am baking some bread for breakfast,” Ferdinand said. “I have some butter. We can eat it together. Maybe your friend will be hungry then. Is he doing better?"

"Much better, thanks to you. He ought to be up and around today."

"It was not too bad a wound. He lost some blood. That was the most of it. The blood. I wish I had a steak to feed him. Steak is good when you lose blood. I know a man down the road who owes me a goat. Perhaps later we can get him to give me the goat and we can butcher it and cook it. It is not a steak, but it is meat."

"Perhaps," I said. "Where is Beatrice?"

"She has gone into the town," Ferdinand said. Like Beatrice, I loved hearing him talk. It was musical even when he spoke English. He spoke nearly perfect English. But the way he emphasized or accented certain words made it sound so unique. I liked the way he looked too. The way I would have thought Hemingway's Santiago must have looked in *The Old Man and the Sea.*

"She said she will come back for you," Ferdinand said.

I was thinking about the boat gig she told me about. What had happened to that? I couldn't help myself, I said, "Not to meddle, but didn't she tell me she had an important job that the two of you were to do today?"

"You are right. We are supposed to do a job. I have told her I cannot. Even though we must and it is important. We cannot. She has gone to tell the men we cannot and that we must delay the job if they will delay. Otherwise, no job. Did she tell you the job?"

"Very little," I said.

"I would like to do the job. It pays well, but I cannot. This is the first time in twenty-five years I have been injured that I do not fix it myself. Like I fix your friend."

"You did a good job."

"I am too old. I cannot fix myself. I cannot deal with it the way I once did."

"No reason to."

"I do a lot of things, allow a lot of things now that I would not allow before. I am nowhere the man I once was."

The old man's gaze took a position over my shoulder. I turned and saw Leonard shuffling in. He found a chair and sat.

Leonard said, "I don't know if I thanked you properly or not, sir. But thank you. You did us both a great favor. You're good with that machete."

"The machete was part of my life growing up. For work, for play, and for fighting."

"Play?" Leonard asked.

"Play fighting. We fought using the flat of the blade. The art of machete fighting is nearly lost, my friend."

"I can see that," Leonard said.

The old man smiled.

When the bread was done it came out flat and blackened in spots. We put some real butter on it and had coffee. It wasn't a gourmet meal, but it wasn't bad either.

We sat around the table and talked about this and that, the weather, life, women. I didn't mention Beatrice, of course, but from the way the old man looked at me, it was obvious he knew what his daughter and I had been doing. Once he stared at me long enough and hard enough I added too much sugar to my coffee.

When we finished all of that coffee, he brewed us more and we drank that, and by noon he had found a bottle of wine and was drinking heavily from that.

Neither Leonard nor I touched the wine.

About two o'clock Ferdinand passed out in his chair and Leonard and I put him in his bed, took off his shoes, and propped a pillow under his head.

"I like the old bastard," Leonard said. "He tells good stories."

"He's worried," I said. "He's trying to put his mind on other things."

"There you go worrying about other people's problems again."

"You said you like him."

"I said I like him. I didn't say I wanted to raise him. We get home, I'll buy you your own old man. Better yet, you can take care of me. Hold my balls up while I wash."

"That'll be the day."

We went back to the kitchen and got the last of the coffee. We had already gone through two pots, and now, with another cup of coffee poured up, I felt as if I might be able to levitate, in an agitated sort of way, of course.

There were a couple of chairs on the front porch, so we went out there and sipped our coffee. It was hot outside and the coffee made us sweat twice as bad.

We hadn't been out there long when we saw a dust cloud coming from the south, a red clay swirl against a bright hot sky. Pretty soon, out of the cloud, came Beatrice in the van. When she braked to a stop, the dust continued on, as if it had disgorged her. It passed over the house and made us duck our heads and cough. When I looked up there was a coating of it over what remained of my coffee. I leaned out of my chair, past the edge of the porch, and poured it in the dirt.

Beatrice practically leaped from the car. Her hair was up. She wore jeans and an oversized red shirt with white deck shoes. There was a sweat line around her neck and sweat blooms under her arms. She saw us on the porch, sauntered over a little too casually.

"How are you this morning?" she asked.

We both answered in the affirmative.

"And you?" I said.

"Well enough. Are you ready to go into town?"

"I suppose we are. Maybe you could show us a store or two where we can buy a few things. We left some stuff at the other hotel, but we haven't the inclination to go back for it."

"Some bellhop is wearing Hap's new underwear right now," Leonard said.

"I will just check on my father, wash a little, change clothes, then we will go."

She rushed inside quickly, as if she might burst into tears at any moment. I started to follow. Leonard took hold of my arm.

"Leave it be, buddy. It's not your problem. You can't solve everyone's problems. Look at it this way. You can't even solve your own."

"Point," I said. "Damn good point."

A little later, when Beatrice had herself together, looking fresh in a blue blouse, she drove Leonard and me into town, to the hotel where I had rented us a room.

After Beatrice had gone up with us to see our room, which though not fancy was nice, I walked her back to her car.

She opened the door, said, "You have been very kind."

"I have to say the same."

"I have been loving, have I not?"

"You have."

"No complaints?"

"No complaints," I said. "You'll give our best to your father?"

"Of course," she said.

She got in the car, pulled the door to. The window was open, she leaned out of it.

"I think, in another time, things could have been different," she said.

I wasn't sure I wanted them to be that different. I liked her, but I didn't love her. I loved Brett, goddamn me.

Still, I couldn't help myself. "How did it go?"

"Go?"

"You know. With the men who wanted to rent your boat?"

"You don't want to know," she said, and I saw a tear well up in her eye. I started to push it, remembered Leonard's advice.

"Whatever you say," I said.

"Goodbye, Hap."

"Goodbye, Beatrice."

She drove away, and I thought that was the end of it.

16

I WAS IN THE HOTEL ROOM, taking off my shoes, getting ready to lie back on my bed and rest a bit, when Leonard, who was already reclining on the other bed, said, “You know what we should do, Hap?”

“I hope you’re not going to suggest anything sexual.”

“Nope. I didn’t bring any of my devices with me. But, now that you mention it, we could catch a mouse and grease him up, let him run up our ass. That might be fun.”

“We don’t have a mouse.”

“There are little black turds next to that hole in the wall to the left of the electric socket by the TV set. So that tells me there are mice.”

“Now you’ve piqued my excitement. But alas, we’ve nothing to grease the mouse with.”

“You’re right. And who’s to say we can catch one? They’re pretty fast, you know.”

“All right, I bite. What should we do?”

“Stay.”

“Stay? I thought you wanted to go.”

“I wanted to get you away from that woman. Women make your head mushy. I tell you, she’s a manipulator.”

“Not much of one. She dumped us off and went home.”

“It would have been just a matter of time, Hap. What we ought to do is just go ahead and turn this into a vacation. Have Charlie wire us some money just like you planned. But we do it a little different. We can get a flight out of Cancun in a couple weeks, be home a few days before we’re supposed to go back to work.”

“Don’t you want to see John?”

“Of course. I love him. But this is our chance for a vacation.

We've never really had one. Not a real one. Not a good one. Things we do tend to go wrong. This could be different."

"We've already been abandoned by our own cruise ship."

"Yeah. Well, you're right."

"Cruise ships are noted for their hospitality. Their ability to deal with cantankerous assholes. Yet, somehow, you found a way to piss them off."

"It was just that one guy."

"You've been in a fight. You've been knifed. That's not quite as good as being shot, but it ought to count for something. And your hat was destroyed."

"True. You're right. It's not a totally different kind of trip for us, is it? There's some of the old charm still there. But the rest of it, we can make it uneventful. We get up late. We eat late. We wander around town. Maybe go fishing. Get out on the water."

"I don't like water. I've seen all of it I want to see."

"We could see the sights. I wouldn't even mind going back to Tulum. Wouldn't it be nice just to hang? Nobody trying to kill us. No one beating on us. It could be rejuvenating."

"People do try to hurt us a lot, don't they?"

"On the nosey. Maybe that should tell us something."

"What?"

"I'm not sure. I think we irritate people."

"We? You got a mouse in your pocket?"

"If I did, we'd be in business. A dry mouse, but in business … But tell me, Hap. Doesn't that sound like a pretty damn good idea?"

"A dry mouse?"

"A real vacation."

"You know, it doesn't sound too bad at that."

Early the next morning I went downstairs and expanded our stay at the hotel to a week. I put it on the charge card, knowing full well I was working on the edge. It might not take more than a couple of pennies for it to be full.

I didn't want to use the hotel phone, because the prices were jacked up, so I walked down the street to the same pay phone I had called from before, dialed Charlie to let him know our plans. He seemed bored to hear I was calling. When I told him what we had in mind he wasn't bored any longer.

He had already raised some money, and was surprised we were staying. So was I, but I was glad to break him out of his boredom. I consider it a kind of special accomplishment to rattle Charlie.

I told him Leonard wanted a real vacation and I felt like I owed it to him. So far, this one hadn't been as bad as our other outings.

Charlie agreed that it hadn't been as bad as it sometimes gets. He also agreed to wire us the money, tell John we were all right, and explain our plans.

On my way back to the hotel I was surprised to see Beatrice sitting in her car out front. When she saw me walking up, she got out, leaned on the hood.

The jeans she was wearing were so tight they must have made her ankles swell. She had on a halter top that was working overtime to hold her breasts in. The sun struck her black hair and made it the color of a raven's wing. There were little brown freckles on her shoulders I hadn't noticed before, but now, out in the full sunlight, they showed clearly. I liked them.

I said, "Don't tell me this is a coincidence."

"I was trying to decide if I wanted to go in and ring your room. I did not expect you to be out so early."

"I had a phone call to make."

"You are not leaving already?"

"That seems like a funny question. You know I was supposed to."

"Yes."

"Leonard and I changed our minds. We're going to stick a few days."

"Good. Good. I need to talk to you."

"We can go upstairs," I said.

Leonard greeted Beatrice with as much enthusiasm as his suspicious mind could muster, and we all went downstairs together and over to a little café for breakfast. The café was fairly crowded and there was the sound of European and American voices all over the place. A cruise ship had most likely sent in its passengers on a tender. We found a table in the corner, ordered coffee and food, waited a long time for it.

While we waited, Beatrice said, “I have had a situation arise.”

“Oh?” said Leonard. “Really?”

I gave him a hard look. He gave me back a dreamy smile.

Smug sonofabitch.

“You have problems with me?” Beatrice said.

“I just don’t like to be fed shit and told it’s tapioca,” Leonard said. “My buddy, Hap, he don’t mind some shit for tapioca. He even gets to like it now and then.”

“I do not understand,” Beatrice said.

“Look, I’m not trying to be offensive,” Leonard said.

“You are doing a very good job of it,” she said.

“All right. Take it like you want to take it. But I think you can smell a sap good as a shark can smell blood. I think you’ve got a scam going and you’re playing him into it, which means you’re playing me into it. It happens to him, it happens to me.”

“You think that, Hap?” Beatrice asked.

“He’s right more than he’s wrong,” I said.

Beatrice hung her head and stared at the table. She looked soft and cute and childlike. I wanted to reach across the table and slap Leonard.

“Well,” Beatrice said, “I did not set out to ask you for anything. I met you by accident, you must admit that. My father and I did help you in your time of need.”

“So now you need help?” Leonard said.

“I do.”

“You and about three million other women Hap knows. Not to mention guys, pets, et cetera.”

“Ah ha,” I said. “You rescued an armadillo once.”

“I admit it,” Leonard said. “That was another fine mess you got me into, if you'll recall."

He was right. There was nothing to say.

Our food arrived. We drank coffee and ate, waiting for Beatrice to drop the next shoe. Hopefully a very small shoe, like a flip-flop maybe. But no, that would be too easy. I figured it would be a boot. Steel-toed. Very heavy.

She ate and we paid up and left.

Outside she said, "Hap, can we talk?"

"Alone, you mean?" Leonard said.

"Yes," she said.

"That figures," Leonard said. "He's no good alone, lady. But then you know that, don't you? Don't ask him to do anything you wouldn't ask me to do, because you ask him, you're asking me."

"It does not have to be that way," Beatrice said.

"Yes it does," Leonard said, and walked away. He called back: "I'll be at the hotel. Crying."

"Will he really?" Beatrice said.

"In a manner of speaking," I said. "Come on, let's walk and talk."

We went along the shoreline on a concrete walk. The sea was bright green, as if lit from below by an emerald light. In the distance I could see the brown line that was Cozumel and against that the horizon. The ocean stank of oil and dead fish and up close to shore there were plastic wrappers and aluminum cans washing against the blinding white sand.

"Now that Father is injured, he cannot do any more than drive the boat."

"What about you?"

"I am company."

"Ah. Company. To this man you told me about."

"Yes. This rich American and his friends. They are here in Mexico for a short time. This one who arranged it all. He wanted to fish the other day. When my father could not go out, he was ready to cancel. We would lose all the money. I tried to convince him with words to wait. To give Father just a couple of days. He could be on the boat then. He didn't want to listen. So I convinced him with something besides words."

"You slept with him?"

"If this man I slept with is a pig, the one Father owes is a butcher … It is not for me, Hap. It is for my father. If I don't make the money, the men my father owes will kill him. They may kill me."

"What are you asking, Beatrice?"

"Help me. Just for a day or two. Please."

Leonard said, "Once more into the breach."

We were sitting at the café again, just me and him, having coffee. Leonard was feeling pretty good. His appetite was back.

"You know she's just jerkin' you?" he said.

"Yep. I know."

Leonard sipped his coffee. "I don't care she slept with this guy. That's her choice. I don't see that as something pathetic. You aren't jealous, are you?"

"We aren't in love, if that's what you mean. But it hurts my pride some. She slept with me, then she slept with the other guy to make sure he went fishing. Worse yet, she has a hotel room and is staying in town tonight. I doubt it's just because she wants to be close to the sea."

"More favors?" Leonard asked.

"I suppose."

"Maybe he was just a better lay. I bet that was it."

"Thanks for being concerned with my pride."

"Don't mention it … So we're going to be conned into being sailors."

"You can con me all you want, and I'm no sailor. Actually, I think she wants us to bait hooks, that kind of thing."

"Believe it or not, that takes skill."

"Aren't you the one said you wanted to go fishing?"

"Yeah, but I wanted someone else to bait my hook."

Next morning, Leonard and I arose early and couldn't find anything open to have breakfast, so we walked on over to where Ferdinand's boat was docked. Ferdinand's boat was being loaded with bait by José.

"I thought we were the crew," Leonard said.

"When it leaves dock, we are."

I climbed on board. I found Ferdinand on crutches. "Where is Beatrice?" he asked.

"That is what we were wondering, señor."

About that time a large man and two other men came up the dock and climbed on board the boat.

One of the men was about thirty-five, tall and stocky with close-cut blond hair and burning blue eyes. He wore a loose blue shirt and tan khaki slacks and white deck shoes.

Right off I thought he was an asshole. I also thought he was the guy Beatrice had screwed to maintain the fishing charter. He looked too damn smug and in charge to be anyone else. The guys with him were both about his age and were dressed similarly. One was thin and had dark brown hair and a mole on the side of his face that could have been painted with eyes, mouth, and nose, and passed off as a Siamese twin.

The other guy was a handsome, average-sized black man. I watched to see if Leonard checked him out.

He did.

Blondie said, "We goin' or what?"

Ferdinand smiled, straining at it I'm sure. He said, "Yes. We are waiting on Beatrice."

"Beatrice," he said. "She's not here?"

"Ferdinand just said that to see if you'd ask if she's really here," I said.

"Yeah," Leonard said. "She's hid. We're all going to start searching the boat for her in a minute. Whoever finds her gets a gummy bear."

"And who are you two?"

I wanted to tell him I was the guy that was going to throw him off the boat, but it wasn't my boat and I was here to help, not make matters worse.

“A friend,” I said.

“And him?” Blondie said, nodding at Leonard.

“I jes do duh coffee and put fishes on duh hooks,” Leonard said. “I’s known as Unca Leonard.”

“That’s funny,” Blondie said.

“Why thank ya, suh. I’s got me uh liddle niggra minstrel act I’s been workin’ on.”

The black guy laughed. Mole Face was smiling. José finished loading bait, then, sensing tension, disappeared like morning fog.

“Look,” I said. “We’ll go back to the hotel and see what’s up.”

“I’ll go with you,” Blondie said. “I left her early this morning so I could run some errands. She’s supposed to be here. I’m gonna give her a piece of my mind.”

“I wouldn’t give her too much,” I said.

“Yeah, and why’s that?”

“Because I might not like it.”

“And I don’t know you got mind to spare,” Leonard said. “I think you use most of it just getting up in the morning.”

Blondie snorted, looked at Leonard. “Lost the minstrel act, didn’t you?”

The veins on the sides of Leonard’s neck expanded.

“Whoa,” the handsome black guy said. “It’s cool. It’s cool. Let’s not get off on the wrong foot. We’re down here to fish.”

“Yeah, and this charter hasn’t been nothing but a problem,” Blondie said. “I’m ready to chuck the whole thing.”

“Hey,” Mole Face said. “You got some poontang out of it, didn’t you … Oh, sorry, old man. I forgot she was your daughter.”

Ferdinand didn’t say anything. He just looked stunned.

I put my hand on his shoulder. “It’s all right. Me and Leonard will go check on her.”

He nodded.

We climbed off the boat. Me, Leonard, and the blond asshole.

“You don’t have to come,” I said to Blondie.

“Yeah, but I want to,” he said. “I left her this morning, I told her to hurry along. One thing I hate’s a woman that doesn’t do as she’s told.”

“You asswipe,” Leonard said. “I’ve got a mind to knock your nose on the other side of your head.”

“Don’t push it, buddy,” Blondie said.

Leonard laughed. It actually scared me, and I love him. I figured Blondie, if he had a couple of brain cells left, must have felt his stool go loose.

At that very moment Beatrice came rushing up, breathless. Boy, was Blondie glad to see her. I saw a bit of color come back to his face.

Beatrice was holding her side, showing she had been hurrying. Her hair hung wet around her face. She had on a shorty towel robe, flip-flops, and was carrying a large yellow plastic bag. She saw us staring at her.

“What?” she said.

“You’re making us wait,” Blondie said.

“I’m sorry, Billy,” she said. “Really.”

She almost started to cry. I noticed she had a bit of a black eye.

I took hold of her arm, nodded at the eye, said, “He do that?”

“Wha … Oh, no. I slept on my hand or something. I am fine.”

“She bumped her head on the headboard last night,” Billy said. “When I was putting it to her from behind.”

Beatrice felt me tense. She said, “Please, Hap. Please. I’m not bothered, you shouldn’t be.”

I let my breath out slowly. “All right.”

“You’re not needed here,” Billy said. “In fact, why don’t you and your man here stick to shore.”

“I need them along,” Beatrice said. “They’ll bait the hooks.”

I knew then why she had really wanted us along. She was afraid of this joker.

Billy looked at Leonard. “Now you’ve nothing to say?”

“I was concentratin’,” Leonard said. “Tryin’ to decide how hard I’d have to pull your head for it to come off.”

Billy tried not to show he was bothered, but his bobbing Adam’s apple betrayed him and the Elvis sneer he manufactured trembled. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s fish.”

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As we boarded the boat behind Beatrice and Billy, Leonard said, “What I suggest is we finish out the day, I whip his ass. If he still wants some, you can have him.”

“We’ll flip for first later.”

Beatrice took us aside, said, “Father will show you how to bait the hooks. It is hard at first, but when you have baited a few, it will be easy.”

We set the boat free of the dock and chugged out into deeper water. The day was hot, the sky blue, spotted with clouds as white as Santa’s whiskers. The diesel exhaust, combined with the motion of the boat, the heat, made me feel ill. Within fifteen minutes I was vomiting over the side. Pretty soon thereafter, Leonard was doing the same.

Billy was sitting in the fighting chair, drinking a cold beer he’d pulled from the ice chest. He laughed. “Couple old sea salts.”

As we hung over the side of the boat, Leonard said, “I’m mortified.”

“Did you bring the seasickness pills?”

Leonard shook his head. “Afraid not.”

* * *

It was a long day. I had only thought it was hot. Now it turned hot. The sardines in the big plastic buckets smelled ripe as disease.

Ferdinand showed us how to bait the sardines on hooks. It was harder than it looked. But after only a few fish came off the hooks and I had poked only five or six holes in my hand, and Leonard had managed to rediscover his East Texas heritage by teaching everyone on the boat all the curse words known to humanity in

English, we had it going.

A little fishing was done en route, but nothing was caught. We moved out into deeper water. The sea was bobbing and rolling at first, but as we went out farther it became more violent. Not stormy, just active. The diesel smoke that had made us sick before was worse now, and the waves were enormous.

Leonard and I went back to tossing our guts over the side, then dry heaving.

Billy loved our predicament. He had a strong stomach, so therefore he thought he was a strong man. He gave the rod to the black guy, whose name was Landis, and stood near us with his beer, slurping it.

“What you boys need is a big old bowl of greasy chili.”

“You motherfucker,” Leonard said. “I didn’t feel so bad, I’d stick that bottle up your ass, see if it would help you float.”

Billy moved on. The boat chugged on.

Out where it was deep, the waves rose up around us in blue-green mountains, then dropped away, as if swallowed by an earthquake. The little boat rode up the waves, and down the other side, then the mountains appeared again.

I had only thought the cruise ship we were on was small and scary. All I could think about was one of those waves crashing on top of us, carrying us down into that bottomless water.

In time we got used to it enough we could work baiting the hooks. Landis fished for an hour and got bites, the bites took his bait and we rebaited, but no luck.

The guy with the mole on his face took a turn. His name was Jason. He sat down in the chair and slipped on the waist and shoulder straps.

I baited his hook and he sat with the butt of the rod in the swivel and waited. He fished for almost an hour, then there was a click on the rod and the line began to sing like electricity charging through a wire.

“I got something,” he said.

“No shit,” Billy said. “Hold on to him.”

I looked out at the water. The line had gone taut. Jason tightened the drag, jerked back on the rod. The rod bent slightly.

"Now I've got him," Jason said.

"You've got him when he's on the boat," Billy said.

The fish cut to the right and the line moved with him. Jason hit him again, burying the hook. He said, "He's not too big. He's nothing."

Jason rapidly cranked the fish on deck. It was a barracuda.

Ferdinand came out of the cabin on crutches. He had one hand dangling off the crutches and in it he held a sawed-off baseball bat. He lifted one crutch from under his arm and laid it on the ground and leaned forward and used the bat to whack the flopping barracuda on the head.

Ferdinand had a pair of shears in his back pocket. He dropped the ball bat, pulled them out, managed himself to a squatting position, put the barracuda's head between the blades, and snapped down hard. The head nearly popped off. Ferdinand snapped down again, and this time the head came loose. He cut the line that held the barracuda to the rod, tossed the barracuda's head into the ocean.

He crutched into the cabin, came out with a metal box. He opened it, and quickly, expertly, he tied a large hook to the cut line.

"Bait it," he said.

I reached into the bucket of stinking fish and did just that.

Ferdinand took a large knife from the box, cut the barracuda open, and dumped its guts into the water. He put the barracuda into a large ice chest just inside the door to the cabin.

Jason said, "That's my fish and that's just about my hour."

"You're next, Billy," Landis said.

"A barracuda," Billy said, "that's no kind of fish."

"Sometimes the barracuda is all the fish you hit," Ferdinand said. "Barracuda are good to eat. I can sell them to the restaurants. There are people who like to eat them, thinking they are eating a very dangerous fish. They are not really that dangerous."

“Well, if he’d wanted to mount him he’d have been shit out of luck, wouldn’t he?” Billy said. “Way you snapped it up and cut off its head. What if we don’t want to sell it to a restaurant? Maybe Jason here wants him on his wall.”

“No,” Jason said. “No problem. Go ahead. Take your turn.”

“When I catch my fish, I want him on the wall. So don’t fuck with him. You hear, old man?”

“I hear,” Ferdinand said.

“Let’s let the lady fish,” Billy said.

“That is all right,” Beatrice said. “I see enough fish.”

“No,” Billy said. “I insist.”

Beatrice looked at him, said, “Very well.”

“You don’t want to fish, don’t fish,” I said.

“No, it is all right,” she said.

Beatrice took off the short cloth robe. Underneath she was nearly wearing a bathing suit. There was almost enough cloth there to hide a quarter if someone shaved it around the edges with a pocketknife. The suit was black, one of those things with a string that went up her ass and covered nothing. The top just managed to fit over her nipples. I could tell she didn’t wear that sort of thing regularly. The skin on her buttocks and around her breasts was lighter than the rest of her, which was deeply tanned. Her pubic hair, which had not been waxed or shaved, escaped at the edges like little black tentacles waving to the public. What cloth was there clung to her snugly and showed the shape of what the old romance novels called her womanhood.

Though Beatrice was probably new to that kind of bathing suit, she wore it naturally, as if unbothered by scrutiny, but I thought I saw in her eyes a look I had seen before.

Late at night, while driving, a cat had darted in front of my car, and I’d hit it. When I got out to see if there was hope, the cat had looked up at me, dying, its eyes hot and savage, terrified in the glow of my flashlight. Even out there in the brutal sunshine, Beatrice’s eyes looked that way.

My guess was Billy had bought that little get-up for her and expected her to wear it, and she was doing just that.

I looked at Ferdinand out of the corner of my eye. I could tell from the look on his face he wasn't happy. That kind of bathing suit wasn't exactly the sort of thing a daughter wore around her father.

I baited Beatrice's hook.

She thanked me, seated herself in the fighting chair, strapped in, and cast. She was very good at it. The line went far out and into the rolling water. She put the butt of the rod in the swivel. She took a beer from Jason and sipped it. Billy stood by her chair for a while; then, bored, he got another beer and sat on one of the benches built into the side of the boat.

It was sticky and the bobbing of the boat no longer made me sick. It rocked me pleasantly. I watched Beatrice for a while as she reached inside her yellow bag beside the fighting chair, took out suntan lotion and began to apply it. I observed carefully as she rubbed it on the tops of her feet, up her ankles, all along her legs, and finally her flat stomach and the tops of her breasts. I felt the boss change positions in my pants.

She finished that, took large sunglasses from her bag and put them on, picked up her beer again and sipped it. I began to feel sleepy. I sat against the side of the boat, leaned against one of the benches, drifted off, thought of home, and Brett.

Brett wasn't as young as Beatrice. Or quite as firm. Or as brown. But God almighty she had it going. I missed her. I wished she missed me too. I wished I was ten years younger, handsome, had five million dollars and three more inches on my dick and my hair wasn't thinning. While I was at it, I threw in wishing for a pastrami sandwich on rye and immortality.

Of course, wishes are wishes. As my dad used to say, wish in one hand and shit in the other and see which one fills up first. The same can be applied to prayer. Shit in one hand and pray in the other. Within moments you can determine the real power of prayer.

I was awakened by the singing of the line. I sat up to see Beatrice drop her beer foaming onto the deck, reach out, and take the rod from the swivel.

"You got something," Billy said.

"No shit," Leonard said.

The line went tight and Beatrice jerked the rod, hit the fish, and it jumped. It was long and enormous. A sailfish.

"Goddamn," Billy said. "Look at that. That's record size. Don't you lose him. Hit him again."

And she did. The line went even tighter. Beatrice was pulled forward against the straps of the fighting chair. I could see one of her nipples peeking over the top of her bikini. It looked brown and friendly.

Beatrice tightened the drag. The line veered to the right, wide. Then back to the left, like a thin saw cutting lumber.

"Loosen the goddamn drag," Billy said.

"It's all right," Beatrice said.

"I know fishing. Loosen the drag."

"So do I," said Beatrice. "My father owns a fishing boat."

"Don't you talk back to me."

"Sorry," Beatrice said, and loosened the drag.

I was suddenly up and standing next to Billy.

"You keep talking to the lady like that, and you'll be swimming home," I said.

"Lady?" Billy said. "Look at those tits and ass hanging out. You call that a lady?"

At that moment I tensed to hit him, but Leonard took hold of my arm.

"It's their show," he said softly. "For the moment."

I took a breath, stepped away back to the bench, and sat down.

All right, I told myself. This is her game. Let her play it. She wants it like this. She knows what she's doing. It sucks. But it's her game.

Ferdinand worked the controls, reversed the boat and slowed the speed, gave the big fish room to run.

"I have one on my wall that's a record," Billy said. "And it's not near big as that one. I've never seen one that big. And a goddamn woman hooks it. Don't you lose it. You hear?"

"Yes, Billy," Beatrice said.

Acid boiled around in my stomach. I looked at Ferdinand. He was stoic. My admiration for him was fading. Surely he knew the score. He must, or he wouldn't let this shit go on. And if he knew the score, then that meant he wanted Beatrice to do what she was doing.

Leonard sat down beside me.

"Just be cool," Leonard said.

The rod was bending. Billy said, "Loosen the goddamn drag."

"It will hold," she said.

"Loosen it."

She did. The line sang, vibrated like a violin string. The fish went wide to starboard.

"Look at that cocksucker run," Jason said.

The fish leaped.

I've never seen anything so incredible. Up it went. The sunlight hit the fish and it was many colors. Red and blue and gunmetal gray. Its veins appeared to stand out under its flesh. Nothing like it would look the moment it hit the deck, dying. Its color would fade. It would fade even more on the trip to shore. It would lose all of its real color in the taxidermist's shop. It would end up dead and mounted on someone's wall over their couch. A living, twisting, multicolored piece of magnificence turned to a hard, leathery, listless shadow of its former self.

The fish struck the water and disappeared.

The line slacked. The pole began to straighten.

"Hit him again," Billy said.

She did. With a pull and a grunt. Then she hit him again.

Sweat pops were coating her forehead now, running down her chin and chest. The bathing suit was damp with it. A convention of sweat beads gathered in her belly button and made the bits of exposed pubic hair limp. The muscles in her legs and arms coiled and knotted, as if being braided from the inside. She pressed her little feet hard against the footrests.

"It's too big for her," Landis said.

"No," Billy said. "She can land it. It's the biggest fucking sailfish I've ever seen. It's a goddamn dinosaur."

Beatrice worked the line, the drag. It was obvious she knew what she was doing, probably better than Billy, but it was just too much fish. It might have been too much fish for anybody.

Billy poured a cold beer down her back.

“Chill out and hang in,” he said.

I looked at Leonard. “Let me just knock a tooth out.”

“Not yet. Don’t fuck her game for your pleasure.”

Beatrice hit the big fish again, solid, and it leaped. Pinned itself against the sky like a brooch on heaven’s chest. Hung there for what seemed way too long to be natural. Then, finally, even it was overcome by the laws of gravity, and down it went, slicing into the water.

“It’s like a goddamn submarine,” Jason said.

The line went solid again, jerked Beatrice against the straps. They were starting to cut into her shoulders, making red lines.

“You take the line,” Beatrice said. “You want him. You fish him.”

“No, honey,” Billy said. “You’re going to bring him in.”

“I cannot,” Beatrice said. “I am much too tired.”

“You’re stronger than you think. I know. I’ve been on the receiving end of your power. If you can fuck all night long, you can fish all night long.”

I glanced at Ferdinand. He was red. He gunned the boat’s motor.

“Hey, old man,” Billy yelled up at him. “You’re pulling the line too tight doing that.”

“Sorry,” Ferdinand said, and cut the engine back.

“I want this fish, Beatrice,” Billy said. “You want to give me what I want. What I’m paying you gives me what I want, and then some. You fuck this up, you’ll pay. You know that.”

“Yes, Billy. Oh, God, Billy, please. My back feels like it is breaking.”

“You’re okay.”

“My arms. I cannot hold them up.”

“Sure you can.”

“You want the goddamn fish,” I said. “You take it. She’s hurting."

"Nothing worth doing is easy," Billy said. "It's her fish, and she'll land it."

"Please, Billy," Beatrice said. "You can have it. It could be you caught it in the first place."

Then I really got it. He was mad Beatrice had caught the big fish instead of him, and he was punishing her with it.

I called to Ferdinand. "Cut it out. Let's take the boat in."

He looked at me, his mouth moved at one corner, but he said nothing.

Billy said, "I'm paying ten, no, twenty times … You hear me, old man, twenty times what you get for a charter. So you do it my way. Beatrice will do it my way."

"It is okay, Hap," Beatrice said. "I can land him. I can do it."

"You don't look like you could hold your leg up," I said, "let alone land that monster."

"I can," she said.

The boat stopped and the great fish sounded, dove way down into the deeps. The rod bent into a bow. Beatrice was beginning to shake. Her face was pale and her eyes looked as if they might roll up into her head. She was stretched forward in the straps so that her back was away from the fighting chair, exposed. I could see the cords of muscle there, knotted like the Gordian knot.

"She can't take much more of this," I said. "This is silly. I'll take the fish if you won't."

"You won't do any such thing," Billy said. "It's her fish and she'll land it. She caught it, she can bring it in."

"Billy," Beatrice said. "I feel faint."

He poured beer over her head. "Here, this'll freshen you up."

Beatrice shook the beer from her hair, began to cry silently.

Landis said, "Maybe it is enough, Billy."

"I say when it's enough," Billy said. "You just sit."

Landis shrugged. He might have a conscience, but it wasn't a strong one. Jason pulled a fresh beer from the cooler, popped it, looked off in the distance, possibly in search of Atlantis.

The rod began to bob up and down and the line on the reel was running out. The fish was still diving down.

Leonard said, “Lady, anytime you say it’s finished, trust me, it’s finished.”

Billy sneered at Leonard.

Leonard looked at him and smiled. “And I might finish it before it’s finished.”

Ferdinand came out of the cabin. “I have killed the engine. The fish will sound. And will keep sounding. It is too much for her. My daughter cannot take much more. I must ask you to take the fish, señor.”

“Me and Beatrice made a deal,” Billy said. “She does what I say for a while, and you get a whole lot of reward out of it.”

“I know,” said Ferdinand. “But it is not enough. Not for such a thing as this.”

My skin had begun to crawl. Not only because of what Billy was doing, but that her father was allowing, and worse yet, Leonard and I were allowing it. I couldn’t imagine anything being worth this.

Billy slipped his hand beneath her bathing suit and began massaging a breast.

The shears Ferdinand had used on the barracuda lay on the deck behind the chair. I picked them up and cut the line. The rod snapped back like a whip. The line jumped over the side of the boat and the fish was gone.

Billy turned. But before I could hit him, Leonard was there. Leonard stuck the tips of his fingers in Billy’s eyes. Billy’s hands went to his face and Leonard kicked him hard in the balls. Billy went to his knees.

I looked at Landis and Jason. They were both on their feet. Jason dropped his beer onto the deck. It rolled up against the side of the boat and foamed.

I said, “I wouldn’t.”

“Naw,” Leonard said. “Come ahead.”

I was still holding the shears in my hand. Leonard had Billy by the hair, grinding his knuckles into the top of Billy’s skull. He pulled Billy forward onto his face, dropped his knee across Billy’s neck.

“Taste that boat,” Leonard said. “Learn to like it. I plan on feeding it to you.”

Beatrice was crying. “You do not know what you have done,” she said.

“Maybe not,” I said. “But enough is enough. Ferdinand, take this boat back to port. And don’t anyone give me any shit about it.”

“Oh, no,” Leonard said. “Please give me some shit. I’m already sweaty and worked up now. And I’m bleeding again. So I’m mad enough to need some shit. Come on, either of you pussies. I want some shit.”

No one gave him any shit.

Ferdinand gunned us toward shore.

18

THAT NIGHT in our hotel, Leonard, wearing fresh bandages, propped himself up in bed with pillows. He said, “I enjoyed our fishing trip. Didn’t you?”

I was sitting in a chair at the desk, drinking a diet cola. “So much,” I said.

“Just a little rest. A vacation …”

“That’s enough. I was trying to help the old man.”

“You’re always helping someone, Hap. Except yourself. And by the way, what do you think of the old man now?”

“I think he saved our lives, and he’s a good old man, but … I don’t know. That stuff with those dipshits. What’s up with that?”

“She’s a masochist, Hap. Where the fuck have you been all your life? Or maybe she has this big daddy thing goin’ with Billy Boy. Boss me, and I’ll be your slave shit.”

“She seems intelligent.”

“Probably is. She’s just fucked up. Leave it at that.”

“Or she’s in some real deep shit and she and her old man are doing what they need to do to survive.”

“Your idea was we were there to protect her today. We did that. In spite of the fact I’m not so sure she wanted it. We haven’t been invited back tomorrow.”

“At least I won’t have to put those nasty sardines on a hook.”

“Do you know how long I had to shower to get that fish smell off?”

“You mean after we went fishing today, or before?”

“That’s funny, Hap. Real funny. And I give up on the vacation.”

“You talked me into staying.”

“I know, and it was a mistake. We cannot take a vacation, Hap.

It is not in the cards. Least not together. I miss John."

"Admit it. He might be your lover, but is he as much fun as me?"

"Trust me, Hap. You're not fun. And who knows, you might even call Brett and she might even like you calling."

"I must admit I think about her."

"She's all right, that one. You should try and stick with her."

"I have."

"No. When she gives you a little bit of coolness, you bail. Every woman you meet can't beat a drum all the time and blow a trumpet. They got to have their moments."

"Like you know anything about women, Leonard. You're a queer."

"But a smart queer. Brett, she's all right. We've known each other for a while now, Hap, old buddy, and I finally figured out why you don't stick with women."

"You mean besides the ones that double-cross and try to kill me?"

"Besides them."

"You mean like the one falls in love with a good friend and then goes off and gets killed."

"Well, besides her too."

"What's the answer, O Sage Queer?"

"What you got to do, my man, is give your relationships some breathing space. You're working so hard to have a relationship, you don't just let it happen. Hang with the moment, buddy."

"That's it? Hang with the moment? What kind of fuckin' advice is that? You haven't exactly had the best love life in the world either, if you'll recall."

"Got me there, but at least I figured out your problem. You meet a woman, you get that charge of being in love. That romantic, sexual rush, and then it gets everyday, and you don't know how, or don't have the character—"

"Watch it."

"Don't have the character to make it work when it gets into the everyday. I'm not one of those says a relationship should be a job. That's the case, get a part-time at the 7-Eleven. I am sayin', it ain't all about moony eyes and exchanging body fluids."

"This from the guy telling me that the size of John's hammer was what you were really impressed with."

"It is impressive. But … I been away from him awhile, and, you know, I'm beginning to rethink things. Not about the size of the hammer. I still like that part. But about love and life."

"Oh, shit. Love and Relationships by Leonard Pine. Save it. Write a column."

"Hey, listen to me, buddy. That's how I realized I'd turned a corner with John. I just let things be."

"You hung with the moment."

"Exactly. Bottom line. Don't try so hard. And this one. Beatrice. Let it go. She's about two dogs short a sled team."

"I think I'll go to sleep now, Socrates."

"Fine. Just when you get in bed, try not to show so much skin. I don't like seeing you in your underdrawers."

"I thought queers liked men in their underwear."

"Not you."

"Well, you snore in your sleep."

"Yeah, and you fart. No wonder you can't keep a woman."

I slipped off my pants and shirt, turned off the light, climbed into my bed. I lay there silent for a while. I said, "Do I really fart in my sleep?"

Leonard snickered.

"Do I?"

Leonard snickered again.

"Do I?"

"Sometimes."

"What times?"

"When you fart. Now sleep tight, and don't let the bedbugs bite. And finally, my good man, shut the fuck up, will you?"

"Leonard?"

"Christ. What?"

"You may be right. It's tough loving someone and doing it right."

"Talk about tough, you ought to be a homo. You know me and John we can't even hold hands without people going bonkers. You, you can hold hands with a woman, no one thinks that's weird. I hold hands with John, people stand and stare."

"I've seen you hold hands with John. In public."

"I didn't say I didn't do it, but it isn't comfortable. Our love is ridiculed when folks can't just accept it. What the fuck harm does it do them?"

"None at all, Leonard. And if it's any consolation, I think John is a good catch. You done good. I don't know how. But you did."

"Good night, Hap."

"Good night, Leonard."

Next morning, early, there was a pounding on our door.

I sat up in bed. Leonard was already on his feet, stepping into his pants. "Who is it?" he said.

"Billy. From the boat."

"Yeah," Leonard said. "Just the man I don't want to see."

I pulled on my pants, was slipping on my shirt when Leonard opened the door.

Billy was standing there fuming, his fist clenched. His bright Hawaiian shirt was almost too much that time of morning.

"She here?"

"Who?" Leonard asked. "Helen of Troy?"

"You know who I mean."

"Beatrice?" I said.

"Yeah. Her. Where is she?"

"She's not here," Leonard said.

"Goddamn it," Billy said, reaching under his shirt, pulling out a small snub-nose revolver. "You're gonna tell me—"

It was quick, the way Leonard grabbed Billy by his shirtfront and started slapping him. I'm not exactly sure how many times he slapped Billy. It was too quick and economical to tell. It was over before it started. The slapping. And the disarming.

Leonard tossed the gun on the floor, stuck two fingers in Billy's nostrils, stepped behind him, jerked him to the floor.

Billy said, "Goddamn."

Leonard dislodged his fingers from Billy's nose, knelt behind him, wrapped his forearm around Billy's neck and squeezed. "Are you gonna be good, Billy," Leonard said, "or am I gonna have to open up an economy-size can of whup-ass?"

"I'm cool," Billy said.

"You ain't got enough time in your life to learn how to be cool," Leonard said. "What do you think, Hap?"

"We could kill him, cut him up, leave him under the bed."

"I like that."

"I was just looking for Beatrice," Billy said.

"I thought you were spending the night with her," I said.

"Can you please stop choking me?"

"You get up, play nice, and don't talk so loud," Leonard said, "you and me can tolerate one another."

Leonard stood up.

Billy stood up. Took a swing at Leonard. Leonard ducked it, grabbed the pistol off the floor, brought it around and caught Billy upside the head with it. Billy went down so fast it was like he'd stepped in an open manhole.

Leonard leaned over, tapped him again with the little gun, said, "You just think Rodney King took a beatin'. Wait'll I get through."

"Hold up, Leonard," I said. "That's enough. Save your strength. We may have to bury him later. And you don't want to open your wounds."

Leonard took a deep breath, tossed the pistol on the bed.

"Take a chair, my man," Leonard said.

Billy got his feet under him, went over and sat down at the little table. Blood was running from his nostrils, dripping onto his colorful shirt. His cheeks were bright and finger-marked.

I went in the bathroom, got some toilet paper, stuff you could use to sand your furniture, gave the wad to Billy.

He pressed it against his nose.

“You didn’t have to do all that,” he said.

“No,” Leonard said. “I didn’t have to. But I wanted to. Don’t ever pull a gun on me, motherfucker. I’d been in a worse mood, you’d have to hire a winch truck to get that little shooter out of your ass.”

“I thought she was here,” Billy said. “I’ve spent more money on that bitch than the Republican party did their last election. I figure I got a right to know where she is. Me and her had a deal.”

“You’re spending money on her,” I said. “You don’t own her.”

“That’s a matter of opinion. I stayed with her last night. We had a fight. I wasn’t happy with you guys. I didn’t want you around, and she said fine, and then she really pissed me saying she fucked Hap here. That true, Hap?”

“I don’t usually fuck and tell, but in your case, I’ll make an exception. Yes. And I really, really enjoyed it.”

“She told me she got herself in some kind of shit with a gangster or something. She needed money. Lots of it.”

“So you took advantage of that?” I said.

“It was a deal she wanted to make,” Billy said.

“Yeah,” Leonard said, “and while you had her bent over a barrel, you thought you’d core her ass with your money. Am I right?”

“I came to her father about a fishing charter,” Billy said. “He was recommended. Goddamn, I need more toilet paper.”

This time Leonard came back with a wet towel. Billy took it, pressed it against his nose.

“Old man told me what he’d charge, and I agreed. Then I met Beatrice. She and I had a drink. We talked. She said she needed help. She needed money. She could make it a hell of a fishing trip, and in the meantime I could drop my line in her little water hole, if you know what I mean. Provided I came up with lots of money. She wanted too much money. Even for a good-looking ass like hers.”

“So you had some ideas?” Leonard said.

"Yeah. I said, you do what I like. What I say for three days, and we fish too, I'll pay off the bill."

"How much is the bill?" I asked.

"Seventy-five or eighty thousand. It wasn't an exact figure."

I looked at Leonard. "You were actually going to pay her that much?"

"I figured I ought to fuck her old man too, for that price. Not that I wanted to, understand me."

"You have that kind of money?"

"Out the ass. That's no money to me."

"Are you going to pay her anything now?"

"I don't know. Probably not."

"So why are we hearing all this?" I asked.

"Because I can't find her and the deal's off. I'm giving the old man the money for the fishing trip. One day, but that's it. She threw me out last night, wouldn't answer her door this morning. I thought she was here."

"What would you care?" I said. "You were thinking about not paying the money. Right?"

"I don't like losing tail to someone else," Billy said. "Especially someone made me look like an asshole. And I've spent money on her, put her up in that hotel. She thinks I'm going to pay for today, her not letting me in like that, not answering the door, she can kiss my ass."

"No one had to work hard to make you look like an asshole," Leonard said. "You were riding high there, my man. And understand you're getting this from the smartest nigger in the world."

"Smartest nigger in the world?" Billy said.

Leonard leaped off the bed, slapped Billy so hard it knocked him off the chair.

"I can say that," Leonard said. "You can't. How'd you vote last presidential election?"

"What?" Billy said, afraid to get off the floor.

"You heard me. You vote Republican or Democrat? And don't tell me what you think I want to hear.”

“Republican.”

“That saves you one whack,” Leonard said.

“But it makes me want to hit you,” I said. “Both of you.”

“Look,” Billy said. “I’m through with all this. I’ll give her father the money, be on my way.”

“I don’t trust you to give anyone anything,” I said. “And I think we should walk over to where Beatrice is, try that knock again.”

We spent a little while cleaning Billy up. We even let him take off his shirt and rinse the blood out. We decided he could have his gun back. Without the ammunition.

Leonard said, “Don’t let me see you pull that again, even if it’s just to scratch your ass. You hear?”

“I hear,” Billy said.

We walked over to the hotel where Beatrice was staying. It was a pretty good walk, took about thirty minutes.

We tried the phone in the lobby, but she didn’t answer. The elevator was broken. We walked upstairs and Billy showed us the room. He knocked.

No answer.

I knocked and called her name.

No answer.

I beat on the door.

Still no answer.

Billy took a turn hammering on the door. “Wake up, you cunt,” he said.

I touched his arm gently. “Don’t say that.”

“I was kind of expecting a guy to answer in his drawers,” Leonard said. “I figured she got rid of both you bastards and got someone else.”

“A guy in his drawers, huh?”

“Yep.”

“Or, if your luck was in, without them.”

“Don’t tease me, Hap.”

“Are you …?” Billy said to Leonard.

“Careful,” Leonard said.

“But you beat me up.”

“And quite handily, I thought.”

Billy dropped his head. It hadn’t been his last two days. Lost his girl. Lost his fish. Got his ass beat by a queer. Several times.

I went downstairs, told the man in charge I couldn’t wake the lady. He understood enough English to get the idea I wanted him to unlock her door, but he wouldn’t do it. I offered him twenty-five dollars to check and see she was all right, but he wouldn’t do that either. So much for Mexican corruption.

I went back upstairs and knocked again. I looked at Leonard. He said, “Enough of this using our brains and politeness. I suggest we resort to good old East Texas brawn and assholism. Stand back.”

He jumped at the door.

He hit it solid and hard. So hard it knocked him backward on his ass. He got up, said, “Let’s do it together.”

“She could already be at the dock,” I said.

“Good thought,” Leonard said. “Glad you came up with that. Maybe a minute or two earlier would have been better.”

“You’re supposed to go out again,” I said. “Right, Billy Boy?”

“Well, yeah. But I told her I wasn’t going out today. Not after last night. I told her that when she threw me out.”

“Maybe she just left and went home,” I said.

“Fuck it,” Leonard said.

“What the hell,” I said.

We hit the door with our shoulders, splintered it at the frame. We hit it two more times before it fell in. Even though it was morning, the curtains were drawn and it was dark in there. I switched on the light. There was a hallway, a bathroom on the left, and at the end of the hallway, on the left, was the bed.

Beatrice was on it. Her mouth was stuffed with something and her bikini top had been used to strap whatever was in her mouth firmly in place. Her throat was cut, wide and deep. Her head hung off the bed. Blood had dripped into her hair and some of it hung in ropy strings across the sheets where it had dried. Her face had been cut on. Someone had taken an axe or a machete to her as well. Her hands and feet were chopped off. The nubs of bone were clean, so the blade had been sharp and the blows had been swift.

There was a chair by the desk in the room, and there were four deep slashes in the seat of it; it had been used to prop up Beatrice's hands and feet for chopping. There were sprays of blood on the chair and on the wall near it. I didn't see her hands or feet lying around anywhere.

On the floor by the bed were a couple of knotted rubbers. They might have belonged to her tormentors or to Billy. Right then it didn't seem to matter.

"One goddamned thing," Billy said. "It wasn't suicide."

I turned to hit him, but Leonard was too quick. There was a sound like someone cracking a stick over their knee, and Billy flew back against the wall, hit his head against it hard enough to dent the sheetrock. His ragdoll body nodded to the left, collapsed to the floor.

"I was just made to hit that motherfucker," Leonard said.

I went quickly into the bathroom and splashed my face with water. I felt Leonard's arm on my shoulders.

"Easy, man," he said.

I raised up, moved away from the sink, then Leonard was splashing water on his face. "Goddamn," he said.

I looked where he was looking. The tub. In it were Beatrice's hands and feet.

The manager, having heard all the racket, arrived about then. He saw the shattered door, Billy on the floor, said something in Spanish. When he came forward, saw what was on the bed, he screamed and darted out of there.

Leonard and I got hold of Billy, dragged him into the hall. He didn't wake up. Or if he did he was smart enough to not let us know.

I reached back inside the room, cut off the light, waited for the *policía*.

19

THE COPS CAME and got us, thought we might have done it. It didn't help that Billy had a gun on him, even if it didn't have bullets. The police thought we were all buddies.

We were shoved into a Mexican jail with cockroaches big enough to work in an iron foundry, rats that reminded me of a roadside attraction. The guard, a tall, mustached man with a slight belly, looked like he'd nail our balls to a log and give us a knife to free ourselves.

Something about him, and the jail, didn't give me great confidence in the Mexican judicial system. I tried to tell them about Juan Miguel, and how I thought he might have done it or had it done. They listened to me, but said nothing. I might as well have been talking to those monoliths on Easter Island.

He did manage to ask in English where the knife was.

I realized then they were looking for the murder weapon. Obviously, we hadn't beat Beatrice to death with Billy's revolver, nor had we used it to cut her up.

Not finding the weapon seemed in our favor. We certainly hadn't flushed it down the commode or hid it in our ass.

I reconciled myself with that. No murder weapon. What didn't reconcile me was that jail and those goddamn rats.

Christ, they were big.

Once, many years ago, I stopped at a little trailer parked beside the road that was painted up with exciting pictures of behemoth rats, and above the painting was a sign that read: SEE THE GIANT RATS OF SUMATRA. I couldn't resist. I paid my money, went inside, found them to be shaved possums. I said as much to the lady who owned the exhibit. She said, "Yeah, you're right." No embarrassment at all.

I said, "Everyone in East Texas knows a danged possum when they see it, shaved or not."

"I know," she said. And that was the end of that. She didn't offer to give my money back. She didn't care I knew they were shaved possums. It's like the world's largest gopher I heard about. You pay and go in and it's the world's largest all right, only it's a stone statue of a gopher and they've already got your money.

The rats in the jail were near as big as those possums, only they were very much card-carrying rats. They came through a hole in the wall big enough to put your fist through—up to your elbow. They came at night, scampered and sniffed and nibbled about. I assumed they'd bite. I kept both feet on my bunk, watched them in the dark.

Rats. The dark. It brought me back to thinking about Beatrice. I didn't want to think about her, but I did. Thought about what human rats had done to her by lamplight. Slowly, methodically.

But why?

The money her father owed?

Wouldn't they let her pay it back after the fishing trip?

Why would anyone want money that bad?

Who in the hell had her father been in dutch with anyway?

Who was Juan Miguel?

What would be the point in killing her?

Break a finger maybe. I could see that.

But she's dead, how do they get their dough back? What's the advantage of dead over a living person you could hound for dollars?

Did it become a matter of pride over commerce?

She had to have let them in. The door was sound. But why would she? Did she think she could reason with them? Perhaps she had part of the money. Maybe she thought she'd have it all, that Billy would cool and she would talk him into doing what she wanted. She was probably used to that. Talking men into doing what she wanted.

No answers. Just questions.

So here we were, in a Mexican jail. Me, Leonard, and an asshole. It was a horrible place. Small and tight, all three of us in a damp cell with all those rats and one horribly stained shitter between us.

You had to sit right out there in the open and take a crap. Somehow I found that the most humiliating part of it. Me working out turds that, because of the food, came out like bricks, and Billy watching.

I don't know why he watched. Maybe he had nothing else to do. Maybe he liked to watch people shit. He certainly seemed to be watching me as I folded the thick toilet paper so I could do my duty.

After about midday of the second day, me shitting, Billy watching, I wiped my ass and rubbed the paper in Billy's face. He tried to fight back, but he was just big and strong and had no skills. I kneed him inside his thigh and dropped him. I got hold of his hair while he was on his knees and gave him a couple of shots with a swinging elbow.

I regretted that. Got shit on my elbow. Had to wash it in the sink with a pumice soap that nearly took the skin off.

Billy lay down on the floor then, shit on his face, whining. I felt like a bully, but not so much that an hour later, when he was showing signs of recovery, I did it again.

Hit him with an elbow I mean.

Had to use the soap again. Got it off his face and on my elbow. That was starting to irritate me as well. It was like washing up with lathered gravel.

Why couldn't he have washed his face?

That way, I hit him it would have been clean skin.

I know I wouldn't go around with doo-doo on my face. No sir.

"Isn't he fun to hit?" Leonard said. "I'm thinking about giving up sex just to save energy to hit him."

"In here you've given up sex," I said.

"So I can hit him lots."

I made a vow that I'd check my watch every hour, and on the hour I was going to kick Billy's ass. But I'd try and keep my elbow, hands, and feet off the shit on his face. That crack he had made about Beatrice's death not being suicide was still rubbing me raw. For that matter, I didn't know for a fact he didn't do it. I doubted he had. Somehow it didn't strike me as his style. He was abusive, but I doubted he was a murderer. He might kill by accident he got mad enough, bitch-slap her to death, but I doubted he'd plan anything like that. Torture. Amputation. Then bringing us over to see his handiwork. Nope. Billy wasn't that calculating.

But he did deserve an hourly ass whipping.

However, the meanness went out of me. Billy eventually felt better, washed his face with the bad soap and stayed in the corner away from us.

Leonard, who heard me make the vow to whip his ass on the hour every hour, was a little disappointed in my caving in. He thought it was the liberal in me. But we decided, liberal or not, it was the best thing all around.

Later on, I felt a little ashamed of myself for doing what I did.

Caving in like that.

After a couple days had gone by—because in Mexico nobody gets in a hurry—they began to seriously suspect we might not have done it. The authorities allowed me to send word back to the States in the form of a phone call. I got hold of Charlie. Told him to come see what he could do, and to bring any kind of help he could bring. The Army might be a good idea.

While we sat and waited, Leonard said, "I don't know how you do it, Hap. You've just got the knack."

"What?"

"Trouble. You step in it the way kids step in mud puddles. You just can't go around it, and when you try to jump over it, you fall in it. It's a knack, brother."

"Poor Beatrice," I said.

"Yeah," Leonard said. "Poor Beatrice. And poor Ferdinand. I wonder about him."

We had warned the Mexican authorities that Ferdinand's life might be in danger as well, but again they gave us the Easter Island treatment. It was the same when we told them about Billy's friends. That was about as exciting to them as egg salad.

"If Ferdinand is alive," I said, "you don't think he thinks we did it, do you?”

“Naw. Hey, Billy Boy.”

Billy, who was sitting against the wall with his head hung, looked up.

“Go over there and put your goddamn nose in the corner. I’m sick of looking at you”

Billy went, stood with his nose in the corner like a child.

“When I judge fifteen minutes, I’ll let you out of the corner,” Leonard said, “but don’t you fuckin’ look at me, you hear?”

“Yeah,” Billy said.

“Change that to Yes sir, Mr. Pine, sir, or you ain’t even imagined the beating you’ll take, you piece of shit.”

“Yes sir, Mr. Pine, sir.”

“Now you’re cookin’ with gas.”

We were sitting close together on Leonard’s bunk, talking quietly. I said, “You don’t think Billy did it, do you?”

“No. I think he got thrown out the night before, just like he said. He didn’t get the lovin’ he thought he was gonna get, and the next mornin’ he was still mad, and when she didn’t answer the door, he thought you were casting your harpoon, so he got the gun and came to scare you.”

“But you scared him.”

“I did. But, if you had answered the door, you would have scared him. Maybe not as good as me, but good enough.”

Next afternoon Charlie arrived with Jim Bob Luke.

Charlie had gotten rid of the straw boater and had gone back to his porkpie. He was also wearing a Hawaiian shirt as usual.

Jim Bob is a private investigator and hog farmer out of Pasadena, Texas. A friend of Charlie’s. He saved my life once.

He was wearing a blue western shirt with silver snaps, jeans that looked as if they had seen a lifetime of rodeos, and a white hat, creased, the brim turned up sharply on both sides. He had a little feather in the hatband and a toothpick in his mouth. The hatband was made out of rattlesnake hide and it still had the head on it, but he probably could have done without it.

He came and peeked at us through the bars.

“Damned, if this ain’t the Ritz-Carlton, and you boys are uglier than I remember.”

“And you’re just as sweet as I remember,” Leonard said.

“Gettin’ lots of hog pussy, Jim Bob?” I said.

“Just if they get muddy,” Jim Bob said. “That’s the way I like it. They twist them little curly tails and it’s all I can do not to cream my jeans.”

“You’re a sick sumbitch, Jim Bob,” I said.

“I tell you,” Jim Bob said, “you boys got a way of gettin’ your dicks between the ground and a horse hoof, don’t you?”

“Hap does. And I suffer because of it.”

“Leonard, you’re a fuckup that’s got an excuse,” Jim Bob said. “Without Hap, you’d fuck up on your own. It’s just you boys’ nature. I know. I’m the same way. Damn, it smells like a goddamn fart in here.”

“They feed us a lot of beans,” I said.

Charlie hadn’t said a word. He took off his porkpie hat and slapped it on his thigh for some reason. His face wore the look of a very tired man or maybe just one who wished he had a better class of friends.

“I’ve got Veil in the other room talking,” he said.

“No shit,” I said.

“No shit,” he said.

Veil had helped Leonard once after he burned down a crack house. His defense was basically Leonard thought he was exterminating rats by destroying it. It worked. Leonard got away with a warning. If there was anyone who could legally get us out of this thing, it was Veil.

Veil wasn’t a big guy, average height, black hair gone gray, a slightly Mediterranean look, one good eye, the other covered with a black pirate patch. He had the demeanor of someone who could roll strikes in a bowling alley with his nuts.

“What’s Jim Bob doing here?” Leonard asked. “I mean, I’m glad you might have brought him along to hold my dick while I pee, but what else is he good for?”

"My hogs speak highly of me," Jim Bob said. "Except for the ones I take to the packin' plant. I reckon their opinion of me lowers dramatically about then."

"We thought there might be trouble getting you out," Charlie said, "so I brought Jim Bob. He kind of likes trouble."

"Don't say that," Jim Bob said. "I don't like trouble. I just know how to deal with it … All right, I sort of like it."

"Well, I don't," I said. "Get us out of here."

"What about him?" Charlie said, pointing at Billy.

"He's on his own."

"Friends he had with him seem to have bailed," Leonard said.

"He guilty of anything?" Charlie asked.

"Birth," Leonard said.

Jim Bob, Charlie, and Veil took a room at the hotel, and Veil did his thing. Arguing with the law via translator. I thought with Veil on the case we'd be out that afternoon, but we weren't.

Billy, who was free to take his nose out of the wall, said, "You know, I didn't mean to start it off so bad with you guys."

"Sure you did," I said.

"All right, but I'm sorry now."

"I'm sorry I ever met you," Leonard said.

"Likewise," Billy said. "I'm sorry I ever came to Mexico."

Leonard said, "I'm sorry my best friend, my brother, talked me into a fucked-up cruise, got me left in Mexico, stabbed, and then into this shit. That's what I'm sorry of."

"Maybe if we'd taken another cruise line," I said.

"Look," Billy said. "I just want to get straight with you guys. I didn't do this to Beatrice. I wanted to fuck her, not kill her."

"You have such a way with words," I said.

"Yeah, well, maybe I'm not silver-tongued, but I got a few dollars. I'll get out of this."

"You're so rich, how come your lawyers aren't all over this?" I said. "I got my lawyer on it, and I'm not rich."

"Hey, you're a hero," Leonard said. "Remember? You got money in the bank.”

“It’s dwindling,” I said.

“It’s my father,” Billy said. “He’s making me suffer a little. He thinks I need to learn a lesson. I know him. I know that’s what he’s doing. I called him, had to leave a message. He could maybe be out of the country, though. So, would you please call him for me if you get out first?”

“Say you’re a chickenshit cocksucker,” Leonard said. “You hear me?”

“All right. I’m a chickenshit—”

“That’s enough,” Leonard said. “I just wanted to know you’d do it. Give me the number.”

“Can we bury the hatchet?” Billy asked. “Well, maybe that’s not what I should have said, considering Beatrice.”

“Maybe not,” Leonard said. “I get your drift. Unless it turns out you had something to do with this—like we’ll ever know—consider it buried. At least as long as we’re in this jail cell.”

“Let me ask you something, Billy,” I said. “If you’re without money now, waiting on your father, what were you going to pay Beatrice with?”

“Well, I would have had to get the money from my father.”

“Would you really have done that?”

“Probably not,” he said. “Will you still call my father?”

“Sure,” I said. “We’ll call once. He’s not there, you’re shit out of luck. I’m not going to make it a career.”

“Thanks. I’ll find a way to write out the phone number for you. You know, that guy in the cowboy hat is right. It does smell like a fart in here.”

“Yeah,” Leonard said, “and I smell it best when you open your mouth.”

20

NEXT DAY we were out. I don’t know what Veil did, but we were out. Basically, I think it was because they didn’t have the evidence to hold us and Veil was one persuasive, smart sonofabitch. But I knew in Mexico, they can hold you anyway, so I figured some money had changed hands.

It didn’t help Billy any. He was there when we left, looking like a friendly dog in the animal shelter, hoping someone would pick him before they came with the needle.

Although Veil and I had known each other for years, in an off and on sort of way, I couldn’t quite figure Jim Bob being in Mexico. We weren’t bosom buddies. Me and Leonard had only met him once before. But he’d apparently taken a liking to us, or maybe he was just bored with hogs, or owed Charlie a favor.

All I knew for certain was once, when the chips were down, and my balls were literally on ice, Jim Bob saved my life. It was a tense situation, punctuated with gunfire and death. But the way Jim Bob acted, you would have thought he had shown up to have a manicure and a massage.

I don’t know I’d vouch for it being true, but Charlie once said Jim Bob was so cool and tough he made Leonard look like a sissy.

One thing for certain, those two ever went at it the sparks would fly so high and hot the moon would catch on fire.

We gathered at a table in the hotel where Jim Bob, Veil, and Charlie were staying. Charlie and Jim Bob were sharing a room. Veil had one of his own. That’s the way Veil is. On his own. Even when he was with you he was on his own.

We bought some food at a café, had it wrapped, brought it up to the hotel. Tamales and fish stewed in some kind of sauce, tortillas and sodas.

We ate while we talked.

“So can we go home?” I said.

“Sooner the better,” Veil said, eyeing me with his good eye. The tan Armani suit he was wearing looked as if it might have been previously worn by one of Jim Bob’s hogs. “Mexican law officials have a way of changing their minds.”

“Or they run out of the money you gave them,” Charlie said.

“So money was paid,” I said. “Jim Bob, was it you?”

“Why the fuck would I do that? I don’t even know you.”

“Oh.”

“It was Charlie,” Veil said.

“Sorry, Charlie,” I said. “It’s just you’re so tight with money I wouldn’t have guessed.”

“Yeah,” Charlie said. “It was my money, and I’m missing it already. I had plans for it. I was gonna do some work on my trailer. Maybe get me a blow-up fuck doll and a refrigerator with an ice maker.”

“They’re nice,” Leonard said. “John’s got one.”

“A doll or a refrigerator with an ice maker?” Charlie asked.

“The refrigerator,” Leonard said. “You got me, you don’t need no blow-up doll … Besides, those male dolls, the dick doesn’t hold air worth a damn. And the balls collapse right away.”

“Don’t suck so hard,” Jim Bob said. “Besides, Charlie gets one, he’ll want a ewe or a heifer. Right, Charlie?”

“Eat shit,” Charlie said.

“Thanks again, Charlie,” I said. “Seriously, we appreciate it.”

“Jim Bob paid for the rooms,” Charlie said. “I only go so far.”

“Thanks,” Leonard said.

“Shit,” Jim Bob said, “I didn’t have nothing to do. Divorce cases lately, and I’m sick of that. I had to sneak around last week and take photos of a fat husband cheating on his fat wife, and he wasn’t even porkin’ some kind of blond bimbo. Had him another porker. It was like I was back at my place, sittin’ in the backyard watchin’ the hogs fuck. Gettin’ that on film, that was ugly. I think there ought to be some kind of law against it.”

“I think there is,” Veil said.

“What the hell were they doin’?” Leonard said. “Fuckin’ out in the open?”

“They had them a picnic spot,” Jim Bob said. “I’d tracked them to it before. It was night. They thought they were safe. But I have an infrared camera. I snuck up on ’em, first I thought two hot air balloons had come down in the park and were bouncing together. But nope, it was just two really fat, ugly people.”

“Your friend, Veil, here,” Charlie said, “you owe him some money too. He put up some of the air flights.”

Veil grinned at me. It was the kind of smile barracudas are famous for. I knew he didn’t want the money, but he sure wanted to make me think he did. It was his idea of a joke. Veil didn’t travel in humor circles much so he kind of laughed at what amused wolves.

“So you all helped us,” Leonard said.

“I brought everygoddamnbody,” Charlie said. “I didn’t have any idea what you two morons might be into. It’s usually pretty deep shit. Actually, I think you got out easy this time. They could have held you until Mexico had a solid economy. In other words, for life.”

“And I want you to know it’s appreciated,” Leonard said. “On the other hand, that appreciation is going to have to go a long goddamn ways. I haven’t got any money to pay you back with. Hap does, though.”

I sighed. “Yep. And it seems to be disappearing faster than sweat on an Eskimo’s lip.”

“I don’t believe they call themselves Eskimos anymore,” Charlie said. “They’re Inuits. Eskimos is not an accepted term anymore.”

“Yeah,” Leonard said, “and the name of the black race isn’t nigger anymore either, but I still hear it.”

“Actually,” Charlie said. “Black is passé. You are now an African-American.”

“Charlie,” Leonard said. “You can kiss my woolly black African-American ass.”

We got transportation to Cancun up the way, flew out of there that afternoon, caught another flight in Mexico City, then headed to Houston Intercontinental. Veil didn't go with us. Next thing we knew he was gone. We neither saw nor heard him slip out. He was at the airport with us one moment, then he wasn't.

It didn't worry me. That's the way he operated. Showed up when you needed him, disappeared like the Lone Ranger. Or the Patched Ranger in this case.

Veil had his own agenda.

The flight from Cancun made me sick. It was a prop. It was all we could get. It bucked and weaved and threatened to strike the ground. Out of Mexico City it was a jet and a better flight.

Charlie and Leonard sat together, along with a red-faced man in a plaid jacket that liked to talk. I could hear him all the way in the back of the plane where I sat next to Jim Bob. Or almost next. The seat between us was empty. It was occupied by Jim Bob's hat.

I talked to Jim Bob about the events that led up to Beatrice's death. I figured I owed him as much of an explanation as possible, considering he'd left his hogs at home with a farmhand and had come all the way down to Mexico to help spring us.

I said, "They let us off easy as they did, I guess they feel certain we didn't do it? You talked to them. Do they have any idea who did it?"

"No. They sort of like your blond friend for it, but they don't sound real convinced. I speak damn good Spanish, amigo, and believe me I quizzed them. I'm always curious, even if it isn't any of my business. Especially if it isn't any of my business. They just think you guys are gringo assholes down there for Mexican poontang. They think Beatrice was whoring. Did you know she was a call girl?"

"What?"

"That's right. An expensive one. Or at least had been."

"Are you positive?"

"According to them. They say they knew her. But, keep in mind, those boys might lie to an old cowboy."

"Drugstore cowboy."

"Hogs may not be cattle, but they got to be tended to."

"I can't believe it."

"Really, hogs are a lot of work."

"I mean about Beatrice."

"Oh, well, as I said, that's what I was told. Said she usually worked pretty high-end, but in the last few years they hadn't heard from her. Then this. They think she tried to pull a trick, pick up a little extra, got the wrong man, someone who wanted more than a ride in the tunnel, and he did her in."

"Did they say why?"

"Because he wanted to. Bad hombre."

"So they don't really think Billy did it?"

"Being honest, I'm not sure what they think."

"Yeah, they were fairly inscrutable."

"I hate to perpetuate a stereotype, but those fellas were about as crooked as a dog's hind leg. Enough money and they'd think Walt Disney did it."

"He's dead."

"See what I mean."

"I guess it could have happened that way. But it would have been just what Beatrice feared. This Juan Miguel."

"Yeah. It could have been revenge against her father."

"What I'd like to know is where in hell was Ferdinand."

"The police would like to know too. That way they could pistol-whip him and have him explain a few things. I reckon you guys weren't Americans, you'd have gotten the bad end of a rubber hose. Irritating the American consulate, though, is not something they like. Pees in the tourist water."

"Ferdinand took off? That seems odd, considering what happened to his daughter."

"Maybe he could see the handwriting on the wall, Hap. He knew this Juan Miguel would want him next, and him being killed wasn't going to bring his daughter back, so he took off in his boat."

I stewed over these revelations the rest of the way to Houston. At the airport, we caught a shuttle to airport parking. We rode back to LaBorde in Jim Bob's near-thirty-year-old, blood-red Cadillac, festooned with curb feelers. Inside, fuzzy dice and baby shoes dangled from the mirror, and on the windshield were silhouettes of dogs and people with slash marks through them.

"You fix this car up like this?" Leonard said. "Or is it some kind of punishment you got to bear?"

"This sonofabitch can outrun the Concorde," Jim Bob said.

"But does it stay on the ground?" Leonard asked.

"Sometimes," Jim Bob said.

"Jim Bob," Leonard said. "Thy middle name is class."

"Veil ride down with you guys?" I asked.

"Nope," Charlie said. "I called him, and he just sort of showed up at the jailhouse in Mexico. How long you known that guy?"

"Long enough," I said. "I don't see him that often, but trust me, he's aces with me."

"Seems it's the same with him," Charlie said. "I called him like you said, said you were in trouble, and he didn't even wait to find out what kind of trouble. He said, Yes, and where is he?"

"He's kind of an asshole, actually," Leonard said. "But he's an asshole worth having on your side."

"You're an asshole," Charlie said.

"I know," Leonard said.

"You too," Charlie said to me.

"I know."

"Don't even say it, Charlie," Jim Bob said.

21

We arrived in LaBorde just after dark, dropped Leonard off at John's house. When John opened the door he let out a yell. They embraced. With his arm around John's shoulders, Leonard turned and waved at us. John waved too. As they went inside a shape low to the ground came out of the dark, waddled into the light.

Bob the armadillo. The critter followed them inside while Leonard held the door open.

"Now that's weird," Jim Bob said.

"His name is Bob," I said. "He likes vanilla cookies, slow walks in the rain, and he doesn't carry leprosy like many armadillos."

Through the open door I could see warm yellow light and there was the sound of classical music playing.

Leonard closed the door.

I rolled up the window and we rode on.

My place was dark as a hit man's plans. Even in the dead of summer, it looked cold. When I got out of the car—the Red Bitch, Jim Bob called it—I could smell the stench of charred wood from the apartment below. Upstairs, where I lived, seemed like the place where a body ought to be laid out on a cooling board. My pickup was parked in the yard. No one had stolen it. No insurance money for me. No new transportation. Just this piece of shit.

"You guys don't stay up too late watching movies and spitting water," I said.

"Piss off," Charlie said, rolled up his window, and away they went.

He may have quit smoking, but late at night, or when he was tired, he grew kind of irritable.

I didn't have my key. I realized it when I was halfway up the stairs. No problem. I trooped downstairs, found the spare I keep in a metal box under a brick, went up, unlocked my door, and went inside.

The place smelled stale as an old maid's closet.

I turned on the light.

No dog jumped up to greet me.

Brett didn't come out of the back room in a negligee.

A small spider scrabbled across the floor, perhaps in greeting.

I stepped on it.

A few roaches were scuttling about in the kitchen. Making a sandwich perhaps.

I sat down at my kitchen table.

I got up and locked the door.

I sat down at the table again.

A roach darted out of the corner, stopped about three feet away. Perhaps he thought this was his home now and I was an intruder. He finally got tired of trying to stare me down, rushed away.

I noticed there were rat turds next to the refrigerator. I wondered if rats would use a sandbox like a cat. I wondered if I could train them. It was nice to know these were just average-sized rats. Not like the ones in the Mexican jail that could be saddled.

At least I hoped they were average size. Maybe the Mexican rats had flown in with us, ridden in Jim Bob's trunk and had hustled into my house when I arrived.

Maybe I needed a lot of rest.

I got a diet cola out of the fridge. I didn't have an ice maker either.

I sat down at the table again.

I drank half the soda.

No roaches came back out to see me.

I didn't really want to think about rats anymore.

I was never going to have an ice maker.

It was tough having all these important things to think about.

I went to bed.

I was so tired, disappointed, and low on self-esteem, I couldn't even manage enough energy to abuse myself.

Next morning I lay in bed for a while and thought about that poor girl in the hospital, wounded by some nut for no reason. I thought about Beatrice, and I felt weak and lonely, like a pine straw being buffeted by the ocean. Lately I was having a lot of those thoughts, feeling my mortality. Realizing more strongly than ever before that I had lived more life than I had left, and I wasn't liking that revelation at all.

I often told myself I didn't mind aging, but now I found myself constantly wishing I was young and that I could do it all over again, and differently.

Wished my hip didn't hurt so bad, that all those places where my ribs were broken had not been broken. When I was young my fight injuries, received while defending myself, or just because I shot my mouth off when I shouldn't, were a badge of honor. Now the badges hurt. The pins that held them to me were buried in my hide too deep and time was causing them to go deeper. The badges were feeling heavy as anvils; they were tugging at the pins; they weren't worth wearing.

I got up slowly, twisting gingerly to make cracking noises come from my back, hip, knees, and ankles. I felt like something made of Tinkertoys, but screwed down way too tight and somehow rotten at the center, fearing that if I turned just a little too far in one direction the whole of me might come undone.

While I was brewing coffee, I noticed the light blinking on my answering machine. I looked at it, saw it registered five messages.

I listened to them. A couple were phone sales. But three of them were from Brett. Two supported the first. The first I played over three times so I could hear her voice.

"Hap. This is Brett. You know what, life sucks if you let it. I've been letting it. No more feeling sorry for myself. My daughter is going to turn tricks if I want her to or not. I'm thinking about getting a new puppy and a wax job. One or the other. Or maybe I'll get a puppy and give that little scooter a wax job. Give me a call. Better yet, come by and see me. Bring your dick."

Pure Brett. I was at a stage in my life where I really hoped it was more me she wanted to see than the dick. Though, like all males, I could tolerate that part if I had to. No arm twisting necessary.

While my coffee brewed I looked for something to eat, but there was only spoiled milk and moldy bread. I put the bag of bread and the plastic milk carton in the trash.

I showered, dressed, poured up a cup of coffee, went down to my car and out of there.

I went by a little café and bought some biscuits and bacon, drank their coffee. I drove to the hospital then, went up to where Sarah Bond still had a room.

I didn't know if I was allowed or not, but I opened the door and slipped in. She was asleep. She didn't have as many tubes and wires in her this time, but she looked only marginally better. Her face was pale as Lazarus before Jesus raised him. She was still patched and taped up. Only a little of her face showed. I reached over, patted her hand, and went out.

As I walked down the hall to the elevator, I thought about what Leonard had told me once. About how things didn't happen for a reason, they just happened. And he was right. But Sarah being attacked, me trying to help her, had set a series of events in motion.

I wondered if things would have been different for Beatrice had I not come along. Maybe I shouldn't have cut that fishing line, put her and Billy at odds with one another. I could have let her do what she wanted to do, as distasteful as it might be to me. She might have gotten her money if I had. Might have paid her bills and spared her life.

I wondered if Brett was on duty. We had met in this hospital. It was a very romantic memory. She had stuck a needle in my ass.

I went down to the desk and asked. She wasn't on duty, still worked the night shift. Of course, I knew that. I was just hoping against hope. I drove over to her place.

The yard was ripe with sunburned brown grass, and a lawn chair had been gathered up and near turned over by the foliage. It was as if the lawn had grassy hands and it was using them to tip the chair.

I went up and knocked on the door. Gently at first.

No answer.

Less gently.

I heard someone moving behind the door.

I hoped it wouldn't be some man.

That would certainly be a disappointment.

Brett opened the door. She was wearing an oversized T-shirt and slippers made like bears. Her red hair was wadded around her face. She smiled slightly, said, "Well, if it isn't Hap Collins. Come on in."

"I've missed you," I said.

"You sure you haven't just missed what's between my legs."

Brett was like that, vulgar, to the point. Being Gilmer High School Sweet Tater Queen some many years ago hadn't gone to her head.

"I missed that too," I said. "I was thinking maybe that's all you missed about me."

"Well, I missed what was between your legs, Hap, but there's plenty of that around."

"Oh, good. Now I feel better."

"I finally think I've got my head on straight. Killing people can kind of dig itself in deep, like a tick. I think I pulled off the body but the head's still in me."

"That's one way of putting it."

"You don't have some other floozy you're porkin' do you?"

"No. But God how I've tried."

"There hasn't been anyone else, Hap. Not for me."

"Well, there has been someone else, but … that's over."

"Wasn't the same as with you and me, was it?"

"Nothing is. Also, she's dead."

"That'll kill a relationship, all right. Sorry I said that. Are you still sad about it?"

"Darlin', I'm always sad about something."

"Sit down, sweetie, tell me all about it. I haven't had breakfast.

Want some? Breakfast, I mean."

"Just ate. But I'll drink coffee with you."

Brett clanged some stuff around, came back with a piece of toast for herself, poured us coffee. We sat down at the table. She put one hand on my leg.

"I really have missed you," she said.

"Same."

"I know about how you saved that girl. You saved my girl too, Hap. You saved me. You're always trying to save somebody. Everybody but yourself. You ever think about that?"

"Sometimes."

"I don't want you to think I didn't appreciate what you did for me and my daughter."

"I admit, I wondered. I shouldn't. That isn't the way you're supposed to be. You do something with the best of intentions, it's supposed to be with the best of intentions and nothing else. But I did wonder. Leonard chastised me for it."

"Leonard's a mutant."

"That must be it."

"The rest of us wonder about those kinds of things. Hap, it isn't that I'm ungrateful. Or that I don't love you. I adore you. It's just that I've been a little lost. Tillie went right back to takin' strokes for money."

"Yeah. You told me."

"Can you believe that?"

"Leonard said she would."

"Again, Mr. Know-It-All."

"I get to thinking he's so smart, what in hell is he doin' hangin' around with me?"

Brett laughed. I loved that laugh. It was rich and smoky.

"Tillie may not have changed like I hoped," she said, "but I like to think she's safer. As safe as anyone can be in that business."

"I hope so, Brett."

"You know I went to the Gilmer Yamboree this year. I told you I rode a float there once. When I was a teenager."

“Yep. You were Sweet Tater Queen. I’ve seen the photographs. The float is a giant sweet potato. As I recall, you told me you thought it looked like a giant turd.”

“That’s right. And you know what, they didn’t even have a goddamn sweet tater over there this year. Not even as a float.”

“Modernization, what you gonna do? Everybody’s eatin’ McDonald’s french fries. There’s people don’t even know you don’t make french fries out of sweet taters.”

“Actually, you can,” Brett said, “but they don’t taste right. But, shit, you’d think they could find a sweet potato somewhere … Hap, this woman. The one who’s dead. Did you love her?”

“No. I didn’t love her.”

“Do you want to tell me about her?”

“Maybe not just now.”

“You want to leave this shitty coffee and go sweat up the sheets?”

“Boy, do I.”

I guess it was about a week later. Me and Brett had taken to living with one another, and it was working out fine. She had gotten neither puppy nor wax job nor waxed puppy. She did let me shave her pubic hair, however, and I liked that.

We had her daughter, the whore, visit from Tyler. She had dinner with us. Tillie decided she was going to spend the rest of her time taking the basic courses at Tyler Community College, turning tricks less and less. Perhaps a career as a brain surgeon was in her future.

Or maybe she just wanted to learn how to count up her trick money better at the end of the day; run her own whorehouse.

Brett’s son, Jimmy, had finally gotten rid of his Christian Scientist girlfriend. Or rather fate had gotten rid of her for him. She died. Should have had that kidney checked when it first acted up. But she believed in the power of prayer. Her God, however, had other plans. So Jimmy was free. And doing better. Had gone on a bender to Mexico, Brett said. Came home with a box of Chiclets, a sombrero, and a dose of the clap. Nothing penicillin couldn’t clean up. He was no longer teaching Aikido; having gotten beaten up in Mexico he decided he needed more lessons.

Anyway, Brett and I were together again. She had only one new rule for me, having doled it out after I had told a friend she was nursing. I was told to say she was a nurse and never say she was nursing. Brett thought it sounded like she was wet-nursing a baby.

“Could I just say you’re nursing me?” I asked.

“No, you cannot.”

Me and Leonard were back to work at the chicken plant. We were happy as people can be protecting chickens. I learned to never make friends with incoming chickens. Under the circumstances, even a chicken knew it was insincere. You could see it in their eyes, way they held their heads.

One afternoon before Brett and I went to work, we went over to my apartment to start cleaning it out. I had decided at the end of the month to let it go. I had pretty much moved in with Brett anyway. We were talking about marriage and a different house that we might rent, or even buy. Some place big enough to hold all our things and anything else that might come to us. I was seriously thinking about trying to start a real career. As always I was stalled on knowing exactly what. I thought about President of the United States for a couple hours, but I didn’t really want to move out of East Texas. Astronaut was an idea, but considering I disliked flying any more than I had to, I had to rule that out. Plantation owner was another thought. But I didn’t have any land or money and Leonard wasn’t the butler type, so I had to dismiss that. I thought about what was most likely. I kept coming up with chicken plant guard.

It was depressing.

I was thinking more and more about Charlie and Hanson, their offer to work for them.

At my place me and Brett cleaned out the refrigerator, tossing stuff in the trash, packing up the good stuff to take over to her place. There was a lot more trash than good stuff.

While we were at it, Charlie came by.

The door to my place was open. I had quit running the air conditioner, trying to save money. It was a time of the year when it was starting to cool down a little. Nothing to get excited about. No igloos were about to go up. We were merely having a mild streak.

Charlie came in and took off his hat. He smiled. I knew it wasn't for me. It was for Brett. She was wearing white shorts and her pale lightly freckled legs were a wonderful thing to see. Her bright red hair was cut so that it fell around her face like a feathered helmet. She had on a loose top and no bra. She was one of the few older women I knew who could get away with that, though it was her claim her days as a swinging tit were almost over.

"Hey, Charlie," she said.

"Hey, Brett. Good God, woman. What do you see in this man?"

"I don't know," she said.

Charlie and I shook hands. Charlie said, "I've come by a few times, but haven't caught you."

"I'm mostly at Brett's," I said.

"I'm glad to see you two back together. How's Leonard?"

"He's good. We only see each other at work these days. He's got John and I've got Brett."

"Good for both of you. Me, not so good. I got Hanson. We're putting together our agency, you know?"

"That's right," I said. "Got clients yet?"

"Not really. We're not quite ready. I've been enjoying my retirement till the money runs out. I been lookin' for you because I wanted to thank you for payin' the money back from the Mexico thing."

"You're welcome. I owed it. You saved my bacon. You're lucky I had some money and could pay it back in one chunk."

"I'd have liked to let it go, but …"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"I can make some coffee, Charlie," Brett said. "We were thinking about having some."

"That would be nice."

Charlie sat on the couch, put his porkpie hat on the armrest.

"You're moving out?"

"I am."

"Well, that kind of log-jams the other reason I came by."

"And that is?" I asked.

"I wanted to see I could stay here one night soon, So I could have my trailer painted. And boy, does it need it. I bought it off a couple had a bunch of kids. They must have wiped shit on the walls, way that place stank. I got some cheap new furniture in storage. Been sleeping on a pallet. It's killing my back. I was gonna do the painting myself, but I'm a shitty painter. Fact is, I'm bringing in painters to repaint what I fucked up. I started trying to do it, but a brain-damaged chimpanzee could have done a better job. Thing is, the smell. Not just from the kids, but the new paint. Man, I can't take it. I thought about staying with Hanson, but his wife doesn't like me. I thought I'd ask you. That doesn't work out, I can ask John and Leonard. I thought it just being you it would be easier, but I see it isn't just you anymore. And you're moving out."

"Well, Hanson's wife just doesn't know your charm," Brett said.

"Yeah, charming, that's my goddamned middle name."

"I hear you, honey," Brett said. "When they were passing out ass, I thought they said class, and I asked for a lot of it. And I got it."

"It looks all right to me," Charlie said.

"I'm not complaining," Brett said. "It sure beats being bony when you fall on it."

I said, "I've got another week or two on this place, Charlie. You can stay here. I'm stayin' at Brett's, so you'd have it to yourself. I can leave the coffee, any of this food you want. Though the rotten stuff might not be too appetizing."

"No. That's all right. Well, just the coffee."

"Not a problem."

I gave him my spare key.

"I can start tonight?"

"Sure," I said. "I've spent my last night here."

22

As I GROW OLDER, my belief in a higher power has not only disintegrated, it's become negative. As my lawyer friend Veil once said, "If there's a God, let him explain babies with AIDS."

I think about the silliness of it. This whole God thing. Two teams praying before a football game. Not to get injured is all right, but they're also praying to win. As if the Wildcats are more in God's favor to win a fuckin' football game than the Beavers.

How does God judge that? Best-looking cheerleaders? Quarterback with the best hairdo? Linebacker with the biggest dick? What's the criteria on that?

In other words, what the hell was God's plan for doing what he did to me and mine?

So, here's what happened. I'm trucking along happy-like. Living with Brett. Playing house. Eating good. Going to work at the chicken plant. Not exactly the life of a high roller, but like the GED, the Good Enough Diploma that's almost a high school diploma, I had a Good Enough Life, which was almost like a real one.

One morning after I got off work, I drove over to my place to tell Charlie if he needed a few days more, he had them. Until the end of the month actually. On that date, the landlord, a real shithead of a guy, was going to level the apartment and put the property up for sale.

I drove over there. Charlie's car was in the yard. I parked next to it, started up the stairs. When I reached the top I saw the door was splintered at the frame. The door itself hung slightly open.

I felt a cold chill get hold of the short hairs on my neck and shake them. I felt a tightening in my stomach, a shrinking of my testicles.

I still had on my guard outfit, including gun, so I pulled the revolver, a .38, and went on up, thinking, Good God, don't let that motherfucker I fought at the chicken plant be up here. Anything but that.

I don't know exactly why that came to mind, but that was my first thought. He had escaped, was looking for me, had gnawed a hole through the jail bars with his goddamn teeth, and now he was waiting to leap on my head, bite my skull, and suck out my brain.

I eased up to the door frame, listened. Off in the distance I heard a kid yell and a dog bark. I gingerly pushed the door completely open.

Inside the apartment the only sound was a drip from the sink.

I slipped inside. It was a little dark. The blinds were drawn, but it wasn't a place a person could hide, unless he was a leprechaun or the Invisible Man. I pointed the revolver around just for the hell of it. I called Charlie's name.

He didn't answer.

I was reminded of something else.

The hotel room in Mexico. The bed with Beatrice on it.

All of a sudden the apartment seemed like a place I'd never been and didn't want to be. The ceiling was too low, the walls too close. I thought the floor might tilt up and drop me off the edge of the world.

I called Charlie's name again, this time real loud. Just for good luck I cocked back the hammer on the .38.

As I moved inside my feet bogged in something wet on the carpet. I lifted them. They were sticky. The carpet was like the carpet of an old theater gummy with spilled soft drinks and smashed candies.

The carpet only partially covered the living room. The rest was wooden floor, and parts of it were coated in something congealed. It had seeped out from behind the couch. My nostrils quivered with the stench of it; sort of road kill meets dried copper baking slowly in a smutty oven.

I put one knee on the couch and leaned over and looked down.

There was a burst of blackness that struck me in the face, sent me stumbling back, swatting.

Flies.

I took a breath, put a knee on the couch, and looked over again. Now I knew why Charlie hadn't answered. You can't yell loud enough for someone in that state to hear.

Charlie lay behind the couch. He wore only jockey shorts. His throat had been cut. But before that he had been worked on. He was missing some teeth. His nose and cheeks had been cut on, as if whittled. He wore an expression that seemed to say, "Oh, shit." His hands were tied behind his back with strips of one of my sheets or maybe a pillowcase.

The flies were settling on him again.

I couldn't help myself. I let out a little bark of pain and fear and bounced off the couch.

I wiped my feet on a dry part of the carpet. I was trembling so bad I thought I was literally going to shake my gun belt off.

I started to back out of the doorway, but I gathered up my courage. It was like trying to gather up ten pounds of yarn and poke it in a two-pound basket. But I did it. I went to the bedroom. Opened the door and yelled. I don't know why I yelled. To scare whoever might be in there. To encourage myself. Hard to say.

The bed was blood-drenched. The stench in there was strong enough to grow legs and dance up the wall. There was a bloody handprint on the wall. As if someone had leaned there, tired from his work. Or maybe Charlie broke free, pushed his attacker back, forcing him to put out a hand to keep from falling.

But whoever it had been was fast enough to catch up with a wounded man. And he had. And he had cut Charlie's throat.

As for the handprint, it was huge.

A little suitcase sat on its side by my chair. On the chair were Charlie's clothes, a Hawaiian shirt draped over the back of it. The shirt pictured a bursting sunset against a blue-green sea, bordered by palm trees and a strip of beach. On the seat of the chair, on top of his gray slacks, was his porkpie hat. Beside the chair, his Dr. Scholl's shoes with black and red clocked socks sticking out of them like tired tongues.

I eased the rest of the way into the room and looked around. I even bent down and looked under the bed. Lots of cobwebs. I opened the closet door.

Empty, except for a dead beetle.

I took a deep breath. I checked out the bathroom.

I pulled back the shower curtain.

Nothing.

I holstered my gun, went to the front room, picked up the phone, called Leonard first. I don't know why, but things go wrong, I call him. It's a wonder I don't call him when I have a hangnail. When I explained, he said, "Goddamn. Godalmightydamn. Charlie? You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

"You're absolutely sure."

"He's behind the goddamn couch, Leonard. He's cut up. It's him. I'd let you talk to him, but he's dead. Dead, goddamn it."

"Easy. I'm coming over … You all right, Hap?"

"Peachy."

I dialed 911 next, told the police who I was, gave them the address and details.

I went outside, took off my gun belt, put it on the front seat of my car. I didn't want any gun-happy cops popping me.

I sat down on the bottom step of the apartment and took in long, slow breaths. I was away from the stench of blood, but I could still smell it. I felt as if it had soaked into my skin. In the distance I could hear a siren. More than one.

Then I really began to think about who was upstairs. My good buddy, Charlie. I thought about what had occurred, how horrible it had been, and that it must have been meant for me.

As I've pointed out, I'm not exactly a lucky man. But I did get a bit of luck. The head honcho on the case knew me. His name was Jake. I had met him several times but I could never remember his last name. He had been a patrol cop when I first met him. He was a detective now. Part of that was due to Charlie leaving, opening up a position. He and Charlie had been friends.

He was a big dark-haired guy with a belly made pregnant by too many beers and not enough exercise. He had a naturally sad face, and today it was sadder. He wore a very nice suit and very nice shoes. I found myself looking at his shoes a lot. I didn't like the fact I was all teary-eyed. Even under such circumstances one tries to be macho. It's expected.

We were leaning on my car, talking. I was giving him the poop I knew. Which, of course, was limited. I didn't mention the Mexico thing. I knew I should have. I even knew they were connected, but right then I didn't mention it.

Leonard drove up. The cops didn't want to let him see me, but Jake signaled him through.

"You okay, brother?" Leonard said.

"I suppose," I said. "I'm not exactly up for Pancho's Mexican buffet, but I guess I'll make it."

One of the blue suits came over, said, "There's a handprint in blood on the bathroom wall. It's big. If the rest of that motherfucker goes with the hand he'll be just a little smaller than a Tyrannosaurus rex."

"You getting prints?"

"I'm just a blue suit, like you used to be, Jake, but I thought of that. We do that when we do police work. We take photographs and try not to step in stuff."

"All right, all right," Jake said. "I get you."

"Did I say this motherfucker is big?" the blue suit said. "I mean big."

"You said he was big," Jake said.

"He's so big he hurts my feelings. I wear like a size eight shoe. Everyone's bigger than me, but this motherfucker, he's bigger than everyone else."

"We get the point," Jake said. "Go supervise. Get a doughnut. Something. You're gettin' on my nerves."

"Now that you're a detective I get on your nerves."

"Ned, you always got on my nerves."

Ned went away. Jake said, "You have no idea why this happened?"

"I think whoever it was was looking for me," I said. "Charlie was in the wrong place at the wrong time. It could have been robbery. They wanted something I didn't have. I had moved most of my stuff out. Disappointed, they took it out on Charlie. It could have been like that."

"Could be that way," Jake said. "But before you said robbery, you said they were looking for you. You kind of tacked that on, like maybe you wished you hadn't said the first part. Why would *they* be looking for you?"

"I live here. Charlie isn't normally here. Maybe someone had a grudge and came to settle it."

"What I know about you guys, lots of people could have grudges. You got any names of these grudge holders?"

"You'll need a computer," Leonard said.

"Yeah, but I can't think of anyone who would do this," I said.

"So no one comes to mind?" Jake said.

I shook my head. "No. Not really."

"What about you, Leonard? You know Hap well. Anyone you can think of would want him dead."

Leonard put his arm around my shoulder. "No."

"And Charlie was here why?"

"He was going to stay a couple nights while his trailer was painted."

"You wouldn't hold back anything, would you, Hap?"

"I don't think I am."

"That's not quite an answer either way."

"No, it isn't, Jake. I'm a little rattled right now. You'll have to forgive me. I just found a good friend with his throat cut. Tends to make a man tense and a little confused."

"Hey, he was my friend too," Jake said.

"I know."

"You called Leonard, obviously. I don't suppose you called and told Hanson. They were like brothers, you know."

"I do know," I said. "No. I didn't call Hanson."

"I'll take care of that. You got some place to go?"

"I'm staying with my girlfriend. Brett Sawyer."

"He'll be with me for a while," Leonard said. "You know my address."

"Who in law enforcement doesn't?" Jake said.

"I can give you my boyfriend's address too."

"Oh. Well …"

"Forgot I was queer, didn't you?"

"Bingo. You just don't … I don't know …"

"Act queer?"

"Well, yeah."

"Guess what? Some of us don't wear feather boas. But just so you don't feel all confused, me and John, sometimes we hold hands and kiss and I did give him a little promise ring."

"Man, I don't want to hear that," Jake said. "Your boyfriend's address isn't necessary. Give me Brett's address, Hap, and go. I need to ask any more questions, I'll look you up."

I gave him the address, started to get in my car.

Jake said, "I assume the gun on the seat goes with the guard uniform?"

"Goddamn, you are a detective," I said. I was trying to come across as cool and calm and still ripe with humor, but the words came out flat and a little desperate. It's funny the way men try to be men.

"Follow me to my place," Leonard said. "We can talk."

When we got to John's, and Leonard explained what happened, John immediately put a pot of water on the stove. Leonard once told me when things get tense, first thing John did was heat water and make tea.

"Motherfucker thinks he's from England," Leonard said.

"Tea is soothing," John said. "I've got some cookies. Vanilla, of course."

"You put ice in tea," Leonard said. "Anything else is un-American. Besides, I like milk with vanilla cookies. We got the wafers or the ones with the creme in the middle?"

"Like it matters to you," John said. "Vanilla cookies with shit in the center would be all right for you. Long as they're vanilla."

We sat at the table while the water heated. Leonard said, "You didn't mention Mexico to Jake."

"No, I didn't. And you didn't either."

"You thought Jake didn't need to know, I couldn't see any reason to mention it. But it's too much like Mexico to be coincidence."

John poured hot water into cups with tea bags in them. He said, "May I ask why you didn't tell the police? You want the killer caught, of course."

"I want his ass. I want it personally. Beatrice was a fool, but she was all right at the center. She didn't deserve to die and then have it all swept under the rug. I left that to the Mexican police. Obviously, it didn't work out. I don't think it'll ever work out. I been thinking about that. Me just going off to let it work out in whatever manner it worked out. It's in my craw."

"Frankly," Leonard said, "it's in my craw too. She and her old man did help us when we needed it."

"Damn right. And Charlie, he was a good friend. He was staying at my place and was killed because whoever did this thought it was me. I want to get even."

"Doesn't that violate your kinder and gentler nature you're trying to preserve?"

"It does. And I want to find out why anyone would want to kill me. What the hell could I know or have that would interest them?"

"I think it's more like what they think you know or have," Leonard said.

"Another thing," John said. "Wouldn't it be best to tell the cops? Just for one simple reason."

"Which is?"

"They might actually catch him. I mean, come on, from what Leonard's told me about you two guys, about the only thing you can catch is a cold."

"Hey," Leonard said. "We stumble around long enough, we get what we want."

“Think about this,” John said. “Guy’s out there running around right now. You think he came all this way just to break down a door, kill Charlie, catch a plane back to Mexico?”

“Well, no,” I said.

“He could have thought you were Charlie,” Leonard said. “He somehow knew a Hap Collins was involved with Beatrice, and for whatever reason he killed her, he connects you to it, comes to kill you, gets poor Charlie, thinks his job is done, and goes home.”

“Bless Charlie,” John said. “Could be just that. But don’t you think at some point in the torture, Charlie would have been inclined to tell this big man who he was, and maybe where you were?”

“He’d done to me what he did to Charlie,” I said, “I’d have told him anything he wanted to know. I’d have sucked his goddamn dick and given him a shoeshine. I don’t see how Charlie could have kept from it.”

“Brett,” Leonard said.

“Shit,” I said.

“You stay here,” Leonard said to John.

“And why is that?”

“Because you’re the bitch in this relationship.”

We were on our way out the door when John said, “Piss on you, Leonard. You male chauvinist pig.”

“But you’re male too,” Leonard said. “So how can that be male chauvinistic? Oh, shit, they could be looking for me as well. I mean, it could be that way, right?”

“They know about me, they may know about you,” I said.

“That means they might come after me, and John’s here.”

“You are not leaving my sweet ass behind then,” John said.

Leonard rushed to his closet, took out his shotgun, plucked a few shells from an overhead shelf. We hustled over to Brett’s in John’s car, and before I got in I got my gun out of my pickup.

That morning, when I had left to go over to Charlie’s, it was my plan to drop in on him and take him to coffee. Take some coffee and doughnuts back to Brett. She had pulled a hard shift the night before and was sleeping late. I thought it would be a nice surprise. But my plans might actually have put Brett in the line of destruction.

When we pulled up in Brett's yard, the lawn chair was still wrapped in grass and the front door was intact.

Of course, our man could have come through the back door.

I got out with my revolver in my hand, Leonard behind me with the shotgun held against his leg. John kept close to Leonard. He was carrying a fistful of shotgun shells, just in case our enemies came in waves.

John said, "That lawn chair. That's one of ours."

"That's nice," Leonard said.

"Circa nineteen ninety-five. We don't make them like that anymore."

"It's a fuckin' antique," Leonard said. "Now shut up."

I used my key and went in.

Everything looked like it always did.

I hurried to the bedroom, my stomach sour with fear.

Brett was in bed with the covers under her chin. She was snoring in a very unladylike fashion. I sighed, glanced up at a whirling shadow. It was her panties hanging from the slowly rotating overhead fan. That was my signal to wake her. Waking her was always worthwhile.

I gently patted her and went out, closed the door, sat down on the living room couch. Leonard sat down beside me, the shotgun draped across his knees.

"I feel drained," I said.

"Understandable," John said. "I'll find a pot and boil some water. Uh … Brett does have tea, doesn't she?"

Leonard looked at me, said, "See?"

About twenty minutes later, Brett came out of her bedroom. We were sitting on the couch sipping tea. We turned to look at her. She was wearing a half T-shirt that covered the tops of her breasts. She wasn't wearing panties.

She looked at us. We looked at her.

“Well,” she said, “ain’t this a fine howdy-do? You on the couch, and me dressed like Huckleberry Hound. I hope you’ll excuse me.”

She turned, showing us her ass, and disappeared back into the bedroom. She came out a moment later with shorts on. As she came into the room, she said, “You know, it’s hard to act cool when you’ve just shown three men your beaver and found your underwear dangling from an overhead fan.”

“Sorry,” I said.

“If it helps any,” Leonard said, “me and John go for dicks.”

“And I’ve seen it before,” I said.

“Well now … Is there still some tea?”

“There is,” John said. “I’ll fix you up.”

“A gal shows off her canoe, even if it’s by accident, you’d hope someone thought it was worth riding in.”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t interested,” I said. “I’m very interested.”

“It looked very nice,” Leonard said. “I guess. I mean, I don’t really know what all of that’s about, you know.”

“You mean you’re still queer? Sight of me didn’t jerk you into a heterosexual frame of mind?”

“ ‘Fraid not,” Leonard said.

“But if anyone could,” John said, “I’m sure it would be you.”

“Thank you, John. I’ll cherish that. May I ask what I owe the joy of this gathering to? I’m kind of surprised you didn’t fix me breakfast, Hap. I figured a fuckin’ like I gave you last night ought to at least warrant toast and coffee. Good God, all three of you have the longest goddamn faces.”

“Actually, I went out for doughnuts, but I got de-toured.”

“Have I faded from your thoughts that quickly.”

“There’s been something come up. Charlie.”

“Is he in the bathroom? Now he’s a hetero. He would have respected my entrance. I can tell by the way he looks at me with my clothes on, he would have loved a view of the canyon. Last I heard, he wasn’t gettin’ any, so that might make me look even better.”

"If he were in the bathroom, he'd be horrified at what he missed," I said. "But he's not. And that's why we're glum. Hon, Charlie's dead."

"What?"

I told her the story. I told her the background.

"I'll be damned. I can't believe it. Charlie's dead."

"Yeah. It's hard to believe."

"We just saw him yesterday."

"I put you in danger, Brett. I didn't even know I did it. Somehow, sorry doesn't seem like enough to say. I don't know what would be enough."

"You didn't know this was going to happen. No way you could have. It doesn't matter. You didn't do it on purpose."

"On purpose or not, this monster might have shown up here. I don't like to think about that. Seems you and me get together there's always trouble."

"You and anybody get together it's trouble," Leonard said.

"Jesus, poor Charlie," Brett said. "He was such a nice guy."

"That's right," I said, "he was."

"And you didn't tell the cops about what happened in Mexico?" Brett asked.

"I didn't."

"That means you plan to settle it, doesn't it?"

"I plan to try."

"Which means, of course, that Leonard will try with you."

"I've dragged Leonard into enough shit."

"Oh, shut the fuck up," Leonard said.

"You're the one complains," I said.

"Yeah, I complain. But you know well as I do, they're doin' it to you, they're doin' it to me, brother."

"But they're not doing it to me," John said. "I don't like the idea of you doing this, Leonard. You said you were backing off doing things with Hap."

"I tried," Leonard said. "I can't help myself. It's like we're

Siamese twins or something."

"I don't want you to do it," John said.

"I love you," Leonard said. "But Hap's family."

"What the hell am I?"

"Family. But Hap and I had a relationship first. Do I chunk that out now just because I love you? What's that say about me? About my feelings toward Hap?"

"I don't know, Leonard," John said. "What does it say?"

"It says I've got to take care of my brother. That's what it says."

"But he isn't your brother. If you haven't noticed, he's not as dark as you are."

"I don't tan well," I said.

"Look, John," Leonard said. "It hasn't got a damn thing to do with genetics. It's got to do with spirit."

"Spirit. That's rich."

"I'm closer to Hap than I am my own kin. He's done more for me than any relative. He's been there when I needed him. He's stood by me through thick and thin. I can't just throw that out."

"I appreciate it," I said. "But you know what? Things do have to change. You've talked about it more than once. We're not getting any younger. It's time we settled down. It's time you settled down right now. Maybe," and I looked at Brett, "when this is all over, I can do the same."

"I understand," Brett said. "You do what you got to do, Hap."

"I don't see how you can say that, Brett," John said.

"Hap's done for me what no one would. I wanted something from him that was dangerous, and he did it without question … I fear for him, John. But I stand by him. I want to help too."

John sighed loudly. He got up and went to the bathroom.

I said, "Leonard. I know you'll do what it takes, my friend. But John, you don't want to lose him. I've never seen you happier. And I'm a goddamn jinx."

"Yes you are," Leonard said. "Shit, man. What a fucked-up thing. Charlie, he was all right."

John came out of the bathroom. He went over and sat on the couch. He said, “Leonard. I love you. I don’t want you to do this. I’m afraid you’ll be hurt. But … I love you no matter what. You do this thing, I’ll be waiting when you get back. But I can’t do it with you. I’m not like Brett. I can’t help. I can’t break the law. I can’t do anything like that. It just isn’t in me.”

“I understand that,” Leonard said. “Never expected you to. I don’t like it either. But it’s got to happen.”

“No it doesn’t. You could still tell the police.”

“And we might,” I said. “I just want to look into it a little first. Find out what I can. It looks to be something I think the police can solve, or will solve, then I’ll tell them what I know.”

“Why wouldn’t they solve it?” John said. “I don’t get it.”

“First off, it’s personal,” I said. “I like to take care of my own problems. Especially when it involves some asshole trying to kill me. Second, Mexico didn’t solve their case. In the future, they may, or may not, figure out and punish whoever killed Beatrice. But I wouldn’t count on it. Mexico is known for its corruption. It’s become a lifestyle in Mexican government, especially the police force. How do I know whoever murdered Beatrice didn’t pay someone off? How do I know it wasn’t someone involved with the police to begin with? Hell, police officers tried to rob me and Leonard, and they cut Leonard. Hadn’t been for Beatrice’s old man, they would have killed us both.

“And if this monster came here to kill me, thinks he has, has gone home, and I tell our cops, can they get him out of Mexico? It might require a lot more than they can manage. Extradition can be a bitch.”

“Christ,” John said. “For the first time in my life I got a real relationship. I don’t want to lose that.”

“You won’t,” Leonard said. “I’m indestructible.”

“Yeah,” John said. “What about that knife wound?”

“I had an off day. Hey, even monkeys fall out of trees.”

“Leonard. Please don’t fall. Promise me.”

“I promise,” Leonard said. “Hap will be my support line.”

“Shit,” Brett said. “Let’s find the sonofabitch killed Charlie, cut his nuts off, and feed them to a German shepherd. Or better yet, one of those little bitty dogs without hair.”

23

TWO DAYS LATER we had Charlie's funeral. It was a simple one. No church or preacher was involved. He wouldn't have liked that. His body was cremated and services were held at a community center. It was packed. Friends. Relatives and cops. Mostly cops. Jake was among them. He said to me, "I got a feeling more and more that I don't know all I know about this thing. Get me?"

"I haven't a clue what you mean."

"Hap, don't get caught. Whatever you're doin', don't get caught. Whoever did this to Charlie, if you're after the sonofabitch, I hope you succeed. But you break a law and I know about it, you know what I got to do."

"I do. But I don't intend to break any laws. I haven't a clue what you're talking about."

"Yeah, right," Jake said.

One at a time, people got up and told things about Charlie. Stories. Incidents. Or just expressed their feelings. I was included. I said: "Charlie was a good friend. He died badly, but I know he died as bravely as is humanly possible. His killer will be found."

I didn't go as far as to say how he would be found. That was still a card to play, and only Leonard, Brett, and John had seen it.

Jim Bob Luke showed for the funeral. He got up and said a few words. Then Leonard.

Hanson was last, and the best. He had known Charlie the longest, had worked with him closely when they were both on the police department.

Hanson was in his motorized wheelchair. He rode it to a place beside the podium where everyone else had stood and talked. Charlie's porkpie hat was in his lap. Hanson's wife, Rachel, a striking black woman in a purple dress, took the microphone off the podium and gave it to him.

Hanson held the microphone for a while, as if he might not actually speak. Then he said, “Charlie Blank was the friend everyone wanted, and if he was your friend, you were proud of it. He made you proud of yourself. Figured a guy like Charlie liked you, you had to be all right. He was a simple guy. Loved his friends. Was a wonderful cop. He loved the smell of a woman’s hair. Told me that many times. He liked dogs and hated cats. In many ways, he saved my life. He made me know it was worth living after my accident. He’s helped me with my physical therapy, and he listened to me whine about how life wasn’t worth living, and he convinced me it was worth living. I thank him for that. Right now, even with what happened to Charlie, I’m very convinced it’s worth living again.

“He loved Wal-Mart. He was a nut for Wal-mart. And before Wal-Mart, Kmart. He was shattered when the Kmart folded. He was depressed for days, had a hard time shifting his loyalty to Wal-Mart, but when he did, he did it wholeheartedly.

“He liked porkpie hats. In fact, I have his here. I’m going to start wearing it. I always wanted to anyway. I thought Charlie looked cool in it. I was too embarrassed to let him know. Instead, I made fun of him. From now on, I’ll wear his hat. He liked Hawaiian shirts. The gaudier the better. He liked tennis shoes and Dr. Scholl’s shoes, which he bought at Wal-Mart, and he wore a pair of one or the other every day of his life. He did jogging, played basketball, he had on those tennis shoes or Dr. Scholl’s. He went to a wedding or a funeral, he had them on. Me, Hap Collins, Leonard Pine, and God bless her, Brett Sawyer, all wore black, tie-up Dr. Scholl’s today in his honor. We love you, Charlie. We’ll never forget you.”

Hanson put the porkpie on and Rachel wheeled him away.

We had a small get-together at John’s house. Me and Brett. Leonard and John, of course. Hanson and Jim Bob. John fixed hot tea for all of us.

Hanson said, “Well, what are we going to do about this?”

“You too?” I said.

“Been thinking about things,” Hanson said.

“I have plans,” I said. “Sort of.”

“Then that means Leonard has plans too,” Hanson said.

“That’s right,” Leonard said.

“They won’t be very smart plans,” Jim Bob said. “No offense, but from my time with you guys, I’d say you’re as dogged as pit bulls, but about as smart as two slices of bologna rubbing together on dry bread.”

“Thanks,” Leonard said. “Nothing like a good compliment. You’re lucky you got slack with me for saving Hap’s ass that time. Otherwise, a remark like that I’d have to see if you bounced.”

Jim Bob grinned. “What you’d find is that I not only bounce. I bounce back.”

“Ooooeeeeee,” Leonard said. “Now my nuts are suckin’ up. You are so scary.”

“What I’m sayin’ is it’s what I do,” Jim Bob said. “Detecting. And making things happen. What you and Hap do is fuck things up.”

“There’s a certain truth to that,” I said.

“Motherfucker did this, is about as mean as a rattlesnake with a stick up its ass,” Jim Bob said. “And he’s big enough to pull a building down on us. What you need is someone like me knows how to sniff this shit out. You want him found, I’m your man.”

“That’s true,” Hanson said. “Me and Charlie were going to pick Jim Bob’s brain to start our investigations business. He’s the best.”

I thought he probably was, and so did Leonard. But there was some kind of macho shit between them, and Leonard wasn’t eager to give Jim Bob credit for much. Not and like it. I think it had something to do with Jim Bob saving me that time. Leonard may have thought that was his job and he slacked on me. Then again, maybe he was just disappointed he didn’t have it to hold over my head.

“Hot tea, anyone?” John said.

“Christ, enough with the tea, already,” Leonard said. “I’m floatin’ in the stuff.”

“I’m nervous,” John said.

“Plan I got is this,” Jim Bob said. “You folks set tight. I’ll make a little trip to Mexico. Do some investigating. I have a friend or two down there. They're in the detecting business too. Mexican. Both of them. They know where all the bodies are buried. Maybe me and them can dig up the ones we need. In the meantime, might I suggest you folks stay close and stay ready. We don't know for sure this behemoth has gone home. He may be waiting for another chance. He may know he didn't get the right person. If we're lucky, he went back to Mexico thinking he did what he needed to do. Or he may have just gone back anyway and plans to come back and finish the job. We'll have to find out."

"Who says Mexico is his home?" Hanson said.

"Wouldn't it be?" Brett asked.

"Hanson's right," Jim Bob said. "Assume nothing. That's the first rule of good detecting. And always wear clean underwear in case you have a wreck. Mother told me that. I've tried to live by it."

"Have a bad enough wreck," Brett said, "you can bet even clean underwear will fill up."

Jim Bob wrinkled his brows. "You know, I hadn't even considered that."

24

WE STAYED HOME and Jim Bob went to Mexico. During that time, we played it careful. Leonard decided to pack up his shotgun, vanilla cookies, John's tea, and move John and Bob the armadillo back to his place for a while. It was out in the country and a little harder to find, and small, easier to protect. There was no certainty that he, or any of us, was in danger, of course, but it was a case of better safe than sorry.

Brett and I hunkered down at her place. I escorted her to work and picked her up, still wearing my chicken plant uniform, my chicken plant revolver on my hip.

Brett wore a little automatic hidden under her nurse uniform. It was in a holster fastened to her thigh. Certainly against hospital rules, but what they didn't know wouldn't hurt them.

When she changed at night it was a ritual. She'd lift the hem of her dress and show me the little revolver in its white holster, which matched her white nurse uniform and white hose. Then she slid the dress up high enough to show me her panties. Off came the dress, the revolver, the hose, the panties. Finally she was wearing nothing but a smile and a thin fringe of red pubic hair growing back into place.

Now and then, while wearing my chicken plant guard uniform, I'd insist I was the law and thought she ought to be strip-searched, and she'd let me. It was foolish and fun.

We made love a lot during the two weeks Jim Bob was gone. Deep down maybe we figured things could go wrong. Thought we'd try to make up for all the love-making we might miss if one or both of us got killed. Something silly like that.

Whatever, that part of the waiting wasn't so bad. And I realized that I didn't just love Brett, I was crazy in love with her. I had never met a woman who made me feel this way.

I thought my first wife, Trudy, was the only one that would ever give me those feelings, but Brett, she was the best yet. She made me truly realize just how childish and puppylike my love for Trudy had been.

At work Leonard and I found ourselves telling Charlie stories. Hadn't been for Charlie, there were a few times when I wouldn't have gone home at night, and now, in an odd way, it was my fault he was dead.

I began to gather up guilt. Had I been where I was supposed to be it would have been me. It was supposed to be me.

And then I'd feel something else.

Shame. Shame because I was glad I hadn't been home, that it hadn't been me. It was a mix of noxious feelings that didn't set well on the stomach.

I told Leonard how I felt. He said what he's said to me before. "Things don't happen for a reason, Hap. They just happen. It's got nothing to do with either you or Charlie deserving to die. The guy did this wanted you, you weren't there. That's good for you. Charlie was there. That's bad for Charlie. It's simplistic, but that's all there is to it. Some idiot might say things happen for the best. And for you that would be true. But what about Charlie? Was that for his best? Of course not. Neither of you deserved that, but he got it. No rhyme. No reason. Just the way it came together. Once you start realizing it's got nothing to do with deserving it, you'll deal with it better."

"Would you have felt guilty had it been you?"

Leonard was silent for a moment. "Yeah. Yeah I would have. But not like you, brother. I'd have brooded on it for a day, told myself just what I told you, and I'd have moved on. I might have a bump in the night from time to time thinking about it, some wiggle in the back of my brain. But I'd put it in its place, and day by day it would grow smaller, and then it would just be what happened. I'd still love and miss Charlie, but I'd know it wasn't my fault."

"Are you saying that just to make me feel better?"

"A little. But I also mean what I say. You can't carry everyone's problems, every bad thing that happens to someone you know around on your back like a boulder. That boulder is going to get heavier and heavier, and finally, you won’t be able to bear it. You’ll go down before your time. My advice is feel guilty only about the things that happen to me because of our association and jettison the rest.”

25

AFTER TWO WEEKS or so, in the middle of the night, on a weekend, mine and Brett's nights off, the phone rang. Brett was so deep in sleep she didn't hear it. I had become so accustomed to sleeping part of the day, I found it difficult to sleep at night on the weekends. Brett, on the other hand, would have shamed a hibernating bear.

I rolled out of bed and went around on Brett's side where the phone sat on a nightstand. I sat down on the bed and answered it, expecting it to be one of Brett's worthless children with their tit in the wringer, their dick in a crack.

It was Jim Bob.

"Qué pasa," he said.

"Where are you?"

"I'm at a phone booth in the center of town. I called John's place, but no answer. I called Hanson and he's coming in. We thought we'd gather up at John's place or Brett's. That okay?"

I thought about it a minute. I said, "Come over here. But don't knock the house down, Brett's asleep."

"Can you get in touch with Leonard?"

"I can. I'll have him meet us."

"Be there in a moment. And I got a little surprise for you."

"I didn't know you knew my size. Is it revealing?"

"Just in all the right places."

"Well, come on then."

I called Leonard's place and he answered. I could hear country music in the background.

"You having a hoedown?"

"Me and John was dancing. He dances like someone sawed off about half his foot.”

I told him what Jim Bob had said.

“We’re on our way.”

“Well, don’t let Bob drive.”

“He’s grounded. Sonofabitch rooted around one of the blocks holds up the porch, made it collapse. No movies, dates, or giving him the car for a week.”

Jim Bob arrived first. He knocked gently on the door and opened it. He said, “I really didn’t know your size, so I got you something else.”

“And what’s that?”

Jim Bob stepped aside and I saw Ferdinand standing there, wearing a simple white shirt and blue jeans. There was a scabbed scar on the right side of his face. He was leaning on a cane.

“Well, I’ll be goddamned. Come on in.”

Ferdinand came in, suddenly grabbed me and hugged me. He started to cry. “You must think me an awful man,” he said.

I peeled him off of me and guided him to the couch. “I don’t think anything,” I said. Which was a partial lie. I had my opinions about Ferdinand. Some of them good, some not so good.

“How did you find him?” I said.

“Let’s wait until the others are here. I’d rather not tell it twice.”

About fifteen minutes later Hanson arrived. He was wearing Charlie’s porkpie. I was surprised to see him using a walker.

“You’re out of your chair?” I said as I let him in.

“Your skills of observation are as sharp as ever,” Hanson said, his black face beaming. “Feeling is back in my legs. Been using this for about a week now. Doctor thinks I keep up the physical therapy, martial arts training, the feeling will come back completely.”

I sat him on the couch, introduced Ferdinand.

About thirty minutes later John and Leonard arrived. When Ferdinand saw Leonard, he got up and extended his hand. Leonard took it. Ferdinand began to weep.

"Just sit down," Leonard said.

"I'll make tea," John said.

"Of course you will," Leonard said.

I decided to slip back in the bedroom for a moment. When I got in there, Brett was stirring. I said, "Baby, if you don't want to repeat your Gypsy Rose Lee act, I'd advise you to dress before you come in the living room."

"What's going on?"

I told her.

"I'll be out in a moment."

John was pouring tea into cups and putting the cups on a tray when Brett came out. Her hair was beautifully tousled around her face. She was wearing a white T-shirt and white shorts. I introduced her to Ferdinand. She sat on the arm of the couch.

Jim Bob was sitting in a chair near the coffee table. He sipped his tea and set it on the table. He said, "I've got an interesting story for you people. I'll try and give you the *Reader's Digest* version.

"To sort of capsulize the theme, let me say, Hap, that you inadvertently stepped into a nest of vipers."

"Hell, I know that."

"No. You don't know. This thing has some twisties and some turnies."

"Twisties and turnies?" Leonard said. "Is that some kind of exotic underwear?"

"Sophisticated private eye talk," Jim Bob said. "Don't you fret none now, Leonard. It's over your head and it isn't your fault."

Jim Bob turned his chair backward and sat so that his arms lay on the back rest. He said, "I'm gonna nutshell for you what this is all about. Ferdinand filled me in on some of it, and me and him sort of guessed out the rest, but I figure it's pretty accurate.

"Beatrice's father borrowed money from someone known for loaning money and not being nice about it. High interest. Strongarm tactics. It was the only way he could get the money he needed to send Beatrice to the States to go to the university. Deal was, she'd graduate in four years, and then pay back what was borrowed with money from her new job, whatever it was. In the meantime, Ferdinand had to pay something back every week. And this amount didn't count toward the amount borrowed. It didn't even count as interest. The man who loaned the money, Juan Miguel, saw it as collateral on the major loan. Best I can describe it."

"If you don't mind me saying, seems like a pretty dumb kind of loan," Leonard said.

"Yes," Ferdinand said. "But I wanted for her what I could not give her. She was to pay it back."

"Let me finish this," Jim Bob said. "Beatrice goes to the University of Texas, and bails. That's the bottom line. She gave up on it and came back to Mexico without the debt paid. That meant Ferdinand had to pay every week and she had to help. In the long run, this being a lifetime deal until they could pay back the loan in full, this might not have been a bad way for Juan Miguel to go. Just have them keep paying until they're both in the grave. This might surpass the loan. And say somehow they make back the loan, pay it all off, well, okay. He gets his money back with interest, plus all the money they've been paying weekly to keep him from breaking something.

"Then there's a new wrinkle. Through old contacts at the university, Beatrice finds out that some Mayan facades—"

"What?" John asked.

"Mayan facades are painted stucco on the fronts of temples. These had been found by looters in the jungle, and they had contacted university scouts to let them know they had them available for a good price."

"Is this kind of thing legal?" Brett said.

"Nope. The scouts aren't sanctioned. They're just people who work for the university and occasionally field information of a dubious and illegal nature. Lot of things you see in museums came through university contacts that weren't on the up-and-up. It's a coup for the university as well as the museum. Though it's harder to pull that kind of thing off these days. Used to, there wasn't much to stop that kind of commerce. That leads us to the rest of the story, as old Paul Harvey is fond of saying.

"Well, the university offers a whole shitload of money for this thing, and the looters say yippie. We'll bring it as far as Playa del Carmen. You come get it. Secretly, of course.

"Here's the corker. The looters load this stuff on trucks and arrive at the pickup point, just outside Playa del Carmen, and the university people don't show. They've gotten cold feet. New attitudes are in place, and what was once smart archaeology is now considered looting. Not only by the obvious looters, but by the university and museum folks as well. That's always been the attitude, openly, but underneath, this kind of thing was okay as long as no one got their tail in too tight a crack.

"University decided it was putting the tail of its reputation in just such as crack, and they backed out. So guess what? The looters decided to hide the stuff away and sell it to another bidder. They decide to hire a boat. Ferdinand's boat. They moved the stucco facades by boat to an island Ferdinand knew. He occasionally took people there to fish, and the looters were paying pretty good money, and he thought he could put this money away and add to it later to pay off what he owed Juan Miguel.

"How am I doing, Ferdinand? Am I telling it right?"

Ferdinand nodded.

"So, Ferdinand, with the help of his daughter, transfers the facades to this little island, hides 'em away, then on the return trip the looters decide—or have already decided—they don't really want Ferdinand and Beatrice to go back with them. In fact, they don't want them to go back at all, and they don't plan on leaving them on the island to Robinson Crusoe it. They decide to use machetes and chop the old man up."

"Well, seeing that he's here, and having seen him in action," I said, "we know how that turned out."

"Exactly. There were two of them. He took the machete away from one of them and killed them both. Dumped them in the ocean. Is that right, Ferdinand?"

Ferdinand nodded.

"You are one bad dude," Leonard said.

"They did not expect one so old to be so willing," Ferdinand said. "And they did not know that I grew up training with the machete."

"Not something you'd expect," Brett said. "Machete training. I thought you just chopped with it."

"Whatever," Jim Bob said. "He and Beatrice survived. So now Ferdinand and Beatrice have an ace in the hole. Or so they think. Beatrice goes to Juan Miguel and tells him she knows the whereabouts of these facades. She believes that the University of Mexico will be interested in them, and that they will pay heavily. She offers to trade the facades to Miguel to sell to the university for the cancellation of her debt.

"Juan Miguel is a nut not only for money and meanness, but dig this—if you'll pardon the pun. He loves archaeology. He likes to think he's adding to the world's knowledge in this area. You know, loan shark a little, kill a little, and do a little archaeology. Or rather buy a little archaeology. He sees himself as a Renaissance man of sorts. So, he agrees to go with Beatrice. He contacts the Mexican university, and sure enough, they will pay for these facades. And considering they don't have to be sold out of the country, it's a legal deal.

"But in the meantime, Beatrice decides she's screwed the pooch. She should have offered to sell them herself, cut out the middleman. This way, she thought, she could pay off Miguel, and come out with enough money to take her and her father to the States.

"Now we have Juan Miguel having negotiated with the university through his contacts, and suddenly, when he's ready for the information to reveal the location of the facades, Beatrice isn't talking."

"I did not know she had done this thing," Ferdinand said. "I would not have let her. Sell them to Miguel for our debt, yes. But to double-cross him … no."

"Juan Miguel was," Jim Bob said, "to put it in casual terms, about ready to piss vinegar and turn it to wine. He was embarrassed. He's like a kind of mafia don in Mexico, and all the underworld knew he was brokerin' this deal, and now some woman, a former prostitute … No offense, Ferdinand …"

"It is the truth," Ferdinand said. "But when she goes to the university, she leaves this life behind. Until this man

Billy … Please, continue, Señor Jim Bob.”

“Well, he doesn’t like it that she backs out on him and throws shit in his face. He is not a happy little criminal. He’s as embarrassed as a priest caught jacking off during a confession. He goes to Beatrice and says, Hey, we had a deal, and she lies and says, I have another deal in place, and I’ll have all the money I owe you, promise. You won’t get the facades to give to the University of Mexico, I’ll do that, but you will get your money *in toto*. Juan Miguel doesn’t like this, but he accepts. But, to make sure Beatrice understands he’s tired of dickin’ around, he has his man cut off the tip of her little finger.”

“She told me it was a fishing accident,” I said.

“She lied,” Ferdinand said. “I would have killed this man had I been there.”

“Maybe not this guy,” Jim Bob said. “Maybe not any of us this guy. But I’ll come back to him. So he cuts off Beatrice’s finger, tells her he’ll kill her and her father if she fucks this up.

“Beatrice isn’t through, however. She meets you and Leonard. And you get involved, and then she meets this Billy. Billy’s a blowhard and as full of shit as Beatrice. No offense, old man. But it seems your daughter had enough bullshit to fertilize about half the globe.”

I saw Ferdinand’s eyes glow, but only for a moment. He hung his head.

“She wants what she wants so bad she will deal with the devil,” Ferdinand said.

“And she did,” Jim Bob said. “And besides the devil, she dealt with Billy. Billy says he’ll pay her a lot more than three days of fishing are worth if she throws herself in and agrees to do whatever he wants her to do.

“As I said, before she went to the university Beatrice was a call girl in Mexico City. She’s not afraid of this deal. She’s seen some things, done some things. It turns out Billy, who is Billy Sullivan, is full of it and doesn’t really have any money. He’s a blowhard but Beatrice falls for it. He gave a little down payment, but the rest of it he didn’t have and wasn’t about to ask his father, who, though not rich, is fairly well off.”

"Know what," I said. "I never did call his old man. I forgot all about it."

"Doesn't matter," Jim Bob said. "He finally got in touch with him and his father came down with lawyers and money and got him out of jail and took him home. I traced him down when I got back from Mexico. And, guess what? He's dead. Someone went all the way to Indiana, which is where he's from, and cut him up. Same way as Charlie."

"Poor old Billy," I said.

"Fuck Billy," Leonard said. "I wouldn't have shit a hot meal in his hand if he was dying of hunger."

"Way I figure it," Jim Bob said, "Beatrice gave names or had addresses on her, something. Somehow she led them to you, Hap, or rather Charlie. I don't think they knew the difference. Then they went to Indiana and got Billy. For all I know, they got all your addresses from the police and Beatrice didn't give them shit. Enough money, information tends to change hands. And not just in Mexico."

"But why would he want us?" I said.

Jim Bob shrugged, said, "Juan Miguel wanted vengeance and he thought you and Billy were in on the scam. Maybe Beatrice, to prolong her life, told them that. How's that for a guess? I think it's that simple. Juan Miguel, he doesn't like taking a fuckin', and if he does take one, then he makes sure whoever gave it to him takes it up the ass as well. A sort of permanent fuckin'. 'Course, could be he thought you or Billy, or both of you, knew about the facades and maybe he thought he'd find that out. He'd still want them, I think."

"What about Leonard?" I asked.

"I don't know," Jim Bob said. "No one tried to kill him, so maybe she didn't give his name, died before she could. I don't know. No way of knowing."

"I gave my address," Leonard said. "Not where I was staying, with John. The ironic part is after Charlie was killed I moved John and me out to my house for a while, because I thought it was safer."

"By then it was," Jim Bob said. "The killers had gone home.

Maybe they decided they had the main two, and after torturing Charlie and Billy and getting nothing, they decided neither of you knew dick about the facades."

"That seems like a pretty good guess," I said.

"And Ferdinand?" Leonard said.

"He was going to kill Ferdinand too, but Juan Miguel made the mistake of not sending the Jolly Green Giant. They sent some everyday fucker, and guess what? They sent him to do it with a machete. It's kind of their trademark, death by machete.

"Guy comes to get Ferdinand on his boat. Ferdinand disarms him, beats him like a circus monkey, makes him tell why he's come. That's how Ferdinand finds out about Beatrice.

"Then, Ferdinand ties up his attacker, takes him out to sea, and dumps him in the ocean."

"Tied up?" John asked.

"Yes," Ferdinand said. "That way he cannot swim."

"Yeah," Leonard said, "tied up cramps a fella's breast stroke all right."

I thought, Damn. This is one mean old man.

"How the hell did you find all this out?" Brett asked.

"Hey, I'm a detective, lovely lady. And I had some help. Guy down there, a Mexican, runs a little private eye agency. I've worked with him I don't know how many times. I heard this name, Juan Miguel, I thought it rang a bell. My acquaintance down there, César, he had a partner who met a nasty end not long ago, and the whole thing's connected with Juan Miguel. That's where I had heard the name, year and a half ago. It didn't mean much to me then. Just something they had got themselves into.

"I didn't know the details, just that some gangster named Juan Miguel was responsible for César's partner's death. The partner I had met, but hadn't dealt with much. Not directly. I always dealt with César. Fact is, César helped me find Ferdinand."

"How did you find him?" Leonard asked.

"Me and César found him by finding the boy you told me about. José. The one helped him fish. He didn't know Ferdinand was in trouble, just that he was gone, and César simply asked him did Ferdinand have a place he went that few people knew about, and how about three hundred dollars if he told us. He was loyal to Ferdinand for about five minutes, then he was loyal to three hundred dollars. For him, that's like a thousand, at least.

"The boy told me about a little island. Said that was where Ferdinand sometimes went to fish for himself and to be alone. Said he had gone with him a couple times. No one else had asked José that. No one else had offered him three hundred dollars either. No one thought or knew to ask him the question. We told José he should say nothing else about it to anyone. César rented a boat and we went out there, found Ferdinand. And the facades. That's the island where they're stored."

"What about what really counts to us?" Hanson said. "Justice for Charlie."

"There's the rub," Jim Bob said. "We might could put together some pretty good information for the Mexican police. But in that little town of Playa del Carmen, Juan Miguel's pretty much the man. He's pretty much the man throughout Mexico when it comes to crime and payoffs in cocaine, money, and poontang."

"So," Leonard said, "might we assume you're saying that would be a worthless approach to taking care of Charlie's killer?"

"Right."

"I say we go to Mexico and get the sonofabitch," Hanson said. "Him and this giant. Or whoever gets in the way."

"First off, you're not going anywhere," Jim Bob said. "No offense, but in your state you'd just fuck up the mission."

"All right then," Hanson said. "What are you and the others going to do? And how can I help?"

"I like Hanson's idea," Leonard said. "We kill the sonofabitch."

"It's an idea," Jim Bob said, "but not an easy one to pull off."

"I been in on a designed killing once, and I didn't like it," I said. "I'm still dealing with it. I just don't like the idea of a guy pisses you off, you kill him."

"Pisses you off," Jim Bob said. "He killed Charlie, man. I'm more than pissed off."

"You want justice for your friend, Charlie," Ferdinand said. "I want justice for my daughter. We all have a price to pay. Vengeance is a price, but it must be paid.”

“Not me,” John said. “You know how I stand. I’m an observer. And not a happy one.”

“Killing him seems awful heavy to me,” I said.

“You’re fuckin’ me,” Leonard said. “What do you suggest, we humiliate him? Shame him? Bad dog. Smack him with a rolled-up newspaper? I think you ain’t got no peas for your pea shooter, Hap. Why don’t we just call him a bad name or knock his hat off?”

“Or write he sucks dicks on some bathroom wall,” Jim Bob said. “Hey, meant nothing by that, Leonard. John. Anyone else in here suck dicks?”

Brett raised her hand.

Jim Bob burst out laughing.

“Listen,” I said. “I was thinking we get some photos of these facades. We say to Juan Miguel we got these facades and we’ll sell them to you for such and such, and then we spring the police on him. You know, have them in waiting, so they got to arrest him when he shows up to buy them.”

“They’ll arrest us for setting up the scam,” Jim Bob said. “It implies we stole the facades in the first place, even if we didn’t. And if it did work, you keep forgetting, he’s got the Mexican law’s dicks in his pockets. It’s a stupid idea, Hap.”

“So we have to kill him?” I said.

No one said anything for a time. Finally Jim Bob said, “Before we start passing out the ammunition and a sack lunch, might be a good idea I tell you a little about this guy Juan Miguel, and his main henchman.”

“Henchman?” Leonard said. “Shit, I just love that term. I think I used to read that in the Fu Manchu books. Henchmen.”

“César helped me find out a lot of stuff on this dude. Juan Miguel is rich because he’s run more drugs than Johnson and Johnson. He started out a petty thief, worked himself up to a higher level, killed off the right guys in the Mexican mafia, and eventually, he’s head dick. Got him some class along the way. Money buys class, you know. And very expensive suits, in all shades. When he wears a suit. He's a practicing nudist much of the time."

"A nudist?" Brett said.

"Yep. A classy nudist. At least in his own eyes. In reality he's about as classy as a ball peen hammer to the back of the head. Which is something he's done. Used a ball peen on his enemies' skulls. But he's too cool for that now. He's got hired hands that do that."

"The henchmen," Leonard said.

"That's right."

"Is he hard to get to?" Hanson asked.

"He's got a little fortress of a house in the hills surrounding Playa del Carmen. Nice pad. You can drive a car right up to it, but there's guys with guns to greet you. One of the guys, according to César, is about six eight, weighs about three eighty-five, and only the bits between his fingers and toes is fatty."

"Sounds like hyperbole," John said.

"Could be," Jim Bob said. "They call him Hammerhead."

"An old family name," Leonard said. "Surely he's a junior."

"Point is," Jim Bob said, "what we got here isn't a cakewalk. This guy is dangerous. The people who protect him are dangerous. We can't drive up to his house, knock on his door, ask if he can come out to play and shoot him in the head."

"Any weaknesses?" I asked.

"Maybe at bridge," Jim Bob said, "not much else. Well, there is one thing. A mistress. A real stunner. She lives in a fine house with some pretty nice guards herself. Provided by Juan Miguel, of course. She likes to travel to Mexico City and shop in expensive shops. We followed her three times in one week to the airport. And we even got on the flight once. The guards were with her. She shopped Mexico City to death. Only thing she didn't do was buy the coats off the bears at the Mexico City zoo. She had the two plugs with her carrying all this shit. Clothes. Shoes. Whatever the crap is women buy, and I bet me and César sat outside those stores in a rented airport car most of the day. We didn't even eat lunch."

"She's the key," Leonard said.

“Yep,” Jim Bob said. “I suppose so.”

26

THAT NIGHT THE RAIN blew hard against the house, rattled the windows like teeth chattering in a cold face. Only it was warm, sticky warm, even in the house with the central air and a fan blowing at the foot of the bed.

Brett, who I thought was asleep, rolled over and laid her arm across my chest.

“You aren’t sleeping?”

“I know. And neither are you. Surely you don’t want sex again? I think I’m pooped out.”

“We didn’t have sex tonight.”

“I’m still pooped out … You sure we didn’t?”

“I’m sure. Man, is that rain gonna wash us away?”

“We’ll float on the bed. We’ll be okay.”

“Will there be room for all the animals, Noah?”

“We’re the only animals that matter.”

“Hap. Can we do this?”

“You don’t need to do anything. Me and Leonard, Jim Bob and Ferdinand, we can do it.”

“The plan sounds kind of lame to me.”

“He’s actually using part of my idea.”

“Like I said, the plan sounds lame.”

“Jim Bob said it was a better plan than he expected the bunch of us to come up with.”

“Finding an extra pecan in your pecan sundae is better than you expected, but it isn’t exactly a whole pie. Jim Bob’s so smart, why doesn’t he come up with a better plan.”

“You’re knocking the plan?”

“I’m just saying Jim Bob saying it’s a better plan than he expected doesn't make it the best plan devised."

"It's better than me or Leonard running the show."

"It's still not a plan that makes me feel confident."

"Would any plan make you feel confident?"

"Probably not."

"It's what we've got. Or what we've got without you. You don't need to go at all. You have a job to worry about."

"You're not doing anything without me. I got a little money put back. I can probably get off for a couple weeks. How long does it take to hunt down and kill a guy anyway?"

"Christ, don't say that, Brett. I still wake up with the other on my mind."

"Me too. I even wake up screaming about it sometimes. But I'd do it again. I'd do what we're about to do twice. Charlie was a good guy, Hap. He didn't deserve this."

"No, he didn't."

"You did a thing for me once that I can't imagine anyone else doing."

"Leonard did it too."

"You always say that, and he did, but he did it for you … Okay. I can't imagine anyone but you two doing it for me, and now here's my chance to pay you back."

"I don't want that. You're not paying me back. This has got nothing to do with you paying me back. It's got to do with me paying back that cocksucker in Mexico."

Brett got up, went to the bathroom, came back, and snuggled in with me again. I said, "Frankly, I hate to admit it, but I been thinking about walkin'."

"No you haven't."

"I haven't?"

"Oh, you might consider it. It's in your head. But you know what you'll do, and so do I."

"Am I that predictable?"

"Except that part where you bent one of my legs sideways and came at me from that weird angle. I didn't expect that. But, other than sex, yes, you're predictable."

"Hey, we're together long enough, I'll be predictable there too. Then you'll have to get rid of me."

"I don't think you're altogether joking."

"I haven't had the best luck with love, my dear."

"Hap. I don't care you're not young, you're not rich or overly handsome, or even well hung—"

"Hold it now, goddamn it, you're stepping across the line."

"I thought that would wake you up. I'm saying I don't care. I don't care about any of those things, but I care about you, and I can't just kiss you bye and send you to Mexico not knowing what's going to happen. And when it's over, when we come back here, I want to make this deal permanent. I'm not saying you have to marry me, though that would be nice, but I want us to be together. And that means being together when you go to Mexico. I don't want to be sitting here waiting on my man to do what a man's got to do like some cheap-ass Western movie."

"That's kind of what it boils down to, though, isn't it?"

"It boils down to you and me. From now on, I want it you and me. Except when I'm doing some serious business in the bathroom. I don't mind you come in I'm doing a number one, but a number two, no way. Unless maybe it's to hand me the toilet paper if I forgot to put it on the roll, but other than that, not a number two. You stay out then."

"You're fucking nuts, Brett."

"I know."

"Brett, I don't know I can go through with it. I think about it I clench up inside."

"Whatever you do. Whatever you decide. I want to be there with you. Except that bathroom part that I've already explained. And that goes if you're doing number two as well. I don't want to see that."

"Brett, thy middle name is class."

"I keep telling you that."

Next day they fired Brett when she wanted time off. She'd already used all her time off dealing with her worthless daughter.

I was with her at the nurses' station when the head nurse told her it was all over and that they'd been thinking about firing her for some time because of her mouth.

"My mouth," Brett said. "My fuckin' mouth. You old dried-up cunt. You'd be so lucky as to have my cunt for your mouth. Turn it sideways, and it'd go better with your mustache than the mouth you got, you fuckin' Wicked Witch of the West. I ought—"

I got her by the arm and pulled her out of there. On the way out she yelled back what they could do with their thermometers.

Later that day, Leonard and I went to our boss. It was tough. I knew Bond felt he owed me something, and I didn't want to put him in a position of feeling he had to let me have more juice than I deserved, but there was nothing else to do.

His office was in town, away from the chicken plant. There were, however, pictures of chickens on the wall, and charts with chickens. There was also a big wooden desk, a black leather chair, and a black and gray striped couch.

Bond actually hadn't been in the office, but I had called and he had called back and said he'd meet me there. He ended up meeting us out in the parking lot, riding up with us in the elevator.

"I don't come here much," he said. "I'm really too rich and too far removed from what's going on anymore to have opinions. I just like to collect checks and leave the work and the organization to people I've handpicked."

"It's a nice life if you can get it," Leonard said.

"Yes it is," Bond said.

Leonard and I sat on the couch, shuffled our feet for a moment. Finally I came out with it. Told Bond something had come up. That we had to go away for a while. But we'd come back. And we'd like our jobs back, if that was possible, and not to think we were trying to take advantage of him. To my ears, I sounded like a kid making up some bullshit excuse for not doing his homework.

Bond looked at us, said, "You do whatever you want. I won't even cut your pay."

"You don't owe me that," I said. "You sure don't owe Leonard that."

"Thanks," Leonard said.

"No," Bond said. "I do owe you that. Go with my blessing."

"I want you to know I'm not trying to take advantage of you," I said. "Something really did come up."

"I believe you. Go with my blessing. And the assurance your jobs are waiting."

"How is Sarah?"

"She's much better. She has been moved to a less critical wing of the hospital."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"She's talking now. Some of her old spirit is back. She speaks highly of you, Hap."

"That's kind of her," I said.

Bond was starting to look teary. We got up to leave. Bond said, "Hap. Leonard. I got an idea you two aren't just going on a hunting trip."

"Actually," Leonard said, "that's exactly what we're doing."

"Be safe."

We thanked him and left.

Jim Bob booked me, Brett, Leonard, Ferdinand, and himself on a flight to Cancun for the next afternoon. I took Brett to a nice store in Tyler and bought her an expensive outfit or two. Still, we packed light.

That night we slept hardly at all, got up early, muddled about. Hanson came by to wish us off. Told us to keep him posted. Early afternoon, we headed for Houston Intercontinental in Jim Bob's car, the Red Bitch.

"What about guns?" Leonard asked.

"César," Jim Bob said, switching lanes to the sound of a car horn blaring. "He'll provide what we need. He has his own grudge he'd like to take care of. He's been nursing it for years, and now he's ready. You brought some of that money you got, didn't you, Hap?"

"I did."

"I sold some hogs cheap, fired all my help, so now I got some extra bread too."

"I brought some," Brett said. "But I didn't have much. I plan to suck off Hap when we get home."

"That sounds enticing," I said.

"You know what I mean," Brett said.

"I didn't bring any money," Leonard said. "I don't even know what color a dollar bill is anymore."

Jim Bob changed lanes so close had the car behind us had another coat of paint, it would have been in the back seat of the Red Bitch.

"You are one scary driver," Brett said.

"I'm just getting you folks primed for the really scary stuff."

27

We arrived in Cancun, rented a car, headed off toward Playa del Carmen. As we neared the town, a slice of sunset the color of a fresh-sliced salmon fillet stained the horizon. As we watched, darkness corrupted it, then it all sank away as if into a tar pit.

It was a night full of clouds and no visible moon. Darkness dripped over the car like ink poured from a jar, but as we neared the city pinpricks of colored lights jumped into view. We cruised past a McDonald’s and a T-shirt shop and on into town.

We ended up staying at a nice hotel near the sea. Brett and I took a room, Jim Bob, Leonard, and Ferdinand took one together. Leonard ended up on a roll-away.

In our room we opened a window, pulled back the curtains, let the sea air in. There was a palm tree near our window. The limbs and leaves scraped the wall like a cat scratching. There were lights on poles along the edge of the beach and they made the sand and water and the pedestrian walk, Fifth Avenue, look like one of those paintings you do by numbers.

Seabirds were coasting low over the water, dropping birdshit like napalm, hoping for a late fish snack before hanging it up for the day.

People walked along Fifth Avenue, talking and laughing.

“Since this is gonna cost us anyway,” Brett said, “what say we order room service, enjoy that, then fuck like two rabbits in a lab experiment?”

“That’s my kind of night,” I said.

We ordered room service, but what we ended up doing was not fucking like rabbits in a lab experiment, but lying in one another’s arms watching a late movie, *The Man With the Golden Arm*, starring Frank Sinatra. It was in English. Something cabled in for the tourists, I guess.

Next morning we got up early, had room service, then went with Jim Bob in the rental to meet César. Leonard was walking a little funny. I thought maybe his bad hip was acting up.

“You all right?” I asked.

“It’s not my hip, if that’s what you’re thinking. It’s that damn roll-away. I fought that motherfucker all night. It finally threw me. I ended up sleeping with a blanket and a pillow on the floor. Now I know how those poor racked sonofabitches felt during the Inquisition.”

We piled into the car. As we drove near the beach, I saw Ferdinand look out at the sea. I said, “Where’s your boat?”

“I sold the boat,” he said. “Some rich American who wanted his own fishing boat.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I needed the money … I know what you must think of me, señor. All of you. But I did what I could do. I tried to help my daughter. I did not make her a whore. She chose that for herself. When I thought she could get the money needed to keep her from dying, I let her do what she had to do. It was never for me. You must understand I was only letting her do what I thought she must do. It is all nothing now. She is dead. I am dead.”

“Time heals things,” I said.

“No, señor. It only heals some things. An open wound heals. This, this does not heal. But I can put salve on it. I can help kill this man who had my daughter killed.”

“If it’s any consolation,” Leonard said. “Knowing now what you were up against, I understand why you did what you did.”

“It is something, señor. It is something.”

César’s place was very nice. Nothing like what I expected. It was nestled amongst palms and foliage, one long story made of wood and stone, not far from the beach. The garage contained a Jaguar and an older-looking dirt-brown Plymouth.

“Looking through people’s windows, prowling through their underwear drawers, seems to pay pretty good,” Leonard said.

Jim Bob looked at Leonard and smiled. Leonard may have forgotten that Jim Bob and César were in the same business, but I doubted it.

We walked up a little crunched seashell path, and before we could knock, the door opened and a little fat man in a red shirt opened the door. He looked to be in his late thirties or forties, had very little hair, and what hair he had was black and gooey with oil. He had a face that would have looked at home on the Buddha, providing the Buddha had one cauliflowered ear. He shook our hands and hugged Jim Bob and Brett.

“Would you come in,” he said. “It is so good to meet you, señores, and it is even better to see this delightful señorita. Or is it señora?”

“Señorita,” she said.

“Surely, you are but an angel visiting from heaven.”

“That goes without question,” Brett said.

Inside the house it was also very nice, with colorful Mexican rugs hung on the wall, fine furniture, and nearby a young Mexican lady with blond hair and black roots. She stood near a stone fireplace, almost at attention. She wore a white pants suit with a long, near-waist-length strand of black beads that had gotten slung sideways, so that against her white suit it looked as if she were a cracked porcelain doll. She was pretty, but the look on her face was like that of someone who had just discovered her asshole has been sewn shut.

“This is my wife,” César said. “Her name is Hermonie.”

“Is Hermonie a Spanish name?” Brett asked.

“I have no idea,” César said. “She is very shy … Ah, Jim Bob.”

He and Jim Bob embraced. “Didn’t we just do this?” Jim Bob said.

“What?” César said. “It is not as good the second time? Come, I have had a late breakfast prepared.” He spoke pleasantly to Hermonie in Spanish.

She led us out the back way, as if leading us to our execution. Leonard leaned toward me, said, “I don’t think these two are a love match.”

We ended up at a table under a canopy. The table was covered with fruit, fried meats, and eggs. There were tortillas and coffee.

There were also a few flies, but César brushed at these with his hand as if they were but part of the ambience.

"Please," César said. "Sit. Eat. Drink. Talk."

We sat. Jim Bob said, "Actually, César, we would like to get right to things. We're on a limited budget and we've got time restraints."

"Ah, you Americans. You do not understand time. Time is time. It has no movement. Revenge is revenge, now or later."

"Drive-through burgers, drive-through pharmacies, and drive-through revenge," Jim Bob said. "That's us."

César grinned. "Of course. Try the cantaloupe. All the fruit is fresh."

Hermonie went away, then showed up with a small pitcher of cream, sweeteners for the coffee, then she disappeared again.

"Will Hermonie be joining us?" Brett asked.

"Actually," César said, looking sadly, "she is shy, and she hates Americans. For that matter, she is not too fond of me. She married me because she thought I had money. And I do, but not the sort of money she is looking for. She wants big money for big cars and big things. I make money that allows the middle-sized things. She made a mistake.

"But that is all right. I tolerate her and she tolerates me. She is as lovely a woman as an ugly fat man like myself will get, and I am most likely as rich as she will find. And I love Americans. My good friend, Jim Bob, I love him."

"I'm a Texan," Jim Bob said.

"Texas was stolen from Mexico," César said. "It should not be part of the United States."

"Mexicans helped steal it," Jim Bob said.

"Would it be okay if you two didn't fight the Alamo all over again?" I said.

"Ah," César said. "I love this guy. He loves me."

"Well, before you and I mate, César," Jim Bob said, "maybe we should get right to it. We have a plan, and being no friend of Juan Miguel, we thought you might help us tweak this plan."

"I am certainly no friend of this man, Juan Miguel. I have been waiting until my time is right to do what I need to do. Waiting, and praying to God to help me have my revenge."

"He helps in those matters?" Brett asked.

"If he does not, then we will do it without him," César said.

Jim Bob briefly outlined our plan.

César said, "Oh, you got some big stones, my friends. Big stones. Pardon me, lady."

"Forget it," Brett said.

"Let me tell you. We can do this. We must plan more carefully, but we can do this. By myself, I could not get even with this man. But with your help. Yes. I can. We can all eat a fine dish of revenge.

"Let me tell you about Juan Miguel, amigos. Many years ago a rich lady, a Mexican lady, she hires me to follow after her daughter who she thinks is being naughty with a man in Mexico City. Did I say she was a rich lady?"

"You did," I said.

"She offered me very much to watch this girl. My partner, Toño, was to help me. We, how is it you say it … double-teamed her, you see. It is easier that way. One can rest while the other watches. After a day or two we determine that, yes, she is in fact being naughty. She is with another man. They are spending many hours together in his hotel room and they did not have cards or dice with them. They are certainly playing that other game we all like to play. Toño takes photographs of her and this man going in and out of the hotel. We think this is good enough to show the lady. Show her that her pretty daughter is in fact running with this man. And we find out who this man is. He is Juan Miguel's son, Carmelo.

"We report all of this to the lady, and she sends her daughter away to the U.S. to study in the university, away from this man. So what happens? The girl, she pines for Carmelo and she decides to climb to the top of the University of Texas tower and jump."

"Jesus," Brett said. "I wanted a man that bad, I'd just hop a plane."

"Who is to understand the thinking of the young?" César said. "And there is another thing. When her mother sends her away, this Carmelo, he finds a new woman. It is not true love to him. It is true lust.

"But that is not all. The mother. She is distraught. She hires us to show her where this Carmelo is. And we find him again for her, and he is in a beach house near Cozumel, and we go away. And this woman, she comes back there another time, and you know what she does. She shoots and kills this boy.

"Then, she is not happy yet. A week after the boy is dead, she sends word to Juan Miguel she knows how his boy died, and he agrees to see her, and she has the photographs we took of Carmelo and her daughter, and when she explains the connection, so he understands, you see, she tries to kill him with a knife she has concealed, but they take it away from her. And then he tortures her. He wants to know how she killed his boy, how she found him. She tells them about us. She tells them Toño took the photographs. She mentions me, but she tells him Toño took the photographs. She remembers Toño because he wanted her. He wanted her badly. He tried to lie with her in his bed. It didn't work, but I believe when it came time to call names, she called his because she knew him better. She said he took the photographs and that I worked for him.

"He cuts off her nose and sets her free. She does not go to the doctor. She goes home, she takes pills, and she is dead. She could not face having no daughter and no nose. Juan Miguel, he sends his men to see Toño. I do not know what happened to him. Not really. They come to see me and tell me they have killed Toño. They say I was Toño's boss. I was not the one who took the photos, but in case I should ever want to bother in their business, they would leave me a reminder. This big one. Hammerhead. Or Oso as I called him. He beat me. He cut off the tip of my finger."

César held his right hand up. The tip of the little finger was missing, same as Beatrice.

"And he gives me this ear. Here. He hit me so hard with a slap he did that. I do not hear as well in that ear anymore. They let me live. That was a mistake."

"Did you try the police?" Brett asked.

César shook his head. "No. I know this place too well. Many of the policemen, they are good. They would do the law. But Juan

Miguel, he owns those at the top. They run things as they see them, and they see them with money.”

“We’re sorry about your friend,” Brett said.

“Sorry is not important. Toño worked for me. He was not a friend. I did not like him much. He was good at what he did, but he was no brother. What I am mad about is my little finger and my ear. Juan Miguel, he will pay. But, unlike the woman, I do not go off half-cocked. I have waited my time. And now, with this tragedy of the woman …”

César reached out and patted Ferdinand on the arm, “… and the tragedy of your friend, the time is correct. He shall now pay. Tell me more of your plan.”

“We thought we’d kidnap his mistress,” Jim Bob said, “but we need you for that. We need to corner her somewhere. As for the bodyguards, you got me, Hap, and Leonard to take care of them.”

“No offense, gentlemen,” César said, “but are you capable?”

“I’d bet my life on them,” Jim Bob said.

“Oh, you will,” César said.

28

IT WAS A TIGHT FIT in the rental, but thankfully, the trip was brief. César drove the car to a spot on the beach and parked us next to a high wide pile of large white stone slabs.

“There was to be a house here,” César said as we got out of the car. “But it fell through. These stones. They were cut to be part of the foundation. The man having it built, he must have lost money. Or lost his wife. Or maybe he builds it for his mistress and she leaves him. I cannot say. Something went wrong. Perhaps he is still the owner of this land. There, where the grass grows up to the beach, that was where he was to build. This was the beginning, these stones. And they were the end.”

The huge stones were cut in even rectangles four inches thick and maybe four feet long, and three feet across. It was obvious they had once been stacked neatly, but weather, or perhaps people climbing on them, had caused them to shift in places. Some of the stones had fallen and broken against others. At the peak of the pile was a colorful bird. I had never seen that kind of bird before. As I watched, it took to the sky. It looked like a bouquet of flowers exploding.

César had placed a telescope in the trunk, and now he got it and the stand out, climbed to the top of the slab pile with it, moving his little round body as surefooted as a mountain goat. He fastened the scope to its tripod, positioned it on a flat piece of rock, focused, looked through, called down, “Come see.”

I went up first, realizing that going up was not as easy for me as César had made it look. I felt slabs shift under my feet. I yelled down for the others to watch out, went carefully, finally found the top.

A moment later the others worked their way up. We clutched together at the top around the telescope.

“This is a good telescope,” César said. “I use it in my work.

After what happened to me and Toño, I began to find out more about this Juan Miguel. I come here … and to another spot higher up, among the trees there, and observe from time to time. Juan Miguel spends much time at home. He likes the middle of the day to eat his lunch and answer his phone. Come look for yourself.”

I looked. The sun was bright on the house and there was a blinding reflection off a great satellite dish that looked like a flying saucer that had landed on its edge. There were palms and shrubs and flowering plants to the left of the house that grew so thick they completely concealed anything that might be behind them.

It was a huge house, mostly glass and stone, surrounded by a fence of rock and mortar positioned at the peak and around a great rise of land covered in greenery and scrubby trees. The way the rise sloped toward us, you could see the close-clipped backyard and the swimming pool and patio. Their view from up there would be terrific. You would see the road below, the greater highway, and beyond that the sandy white beach and the deep blue sea.

There was a man sitting at a table under a patio roof, shirtless, shoeless, wearing a pair of khaki shorts. He was talking on the phone. He was middle-aged, brown, a little heavy.

Closer to the fence was the pool. Someone was swimming in the pool. I watched. It was a woman. She climbed out. She was tall and lean and dark with shoulder-length black hair. She looked middle-aged, and she looked to have worn well. I could tell that even from a distance. She was topless and proud of it. Walked with her back straight, shoulders back, her breasts forward like copper headlamps. The bikini she wore was a dark color and covered her in the front but did little to hide anything else.

“Damn,” I said.

“Ah, that would be his wife you are seeing,” César said. “Is she nude?”

“Damn near it.”

“She likes to go without the top. Sometimes she wears nothing at all. Juan Miguel. He often goes nude. They are very much into the nudity. They travel to nudist camps worldwide I am told. They think the life is healthy. And then there is Hammerhead. Do you see him?”

“Nope,” I said. “Damn. She’s a beauty … And he’s screwing around with another woman?”

“Alas, it happens. And she too is magnificent, this other woman. And younger.”

“They always are,” Brett said.

“If the guy takes off his pants,” Leonard said, “let me know. Then I’ll want a look.”

“I would like to see,” Ferdinand said.

“Look,” I said.

He looked through the telescope. “I want him to see my face before he dies. I want him to know why.”

“We all do,” Brett said. She stood with her arm around my waist.

“I’d just settle for him being dead,” I said. “A good rifle, and bam, he’s out of here.”

In fact, I knew it was a shot I could make if I had the right instrument. I had learned to shoot a rifle on my daddy’s knee, and though my close vision wasn’t what it used to be, I could still see far away and well.

“No,” César said. “I agree with Ferdinand. He must know.”

“After he knows, he’s got a long time not knowing,” I said. “What’s the difference? We got to do this thing, why not just do it?”

Because I will think of it forever,” César said. “And I will cherish it forever. The look on his face when I explain.”

“You have to have time to explain.”

César grinned at me.

“I don’t think you’re going to find this type of revenge all that satisfying,” I said.

“Oh, I will,” César said. “Are you losing your stomach for this?”

“I’m beginning to think I never had the stomach for it.”

Brett took hold of the telescope, said, “Let me take a look.”

She said, “Oh, my God. That must be Hammerhead. Jesus Christ. You put a sock and shoe on his dick, stroked it a couple times, he could use it as a third leg.”

I took over the scope.

“My Lord.”

The man was monstrous and naked. He had come into the yard carrying a barbell decked with weights. I saw now there were other weights in the yard, and there was a weight rack. Hammerhead was completely nude. Miguel’s wife had stretched out on a towel and was rubbing her long legs with lotion. She had put on sunglasses. Her head was turned in Hammerhead’s direction, head tilted slightly like a dog that had spotted a salami, and in way, she had.

Hammerhead’s body coiled and the weights rose, he uncoiled and they lowered. He repeated the process. Muscles crawled and knotted under his flesh like angry pigs struggling in a sack. He was the biggest man I had ever seen. Not the tallest, or the heaviest. Just the biggest. His shoulders were broad enough to maybe just hold up the sky. His chest was like the Hoover Dam. His arms were big enough to be used to beat the World Wrestling Federation to death all at the same time. His penis hung long and limp and seemed as big around as my wrist.

“He is one big motherfucker,” I said.

“Is he as big as Big Man Mountain?” Leonard asked, referring to a wrestler we had crossed paths with once.

“He could hide Big Man Mountain under his nut sack,” Jim Bob said, glancing through the scope. “I told you he was big, didn’t I, Hap?”

“Let me look at this,” Leonard said. He took a look. He said, “Good God, his goober and balls look like grapefruits hanging off a fence post. He got that thing up someone’s asshole they’d have to get it out with crowbars, maybe dynamite it free. He is one creepy motherfucker. Maybe a rifle shot for the both of them isn’t such a bad idea. Or in his case, maybe a couple land mines.”

“No,” César said. “I will not do it that way.”

“Nor will we,” Jim Bob said. “Now we need to get started.”

29

We had to wait a few days and watch the mistress. Actually, I didn't watch anything. César, Ferdinand, and Jim Bob did the watching. They took turns near the mistress's house, parking nearby and observing, sometimes from a distance with the scope.

Me, Brett, and Leonard got the cushy part of the deal, which probably meant Jim Bob was afraid me and Leonard would fuck things up.

Brett and I stayed at the hotel, in bed a lot. Leonard spent time in the swimming pool. Each day the three of us met for lunch, and in the afternoons, Ferdinand and Jim Bob, or Ferdinand and César, or some combination of the three would meet us back at the hotel for dinner while the other watched. Ferdinand was very uncomfortable when he was one of the two who joined us for dinner. He was not used to restaurants.

It was one of the few times in my life I had lived like I had money, and I was enjoying it.

I did have money. But it was seeping away daily, like a sand angel washed by the waves.

About four days after we arrived in Playa del Carmen, Jim Bob met us for dinner without Ferdinand or César. We were sitting at a poolside table, and Brett had ordered margaritas for herself and Leonard, and they were going at it when he walked up.

"Just you today?" I said.

"That's right. César and Ferdinand are on their way to Mexico City."

"The mistress went shopping?" I said.

"Looks that way. She went to the airport. César gave me a cell phone, left me sitting under a palm tree, followed her in the car, then called me back. They were at the airport. He said she was getting a ticket to Mexico City."

“How does he know?” Brett asked. “She might have been getting a ticket to Juárez.”

“He knows,” Jim Bob said. He smiled at her. “He’s a detective. Remember?”

“Ah,” Brett said.

“César and Ferdinand were about to get tickets to follow. Guess they did. He said for us to meet him in Mexico City at the Presidente Intercontinental Hotel. After I got all that, I walked a couple miles, hitched a ride, and here I am.”

“When do we leave?” Leonard asked.

“Not before dinner,” Jim Bob said. “I can assure you of that.”

The summer days were long, so it was still full light by the time we finished dinner and took a taxi to the airport in Cancun. We bought tickets, waited about an hour, and flew out. The plane was poorly air-conditioned, so it was a stuffy, hot flight.

Brett and I were sitting together with a spare seat between us. We were holding hands like teenagers, but it was too humid, and by mutual unspoken agreement, we let go. I opened my shirt collar, adjusted the air-conditioning vent, but no help there.

“I got sweat beads in my crack,” Brett said. “Both cracks.”

“Overshare,” I said.

There were no clouds and the sun was beginning to dip as we flew into Mexico City’s airspace. We circled for a while. Through the window I could see mountains and snow-capped volcanoes bathed in the red of the dying sun.

Finally we flew in closer to the city. A haze of pollution thick enough to wear overalls hung over everything. Mixed with the sunlight the air achieved the color of a dried wound. Buildings jumped up at us and the streets below were as confused as a ball of twine.

Soon we were landing, hustling our luggage, trying to move through a sweaty crowd of people toward the street and a taxi. Jim Bob spoke to a driver and got us a ride. The car was once blue, but was now spotted like a pinto horse with gray filler. The tires were so worn-looking the rubber seemed attached to them by no more than a prayer.

We packed our luggage in the trunk, which smelled as if fish had recently been stored there, and no sooner had we closed the doors of the taxi than the driver gave it gas and leaped us out in front of traffic like a sacrifice.

Horns blared. We cruised at top speed through lights that once they turned red were shaded by at least three or four cars before anyone actually took heed of their color. We bounced the curb a couple of times, as if our driver might get points for pedestrians, and he may actually have clipped the ass of a slow-moving woman carrying a shopping bag. It was hard to tell if she was knocked or she jumped. She just went leaping away, her long blue dress fluttering, one shoe flying, the bag swinging on her arm by its rope handle.

I turned to look out the back window to see if she got up, but we turned so fast everything behind us became a blur and we edged in on another taxi as if to initiate a duel.

I glanced out the left-hand window of the back seat, saw we were close enough for me to put gas in the other taxi's tank, but that wasn't close enough. Not for our man. He edged in tighter, so close that if the elderly lady in the back seat had rolled down her window, we could have French kissed.

The lady looked to be on the verge of a stroke, or at least a very heavy-duty bowel movement. She glanced at me, swallowed. I smiled as our taxi driver cut down on his horn hard enough and loud enough to alert any ship channel within a thousand miles, then we shot away from the car beside us as if we had just vaulted to warp speed, changed lanes tighter than a suppository in a fat man's ass, went weaving, honking, and being honked at all the way to the Presidente Intercontinental.

As our driver pulled into the driveway at the hotel and I stepped out on solid ground, I felt like a ripped-up teddy bear that had just had its legs sewn back on, but without all the stuffing.

Our driver lugged our luggage out of the trunk with the care of a murderer disposing of a body in a tar pit, and a fellow who looked as if he could bench-press the taxi came out, threw our bags on a rolling rack, and showed us he had all his teeth and every one of them yellow. Jim Bob paid the taxi driver, and we followed our toothy man with the rack to the front desk.

“I haven’t had that much fun since my last yeast infection,” Brett said.

“I just kept my eyes closed,” Leonard said.

Jim Bob talked in Spanish to a pretty woman at the desk with too much eye makeup. They smiled at each other a lot. Jim Bob borrowed the desk phone.

The phone conversation was short. Jim Bob talked to the lady at the desk again. She gave him some keys.

Jim Bob said, “César already has our rooms. You and me, Leonard, we’re roomies.”

“Oh boy,” Leonard said. “Up late spitting water and reading fashion magazines.”

“Hot damn,” Jim Bob said.

We rode the elevator up with the man with the luggage carriage, got our stuff loaded in our rooms, paid the guy off, then took a walk down the corridor where Jim Bob knocked on a door.

César opened up and let us in. “Qué pasa,” he said.

He was dressed in a navy blue shirt that fit him tight as a grapeskin. His pants were tight as well, and too short. He looked like someone who had tucked his belongings into his crotch and was trying to wade high water.

Ferdinand appeared, wearing what must have been one of César’s shirts; it was black as the grave and the collars were flared as if they were wings. He was silent as usual, sat at the table near the window, looking down at the streets and the hot sunshine. He was drinking a Mexican beer. Another was on the table, opened.

“Would you like drinks?” César asked. He opened up the little bar with his key. Brett and Leonard took a beer, I took a Diet Coke. We sat on one of the beds, César took a chair at the table. He said, “Our little mistress is quite the busy one already.”

“Aren’t we supposed to go out and spring on her or something?” Leonard said.

“In due time,” César said. “I have followed her before, remember. Jim Bob and I followed her. But I have watched her before that."

"Why?" Brett said.

"I have watched her because I have watched everything there is to know about this Juan Miguel. I am very patient, you see. But I must confess, this idea of kidnapping her, it had not occurred to me. It is a good idea for what you have in mind. I should have thought of it some time ago."

"We are masters of crime," I said.

"She is in this hotel," César said. "It is where she always stays. She will go to the Museum of Anthropology. She will shop, and she will come to the restaurant here to have her dinner. This is her schedule in the past."

"What if she changes it?" I said.

"It is possible, but I will chance that she does not."

"You're chancing our money, César," I said. "I only have so much. I can't run around all over Mexico."

"Trust me," César said. "Tell them, Jim Bob."

"Trust him," Jim Bob said.

"I feel better," Brett said.

"What's up with the Museum of Anthropology?" Leonard asked.

"That is for Juan Miguel, or so I believe," César said. "I think she is trying to sell certain pieces that Juan Miguel has to the museum. She goes there each time she comes here. Juan Miguel, as I'm sure my friend Jim Bob has explained to you, is known to have an extensive collection, known to traffic in antiquities. So it is possible."

"And maybe," Brett said, "the reason she's his mistress is she shares Juan Miguel's interests. Maybe she isn't just a poke piece, but someone who is smart, sophisticated, and loves anthropology and archaeology, and maybe his wife doesn't."

"And she's a poke piece," Jim Bob said.

"That too," Brett said. "But Hap and I are attracted to each other because we share interests."

"Like what?" Jim Bob said.

"Chickens. He protects them, and I deep-fry them."

“I was once asked to masturbate a rooster,” I said.

“I don’t even want to know about that,” Jim Bob said.

“I think that I would, señor,” said César.

Even Ferdinand looked interested.

I told them about being offered a job to garner rooster sperm. César laughed as if I had told him the best joke he had ever heard.

Brett said, “That’s my man.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Hard to believe I turned them down.”

“About this thing we’re doing?” Leonard asked. “You know, the thing that’s not as exciting as jerking a chicken’s nub, but this thing with the woman … She has her body-guards with her, of course?”

“Of course,” César said.

“Are they big?”

“Big enough, señor.”

“As in big and mean?”

“I would say so. Yes, señor, big and mean.”

“Shit.”

“Armed of course?” I asked.

“Unless those big bumps under their arms are breasts that have slid sideways, I believe so, señor.”

“Maybe we could talk them into just arm wrestling us for her?” Leonard said.

“Will you two just shut up,” Jim Bob said.

I looked at Leonard and grinned. He wrinkled his mouth into a near smile. Brett reached over, patted me on the leg. She either loved my humor or was kind enough to make me think so.

“The best time to grab the woman would be when they come up from dinner to their room,” César said. “They have a very nice room at the top of the hotel.”

“You know they’re in this room because they always are?” I asked.

“Yes. Juan Miguel pays for this, so he sees she has the best. Tomorrow, that will be the day when she does the serious shopping. It is too late today, and I am too tired. I say we have a good dinner, rest, and tomorrow, I will tail them. Is that how you say it, Jim Bob, tail them?"

"Yeah," Jim Bob said.

"I will tail them, and then when she has her dinner, you will be prepared when she comes up, and you will take care of the guards—"

"Hey, I don't want to kill these guys," I said. "That's not part of the deal. We want Juan Miguel and the walking haystack, but these other guys, I don't want to kill them."

"Then do not," César said. "But take care of them. Make your choice. Take the woman. Make her quiet."

"Then what?" Leonard said. "Do we knock her unconscious, beat her up in the hall?"

"Do not worry," César said. "I have brought the chloroform. You put it on a rag, give her a whiff, and she will fall to the ground. You can do it with the guards too, but they may not fall so fast. They are big and strong and most certainly willful. I leave that to you."

"You know," I said to Jim Bob, "I think your additions to my basic plan aren't all that better than the basic plan. My plan sucks, and this is better?"

"Believe me," Jim Bob said. "It's better. And there's more to it. Most of it will be passed on to you on a need-to-know basis."

"Boss," Leonard said. "Dat a good idea. We don't wants lots of stuffs in our haids might be confusin'."

"You got that right," Jim Bob said.

"I suppose Jim Bob has told you that you are all listed under false names?" César said.

"He failed to mention that," I said.

"I was going to," Jim Bob said. He told us our false names.

César said, "Meet here at four P.M. tomorrow, local time. If you have watches, make sure they are set correctly. Come to this room and wait until you get a phone call."

"From who?" I asked.

"From me. I will be watching her. Ferdinand will let you in so you can wait. I will call when they are near.”

“What about guns?” Leonard said.

“I will take care of that, my friend,” César said.

Jim Bob said, “I’m going to my room now, going to watch a little Mexican TV, then get a good night’s sleep. What about you, Leonard?”

“I got a key,” Leonard said. “I’ll come along shortly.”

“Suit yourself,” Jim Bob said, and left the room.

Leonard went with me and Brett to our room, had another drink. I said, “This thing is starting to involve more people than the U.S. Army. And it seems like there’s more people to hurt all the time. All I want to do is nab the woman, set her up as an insurance policy for us so we can do what we have to do.”

“It’ll be okay, Hap,” Leonard said. He stood up. “Good night, brother. Good night, Brett.”

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NEXT MORNING AFTER BREAKFAST I couldn't bring myself to sit in the hotel room, because all I did then was brood on our plans. The old saw about revenge is a dish best served cold is bullshit. Revenge is only sweet in the heat of the moment.

Brett was willing, so we went walking. The streets were crowded and the air was blistering to the eyes. Within fifteen minutes the pollution had done a job on my throat. It felt as if a little man with a bad temper had moved into my mouth and sandpapered my tonsils.

We walked over to the Anthropology Museum and looked around. I loved it. Deep inside me I felt old longings. As a child I had often thought of teaching, perhaps archaeology or history. Here I was, in my forties, a night guard in a chicken plant. I didn't even have a college education, just a piece of one. There wasn't much point thinking about what might have been, but as we walked about and looked at things, I thought about it anyway.

"I wish we had time to go out and see the pyramids," Brett said. "The Temple of the Sun and the Moon aren't far from here. A day's excursion."

I looked at my watch. "How about lunch instead?"

"Lunch is good."

We left the museum and walked until we came to an interesting restaurant. It wasn't fancy, but it wasn't exactly a hole in the wall either. No one spoke English there, so we pointed at the menu a lot, not sure of what we were getting.

It turned out to be something the waiter called mole de quajalote, and it was good. It tasted like some kind of bird, maybe turkey, in a very sweet sauce. We also had a dish called cochinita pibil, which I could tell was made from pork.

When we finished with the meal, they brought out a sweet bread and a kind of pudding made of milk, fruit, sugar, and stuff I couldn’t identify. It was too sweet for me.

Feeling like funnel-fed geese, we decided to walk off the meal. Outside the air was rawer than before. It had a stench, like gasoline mixed with sewage, tortillas, and frying meat. The last two smells came from the large number of vendors who cooked you meals on the spot. Chances were, you ate the stuff in the square, you could get a case of the squirts that would make a mud slide seem tame.

We looked at huge and beautiful churches, took a short walking tour that was guided by a man that almost spoke English, though it was certainly better than my Spanish, and finally we ended up at the Mexico City zoo. It was a huge zoo, well tended, but as always, like circuses, it made me sad. Polar bears housed in southern regions do not consider themselves on a tropical vacation. They just look lost.

About three in the afternoon we caught a taxi, found out our first experience had not been a fluke. This taxi ride was just as scary, and by the time we arrived back at the hotel, the sweet sauce I had eaten was nestled in the back of my throat.

We went up to our room, brushed our teeth, looked at our watches. We were about fifteen minutes early. We checked to make sure both our watches said the same thing. They did. Finally, we said fuck it, walked over to César’s room, knocked on the door.

Ferdinand let us in. About five minutes later, Leonard showed up.

“You sightsee?” I said.

“Just the back of my eyelids,” Leonard said. “I slept in. Jim Bob snores like a goddamn bear. I didn’t sleep good last night. I’m sort of pissed off, actually. I don’t like it when I don’t sleep well.”

“Where’s Jim Bob?” Brett said.

“He was gone when I got up. I grabbed some lunch, read a Western Jim Bob had brought with him, went to the bathroom a lot, blew my nose, looked out the window, and here I am.”

“Quite a prosperous day,” I said.

There was a knock on the door. I looked through the peephole.

Jim Bob was shooting me the finger.

I opened the door, said, “What an adolescent.”

“I drop these pants, boy, you’ll think adolescent. Calling me a child is like calling—”

“Oh, just come in and shut up,” Brett said.

There were two suitcases setting on either side of Jim Bob. He picked them up, carried them into the room. He put them on the bed.

“What you got there?” Brett asked. “Sex toys?”

“You wish,” Jim Bob said. “César’s contacts. They’re bad boys.”

Inside one suitcase was something wrapped in a white towel. Jim Bob removed that, laid it carefully on the bed. It was a bottle of chloroform.

He removed a folded duffel bag from the suitcase and unfolded it. It was about six feet in length. Beneath it were a couple of blackjacks, a slapjack, and four nine-millimeter automatics. The other case contained ammo clips and several pieces that went together to make a rifle and a sawed-off double-barrel shotgun. The rifle had a scope and a silencer. There was ammunition for both guns.

“I still think shooting him from a distance is the way to go,” I said.

“He must know who it is that kills him,” Ferdinand said.

“Yep,” Jim Bob said. “It’s a grace note. Five seconds of knowing you’re about to die, for whatever reason, is a long goddamn time. Shooting him from a distance is just doing the motherfucker a favor.”

“All right,” I said. “Outline it.”

“For what we’re doing here,” Jim Bob said, “the guns are out. We take the blackjacks, or the slapjack, our hands, whatever. We use the chloroform. We get these two guys down quick, we nab the woman, put her out of commission, and we’re out of here.”

“How are we out of here?” Brett asked.

“We stick the woman in the duffel bag, we check out, we get in the black van out front that César will have waiting, we go to the airport, and he drives the woman back to his place. We meet there."

"Why don't we just put her in our pocket and walk out?" Leonard said. "A duffel bag? That's it? A fuckin' duffel bag?"

"It'll work," Jim Bob said. "Trust me."

"So we're supposed to meet them as they come up the elevator," I said. "What if someone rides up the elevator with them?"

"They won't," Jim Bob said. "César says they never ride up or down with anyone. They wait until they have it to themselves. Safety precautions."

"Don't these guys know what César looks like?" Brett said. "I mean, hell, they cut the tip of his finger off and slapped his ear silly."

"These men may or may not," Jim Bob said. "But they won't see him if he doesn't want to be seen. César's good. Almost as good as me."

"Why so much protection?" Brett said. "Is she made of gold?"

"She's protected because of people like us," Jim Bob said. "Juan Miguel protects his property, and to him, she's property."

"So the elevator opens on this floor," Leonard said. "What's to prevent someone else being in the hallway, seeing us go at these guys?"

"Nothing," Jim Bob said. "We deal with that if it happens."

Just before six the phone rang. Jim Bob answered, listened, hung up. He turned to us.

"Yippie ki 'eah."

I put the slapjack in my back pocket, Leonard took a blackjack, and Jim Bob brought only himself. Ferdinand said, "And me?"

"You're going to have to wait in the room," Jim Bob said. "When we knock, you be right by the door and let us in. Got me?"

Ferdinand nodded.

Brett opened the door for us and tagged along behind carrying a towel. She had poured it full of chloroform, and the stench of it was strong in the hall.

“This is so fucked,” she said.

“I’m about to swoon here,” Leonard said. “Brett, you think maybe you got enough of that crap on the towel?”

“Too much and you’ll kill her,” Jim Bob said. “Hit her with it quick, then get it off her face.”

No one was in the hallway. We stopped at the elevator. The numbers on the elevator light were racing toward our floor. Then the other elevator started moving up.

“Which elevator are they in?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Jim Bob said.

“Oh, shit. That’s good.”

We tried to stand casual, just a wad of folks waiting to get on the elevator. The door opened. A short, stocky woman just shy of three thousand years old with sparse hair dyed shoe polish black and at least twenty-five whisker hairs to match, also dyed, stepped out of the elevator carrying a white poodle with a leash.

Brett leaned close to my ear, spoke softly. “Maybe we should sap her once for not getting rid of that mustache.”

“Twice,” I said. “She also has a poodle.”

The woman moved slowly, putting the dog down, leading it on its leash. She had just turned the corner away from the elevator, out of sight, when the other elevator’s light hit our floor and the door opened, and there was one of the most astoundingly beautiful women I have ever seen.

She was probably five seven, a little over a hundred pounds, well built, face like an angel, large black eyes and soft black hair that flowed to the middle of her back. She wore a short blue dress and matching high heels. Her legs were fashioned from a dream. She looked very elegant.

The guys on either side of her were well dressed, but not so elegant. They would have looked the same in thousand-dollar suits or tablecloths. They looked about as casual as meat gravy stains on a white shirt.

As they stepped out of the elevator, Jim Bob said something pleasant in Spanish, stepped aside. As they passed, the guard on the left eyed Jim Bob. Brett took hold of her skirt, pulled it up and scratched her leg, causing the skirt to ride almost to her hip.

The guy looked.

Jim Bob sapped him. It was a good lick. The guy stumbled, Jim Bob leaped on him, started beating him like a hamburger steak.

The other guy was on the move now, his hand going inside his coat. Leonard grabbed that hand with his left, poked the man in the eyes with his right. The big bastard grunted, his hand came out of his coat, he tried to reach for his face, but Leonard had that hand. Leonard twisted slightly, and the dude flipped, hit the floor hard, banging the side of his head. I kicked the poor bastard hard as I could. He didn't go out, but he didn't act as if he was in any hurry to get up.

Leonard bent down over him and went to work with the sap. It sounded like a carpenter driving a pesky nail. Even after I thought the guy was out, I heard the sap ring a half dozen more times.

Brett had wrestled the woman to the floor and was trying to push the chloroform-filled towel over her face, but no luck. The woman started to scream.

Jim Bob pulled Brett off the mistress, brought his palm down swift, but not too hard on the woman's forehead, just above the eyebrow at the left corner.

She went out.

I was standing, panting. The place stank of chloroform. I had moved away from the elevator wall, and now I could see down the hall. The woman with the poodle had stopped, listening to those screams.

Brett stepped into the hallway. "A bug. A spider. It frightened me."

The woman looked puzzled.

Jim Bob stepped into view, he spoke Spanish. The woman grinned, said something in Spanish. She and her dog went on down the hallway.

"What did you say?" Brett asked.

"Just what you did. I told her you saw a spider."

"What did she say?"

"What a sissy. Words to that effect."

“I’m not sure I like that.”

When the old woman was out of sight, Leonard removed the guns from the bodyguards, got one of the guys by the leg and started dragging him down the corridor toward Jim Bob’s room. Jim Bob got the other guard by the leg, and I picked up the woman. She was as small as a child.

I looked down at her. A small purple bruise was forming at the corner of her eye. She was so gorgeous I felt as if her beauty were sucking out my soul. I could see why Juan Miguel would leave his wife. It’s a hard thing to admit beauty alone can make you crazy, but a woman like this, good God, she *could* make you crazy.

“When we get her to the room,” Brett said, “maybe you could tuck her in, give her a bottle.”

I made a snorting sound. “I hope you’re not jealous of someone we just tried to chloroform and hit on the head.”

“I’m jealous of someone who looks like a magazine cover, that’s what I’m jealous of,” Brett said.

Jim Bob knocked, Ferdinand opened the door. Jim Bob and Leonard dragged the guards inside. I carried the woman and put her on the bed. She had begun to stir. She opened her eyes. Brett, smiling, leaned forward and pushed the chloroform-filled towel over her nose. The woman struggled briefly, went out.

Brett pulled the towel away.

“Tie up and gag these mooses,” Jim Bob said. “And quick before they wake up. Tie her up too, and pull her dress down. I don’t need to see that. I like it, but I don’t need to see it. I better not see it. Damn, those panties are sheer …”

“We get the picture,” Brett said.

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WE BOUND THEM and gagged them with strips of sheets. We poured the chloroform down the sink, put the towel in the tub. The air was still fairly stout with it. We opened a window. We turned on the TV set, sat the bodyguards on the floor with their backs against the bed.

We found a Spanish game show. Jim Bob patted them on the head and we left out of there, the woman in the duffel bag, slung over Leonard’s shoulder.

We rode the elevator down. As Jim Bob and Brett stopped at the desk with our keys, prepared to check us out, Leonard and I walked outside to the curb. There was a black van there. César got out of it, nodded at us. He opened the side of the van. Leonard put the duffel bag on the seat, closed the door.

“We will see you in Playa del Carmen in a while,” César said. “We must drive the whole way. Where is Jim Bob?”

“Coming,” Leonard said.

Jim Bob and Brett came out. Jim Bob got in the van. Before he closed the door I looked at the duffel bag on the seat. “She’s moving,” I said.

Jim Bob reached inside his coat, pulled out the blackjack. With a motion a ballet dancer would have appreciated, he shifted in his seat and smacked the bag where the head was. The bag quit moving.

“Goddamn, Jim Bob,” I said. “It’s not her we want to hurt.”

“You want I should take her to a bullfight?” Jim Bob said. “A bump on her head is better than us in a Mexican jail. You should know.”

I closed the door, César drove them away.

We had a slightly better ride to the airport than from it. I was able to get out of the taxi without feeling faint. Our life had only been in danger maybe half a dozen times.

We caught our flight out without incident, arrived that night in Cancun, took our rental back to Playa del Carmen. We didn't have reservations, but we got our same hotel without trouble. Leonard got a room. Brett and I shared a room.

That night, when she finished brushing her teeth, Brett said, "Do you think that woman is beautiful?"

I was stepping out of the shower. "Ravishing," I said.

"She was very pretty."

"Ravishing."

"Don't overdo it if you want Mr. Happy to actually be happy tonight."

"But with that knot on her head from the blackjack, not so beautiful. And you know what? Jim Bob may have hit her again. Maybe a lot of times. She could be real ugly by now."

"That's better. And dry under your balls. I hate it when they're sticky on my ass."

"You say the most exciting things," I said.

"Do you know what they're planning to do?"

"About as much as you do. They'll drive her to César's, taking their time. Maybe stop along the way a couple of nights. Tomorrow, a couple of us go to see the man, tell him we have her, and then we lay the trap."

Brett had slipped out of her clothes, and I was enjoying watching her pull on a nightie with no underwear. No underwear was always a good sign.

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THREE NIGHTS LATER, about three A.M., we got a call.

“Come over.” It was Jim Bob.

“On our way.”

I woke Brett up. Called Leonard’s room, fifteen minutes later we were in the rental, wheeling our way to César’s house.

César let us in. He was colorful as usual, a purple shirt with red and green parrots on it, white slacks and slip-on white shoes without socks.

Jim Bob looked his usual self, but for the moment, he was without his hat. I was surprised to discover he had hair.

Ferdinand was sitting quietly in a chair, hands rested in his lap. He looked calm, as if he were waiting to drop the lever on a guillotine. He smiled thinly at us, nodded his head.

Hermonie sat on one end of the couch, looking pretty and inscrutable in a pale yellow pants suit. When we came in, she didn’t speak, didn’t change her expression. There was nothing about her to acknowledge we had entered the room except a lifting of her eyes.

On the other end of the couch, her hands cuffed in front of her, a chain fastened to the center of the cuffs on her ankles, was the mistress. She looked like a goddess, except for a faint blue bruise above her right eye. I assumed, under that luxurious mane of black hair, would be at least one blackjack knot. She was smoldering. I half expected the couch to burst into flames.

On the coffee table in front of the mistress was a plate of food, untouched from the looks of it.

“More bastards!” she said. “You are all bastards!”

“Actually,” Brett said, “technically, I’m a bitch.”

“Bastards! All bastards!”

“Her English,” Jim Bob said, “is quite good, especially when it comes to cuss words. We took our time getting here, and we’ve had her here awhile, doing a bit of interrogation.”

“Juan Miguel will kill you,” she said. “He will have you skinned. He will nail your skins to walls and he will piss on them.”

“Do you want to be gagged?” Jim Bob said. “I’ll use my dirty underwear again.”

The mistress went silent, but the looks she gave Jim Bob were almost enough to skin him without Juan Miguel’s help.

“Her name is Ileana,” Jim Bob said.

“Fuck you, you pig,” Ileana said. “Fuck you. Fuck you.”

“Dirty underwear, dear,” Jim Bob said. “Ones with the Hershey stains in the seat.”

“Jesus,” Brett said. “You’re not even threatening to gag me and I’m scared.”

Ileana went silent again, but she wasn’t happy about it.

“What’s next?” I said.

“We have already contacted Juan Miguel,” Jim Bob said. “Told him we had his woman. He really wants her back,” Jim Bob said. “I don’t know he cares for her so much—”

“He loves me,” Ileana said. “He loves me much. He will hate you much.”

Jim Bob put a finger to his lips. “You be quiet now. As I was saying, I don’t know how much he cares for her, but he wants her back, talks like he’s lost a wallet or something and wants it back. He doesn’t talk like she’s a person.”

“Neither do you,” Brett said.

“No, I don’t, lady. It makes things easier not to. He wants her back, so I arranged a meeting. You and me, Hap. We’ll do it.”

“Will it be safe?” Brett said.

“Safe as we can make it,” Jim Bob said. “We got something Juan Miguel wants.”

Jim Bob stopped at a phone booth on the way into Playa del Carmen. He didn’t want to chance César’s home phone or cell phone number. If the number could be traced, Juan Miguel might have the contacts to trace it.

César had somehow gotten Juan Miguel's number, either through research or from Ileana. I hoped he had not done anything bad to her to get it.

Jim Bob called and talked while I stood outside the old rickety phone booth. As he talked, three young Mexican men wandered over in our direction.

I knew their intent. I had seen it many times. Thugs come in all colors and sizes, but they all walk just alike. I figured a phone booth that worked, located in a dark place, this time of night, was a great spot for them to pull off a mugging.

By the time Jim Bob finished talking and came out of the booth, they were about ten feet away. He reached in his coat and pulled out one of the nine millimeters, said something in Spanish while he waved it around.

The three thugs bolted away into the darkness.

"You have such a way with words," I said.

"Ain't that the goddamn truth," Jim Bob said.

"How'd it go?"

"They're expecting us."

"Jim Bob."

"Yeah."

"Ileana. You didn't really hurt her, did you?"

"I think that sap shot hurt pretty good."

"I mean beyond that."

"No … You planning on dating her?"

"I merely meant I don't want to see her hurt. I feel scummy. She's an innocent bystander."

"In a manner, but in another, she knows who Juan Miguel is. She knows what kinds of things he does. She profits from this, Hap. Don't get too fuckin' sentimental just because she's a looker. She got in bed with this mangy, flea-bitten dog, and she's got his fleas on her now. That's the long and the short of it."

We drove along the beach toward the great house that belonged to Juan Miguel. It was full of light up on the rise, stood there like a gem growing out of the ground.

We came around on its back side, stopped at a wide metal gate. There was a box you talked into, and Jim Bob did that. The gate opened. Jim Bob took the nine millimeter out from under his coat and pushed it under the car seat.

“They’re gonna search us anyway, take it away,” he said. “You got anything?”

“A wallet.”

“Put it under the seat. That’s what I’m doing.”

I did that. He said, “Anything else?”

“Nothing that isn’t attached.”

“Let’s hope they let us keep that stuff,” Jim Bob said.

We drove through the gate, down the drive, up to the house. Juan Miguel’s home was even more awesome close up, like something I thought the movies made up. Three stories high, lots of glass, the rest of it pink stone with a red tile roof and a front porch big enough to build a tennis court on. The porch was made of stone too, but snow white, as if it were bleached daily and polished. The house and porch gleamed fairy-tale-like in the soft glow of the night lights that poked out of the shrubs and palm trees, but the tall tinted windows deadened the light like cataracts.

Surrounded by low-cut shrubbery was a well-lit pool. It was to the right of the house, the color of a sapphire, the shape of a kidney. A diving board perched above it like an extended tongue. It was a big pool, and I knew from my telescopic eavesdropping it was smaller than the one at the rear of the house, which had through the looking glass appeared big enough and deep enough to provide Shamu the Killer Whale with a vacation home.

“Damn sure beats a double-wide, don’t it?” Jim Bob said.

“I once knew a fella fastened two double-wides together,” I said. “That was pretty nice.”

Jim Bob chuckled.

The door opened and two guys in tan suits came out on the stone porch. From where we sat, they looked like two fleas standing on canvas, about to go through their act. They were the two guys we had beat and tied up at the hotel in Mexico City.

As we got out of the car, Jim Bob said, “At least there are two people here who know us.”

“They are sweet,” I said, “but my guess is neither of them will be bringing pot luck lunches to Mensa’s next Christmas party.”

The air was stuffed with the smell of fresh-mowed grass and recently manicured shrubs. There was a touch of chlorine from the pool. If it had been daylight I’m sure a butterfly and bluebird would have lit on my shoulder.

The two came down the great steps carefully, as if they were afraid their pants might rip. It seemed to take them forever to cross the green, clipped lawn, make their way over to meet us. First thing they did was clobber the both of us. I took an uppercut in the belly and went down. I wanted to fight back, but didn’t. I took another clip to the side of the head, was yanked up and kicked in the ass. I made a note to remember that kick in the ass. Not to mention the fact I had a headache about the size of Alaska.

A moment later we were searched and four pesos I had in my front pocket were taken and Jim Bob lost a pocketknife out of the deal. We should have put those under the seat.

Next Jim Bob and I were hustled in front of them, toward the pool. Jim Bob had lost his hat in the beating, and it had been stepped on before he recovered it. As he walked along he was at work straightening it.

“They took it personal,” he said.

“Looks like.”

“I didn’t take the beating personal myself,” Jim Bob said. “But stepping on my hat was just mean, and I won’t forget it.”

“You’re like Leonard about his hats,” I said.

“I’ve never seen him in a hat.”

“They get stepped on.”

We went through a gap in the wall of shrubbery, between palm trees with lights on them, out to the side pool, which was bordered by copper-colored tile and on the far side there were plenty of bushes and trees and a fountain in the shape of an angel with wings spread wide. There was plenty of light on the sapphire pool and someone was in it, swimming. We were taken to a glass table, pushed down into white plastic chairs, spoken to in Spanish.

"They want us to stay," Jim Bob said.

"I figured that much. Goddamn, my gut hurts. That fucker has quite a punch."

"My guy hit like a sissy," Jim Bob said.

"You're lucky," I said. "He hit any harder than he did, you'd look like E.T. on that side of your face."

The person in the pool was obviously Juan Miguel. He swam a couple more laps just for show, then climbed out. He was butt-naked. One of the buffaloes gave him a long white towel and he went to drying himself.

He came over, flipping his dick and balls with the end of the towel. I didn't know if he were merely drying himself, or if it was some kind of greeting.

Up close I could see Juan Miguel was older than he had appeared through the telescope. He was in good shape, with a slightly protruding belly, but solid muscle tone. He had all his own hair and certainly dyed it. He was probably about five ten, one ninety and proud of himself.

"Qué pasa," Juan Miguel said, and he smiled so big the light bouncing off his teeth nearly put my eyes out.

"How's it hanging?" Jim Bob said.

Juan Miguel thought about that, then slowly he laughed. "How is it hanging. That is good. How is it hanging. As you can see, my man, it hangs quite well."

"Yeah. It almost looks like a real dick."

Juan Miguel said something in Spanish. One of the buffaloes stepped forward, slapped Jim Bob so hard he was knocked out of the chair and the chair went spinning. He lost his hat again. It rolled backward all the way to the shrubbery.

Juan Miguel looked at me. "Do you have a comment, sir?"

"I'm cool," I said.

Jim Bob got up, straightened his chair, recovered his hat, sat back down. "Where do you get these guys? A girls school?"

Juan Miguel made a movement with his mouth that wasn't quite a frown or a smile, but was certainly unpleasant. I thought Jim Bob was due for another slapping, or worse, but Juan Miguel took a breath, looked down at his package and continued drying it as if he were polishing a precious stone.

“Do you find nudity unpleasant?” Juan Miguel asked us.

“Yours, yes,” Jim Bob said. “But your woman, hey, I think she looks pretty good.”

Juan Miguel snapped something in Spanish, and this time both buffaloes jumped on Jim Bob. I wanted to help him, but I knew that wasn’t our game. Jim Bob took a short but rapid beating from their fists, then lay on his side and was kicked for a while.

I said, “You do that much longer, I can assure you, you’ll never see your mistress again, unless it’s in a ditch with a zucchini stuffed up her snatch.”

“Alto,” Juan Miguel said.

Jim Bob lay awhile longer this time, but finally he got up, brushed himself off, righted his chair, recovered his hat, which was the shape of a paper wad, and sat down. “The two of them together, working hard, are almost a man,” he said.

“You are crazy,” Juan Miguel said. “You want to die. And you will.”

Jim Bob spat blood on the stones. “Not unless you want that mistress to end up like my partner said. Only I’ll make sure she gets a zucchini in every hole. Maybe even a melon. No more beatings. No more bullshit. You listen to us. We don’t come back soon, call in, your girlfriend, she’s gonna end up in a bad way. You hear me, you cheap-ass Mexican Godfather wannabe. We’re just hired help, and it don’t mean a thing to us one way or another, except we want to come out of this alive and happy, and if things work out, you get your bitch back alive and happy, and we come out of it with some money. And let me tell you, I’m gonna talk to you, you get some drawers on, or wrap that towel around that limp piece of spaghetti, sit down and listen.”

“You are on my turf, you American turd. Nudity is healthy. I am sixty years old, and I know I do not look it. It is the nudity. The fresh air, the sun. I swim nude every night in this pool, and it has done wonders for me. Man was meant to have fresh air, sunlight, and exercise.”

“It’s dark,” I said.

“Yes, but there is the night air,” Juan Miguel said.

“We’re on your turf,” Jim Bob said, straightening his hat, “but we’ve got your muff. Let me tell you about nudity for health, Zorro. Tried it when I was twelve. Stripped off and played Tarzan. Climbed up in a tree and got a sunburn, damn near fried my pecker off, turned my ass the color of a Washington apple. I didn’t find it so healthy. You get a good sunburn on your general and it starts to peel, let me tell you, it’s highly uncomfortable.”

“You idiot,” Juan Miguel said.

“You gonna sit and deal, or you gonna bore me with your lifestyle choices?”

“You fool,” Juan Miguel said. “You think I am losing true love here? My wife, she is my true love. Ileana, she is a dalliance. A hobby. A pastime. She is one of many.”

I felt my stomach go sour. What if Ileana didn’t matter to him? What if he had women all over Mexico?

Then I thought: Like Ileana? Not likely. Who the hell was he fooling?

“I think we’re wasting time,” I said. “You want her, we best get to talking, and talking now.”

Juan Miguel studied us, as if to be certain we weren’t mirages, some stupid dream. He wrapped the towel around his waist, pulled out a chair and sat down. No sooner had he done that, as if on cue, out of the darkness near the pool, on the far side, something moved.

At first I thought one of the palm trees had come loose of its roots and was about to topple, but the base was much larger than the palms, and as it stepped into the light, I saw it was tall, but shorter than a tree. It looked like someone had stacked some brown tires in a pile, put sumo wrestler legs and arms on it, fastened a vague facsimile of a human head to the top, and tied an anaconda between its legs. It was, of course, our living Michelin Man, in the nude.

Juan Miguel saw our gaze had shifted from him to somewhere over his shoulder. He grinned. “Hammerhead, we call him.”

Hammerhead leaped into the pool with a splash that almost started a tidal wave. He swam across the pool with a couple of strokes, climbed out dripping on our side. He ambled toward us. Moby-Dick gone bipedal.

“What do you think?” Juan Miguel said, as proud as if he was showing us a pet, and I suppose he was. “Is he not something?”

Jim Bob, naturally endearing, said, “An ambulatory shit pile. But I wouldn’t want him to fall on me.”

As Hammerhead grew closer, he became even more frightening. Through the telescope I had not been able to see how strange his head was. The front of it protruded, then sunk toward the nose, which lay flat against his face like a splattered man who had jumped from a great height. He had more scars than a Gurkha division and there were little pale scars like road map lines against the darkness of his body. It was hard to tell his nationality. He was dark, but his features were almost blank. He had Asian eyes and a little mouth that held tiny white childlike teeth. When he moved, water trapped beneath the rolls of his flesh squished out. He came to stand next to Juan Miguel’s chair.

“You’re a cute couple,” Jim Bob said.

I thought, that’s it. Jim Bob’s gonna be dead so fast Juan Miguel will forget why we’re here. But nothing happened. He just stared at Jim Bob for a while. Then at me. He said, “You listen to me. You hurt Ileana, Hammerhead here, he will beat you to death.”

“He could probably do that with that sausage between his legs,” Jim Bob said. “Considering that peanut you carry, I’m surprised you keep this guy around. Seems like it would remind you of your shortcomings.”

Juan Miguel leaped to his feet, his fist crashed down on the table and the glass split and splattered into thousands of fragments that caught the light and ricocheted images of trees and shrubs at us.

When the glass fallout was over, Jim Bob, in a bored voice, said, “You broke your table.”

“Enough!” Juan Miguel said. “It is enough!”

“I guess he’s had enough,” Jim Bob said to me.

“Reckon so,” I said.

Juan Miguel was panting. “What is … How do you say it? The deal? What is it? Tell me now, or I have you killed.”

Juan Miguel’s hand was bleeding. He pressed it to the towel at his waist.

“The deal is this,” Jim Bob said. “We want half a million dollars for your little doll, and we want to tell you why we want the money.”

“I know why you want the money,” Juan Miguel said. “I know why anyone wants the money.”

“No,” I said. “No, you don’t. We want the money because of Beatrice and Charlie.”

“Who?”

“We want the money because you wanted to kill me and the old man. I even want it for Billy, and I didn’t even like that sonofabitch.”

“What is it that you are talking about?” Juan Miguel said, his words becoming more accented and purposeful. “What is the fuck you want?”

“That’s what the fuck,” Jim Bob said. “That’s the way you say it. No slight there, just thought you might like to know that for future reference.”

“You do have half a million?” I said. “We’d hate to think you don’t. ’Cause you don’t, we got to take less, well, you get her back, but without a little finger or a thumb. You know what I’m saying?”

“Let me tell you a little thing you have not thought of,” Juan Miguel said. “I get her back with any part missing, her hair cut, a scar on her thigh, I do not want her back. She must come back as she is supposed to be. She does not, she is of no use to me, understand?”

Definitely not true love, I thought. And, unlike us, he wasn’t bluffing.

“Very well,” I said. “She comes back pretty quick if you act pretty quick.”

“How dare you threaten me.”

I knew we were beginning to play it pretty close. Maybe Juan

Miguel was thinking now he could let Ileana go, shop for another. Then again, she was special. Unique. And she was his, and he liked to own things, and once owned, he didn't like giving them up.

I said, "Here are our demands. And we want you to know our reasons. So just listen. And tell Gorgo here to go play somewhere. He makes me nervous."

Juan Miguel spoke something in Spanish. Hammerhead's face stayed just the same. Not a flick of an eyelash. He went to the pool, dove in, began to swim.

"Because of his size, the way he looks," Juan Miguel said, "you might think he is a fool. He is not. He is very strong. And very loyal. He would do anything I ask. I want you to keep that in mind as you deal with me. You must prove to me that Ileana is alive. That she is okay. That she is unharmed merchandise."

"We can do that," Jim Bob said. "That's how we'll begin the down payment, with proof she's okay?"

"What kind of proof?"

"A phone call. She can speak to you to let you know she's all right. We come back here, you give us half the money."

"How much is this half?"

"This half is two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. The other half, well, obviously we're talking half a million here. But you try to be smart. You try to get by not paying the money, I'll send her head home to you in a box. Comprende?"

Juan Miguel said, "Very well. But what has this to do with the people you named?"

"You're making me mad," I said.

"That bothers me so greatly," Juan Miguel said.

Jim Bob looked at his watch. "We're not back in half an hour, they kill the girl. So you had best listen and cut with the shit. Tell him, Hap."

I gave him a brief outline of the events I thought he needed to know, and when I was finished, Juan Miguel said: "That was a personal matter. She had it coming. She lied to me. She did not do as she said. That I cannot allow. I will not allow it with you. Do you understand?"

“What about Charlie, the man you killed because you thought it was me?”

“I thought you had helped her to try and con me. I did not like that. The same with this Billy. Mistakes. I can see that now. I was angry. I like to make a clean sweep, as you Americans say. I have her killed. She gives your name. They find this other man’s name on a card. I send Hammerhead to the States. He does the job. He comes home.”

“That’s it?”

“That is it, señor. Nothing mysterious. That is all.”

I wondered how a giant like Hammerhead had wandered around LaBorde without the cops hearing about him from some source. Juan Miguel must not have been kidding about him being smart.

I suppose I had wanted there to be more, some semi-valid reason for all the deaths, but there was none. It was as Jim Bob had figured. Juan Miguel cleaning up after himself, not wanting any messes left over from his dealings with Beatrice.

“So, this is your plan,” Juan Miguel said. “I could hold you, of course. I could make sure you do not leave.”

“We been over that,” Jim Bob said. “Fuck with us, the woman’s dead. For whatever reason, even if the reason belongs to someone else, you fuck up, she’s toast.”

“Toast?”

Jim Bob slapped the back of his hand into his palm. “Burned. Done. Wiped out.”

“Very well,” Juan Miguel said. “But do not make a mistake. Take care of Ileana. Very good care. And when I get her back. When you have your money. Please run. Run very far. For I will be at your back, my friends.”

“We’ll remember that,” Jim Bob said.

“There’s just one more thing,” I said.

“There always is,” Juan Miguel said.

“The archaeological items you wanted from Beatrice. They are real and they are available. They are for sale.”

“You must be out of your mind,” Juan Miguel said. “I would not buy them from you."

"Well, you see," I said, "they sort of go with the deal."

"Then we are not talking half a million of your dollars, are we?"

"I suppose not. I will reveal the location of the facades when I see the money."

"I no longer want them."

"That doesn't matter. You'll pay for them anyway. And then I won't give them to you. I'll donate them to the Anthropology Museum in Mexico City."

"How much?"

"That'll be another half million."

"A million American dollars. That is outrageous. No woman is worth that."

"Well, considering you can buy pussy for about two dollars in some places, I reckon you're right," Jim Bob said. "But if this woman is someone you like specifically, and can't be replaced easy—and let me tell you, she looks to me hard to replace under any circumstances—well, then, at least to you, she's worth a million dollars. It was me, and I was in your position, I'd buy her back. Oh boy, would I. And you want her, good buddy, you better let us leave in less than five minutes so we can stop and make a phone call along the way, say the deal's on so she doesn't get snuffed. And don't follow. I wouldn't like it."

"My men could work on you until I knew what I wanted to know," Juan Miguel said. "They are very good at that sort of thing."

"That's nice, but we made a pact with our group. We don't know anyone's real names. That way, you can torture us all you want, and we can't even tell you where each other lives, except the two of us. We know each other. But you got us. So how would that help? And it don't matter we did know, we told you where she is. By the time you get through doing what you got to do, it'll be way too late. I can hold out that long, I promise you."

Juan Miguel looked at his men, then he looked at us. I tried to remain cool and calm. I glanced at Jim Bob. He looked like he was waiting on a waiter to bring him a beer.

“Go,” Juan Miguel said. “Go. I will be waiting for her call. And she must answer me. It cannot be thought to be a recording. I must ask a question and she must answer so that I know she is alive and unharmed.”

“Fine,” Jim Bob said. “Remember, we’ll be listening. And I better not see your men, or your giant, anytime during the dealings. And when it comes time to trade, you’ll do it our way. Just you. And dress up, would you? And by the way, before we leave I want my pocketknife, and he wants his four pesos back.”

We went out to the car. Jim Bob drove us out of there. When we were away from the house, he checked the rearview.

“Well?” I asked.

“No one’s following.”

“Good,” I said, letting it out like a sigh.

Jim Bob held out his hand. It was shaking violently. He said, “Will you look at that?”

I held up my own shaking hand.

“Twins,” I said.

33

THAT NIGHT, in the hotel, Brett and I sat by our window in chairs pulled close together. I had wrapped some ice in a towel, and was holding it to the back of my head, trying to bring the swelling down on a knot one of Juan Miguel's Golems had given me.

We sat there with the shades wide, looked at the pedestrian walk and the sea beyond. The water looked oily and there were a number of dead fish washed up close to shore and they too were covered with something dark and slick.

The moon was a nasty slice of limburger, spotted by clouds that looked like soggy boles of field-spoiled cotton.

Jim Bob had dropped me off and driven out to César's.

"You really think Juan Miguel will come through with the money?" Brett asked.

"Truthfully, I don't know. And it doesn't matter. We don't want the money."

"But he might come through with it."

"You want the money, right?"

"Of course not. It's blood money. I don't want that. But what if he did come through with the money?"

"We meet him, he has the money, we kill him. We leave the money."

"It would be a shame to leave all that money. A quarter million first time, right? I mean, that's a lot of money to just leave lying around."

"Brett, I don't steal from the dead."

"I know. But listen. What if you took the money and gave it to Ferdinand? He could buy a new boat. He could go on with his life. If anyone deserves the money, it's him. His daughter was killed by that animal. Charlie, he doesn't have anyone he'd want to have the money. Certainly not his ex-wife."

"You got a point. It works out that way, okay. Ferdinand gets the money. Maybe César will have other ideas. I don't know. But it's okay with me."

"You're going to have him deliver half, right?"

"It's all he'll ever deliver," I said. "We're going to kill him, remember? Then let the girl go."

"You want to do this right, want to get him good, have him pay all the money, and on the last delivery kill him."

"You're cold, Brett."

"We're going to kill him anyway, right?"

"Right."

"He's a piece of shit, right?"

"Right."

"So we kill him, and we take him for a million. Ferdinand would never have to worry. And with that kind of money, neither would we."

I turned in my chair and looked at her.

"Brett, I'm not sure I believe my ears. Didn't you just say you didn't want the money?"

"It's a lot of money."

"It's not like we're finding it in a pig track. It's blood money."

"I was just thinking out loud," she said. "Jesus. Will you listen to me? Money does corrupt. I feel like Humphrey Bogart in *Treasure of the Sierra Madre."*

"Well, one thing you got going for you, you don't look like Bogart. And if it's any consolation, I've thought of the money too. You can't help but think about it. But we start getting greedy, even if we get greedy for someone else, we're gonna end up messing up."

"Don't you want the Anthropology Museum to have those facades?"

"Brett, we don't need money for them to have the facades. We just give them a tip-off on where they're hidden. They'll do the rest."

“Oh yeah, I forgot. But you know what?”

“What?”

“You could quit working at the chicken plant. You could do what you want. So could I.”

“For a while. Even if we took the money, it would be split between everyone, our share would be small for a lifetime. We could live on it for a while, but then what?”

“We invest it.”

“And maybe we lose it.”

“True. I don’t know anything about the stock market. We could live off of it while you figured out what you really wanted to do. Maybe you could go to college. You got some hours, right?”

“Right.”

“You could get a degree, maybe teach or something.”

It sounded good. But it sounded wrong. Still, I sat and considered.

Brett said, “When does Jim Bob let Ileana talk to Juan Miguel?”

“I don’t know. He’s playing it loose, making sure Juan Miguel is tense. He’s also giving him time to get the money together. Mostly though, it’s just Jim Bob playing a waiting game.”

“You think he knows what he’s doing?”

“Much as anyone knows. You should have seen him at Juan Miguel’s. He was as cool as an ice tray. He had Juan Miguel eating out of his hand. Juan Miguel tried to act like he was in charge, but I tell you, Jim Bob, he was running the show. We left, his hand was shaking bad as mine, but he didn’t show it, not with Juan Miguel.”

“Did you?”

“I don’t know. Jim Bob says I didn’t. I hope I didn’t.”

“You wouldn’t want to be outmachoed by Jim Bob, would you?”

“I wouldn’t,” I said, “but I got to tell you, that sonofabitch is more macho than my brother, Leonard. I’m surprised he doesn’t go around with a wheelbarrow in front of him so he can carry his balls.”

"Remember," Brett said, "Leonard's macho and queer as a duck in a tuxedo. He's starting one square lower on the tough guy scale. So, you got to sort of give him special points."

"I wouldn't let him hear you say that."

"Hap, we come out all right on this, you and me, we're gonna stay together. Right?"

"We're gonna get married," I said. "If you want to, of course."

"You're not joking?"

"I'm not. I had a ring I'd give it to you. But you didn't say if you'd marry me. We've talked about it, but we haven't really talked about it. We just keep saying someday. I'm saying we've about come to that day."

Brett slid her chair over close to me and put her arm around me.

"I want to. Bad. But you got to pretend on our wedding night that I'm a renewed virgin."

"That won't be easy," I said.

"Most women play that game."

"It still won't be easy."

"Well, considering I been to bed more than a hospitalful of invalids, I know that," Brett said. "But you got to try, just the same. You don't try, well, to put it in simple terms, you don't get any nookie."

"You drive a hard bargain," I said.

We were sitting there snuggling, when we saw Jim Bob and Leonard come along the pedestrian walk.

"Back from César's already," I said. "Things be happenin'."

I went to the door and opened it. Jim Bob and Leonard appeared in the hallway, and I ushered them in.

"How goes it?" I said.

"Good. You got a beer?" Jim Bob said.

He looked rough. He had taken a worse beating than I had. One eye was swollen and there was a bruise the color of smashed plum on his right cheek. The lip on that side was fat and dark.

His hat had crease lines all through it.

“There’s a beer in the cash bar. What about you, Leonard?”

“I want John.”

“He’s not in the cash bar,” I said.

I got the bar key and retrieved a beer for Jim Bob. He twisted off the cap, dropped down in the only cushioned chair, and pressed the cold bottle against the bruise on his cheek.

“Man,” he said, “I could cook an egg on this motherfucker.”

Brett and I sat on the edge of the bed. Leonard pulled one of the wooden chairs over and sat down, crossed his legs and played with the toe of his shoe.

“How’d it go?” Brett asked.

“Well, we hauled Ileana to a pay phone, twisted her arm, had her talk to Juan Miguel a bit,” Jim Bob said. “I talked to him then. I set a meeting up. He’s so mad he sounds as if he could eat the ass out of a bull and spit out a wallet.”

I said, “When?”

“Tonight.”

“That’s quick. I thought you’d let him sweat.”

“I don’t think we ought to fuck around.”

“And I don’t like waiting,” Leonard said. “It makes my feet break out in little hives.”

“Juan Miguel is supposed to meet us at the souvenir stands on this side of Tulum,” Jim Bob said. “He brings the money, we take the money. He thinks that’s it. He thinks he gives us the money, then we set up the next meeting, where we give him the girl and he gives us the rest of the money. I was him, that’s where I’d think about nailing us. He gets the girl, double-crosses us, kills us. That would be the plan if I were doing it. Maybe I was him I’d torture us to give back the first batch of money.”

“So, like us,” I said, “you’ve actually thought about the money?”

“You can’t help but think about the money,” Jim Bob said. “ ’Course, being smarter than the average criminal, the plan should be take the first batch of money and kill the woman—”

“We’re not doing that,” Brett said. “That’s not the deal.”

“Of course not,” Jim Bob said. “I’m saying if I were really a kidnapper.”

“You really are,” I said.

“You know what I mean. I was really out for the money, I’d take the half, let the girl go free, or kill her, and get away with what I got. Best thing to do would be to actually let her go. That way Juan Miguel doesn’t have a way to magnify the grudge.”

“Since there’s supposed to actually be some real money,” I said, “what do we do about that?”

“Yeah,” Brett said. “What about that?”

“I’ve been giving that some thought.”

“So have we,” I said.

“Crossed my mind too,” Leonard said.

“My belief is this,” Jim Bob said. “We take just enough to pay for our expenses, we give the rest to Ferdinand.”

“I thought maybe give it all to Ferdinand,” Leonard said, “but I got to admit, that sounds pretty fair.”

“We got the hotels, car rentals, and we owe César for the guns,” I said.

“Where are the guns?” Brett asked

“In the trunk of the rental,” Jim Bob said.

“What time does it happen?”

“We meet at midnight.”

“Why midnight?”

“Because where the tourist stand is there’s a crossroads.”

“Yeah. So?”

“I like the idea of it,” Jim Bob said. “It’s an artistic touch to the job. Devil takes a man’s soul at the crossroads, and this bastard’s gonna sell his soul there.”

“How will it work?” I asked.

Jim Bob looked at his watch. “It’s eight o’clock. We go over and pick up Ferdinand at César’s so he can have his chance to see it come down—”

“He wants to do the killing,” Leonard said. “Not see it.”

“He may have to settle for a back seat,” Jim Bob said. “Perhaps Juan Miguel doesn’t go down for good right off, we let Ferdinand deliver the coup de grâce. A bullet to the head. That kind of thing.”

“No torture,” I said. “I don’t care what Ferdinand wants. Juan Miguel knows why we took Ileana, and that’s as close as we’re going to get to explaining it. It meant nothing to him anyway.”

“At the moment of death, it may,” Jim Bob said. “Anyway, we load up Ferdinand. We go out to the drop sight early, before dark. This time of year it gets dark, say, nine-thirty, true dark a little later. There are some good places to hide, and you, Ferdinand, and Leonard can get somewhere you can’t be seen.”

“Won’t they get there early too?” Brett asked.

“They will,” Jim Bob said. “You can count on it. But we’ll be earlier yet. They see us, they see us. We deal with that when we get there. Thing on our side is Juan Miguel doesn’t know our real plan is to kill his sorry ass. If it goes well and he doesn’t get there early, doesn’t see you guys, I’ll appear to be there alone. When Juan Miguel delivers the money, you drop him, Hap.”

“Me?” I said.

“Leonard says you can shoot the nuts off a squirrel when all you can see is shape.”

“Thanks for volunteering me, Leonard.”

“You’re welcome, Hap. You’re the best shot, and that’s all there is to it.”

“But if I’m going to shoot him in hiding, what’s so wrong with my idea of picking him off from a distance? It’s because he wouldn’t have the money, isn’t it? It’s about the money, isn’t it?”

“It’s about him deserving it,” Jim Bob said. “Then there’s the money. I told you what I wanted to do with it. I don’t think that’s selfish. We get our expenses, Ferdinand gets the big cut, and Juan Miguel is dead. That okay with you, Hap?”

“I suppose.”

“They’ll search me for weapons, so I won’t carry. Leonard will be hidden with the shotgun in the bushes. When I clench my fist, you shoot, Hap, and I’ll jump. Leonard can open up then. I’ll stash the nine mil close by in the weeds so I can get to it, and play cleanup. We still got Ferdinand and César as insurance. Brett, there's not enough guns, so you're going to stay at César's with Ileana. Someone has to watch her."

"All right," Brett said.

"You can bet Juan Miguel will have his boys with him, so no fuckin' around. Be sure, be double-sure, to take out that Hammerhead motherfucker."

"What if Juan Miguel sends someone?" I said. "Doesn't show himself?"

"When I called, I told him he had to come with the money. Said we didn't trust any of his sidekicks. So he'll show. Like I said, he'll bring them with him, but he'll show. No matter how cool he plays it, he's got it bad for this Ileana. She's got his nose wide open, buddy, you can count on that."

"Now that we got it all talked out, how about we go do it," Leonard said.

34

WE DROVE UP in César's yard at about eight-thirty. When we got out of the car a cold feeling went over me. Something was out of kilter.

I said, "Something sucks."

"Yeah," Leonard said. "But what is it? It doesn't look any different."

Jim Bob stared at the house for a moment. "Yes it does. The blinds are closed. They haven't been closed before."

"Maybe they wanted them closed," Brett said.

"Yeah," Jim Bob said. "Crushed shells up by the porch are pitted. Like maybe there was a struggle there. See, there's shells on the porch. More than would have come off someone's shoes. It's like they were rolled in them, got dragged on the porch and the shells fell off their clothes. Screen door is unlocked and it's slightly open."

Jim Bob strolled to the rear of the car, opened the trunk. He popped one of the suitcases. He took two nine mils from the case and gave one to me, one to Leonard. He got the shotgun parts out of the other case and put it together. He gave us ammo clips, took a fistful of shells and stuffed them in his shirt pocket. He loaded two in the double-barrel.

"I'll just stroll around back," Jim Bob said. "You and Leonard take the front."

Jim Bob trotted off. I said, "Brett, you get behind the wheel. You see anyone come out of the door you don't want to see, you back out and go. Go away fast."

Brett nodded, climbed in behind the wheel, closed the door softly.

Me and Leonard moved toward the front door.

I thought: It could be they wanted the shades closed. Maybe César or Hermonie fell in the drive, brushed themselves off on the porch. Went in and didn't close the door well. In a hurry. It could be that.

I moved the door with my foot. It swung open with a sound that would have made a can of WD40 cry.

Easing inside, crouching, the gun held before me, I saw why things were quiet, and I felt my knees wobble. I kept the gun at ready, but I knew I wouldn't need it.

Leonard came in behind me about the time Jim Bob reached the back patio glass. I strolled over and let him in, using my shirttail to work the latch.

I went around what was on the floor, stepping carefully, eased to the bedroom, pushed the half-open door the rest of the way with my foot.

The room was empty, of course.

I checked out the bathroom, just in case Hammerhead might be using the commode, found nothing, went back to the living room.

I sat down on the brick ridge of the fireplace and looked at what was before me.

Hermonie was dressed in her white pants suit, seated on the couch, looking pretty much the way she always looked, except one side of her head poked out in a funny way. That was because a bullet entering the other side had come out on the side facing me, splintered the bone, lifted her hair. Where her hair was lifted it was slick, as if she had been hit with a tomato. Her right eye had moved a little too far to the right and was almost hidden. The left looked straight ahead. A splotch of blood like another shot from a tomato was splattered on the right shoulder of her outfit. There was red on the wall and the back of the couch.

César lay on the floor. He had been tied to a chair. In his final agonies, most likely, he had turned it over.

His fingers had been chopped off close to the knuckles, and I could see the skin on his hands had been filleted all the way to his elbows. He was shirtless and there were burns on his chest. His eyes were open, as if he had just discovered he had gotten exactly what he wanted for Christmas, but his mouth was wide and gummy and his tongue poked out of it, fat and gray as an old piece of liver. His pants had large globs of blood on the knees where they had dripped off the chair when it was upright. His shoes were gone. So were his toes. The skin on his feet had been peeled all the way to his calves, and his pants were cuffed high to allow it. There were little bits of crushed shells from the drive stuck to his clothes and on the floor around the chair.

Leonard leaned against the wall and let the nine mil hang by his side. Jim Bob bent over César, stood up, looked at Hermonie.

"You have some intuition," I said to Jim Bob. "You were right about there being a struggle in the yard."

"Intuition is really just the unconscious mind learning to talk to the conscious." He gestured toward Hermonie. "One for her and it's over with. César, not so easy. What's that tell you?"

"He didn't talk," I said. "So they gave him hell."

"Shit, he talked. I would have. I tell you what happened. Hermonie here, she called Juan Miguel and told where the girl was."

"But why?" I asked.

"Because she wanted what she thought Juan Miguel could give her," Leonard said.

"Yep," Jim Bob said. "Leonard, you aren't as dumb as you look."

"Thanks."

"I never really trusted her," Jim Bob said, "but I didn't think this. I didn't think she was this stupid. I just thought she was a shit and a bad pick for César. Goddamn, César didn't deserve this."

"Who the hell does?" Leonard said.

"You actually think she called Juan Miguel?" I said.

"They finished her easy," Jim Bob said. "No torture. They just popped her. That tells me she thought maybe she could make the big money. Maybe Ileana talked Hermonie into it. Said I'll see you get paid good. I'll get you in good with Juan Miguel you get me out of this."

"Who did she think she was dealing with?" I said.

“She had no idea,” Leonard said.

“No,” Jim Bob said, “she didn’t. She didn’t like us, and according to César, she didn’t like him much either. But I don’t think this is what she expected. Maybe she thought César would get his, but she figured she was doing Juan Miguel a favor, so she thought she was all right. Would make some big money out of the deal. Get a chance to end up with what she thought she deserved. Juan Miguel had other plans. He decided to thank her by not torturing her. He gave her what he thought she deserved.”

“So now Juan Miguel knows we were going to ambush him?” I said.

Jim Bob nodded. “I’m sure César said what he had to say.”

“And now,” Leonard said, “we don’t have our bargaining chip. And we aren’t going to get any money, and we aren’t going to surprise him … Ferdinand … where is he?”

“Out back,” Jim Bob said. “They took him out there and hacked him to pieces. I wish he’d had a machete. I wish he’d had his chance … Probably that goddamn giant did it.”

“What now?” I said, and was surprised at how hoarse my voice was.

Jim Bob took off his battered hat and ran a hand through his hair. “Well, three things occur to me. Let’s wipe our fingerprints up, and hope there aren’t too many old ones. They come up, we get hauled in, we were visiting César. He’s a friend of mine, so maybe we can swing it. I doubt anything’s missing. I don’t thing Juan Miguel would give a shit about anything César owned.

“Second thing is we get the hell out of here quickly. Third thing is César might have told him we were staying at the hotel. Since we got everything we own in the car, I say we check in somewhere else. We don’t go back.”

We wiped down what we knew we had touched, eased out of there, and with Brett at the wheel, we drove briskly away.

35

We moved to a smaller hotel. Jim Bob carried the suitcase with the shotgun in it to his and Leonard's room. Leonard kept the nine mil. I kept mine. I kept the suitcase with the rifle.

We were too stunned to eat. Too shocked to think. That was good. I had been thinking too much. I may not come up with class plans, but I could at least come up with something. I had been trying to be too damn smart. I had let Jim Bob the pro do what the pro knew how to do, and it hadn't been enough. The pro was good. He was grand. But sometimes the way you kill a bug is just step on it. You don't think about it too much. You don't go get bug spray or call the exterminator, or talk to the bug and tell it why it must die, or try to bargain money from it, you just step on it.

Brett watched a Mexican television show for a while, not understanding a word of it, then fell asleep. I sat and watched her sleep. I thought about poor Beatrice, how she looked after that animal Hammerhead had had at her. It had to be him. Hammerhead was the one. He was the one that had come for me and killed Charlie instead. That's what Juan Miguel said. I thought of César. He had done his best to help us. He had tried to be a friend. And Hermonie. How horrible it must have been for César to have been betrayed by her. More horrible than the torture.

And Ferdinand. If they had given him a machete like Jim Bob said, let him fight it out with Hammerhead, he would have died happy. And he might not have died. He had been a terror with a machete.

God. All that blood. The skin peeled back on César's hands and feet. I kept thinking about his eyes. His mouth. The way his pants cuffs were rolled up. Somehow that hit me the hardest. Just that simple little thing, the careful rolling up of the cuffs so they could peel the flesh higher.

I got up quietly, checked on Brett. She was snoring like a lumberjack. I got some of the hotel's stationery out of the desk drawer, a pen. I wrote.

> Brett, I love you.
>
> You wake up and read this note, you be cautious. I'm leaving the nine millimeter on the desk. You keep it, go stay with Leonard and Jim Bob. Trust me on this. Tell Leonard I love him. A man couldn't ask for a better brother. Don't tell him that unless I don't come back. No use giving him the big head. Tell him I love him, but that doesn't mean I forgive him for everything. He won't know what he needs forgiving for, but I like the idea of making him nervous.
>
> This isn't a suicide note. This isn't a so-long note. It's a just-in-case note. You read it, you remember that. It's just in case. I'm going to do what always sounds so hokey, but tonight sounds exactly right.
>
> I'm gonna do what a man's got to do, and I'm going to do it without dragging anyone else into it. If you figure what I'm doing, try and help me, you'll just fuck it up. But if I'm not back by tomorrow, then I didn't do it. It's best you just take a plane home and forget about all this. Leonard and Jim Bob will do whatever. And I have a pretty good idea what that will be. I want them to. But better yet, I want them to end up going home with you. I want Leonard to be with John and Jim Bob to be with his pigs. Leonard and John in a carnal sense, and for all I care, Jim Bob and his pigs in a carnal sense. Actually, I kind of like that idea.
>
> So go home and forget about all this.
>
> Except for me. Remember me awhile. Then forget me.
>
> I keep writing because I don't want to go.
>
> I've got to go. I keep waiting, keep messing around here, I'll be waking you up asking you to proofread

> this. I go now, I may get back before you know I'm gone, then I can tear up this silly tripe and we can go home.
>
> Love, Hap.
>
> P.S. I don't come back tomorrow disregard what I said before. Have Jim Bob and Leonard kill that sonofabitch. But you go home.

The keys to the car were on the table where Brett had left them. It was easy for me to walk out with the suitcase containing the rifle, scope, and silencer. I drove along the highway, half expecting to see a dark car filled with Juan Miguel's two thugs and the impossibly large Hammerhead.

How would he fit in a car? Did they have to drive a convertible? Did they pull him behind them in a trailer?

I kept thinking about all kinds of stupid things. I felt as if I was coming undone, a piece at a time.

The moon laid greasy patches of light along the road and the road rose up and curved. I could see Juan Miguel's great house standing tall with its palms and its thick high wall, the moon above and behind it like a chunk of suspended lard.

Then the road dipped and I could only see the rise of land on which it was positioned. The road went that way awhile, then rose again. I took a cutoff that was all dirt and steered through tight trees that scraped the car, finally came to a widening in the road that was below Juan Miguel's wall.

I pulled over and got out with the suitcase.

I walked up the road apiece, where the brush and trees cleared, looked up. There was moonlight and man-made light spilling over the vine-covered wall. I could see it was no easy task to go up the side of that big hill, which was maybe two hundred feet high to the wall.

I took off my belt and ran it through the suitcase handle and fastened it, slipped the belt over my head and one shoulder, started to climb.

At first there was vines and brush to hold on to, then some rocks and little plants that sometimes jerked free of the dirt the moment I touched them.

When I was about halfway, I thought I was going to have to give up and start down. I lay tight against the hill, my face touching a cool rock, and gave that a lot of thought. I could get down from here now, give up this silly idea, go back to the hotel, throw away my note, shower, get in bed with Brett and make love to her, and tomorrow, no matter what Jim Bob or Leonard thought, I could take her home and live happily ever after.

I took a deep breath, started up again.

I had gone about twenty more feet when I decided I definitely couldn't make it and had to go back. The suitcase was killing me. Atlas and the world on his shoulders was nothing compared to that goddamn suitcase.

But by then I had gone too far. I was committed.

I continued climbing. It was slow, exhausting work. My fingers ached something horrible. I was losing feeling in them. I wasn't even sure if I was holding on to anything. I decided to look neither up nor down, but to concentrate on the moment, on what was in front of me.

I had no idea how long I had been climbing. Wasn't wearing my watch. Couldn't look at it if I had been. Too dark. Couldn't spare the handhold.

The moonlight shifted. Maybe two hours had passed. I needed to pee. My hands hurt and they were bleeding.

I kept at it. Inch by inch. And then I touched the rough rock wall and the vines that grew over it.

I clutched a fistful of vines and tugged. The wall didn't come loose. Neither did the vines.

I pulled and scuttled and pretty soon I was near the top.

I reached an arm over the wall, hauled up slowly, poked my face over the edge, looked down on Juan Miguel's property.

There was no one there. The pools were blue and shiny and the growth around their edges was thick and green.

I dropped over the wall, managed to get a shaft of a shrub nearly up my ass, fell, clattered against some tall elephant ears and lay still.

I got up slowly, hustled around on my hands and knees until I could see through a split in the shrubs.

Still no one.

I opened the suitcase and took out the rifle parts and, in the glow of the pool lights, I put it together, pushed in the clip, put on the silencer. I didn't bother with the scope. This close I didn't need a scope.

I pulled the suitcase back with me, found a place less obvious. It was a thick swathe of hedge next to a palm tree that afforded me about six feet between it and the wall, and was a good hiding place. It was a good position. I could see all of the side pool. Across the way, I could see the backyard pool.

He said he swam every night.

Would he swim tonight?

Was he off celebrating having Hermonie shot, having César's feet and hands skinned, Ferdinand chopped up like a fish at the market?

Maybe he was celebrating by staying over with his mistress.

The bitch. Jim Bob was right. She knew what Juan Miguel did. What he was like. She didn't care.

I took a pee in the bushes, picked some prickles out of my hands as best I could.

It was hot even for so late at night, so I sat with my back against the cool stone wall, watching through my split in the shrubbery.

There were lights on in the house. They looked orange instead of yellow. I watched the lights until I decided they were causing me to focus too hard. I began watching left and right, waiting, listening.

I must have dozed for a while. I came awake to the sound of the back door opening.

Some ambusher I was.

A woman came out. The wife. She was nude. She walked out to the back pool, leaped in, swam for a while.

This nude business was starting to seem common to me. Maybe I should strip off now. I could be the nude ambusher.

I kept waiting for Juan Miguel, but he didn't show.

She must have swum half an hour. She climbed out, snatched a towel off the back of a chair and slowly dried herself, running the towel the length of her legs, drying between her legs, her breasts, her hair. When she was finished, I felt like I should leave her money.

She went inside. The orange lights soon went out. The moon was starting to drop low in the sky.

I leaned against the wall and dozed.

I dreamed of trying to go back over the wall, of falling.

Then I dreamed I was eating a banana.

I hoped to God I was smart enough to never tell Leonard about that dream. He'd give me shit.

I awoke, hungry, in spite of my nocturnal banana. My stomach growled. Loud.

Trying to shift to get comfortable, I heard a car door. I peeked through my leafy peephole. Beyond the pool, about where Jim Bob and I had taken a beating from Juan Miguel's two assholes, was a long black car. Juan Miguel got out. So did Hammerhead and one of the assholes.

The other asshole drove the car to the other side of the house, to the garage. The remaining three walked up the drive and the big stone steps before I could say to myself, "Where the hell is my gun?"

They went inside.

Some shooter I was.

I waited awhile. They didn't come out. I stood up, stretched my legs behind some tall plants, took a leak again, went back to my spot, lay on my side with my back against the wall. I knew it was not a good idea, but I couldn't help myself. I was exhausted. I slept.

When I awoke I had a taste in my mouth like a well-used cat box. The greasy moon was gone and the sun was a ball of flaming lead burning away the clouds, heading up toward high noon.

I was sweaty and my face was dirty where I had slept with it pressed to the ground. I brushed myself off, moved my tongue around in my mouth trying to move the rotten taste about.

I peeked through the slit in the shrubs, saw nothing. He was probably sleeping in. Maybe getting a morning quickie with the wife, then brunch.

I wondered how that worked for the wife. She knew he had a mistress. Did she say, “Hey, did you and Ileana have a good hump last night? You did wash your pecker before we did it, didn’t you? What shall I get her for her birthday? Edible underwear?”

It was such a weird situation, and yet to them it was as normal as a nose on a face.

A pocked and diseased nose.

Maybe he wasn’t sleeping in. Maybe he had already left, and me, the lone assassin, had slept through it.

I wondered if Brett had seen my note.

Surely.

By the sun it was about ten o’clock I figured.

What was Brett thinking since I hadn’t come back?

Had she told Jim Bob and Leonard?

Would they do something foolish like rent a taxi and have it drop them off so they could go into the house, guns blazing, looking for me?

Nope. That was more my kind of plan.

More Leonard’s kind of plan. Jim Bob wouldn’t let that happen. He might come in guns blazing, but he wouldn’t arrive in a taxi. He’d be sneaky.

Hell, I had been sneaky, and in the end I had hidden in the bushes and taken a nap.

I was thinking about that, when suddenly I realized I was looking directly at Juan Miguel.

36

HE SEEMED to just appear, standing at the edge of the pool. He was in all his naked glory and quite fond of himself, stretching his arms, rolling his shoulders. He looked left and right, then checked his package, shook it, let it go.

I could see it in his eyes, in the relaxed way he stood and stretched, the slight smile on his face.

He was happy.

He was the king.

The king's package was fine, ready to be used at any time. The envy of all others, that package. Men feared and admired him, women wanted him.

The universe was his.

A strange feeling came over me. Of watching in slow motion, of moving in slow motion. I had had a similar feeling before. In fights. It's always that way. You may be moving fast, but to you it's slow, and everything around you is moving slow. But life is heightened. It's as if in that moment of violence you feel directly connected to the world around you, as if you are in tumultuous union with the universe.

This moment was stronger than ever before. I remember wiping my eyes, rubbing out the sleep. I had been sitting on my ass, but I rose up on my left knee, raised my right knee, put the rifle against my shoulder and looked down the sight. The sight was very fine, like a little blackhead in the center of Juan Miguel's face.

He was rolling his neck now. I watched him roll it. I wanted him to stop moving just for a moment. The way you're supposed to shoot someone is you aim at the biggest part of them, but I wanted Juan Miguel's head.

I was putting the little blackhead on his face, when I heard a noise and saw, coming around from the rear of the house, Hammerhead. He was naked except for a white beach towel wrapped between his legs and around his waist. It made him look as if he were wearing a huge diaper.

That's all right, I told myself. That's all right, Mama, that's all right with me.

I put the sight back on Juan Miguel as he lifted his arms and touched his hands in dive fashion, and as he lowered them to make his leap into the pool, his head lowered, I shot him right in the top of it.

There was a cough from the silencer, a flash of red juice, a flurry of hair, a whirl of skull like a hubcap fragment, and Juan Miguel dropped his arms and went into the water. There was a burst of dark blood, like ink from a Technicolor squid.

I shifted, floated the barrel, put the sight on Hammerhead.

He had just removed the towel from himself, probably preparing to swim with his boss. He held it in one hand like an oversized hanky he was passing to someone. His jaw hung low, his eyes were fastened on Juan Miguel's body floating under the water, dropping slowly to the bottom.

Hammerhead crouched, dropped the towel, turned his head, looked in the direction from which he thought the shot must have come. In that moment he saw me in the foliage. Our eyes snapped together like padlocks. I fired again.

It was a good shot, but not as good as it would have been had he not moved. It went through his throat, low and on the right side. He snapped a hand to the wound and let out a bellow. I put three in his chest as fast as I could pull the trigger.

Where he clutched his throat blood was running through his fingers. Three little holes appeared on his chest without much blood.

The pool was in front of him and he hit the water running, went down, not quite over his head, tried to trudge along the bottom. The water bounced him up and down. I took a bead on his eye and let it rip.

His head snapped back. When it righted itself, he continued forward. Much of the pool's surface was slick with his and Juan

Miguel's blood and it kept widening as if its job was to paint the remaining blue red.

As Hammerhead climbed out of the pool, a real feeling of terror went over me. This bastard had three in the chest, one in the throat, and one through the eye, and he was still coming.

As he stepped out of the pool on my side, I aimed for his kneecap, popped him twice. The knee went away. He collapsed, tried to raise up on his elbows, but I shot him again, about where the neck meets the shoulder.

This time there was a big burst of blood, like a pipe full of pressured rusty water had broken.

Hammerhead's head snapped forward on the cement at the edge of the pool. He pulled himself forward another inch or so, then lay with only his foot jerking and one hand vibrating. The hand quit, then the foot.

I took a deep breath.

I looked about.

No wife.

No assholes. They were probably watching bowling on TV.

I took the wrench out of the suitcase and took the rifle apart. My hand was shaking so much it took me longer than it should have. I put the pieces in the suitcase.

I looked up.

Still no one. I tossed the suitcase over the fence. I climbed on a slanting palm near the fence, inched up it with the speed of a ground sloth with its leg in a sling.

I made it to the fence and looked down. It didn't look good. I didn't see the suitcase. I'd need that. It had fingerprints all over it.

I walked along the top of the rock wall until I found a place I felt I could descend, went over and started working my way down. Below I heard a car, looked. It went zooming by. I wondered if they had seen me.

It was easier and faster going down in the light than it was going up in the dark. I made the ground fairly easy, looked for the suitcase, didn't see it.

Worse, the car was gone. There was windshield glass on the ground, so I knew during the night, while I slept, someone had smashed the glass and hotwired the rental.

Typical.

I eventually located the suitcase. It was up the hill, hung up in some roots and bushes.

I took a deep breath, started up again. I got the suitcase, and as it still had my belt through the handle, I slung it over my neck and shoulder and climbed down.

I brushed myself off as best I could and started walking.

* * *

It took an hour or so for me to reach the main road. I had walked along about fifteen minutes when a large ancient truck with sideboards appeared. It pulled up beside me. In the seat were five men wearing straw hats. One of them stuck his head out the window and said something in Spanish. He was young-looking, with a split between his teeth. He had taken advantage of the split and had inserted a straw between it. It moved around in his mouth when he spoke.

I finally realized they were asking me if I wanted to ride.

“Sí,” I said.

I climbed in the back, over the sideboards, found I was company to three large black and white hogs. In one corner of the truck was a large pile of hog shit, and as we bounced along, so did it, creeping its way toward me.

They let me and my suitcase off in town and I walked to our hotel. I wondered if Brett, Leonard, and Jim Bob were still there.

I went straight to Jim Bob’s room and knocked. If it was someone else I’d just claim the wrong room and go away.

Jim Bob answered.

“You asshole,” he said. “You thoughtless asshole. We been worried fucking sick. Serve you right if you were dead.”

“Hi. Good to see you too.”

I went inside. Brett was there, she pushed past Leonard, who was trying to shake my hand, grabbed me, kissed me on the face.

“Wow,” she said. “What have you been rolling in, Rex?”

“Hog shit,” I said. “Really.”

“He has,” Jim Bob said. “If there’s one smell I know, it’s hog shit, and that’s hog shit.”

“You killed him, didn’t you?” Leonard said.

“He and that Hammerhead are two of the deadest motherfuckers you’ll ever see.”

“Good,” Jim Bob said. “Goddamn good.”

“Who says you have to have good plans to get the job done?” Leonard said.

“You know,” I said, “I sort of thought you guys would charge to my assistance. Note or no note. It was just for dramatic effect.”

“I slept late,” Brett said.

“We didn’t see it until a few minutes ago,” Jim Bob said.

“I was considering just how bad I wanted to kill you,” Leonard said, “then I thought maybe Juan Miguel and Hammerhead would do it for me, so I went back to sleep.”

“He did not,” Brett said. “He was having a shit fit. We were just about out the door, come to help.”

“Yeah,” Leonard said, “but I wasn’t going to dress up for it.”

“You’re a dumbass,” Jim Bob said.

“Yeah, and don’t ever do it again,” Leonard said. “It ain’t good for my heart. And besides, since when do you have enough brains to do anything without me?”

“It was lonely without you, brother,” I said.

Brett suddenly began crying. She said, “You asshole. You thoughtless asshole.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Yes, you are,” she said. “Now, for goodness sake, shower, then let’s go home.”

While I showered Jim Bob rented us another car, disposed of the suitcases, and brought us food. We ate, checked out, rode to the airport.

We turned in the car there, Jim Bob talked to the other rental agency, explained our car had been stolen from the hotel, filled out the proper forms, and we sat around in hard plastic chairs waiting for our flight.

“Did they buy the theft story?” Leonard asked Jim Bob.

“I believe they did,” Jim Bob said. “When I want, I can charm the ass off someone.”

“It’s your way with the language,” Leonard said.

“You betcha.”

We kept watching, half expecting Juan Miguel’s two goons to show. Except Jim Bob.

He said, “With Big Daddy dead, those two haven’t the sense to get in out of the rain. They’re probably still trying to wake Juan Miguel and Hammerhead up.”

Our flight was late, so we sat a long time, but once on the plane I fell asleep immediately and by the time we were landing at Houston Intercontinental, I felt as if I had been on board for no more than a few minutes.

37

FOR ABOUT THREE MONTHS I still watched for Juan Miguel's goons. But Jim Bob was probably right. They were lost now, maybe working for the old lady. Or perhaps she blamed them and had used her considerable money to have them whacked. Perhaps they had gone to barber college and were now doing honest work in a border town, cutting hair, powdering the back of customers' necks.

I thought about César, Ferdinand, and Hermonie, left there in that house. We hadn't contacted anyone. How long would they go before they were found? A day? A week? A month?

I guess it didn't matter when you were dead.

It was odd, walking away from all that, going back to being a security guard at the chicken plant. But I hadn't fallen back completely into old habits. I had started part-time at the college, taking courses in history. I wasn't exactly sure why, but for the first time in years I felt like I was doing something that counted, even if I wasn't sure what it counted for.

Leonard got another job, security manager of a bakery. All he does now is sit in the office with his feet up, eat sweet cakes and cookies and make sure everyone else does the work. He's even gotten a little fat.

He and John are happy.

Jim Bob's back with his hogs.

Hanson is walking without a cane now. A little slow, but he's walking. He's still wearing Charlie's hat.

Me and Brett?

Well, we haven't gotten married, but we still talk about it. It doesn't seem quite as urgent as it did in that hotel room in Mexico, but the thought is still there.

The other night Brett and I were sitting out in her yard, which I had mowed and freed the lawn chair from, and I was sitting in that lawn chair, and she in another, just sitting there with the moon and the starlight above, a bug-thronged streetlight in view, when a blue Cadillac pulled up at the house, parked next to the streetlight, and killed the motor.

I had a momentary sinking feeling, thinking those dicks from Mexico had caught up with us, but then I saw Mr. Bond come out from behind the wheel and close his door. He went around and opened the other.

A fragile-looking woman with her hair in a ponytail and a bandage across her face got out of the car carefully, pulling crutches after her.

I stood up, but Mr. Bond held up his hand in a *wait there* signal.

I remained standing. Sarah Bond crutched over to me. Her face was a wreck of stitch tracks and little swellings, that white bulgy swathe across one eye. When she spoke she was missing teeth and her voice was a little airy.

“Thank you for saving my life,” she said. “I owe you everything.”

“You owe me nothing.”

“They say they can fix me good as new with ortho work and plastic surgery. Except for the eye.”

“That’s good,” I said. “That’s real good.”

“Mr. Collins, you will always be my guardian angel.”

She positioned her crutches, leaned toward me, puckered her lips. I lowered my cheek and she kissed it.

“She wanted to tell you that,” Mr. Bond said. “And I want to thank you again for sparing my daughter. God bless you, Hap Collins.”

When they were gone, Brett and I remained in the yard, sitting in our chairs. My cheeks were wet.

“You’re such a softie, Hap Collins,” Brett said. “And I love you so much for it.”

“Sometimes we do something right in spite of ourselves, don’t we?” I said.

“Sometimes,” Brett said.

BOOKS BY JOE R. LANSDALE

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After a harrowing stint in the Iraq war, Cason Statler returns home to the small East Texas town of Camp Rapture, where he drinks too much, stalks his ex-wife, and takes a job at the local paper. There he uncovers notes on a cold-case murder. With nothing left to live for and his own brother connected to the victim, he makes it his mission to solve the crime. Soon he is drawn into a murderous web of blackmail and deceit. To make matters worse his deranged buddy Booger comes to town to lend a helping hand.

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The Hap and Leonard Novels

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MUCHO MOJO

Leonard is still nursing the injuries he sustained in the duo's last wild undertaking when he learns that his Uncle Chester has passed. Hap is of course going to be there for his best friend, and when the two are cleaning up Uncle Chester's dilapidated house, they uncover a dark little secret beneath the house's rotting floorboards—a small skeleton buried in a trunk. Hap wants to call the police. Leonard, being a black man in East Texas, persuades him this is not a good idea, and together they set out to clear Chester's name on their own. The only things standing in their way are a houseful of felons, a vicious killer, and possibly themselves.

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In this rollicking, roller-coaster ride of a novel, Hap Collins and Leonard Pine take a break from their day jobs to search for Florida Grange, Leonard's drop-dead gorgeous lawyer and Hap's former lover, who has vanished in the Klan-infested East Texas town of Grovetown. Before she disappeared, Florida was digging up some dirt behind the mysterious jailhouse death of a legendary bluesman's son, who was in possession of some priceless merchandise. To Hap and Leonard, something don't smell right. With murder on their minds, Hap and Leonard set out to investigate as only they know how . . . chaotically.

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BAD CHILI

Hap Collins has just returned home from a gig working on an offshore oil rig. With a new perspective on life, Hap wants to change the way he's living, and shoot the straight and narrow. That is until the man who stole Leonard Pine's boyfriend turns up headless in a ditch and Leonard gets fingered for the murder. Hap vows to clear Leonard's name, but things only get more complicated when Leonard's ex shows up dead. To the police it is just a matter of gay-biker infighting, but to Hap and Leonard murder is always serious business, and these hit a little to close to home.

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RUMBLE TUMBLE

Even though a midlife crisis just hit Hap Collins like a runaway pickup truck, he's still got his job as a bouncer at a local club, he knows his best friend, Leonard Pine, will always be there for him, and of course he's got his main squeeze, ex–Sweet Potato Queen Brett Sawyer. Things go downhill, however, when Brett's daughter, Tillie, who has been walking on the wrong side of the law—doing drugs and turning tricks—suddenly stands in need of a rescue. It won't be easy— it never is—but nothing is going to stop Hap and Leonard as they hit the road destined for Hootie Hoot, Oklahoma, to shake things up. And with Hap and Leonard at the wheel, this promises to be a wild ride.

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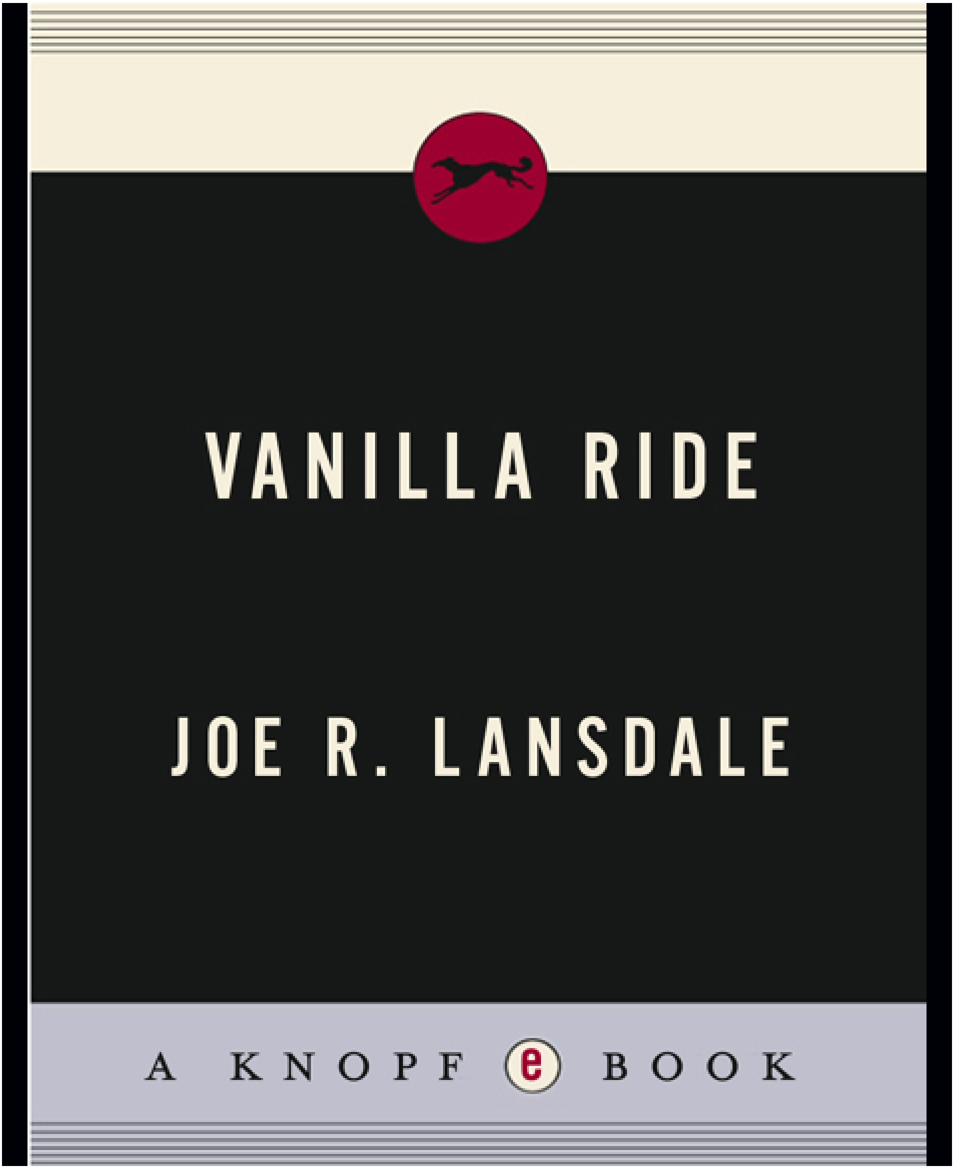

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VANILLA RIDE

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For all you Hap and Leonard fans. Bless your little weird hearts.

The pistol is the devil’s red right hand.

—Steve Earle

Man turns everything into a weapon. Even his tongue.

—Hap Collins

1

I hadn't been shot at in a while, and no one had hit me in the head for a whole month or two. It was kind of a record, and I was starting to feel special.

Brett and I were upstairs in our little rented house, lying in bed, breathing hard, having just arrived at the finish line of a slow, sweet race that at times can seem like a competitive sport, but when played right, even when you're the last to arrive, can make you feel like a winner.

In that moment, life was good.

Brett sat up and fluffed her pillow behind her back and pushed her long bloodred hair to the side with one hand, shoved her chest forward in a way that made me feel mighty lucky, said, "I haven't had that much fun since I pistol-whipped a redheaded midget."

"You don't know how romantic that makes me feel," I said. "I think Little Hap just went looking for a place to hide."

"I thought he just came out of hiding," she said, and winked at me.

Thing was, she actually *had* pistol-whipped a midget. I was there. She was trying to find her daughter and save her life, but still, it was ugly, and I was a party to it. I will say this, however, in favor of the midget: he took his beating with stoic pride and refused to take it while wearing his cowboy hat, an expensive Stetson. He wanted it right on the skull and that's where he got it.

"You know, I think they prefer being called *dwarf* instead of *midget*, or *little people,"* I said.

"No kidding. I don't know about the rest of them, but the one I worked over, I just call him Pistol-Whipped."

"Do you ever feel bad about it?"

“Nope.”

“He died, you know.”

“Not from the pistol whipping.”

This was also true. He ended up dead another way, but, man, that had been some pistol whipping. She had also set her ex-husband’s head on fire and put it out with a shovel, which is a far cry from a water hose. My sweet baby, at times, could make a man nervous.

She said, “Speaking of little guys,” and took hold of my crotch.

“Little guys?” I said. “That’s supposed to fire me up?”

“No. I’ll fire you up.”

She chuckled and slid over close and I took her in my arms and we snuggled. Things were looking operational when there was a knock on the door.

Typical.

I looked at the clock on the nightstand. Eleven p.m.

The knock came again, louder.

I got up and pulled on my robe and bunny slippers, and cursed. “Keep that thought. I’m going down to kill a late-night Bible salesman.”

“Will you bring me back his head, please?”

“On a platter.”

2

Downstairs, I went to the window, eased back the curtain and took a peek. Two big black guys, one supported on a stick, were standing on the steps. My best friend, Leonard Pine, and an ex-cop buddy, Marvin Hanson.

I opened the door.

“Sure isn’t good to see you,” I said to Leonard.

Leonard pushed on in. He was decked out in cowboy boots, jeans, a faded snap-pocket shirt that was a little stretched across his broad shoulders, and a shit-eating grin. “Now that’s no way to be,” he said.

“Your timing as usual is impeccable, brother,” I said.

“Thank you.”

“Leave your horse and hat at the corral?”

“The horse is wearing the hat,” Leonard said. “After the fun me and him had, I thought he deserved a little token of my appreciation. You can bet he’ll call tomorrow.”

“You’re funnier earlier in the day,” I said.

Marvin came in more slowly, using the cane.

“Like them foot rabbits,” he said, nodding at my shoes.

“Yeah, me and them are buds,” I said. “You’re getting around good.”

“You should have seen me before we went dancing. Those hip-hop steps have a way of making you weak.”

“We went for tacos,” Leonard said. “This guy, you can’t get him to do nothing fun. His idea of a good time is chewing gum with a fruity flavor.”

“Where’s the love of your life?” I asked Leonard.

“John?”

“No. Winston Churchill.”

“He’s mad at me.”

“Imagine that.”

“It’s nothing much. I think we called each other bitches and then I got mad enough to take a dump in the middle of the bed, and did.”

“Overshare,” I said.

“We both forget what started it, and we’re both holding out for an apology. I will, of course, cave, and then we’ll be back to normal. You got anything to eat?”

“I thought you ate tacos?”

“Two, maybe three hours ago.”

“I’m not feeling all that friendly right now,” I said. “Why would I want to feed you?”

“Interrupt something?” Leonard said, sliding into the kitchen to open the refrigerator.

“Yeah, me and Brett were just setting up the checkerboard. Marvin, why do you hang with this riffraff?”

Marvin found a soft chair and was sitting there, stretching out his leg, rubbing his knee. “I hang with him because I pity him.”

“So why let him bother me?”

“Leonard said you love late-night company.”

“He’s a lying sonofabitch.”

“Hey, boys,” Brett said.

I turned and saw her coming down the stairs. She had on a white shorty robe and her hair was bed fluffed and her legs were long enough to make a giraffe drown himself. Her eyes were half closed and she was beautiful.

Leonard came back into the living room, empty-handed.

Brett finished off the stairs, said, “Hi, Leonard.”

“Hi, Brett. You got anything to eat?”

“John lets you out to play this late?” she said.

“I’ll make it up to him tomorrow,” Leonard said. “I’ve got some moves, honey. If you like, I could show Hap some of my tricks, though it would be purely theoretical, of course.”

“Your biology sucks,” I said. “John. Brett. Different plumbing. Wouldn’t work.”

“Hi, Marvin,” she said.

Marvin smiled, gave her a little wave.

“I’m having milk and cookies,” she said. “Anyone else?”

“Me. Me,” Leonard said. “Are the cookies by any chance … vanilla?”

“They are,” Brett said. “Hap keeps them just for you, baby. There’s also your favorite. Dr Peppers. These are from the only plant where the original formula is used. We drove over there special to get them.”

“We were passing by the plant,” I said, “so I thought, why not.”

Leonard looked at me and batted his eyes. “You are the sweetest bastard ever squatted to crap over a pair of shoes.”

“Cookies aren’t just for you,” I said. “I like them too. And Dr Pepper.”

“He’s a liar,” Brett said. “He keeps them for you. He drinks that diet crap. Go sit down. Milk or Dr Pepper with your cookies?”

“Need you ask?” Leonard said.

“Marvin?” Brett said. “How about you?”

“Milk and cookies sounds fine.”

“Great,” she said. “Hap, get your ass in there and get the cookies. Some for me too. Chop-chop.”

I started toward the kitchen. As I passed her, she grabbed my arm. “Just kidding,” she said. “I’ll get them. I was just evaluating your training. You get an A. Later I’ll give you a treat, and it won’t be a dog biscuit.”

She leaned forward and kissed me on the lips.

As I started back into the living room area Leonard said, “Good dog. Next you’ll be off the newspapers and using the yard.”

“That’s my goal.”

I sat down on the couch, the far end from Leonard, who had kicked off his shoes and was stretching his legs out.

“I can’t see what Brett sees in you, Hap,” Leonard said.

“It’s the parts you don’t see,” I said.

“Nor do I want to.”

“I’m thinking, maybe,” I said, “you didn’t really come over here to interrupt my sex life and have milk and cookies.”

“I’m having Dr Pepper,” Leonard said. “Dr Pepper that you got special just for me.”

“Go to hell, Leonard.”

“You’re right, Hap,” Marvin said. “We didn’t come over to have milk and cookies. It’s a little more complicated than that.”

3

We finished up our milk and cookies, Leonard his Dr Pepper and cookies, then Brett went upstairs to bed. The treat she offered me would have to be held in abeyance. I considered the delay Leonard's fault, and gave him a black mark on my mental chalkboard. No star for you, asshole. Next time I'd get RC instead of Dr Pepper, see how that pulled his chain, maybe get some of those nasty coconut cookies he hated. I hated them too, but the punishment was worth consideration.

We went out in the yard to talk so Brett wouldn't be bothered by our big mouths. She had bought some metal lawn chairs and put them out there, and I kept expecting to come out some morning and find they'd been chair-napped, as our part of the neighborhood was getting bad. Used to, you could leave your wallet on the porch swing and no one would bother it. These days, you left a cheese grater out, someone would steal the holes.

It was a nice night and there weren't too many lights on our street, and the sky was clear so you could look up through the limbs of the elm tree at the edge of the yard and see stars. It was too cool for crickets and there wasn't any traffic on the road out front. The air smelled fresh and a little sweet, like a baby's breath, and in that moment I was glad we lived there in that house with that yard and that big elm, in what the old books about the South used to call genteel poverty.

After seating ourselves in the lawn chairs, I crossed my legs and dangled a bunny shoe.

Leonard said, "Man, you could have at least put on pants. That robe is a little too peekaboo."

"My motto," I said, "is if you've got it, flaunt it."

"What you're flauntin' is enough to make a man turn a gun on himself," Leonard said.

Marvin said, “I got a job proposition to discuss.”

“You’re gonna love this, Hap,” Leonard said.

I looked at Marvin. “Am I?”

“I don’t think you’re going to throw a parade, but here it is,” Marvin said. “My daughter’s daughter, her boyfriend, he’s been beating on her.”

This fit in with the theme Brett and I had been discussing. Maybe I should just send her over there with a shovel. If there was a dwarf, I could send her with a pistol.

I said, “Boyfriend? Your granddaughter? What is she, like twelve?”

“Eighteen.”

“Get out,” I said.

“They grow fast,” he said.

“And she’s a cutie,” Leonard said. “You should see her. A dirty old hetero man like you, you’d love her.”

“You’ve seen her?”

“Photograph,” Leonard said.

I turned to Marvin. “So what exactly is the deal?”

“Well, he whipped up on her and I went over and caught him pulling into his place and he got out and I beat him a little bit with my cane. It wore me out and it didn’t do my cane any good and I scuffed up a good pair of shoes. I had to get a new cane and have the shoes shined. That ain’t a quarter no more. White boys are doing it now, by the way. They like at least five dollars.”

“Inflation,” Leonard said.

“How old is the boyfriend?” I asked.

“Twenty-five or so,” Marvin said. “I don’t know exactly. Old enough to be a better person than he is. Old enough for me to kill him and drop his body in a hole somewhere.”

“So you beat him with your cane, and now you want… what?” I said. “Sounds like to me you took care of the problem, gave him an attitude adjustment. Did you leave the old cane up his ass and you want us to fetch it?”

“Deal is,” Marvin said, “he didn’t like it much, that beating, and he has friends he can go to. And my leg, it’s just getting good, but it’s not that good. I can whip one ass easy enough, but multiple asses, not so sure. And I’m only up for one ass at a time, maybe once a week during certain hours after lunch and well before sunset when the stars are aligned just right… I was lucky I caught him alone, without his posse.”

“Call me foolish,” I said, “but since you used to be a cop, did it occur to you that you might want to call the law and maybe have them go over there and do the domestic violence thing?”

“Therein lays the Shakespearean rub,” Marvin said.

“That sounds like something I’d like on my middle leg,” Leonard said.

“You see, my granddaughter, Julia, we call her Gadget, this guy she’s with, he’s kind of a drug dealer.”

“Kind of?” I asked.

“Okay,” Marvin said. “Absolutely he is. And if the law gets involved, well, she could get involved.”

“I’m not loving this at all, Leonard.”

“I was being facetious.”

I turned to Marvin. Fearing I already knew the answer, I asked, “Why would she get involved if the law got involved?”

“Because she is selling grass out of their trailer, and they, as I said, are drug dealers. As for the law, they are in the drug dealer’s pocket, in there with the lint and the pocket change. So it could really turn out bad.”

“I probably should know this already,” I said, “but what about Gadget’s father? Maybe he can do something.”

Marvin shook his head. “No reason you should know. I don’t make a point of talking about him much. He ran off when she was a fetus, and now her mother is at her wits’ end.”

“So what you need from us is…?” I asked.

“I need someone to do some serious ass whipping, and bring her home. If you can get by without the ass whipping and just bring her home, that’ll do. But I’d like to think there will be an ass whipping. Not meaning her ass, of course.”

“What if she doesn’t want to come home?”

“I think she will. I think she would have the other day, but at the last minute she didn’t. I’m not up to snuff. I burned myself out and didn’t have any energy left, so I had to let her go. There wasn’t anything I could do. I bluffed my way out to the car and got out of there. But you two, you can do it. You can bring her home.”

I studied on this a moment, looked at Leonard. He gave me a small nod. I said, “We’ll do it, but she doesn’t want to come home, I don’t know what to tell you. That’s the case, we bring her back, she’ll just run off again.”

“I understand that,” Marvin said. “But I saw something in her eyes before she got pulled away. She wanted to come home. I’m not sure she knows it outright, but I could tell.”

“I don’t trust things you see in people’s eyes,” I said. “You might be seeing your own reflection.”

“Me neither,” Leonard said, “but I’d sure like to whip that guy’s ass. We could make it a weekly tradition.”

“You mentioned that he has a posse,” I said.

“He does. My catching him alone … I understand that’s rare.”

“How many?”

“From my sources, I hear four, sometimes less, sometimes more. But generally, four. They stay in a trailer out in the woods. That’s where I caught him. I wasn’t using my head. Had they been there with him, my picture would probably be on a milk carton, people out beating the bushes, digging up anything looked like a grave. I don’t think they’re all that rough-and-tumble, but I don’t want you to think they can’t be dangerous they catch you just right.”

“Who are your sources, far as the size of his posse goes?”

“Formerly bad people gone straight. Or so they say. They may still be bad people. But I trust them on their head count.”

“Four is a lot,” I said.

“Hey,” Marvin said, “you two against a trailer full of scum, that’s not fair to the scum.”

“Don’t blow me, Marvin,” I said.

“I wouldn’t think of it. But you show up in that robe and bunny slippers, you’re bound to have them licked. They’ll laugh themselves to death.”

“You’re kind of nasty for a man wanting a favor,” I said.

Marvin grinned at me, then his face let loose of the smile and his eyes narrowed. “Look. I need your help. I’m asking … Hell, I’m begging a little, just not so that you can tell, all right?”

“This guy, what’s his name?”

“Oddly enough, I don’t know. I know where he lives. He has one of those sixties-style Afros, maybe not as big as the really big ones, but you know, out there, Jimi Hendrix like. But I can put you right at his trailer.”

I looked at Leonard. He gave me a nod.

I said, “We’ll scope it out. See what we can do.”

4

The place where Gadget was selling grass and her boyfriend was selling meaner drugs when he wasn't using Gadget for a racquetball was not in LaBorde but just outside a nearby town called No Enterprise, where the law was two fat guys in a used cop car with so-so tires. They took the town's cop checks, but they didn't do much for it, except maybe catch a speeder now and then, maybe talk some gal into a blow job to get a pass on a ticket. The real money was in crooked enterprise. Or so Marvin told us. And Marvin isn't often wrong about stuff like that. He was a cop for years. First in Houston, then in LaBorde. He said he knew about those guys and told us about them, and I took his word to be as true as the turning of the earth.

We drove over to No Enterprise in my pickup. The truck is one of those Dodges with a backseat and four doors and a short bed. I had recently traded for it and it ran good.

It was raining and it was a cool day, especially for early fall. Just the night before we had been sitting in my yard in shirtsleeves, and now it was cool enough to wish for excess hair on your chest. As for women, I don't know exactly what they'd wish for. Probably a nice coat and a pair of shoes. I know Brett liked coats and shoes, especially shoes. She had enough in the closet to shoe a couple of monster-size centipedes, as long as they liked their footwear to come from Payless, Wal-Mart or Target. Equating women with shoes might be an old sexist cliché, but it didn't change the fact Brett had a lot of shoes.

What Leonard and I had were some windbreakers. Mine was blue. Leonard's was beige. We made a point of making sure we weren't wearing the same colors. It's hard to be convincing as tough guys when you're wearing matching outfits.

We had the address from Marvin, and of course the thing to do was not to just drive right up on the place, as that would be foolish and dangerous, but, since the two of us together sometimes can only manage the IQ level of a ground squirrel, that's exactly what we were going to do. We tried to come up with some nifty sophisticated plan on the way over, but we kept getting distracted and singing along with the CD player. We had to listen to Leonard's music. If I didn't want to, he pouted. He can pout big-time. Since we were in my truck and it was my CD player, I should have chosen some of the music. I wanted to play Amy Winehouse. He didn't.

Anyway, we drove over there singing to Kasey Lansdale's *Back of My Smile* CD, some Hank Williams, and a bit of Ernest Tubb. All good stuff. Then we listened to Patsy Cline. Neither of us had the balls to sing along with Patsy. That just isn't done. By the time we were five miles outside of No Enterprise it occurred to us that we had yet to concoct some kind of strategy, so we stopped off in town at Big Burger, a local place that served food and was also a filling station with an open garage. Inside the garage was a lube rack and a lonely-looking guy in blue khakis sitting on an old-fashioned Coke crate turned on edge. He was reading without fear of insult a sex book titled in bold letters *Poontang Palace*. The book was probably older than the reader, and considering the size of the town he probably read more books than he lubed transmissions.

Inside, they took our order and a lanky guy in an apron brought it to the little table where we sat, placed the hamburger plates on the plastic checkered tablecloth, and went away. They made a good hamburger and some French fries that tasted as if they had been put out on the drainboard and pissed on the night before and left to dry. We both bought potato chips as a replacement and pondered how a place could make such good hamburgers and such shitty fries. What kind of cook could fry a burger and couldn't dip some French fries in a deep fryer without screwing them up?

At that moment it seemed like a question equal to "why are we here?" We came closer to solving the French fry enigma than coming up with any kind of plan to deal with our problem concerning Gadget and her keepers.

"We're just going to rough him up, aren't we?" I said.

"He hit Gadget."

"We don't really know Gadget."

"She's Marvin's granddaughter, isn't she?"

"She is."

"All I need to know, Hap, ole buddy."

"So, we punch him in the head a little and we take Gadget with us."

"We can punch him lots of places. He's got friends, we got to punch them too."

"Okay, so we punch him and anyone else gets in our way, and we punch them all kinds of places, and then we take Gadget."

"Always been the plan, far as I'm concerned."

"And if she doesn't want to go?" I asked.

"We could take her."

"That wouldn't be smart, and it wouldn't be any good. You know that. We told Marvin that."

"You told him," Leonard said, sipped his coffee and looked out the window at cars going by on the highway.

"But you know it's true," I said.

"Yeah, I know it. But I don't like bastards like this guy and I don't like what he's done to the granddaughter…. Ever notice how many cars are red these days? That used to be bad luck, a red car."

"No. I haven't noticed. We don't know this guy has done anything. She might be making him do it."

"Making him do it? Sayin', 'How's about hittin' me upside the head'? That what she's doin'?"

"I don't mean she deserves it. I mean it may be some kind of sexual ritual. He punches her in the eye, then she sucks his dick. Then she punches him in the eye, and he goes for the taco. Then they start all over again."

"That what you think?"

"No."

"Just like to hear yourself talk, don't you, Hap?"

"Pretty much," I said.

"So we're back to roughing his ass up and seeing she wants to go with us."

"Yeah, that's pretty much it," I said. "That is the plan. I mean, why do something smart and safe and well coordinated, when we can just drive up on them and start throwing knuckles."

"Sometimes it works."

"Sometimes it does. And sometimes we get our asses kicked around."

"I know," Leonard said. "I've seen it happen. But that ain't often, is it?"

"Once is too goddamn often."

"Point taken. Chocolate pie?"

5

We finished off our lunch with chocolate pie and more coffee, considered having another slice and another cup but talked ourselves out of it, reminded by the fact that we had a job to do, a promise to keep, and we didn't want to do it toting too much weight in our bellies.

Outside I took a peek in the garage. The reader was still sitting on the upturned Coke crate, engrossed in his book. I sort of hoped no one would want a tire changed or a manifold replaced. I'd hate to think such intense concentration might be broken. A car backfired out on the highway. The dedicated reader didn't move. He didn't bat an eye. I guess he was at the good part, where someone was about to put the arrow in the target.

Leonard came over and stood by me, said, "Come on, doofus. I been standing out by the truck waiting. Let's roll."

* * *

Following Marvin's directions over to the place, we listened to some more music and sang along some more, this time with Willie Nelson. I thought I did a pretty good "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain." Leonard didn't think so. We sang "In the Jailhouse Now," which I thought might be a form of prophecy, considering what we were about to do.

Where we were going was kind of a peckerwood suburb, which was pretty much a clutch of fall-defoliated trees, some evergreen pines, a listing mobile home, and a dog hunched to drop a load in what passed for a yard. The dog was medium-sized, dirty yellow, and looked like the last meal he'd eaten was what he was dropping. He was working so hard at dropping those turds, his eyes were damn near crossed, had the kind of concentration that made you consider he might be close to figuring out the problems of string theory. He didn't look owned. Had the look of a freelance dog. Maybe there was something to be said for that.

The yard wasn't much. The rain had stopped and windblown leaves had bunched up all over the place. There were some cars parked there, and there were some people standing next to the cars. Eight guys, to be exact. They looked pretty young. There was a fellow standing in the doorway of the trailer in Scooby Doo shorts scratching his nuts like a squirrel sorting acorns. He was young too. I didn't see anyone I thought was Gadget, unless she had been disguised as the stray yellow dog or was in that fellow's shorts hiding next to his nut sack.

We parked and Leonard got my .38 snub-nosed revolver out of the glove box and stuck it in his pants and pulled his shirt and windbreaker over it. I have a gun permit, as does Leonard, but that gun wasn't on it. It wasn't even registered. It was for nefarious deeds.

I said, "Don't use that."

"Hey, better to have and not need than not have and need."

"What about me?"

"You didn't want me to use it, but now you want to carry it? I don't think so."

"It's my gun."

"Tough shit. Use your suave and debonair fucking charm."

We got out and started walking toward the trailer. The people in the yard rapidly divided into two camps: the scared and the nervous. Some of them got in their cars and drove away quickly. They would be the buyers. The rest started inside the trailer. They would be the drug-selling posse. The guy in the shorts let them pass, then took his position again, hand in his drawers. He looked at us like he thought he was tough enough to chew the edge off a Buck knife. I didn't think he looked as tough as he thought. However, sometimes looks can be deceiving.

There was what passed for music coming out of the trailer. Rap, I guess, but it sounded like someone beating an active washing machine with a log chain.

I said to Leonard as we walked up, "Take it easy, play it cool."

"Cool is my middle name," Leonard said.

“No,” I said. “No, it isn’t.”

We were close to the front door when the man holding his balls, a black guy with pale skin and a longish Afro that made him look like a time traveler from the late sixties, early seventies, said, “Man, you two are fuckin’ my game. You didn’t come here for what we sell, I can tell.”

“Ain’t this where they’re having the revival?” Leonard said. “I been wanting Jesus in my heart, or up my ass or somethin’. Way you’re digging, is he in them Scooby shorts with you?”

“You a funny nigger,” the black man said. “You don’t know shit. Scooby is cool. What the fuck you want?”

The idea that our bad guy guarding the door was worried about our dissing Scooby amused me a bit. We had stopped about four feet from the door. The trailer was up on concrete blocks, so the guy in the doorway was standing above us. He was still playing pocket pool. By this point, my nuts would have been chafed and my hand would have been tired enough I would have had to call in re inforcements. His legs had bruises on them. I figured that would be from Marvin’s cane. Behind him, in the slight darkness, I could see movement, and the sound of the music was loud enough and bad enough that the idea of kicking someone’s ass was beginning to appeal, if for no other reason than their lack of taste.

“I don’t like being called a nigger even when a nigger calls me that,” Leonard said.

“That some kind of joke too?”

“You see me laughin’?” Leonard said.

Another man, a lanky but muscled white guy with a close-shaved scalp, appeared at the Afro guy’s shoulder, looked out, said, “You want I should take care of them?”

“I ask you shit?” the Afro man said. “You hear me ask some shit from you? Go on in there and sit your white ass down. Pet the fuckin’ dog or pat my old lady’s ass, but don’t be gettin’ in my game unless I call on you.”

“Have it your fuckin’ way,” the white guy said, and disappeared back inside the trailer.

“I’m pettin’ your gal’s ass,” the white guy called from somewhere inside.

“That was like just a fuckin’ thing to say. Don’t you do it, asshole,” the Afro guy said, glancing inside the trailer. Then he looked back at us.

I said, “Could you ask him to turn down the music? I think I saw a bird fall out of a tree.”

He ignored me. “You cops?”

“We look like cops?” Leonard said.

“He does,” he said, pointing a finger at me.

“He’s white,” Leonard said. “All white guys look like cops.”

“I resent that,” I said.

“We ain’t cops,” Leonard said. “Now, get your hand off your bulbs, we maybe can do a little business. But you and me. No matter what the business. We ain’t shakin’ hands.”

The Afro guy didn’t pull his hand out of his shorts. His eyes narrowed. “All right, you buyin’ somethin’ or not?”

Leonard said, “You’re right. I fess up. We don’t want to buy anything. To be precise, we’re here to take somethin’. It’s Gadget we want.”

“Gadget?”

“Yep,” I said.

“You guys are nuts. Ain’t nobody around but you two, and there’s four of us and a badass dog, and you’re tellin’ me you’re takin’ my woman?”

“If you had two dogs,” Leonard said, “now that would be different.”

“There’s a dog?” I said.

The guy in the doorway shifted his nuts to the other side of his shorts and looked exasperated. “Gadget ain’t goin’ nowhere, man. She’s my hole.”

“Damn, that’s a romantic reference,” I said. “You say you got a dog in there?”

“She ain’t goin’,” the man said.

“Only if she wants to go,” I said. “And maybe even if she doesn’t want to. We’re kind of up in the air on that part… What kind of dog is it?”

“Ah,” he said, “I get it. You two from that old nigger. Her granddaddy That fuckin’ cripple.”

“Whipped your ass with a cane, didn’t he?” Leonard said. “That was some lively old cripple, wouldn’t you say? Your legs look like a fuckin’ zebra with them bruises.”

“He caught me off guard.”

“He hit you with that stick like he was dustin’ a rug, Tanedrue,” the white guy said from somewhere inside.

“You shut the fuck up,” Tanedrue said.

He turned back to us.

Leonard laughed a little. “Tanedrue? That’s your name? Your mama made that name up, didn’t she?”

“It’s African.”

“Naw it ain’t,” Leonard said. “If that don’t scream ignorant backwoods nigger, I don’t know what does. That was my name, I’d stick a sharp stick up my ass and impale myself.”

“That’s it,” Tanedrue said, and reached back into the trailer with his right hand. For a slight moment he was distracted, which of course was what we were waiting for.

Leonard moved quickly, caught Tanedrue by the feet, jerked them up and out. Tanedrue’s head smacked on the bottom of the trailer doorway and then Leonard dragged him down the metal stairs so that his head bounced on each and every one of them. I saw a bit of blood fly out from Tanedrue’s skull, then he went limp and tumbled off the stairs, his hand still in his shorts. No doubt about it, he was one tenacious ball handler.

We kept moving, straight into the trailer.

6

The white guy with the shaved head was the first one at the door. Leonard hit him between the eyes with a swinging elbow so hard I'm sure a distant relative in bad health in the old country crossed his eyes and died. The blow made the goon spin around and away from us. He went down on one knee and held his head, just to make sure it was still attached. While he was on his knees, his legs slightly spread, Leonard kicked him in the balls like he was making a soccer goal.

I was in right behind Leonard. As I entered, the music smacked me like a fist and the stink of the place draped over me like a blanket. Then a dog jumped at me from the shadows. It was a big, dark, growling dog and it was part of the stench. It went for my throat. I moved to the side slightly and caught the dog by the collar with one hand as its teeth snapped in the air, and saliva from the snap popped across my forehead. With the other hand, I caught its hind leg and picked it up high as I could manage. It was a heavy dog. I saw a window out of the corner of my eye, just over a stained kitchen sink. I tossed the dog at it, hard as I could. The window cracked and the dog went through it in a shower of black and tan fur and a tinkling of glass, its body doing a kind of horseshoe maneuver from the impact. The dog let out a whelp and a yip and then I heard nothing but the sound of its body striking the earth outside. There was blood and fur on the jagged glass. I suspected fleas had pulled parachute cords.

I heard Leonard say, "Come to papa," and when I turned my head, I caught sight of Leonard holding a big bushy-headed white guy by the back of the neck, slamming his head into the wall so hard a mirror fell off and shattered.

As I turned, a thin black guy came down the hall at a rush, clubbed me in the ribs with a right hook that nearly caused me to piss myself. I tried to kick him, but there wasn't any room. In a reflex action he shoved out with both hands, hit me in the chest and knocked me down on top of the guy Leonard had kicked in the balls. The ball-kicked dude was resting politely on the floor whimpering like a little girl who had lost her dolly, hands between his legs.

“You hurt my dog,” said the guy who shoved me.

I rolled up and he kicked at me and I scooped my hand under his leg and grabbed his face with my other hand and used my closest leg to sweep his standing leg out from under him. He hit his head on a counter, his teeth snapped together on his tongue, and he went down, blood foaming out of his mouth. I smelled something that made me think he’d bent a biscuit in his skivvies.

I heard a shriek from the back, looked down the hall. A young, long-legged woman was running at me. She was a dark-skinned girl with a lot of processed hair, maybe some extensions, and for all I knew a recent manicure and a toe ring. She jumped on me with her legs spread and straddled me, her ankles locked around my back; she had hold of my hair with one hand and was clawing my face with the other, still shrieking.

I hit her with a right cross between the eyes and she let go, though her legs stayed hooked. She fell back on her head, then her legs came undone and they sort of melted toward the floor with the rest of her.

Leonard was still working on the big hairy guy, had him by the mane and was smashing his head into the wall, cracking the paneling. All I could tell for sure was the guy now had a very flat nose and his lips looked like fat fishing worms that were coming apart. One of his teeth was embedded in the paneling and there was blood on the wall. One more slam and a big crucifix fell and bounced on the couch and then bounced on top of the ball-kicked guy and then onto the floor.

The ball-kicked guy had gotten some juice back. Maybe the crucifix revived him. He tried to get up, made it to his hands and knees. Leonard, without letting go of the guy whose head he was bouncing, kneed the other dude in the face, knocking him back down. He winced, did a kind of push-up, tried to come up. I got him from behind, right in the snickerdoodles again. He farted and went down and didn’t get up, either knocked out, dead, or hoping to God we thought he was. Right then he was probably wishing he had been thrown out the window with the dog. I was too. That was quite a fart.

I took a breath and put a hand on my side, then my face. I was bleeding from where the girl had scratched me.

I did a quick reconnoiter. It looked as if the trailer occupants were all pretty much Nap City. Leonard whirled the guy whose nose he had flattened around and hit him with a hard strike to the neck with the side of his hand. The guy went down. Not that he really needed that neck strike. He was going to fall anyway. Leonard kicked him once just to keep himself flexible.

I picked up the CD player on a shelf over the couch and slammed it against the wall. The CD flew out of it and I stepped on it. It felt good to have the air filled with emptiness.

That's when the now awake Tanedrue came wobbling through the door, his hand no longer in his shorts. He reached for what he had been reaching for before, something just inside the door on top of the refrigerator. A little automatic. He got hold of it. As he brought it around, Leonard pulled my .38 and shot Tanedrue in the right thigh, just below the shorts. Tanedrue dropped the automatic, grabbed his leg, let out a yell that made my asshole pinch tight, then went down shrieking, holding his thigh, blood squirting everywhere.

"Goddamn, Leonard!"

Leonard gave me an exasperated look. "I started to let him shoot you, but I thought Brett would be mad."

"Goddamn, Leonard."

The guy who had bitten his tongue was closest at hand, so I grabbed his shirt by the front and pulled hard. It ripped off of his unconscious body, and I stuck it in Tanedrue's wound. Tanedrue cussed me and struck out at me, so I hit him in the head a couple of times. "Lay down, you stupid fuck, before you bleed to death."

"You shot me!" he said.

"Technically, he shot you," I said, jerking my head at Leonard.

Leonard tossed my .38 on the couch, grabbed Tanedrue by the Afro and lifted him off the ground a little, slid behind him, and slipped his forearm around his neck, pushing in tight on the arteries there. He slid his choking hand into the bend of his other elbow and locked the other hand behind Tanedrue's head, compressed while he expanded his chest.

Tanedrue passed out quicker than an asthmatic octogenarian fucking a sheep in a stuffy hayloft.

"Now fix him," Leonard said, letting Tanedrue drop.

"I don't know he can be fixed."

"It ain't through an artery. I'm a better shot than that."

"No, you're not."

"Yeah. Okay, I was lucky."

Leonard was right. Tanedrue was hit through the meaty part of the thigh and he was losing blood from the hole in his leg, but the main artery had been missed. I tore some more of the shirt off the guy on the floor and wrapped Tanedrue's leg as best I could, put my ear to his chest to make sure he was breathing. Leonard had used a blood choke, but sometimes they don't come back.

"I guess that's Gadget passed out over there," I said.

"She wasn't as glad to see us as I had hoped," Leonard said. "I saw you hit her. You hit her hard. If she was wearing a Tampax, I bet you knocked it out of her ass."

"She rearranged my looks a little," I said, touching the scratches on my face.

"You look like an old-fashioned German duelist."

I picked up Tanedrue's automatic and went to the back of the trailer, just in case someone was hiding back there with a shotgun and a machete. There was no one else left. On a chest of drawers in front of a mirror there were some bags of white powder that I didn't mistake for self-rising flour. There were some boxes of baby laxative there too, for cutting the stuff. On the floor were empty cheese cracker boxes, lots of wrappers for sweets and empty soft drink cans and bottles and a near-empty jar of peanut butter with the lid off. There was a box of half-eaten Cracker Jack. That would be the property of the health nut of the bunch. What remained of the peanut butter had turned dark as dried dog shit. And there was plenty of that to go around too. Dog shit in the corner, on the floor by the bed, at the edge of the dresser. There was a footprint in that pile. Not mine. This footprint was bare. There were some other piles that someone had thoughtfully covered with paper towels. Whoever did that was probably considered prissy. A fat roach crawled out of the peanut butter jar and scuttled under the bed.

Taped to the mirror on the dresser were birthday cards, an old Christmas card. They said “To Tanedrue” and were signed “Mom.” I felt a little sick looking at those, had to wonder how his mom felt about how her boy had turned out. For that matter, if my mother was alive, how would she have felt about me, hitting people and throwing dogs out windows? It wasn’t a line of thought I wanted to linger on.

When I looked up, I noticed the walls of the trailer were moving. I had seen it before in white trash housing and poor black folk shacks. Cockroaches. They were so thick in the walls they made the paneling flex like it was breathing. Yuck.

I went back to where Leonard was slapping Tanedrue briskly on the cheeks to either bring him awake or give his cheeks a touch of color.

“Wake up, nigger,” Leonard said.

“They got some real bad stuff back there,” I said. “And perhaps, as a nod to political correctness, I should note, for your own good, that you’re using the N word.”

“I’ve been busy with words and slapping in here,” Leonard said. “I’ve done run out on the cocksucker word, and I wore out motherfucker, and sonofabitch seems so lame, so I’m going for the gold … Ah, Sleeping Beauty awakes.”

7

Tanedrue woke up. We were squatting down beside him. Leonard said, “Every time I think of Gadget’s grandpa beating your ass with a cane, I get a kind of warm feeling all over. In fact, my dick gets hard.”

Tanedrue said, “I’m bleeding to death.”

“You ain’t bleeding to death, dumb ass,” Leonard said. “Not yet, anyway. It got the fat part of your leg, went all the way through. Bleeding has mostly stopped because Hap, who is like goddamn Florence Nightingale with a pecker, stuck your buddy’s shirt in the bullet hole and stopped the bleeding. Course, you might want to worry about blood poisoning from the dye in the shirt, that would be my concern. Oh yeah, and the bullet.”

“You could have shot my balls off.”

“You’d have to have some first,” I said.

Tanedrue was sitting on the floor with his legs stuck out, his back against the refrigerator, looking around. “You fucked everybody up, you done killed them.”

“No,” Leonard said, “nobody’s dead. The fucked-up part is right, probably a concussion here and there, so I’d wake them up pretty quick. Word is on concussions… you shouldn’t sleep. Do that, sometimes you don’t wake up, and what a shame that would be. Think of the loss to art, science, and literature. Oh, and the big guy there, with all the hair. He may not have a real profile anymore, so photo shots of him might be best from the front, him wearing a bag over his head, standing somewhat at a distance.”

“They could die,” Tanedrue said. “You might have hurt them real bad. And me, I don’t feel so good either.”

“Boy, that’s a shame,” Leonard said. “Considering you were going to shoot us, you fuckin’ asshole! Pour some monkey blood on it and shut up. Now listen here: Leave Gadget alone. Stay away from her. And if you have a day where you think maybe we've forgotten about you and you decide to bother her again, that's the day we kneecap you, asshole, and then I'm gonna put your ass in an ant bed after I stuff it full of Gummi Bears, and then I'm gonna set your head on fire, and then I'm gonna get mad. Savvy?"

"Gummi Bears?" I said.

Tanedrue was almost crying, but he was still defiant. "You don't know what you're up against, nigger."

About that time the guy whose shirt I had torn off woke and tried to sit up. I said, "Lay back down, ball sweat."

He lay down and closed his eyes and stretched his arms out at his sides with the palms down and was quiet as a dead mouse.

"Now," Leonard said, standing, "we'll be taking Gadget with us, and before I go, I want to leave you with one more piece of wisdom."

Leonard kicked Tanedrue in the head, hard, knocking his noggin back against the refrigerator. Without knowing it was going to come out of my mouth, I said, "Ouch."

"You get my drift, dick cheese?" Leonard said.

Tanedrue nodded, blood dripping from his mouth, his hand held to the side of his head.

"Say it," Leonard said.

"I got you," Tanedrue said.

"That's good. And you know, this place … you ought to get some nice curtains, a little better lighting, one of those de-stinkers that plug into the 'lectric socket, a friendlier goddamn dog. This joint is fuckin' depressin'."

"You ought to see the dog shit in the back room," I said. "It's not a pretty sight."

"Clean that up too," Leonard said. "Goddamn dog don't want to see that, wonder he hasn't committed dog-acide. Better yet, set fire to this whole place and start over."

"Your little white powder in the back," I said. "I'm gonna have to get rid of it."

I put Tanedrue's automatic in my waistband without blowing my dick off, went back to the bedroom. I could hear Tanedrue calling out, “Don’t do it, man. There’s people gonna be mad and they’re so bad they make you two look like weenies. I ain’t jerkin’ you. Come on, man. We can work some kind of deal.”

I heard Leonard give Tanedrue a whack and then the guy went silent.

I got the bags one at a time and took them to the bathroom and used my pocketknife to cut them open and flush the contents down the toilet, which was a nasty little number with a dark ring inside the bowl that wasn’t some kind of design.

I could hear Tanedrue groan every time he heard the toilet flush. I kept at it until I was finished. I took a leak and washed my hands and came back and stood over him. Leonard was squatting beside him.

I said, “All down the crapper. Thousands of dollars’ worth of blow.”

“You’re gonna wish you hadn’t done that,” Tanedrue said. “Them guys we work for, they ain’t got no sense of humor.”

“That may be,” Leonard said. “But a fashion tip. Them Scooby shorts, on a grown man, they aren’t that cool. Trust me.” Leonard sniffed at the air, looked at the guy on the floor without a shirt, wrinkled up his nose. “And maybe you ought to wipe that fucker’s ass.”

◆

I looked down at Gadget. She was lying on her back, breathing deeply. She was wearing a tank top that barely kept her unfettered breasts in check and a pair of shorts that were cut so high and were so tight, if she yawned the damn things would have sucked up her ass. She was not bad to look at, though her eyes had dark circles like a raccoon’s around them. I had only hit her once, so I figured Tanedrue or one of his brethren had done the bulk of the knocking. My shot had given her a knot in the center of her forehead about the size of a turnip, so I too could be proud.

I got the .38, leaned over, and picked her up and threw her over my shoulder. She was very light, maybe a hundred and ten pounds. That’s great, Hap, you just punched out a little girl about half your weight.

I carried Gadget out to the truck and we looked around for their dog, just in case he was vengeful. But he was either on the other side of the trailer in a heap or had run off to join the circus. I hoped the latter. I liked dogs. I put Gadget in the backseat and Leonard got in the front and I drove us out of there. As we went, I saw the other dog, the yellow one, sitting beside the road. He turned his head to watch as we drove by.

Leonard turned to me, said, “Now, see. That worked out fine.”

“I hate you,” I said.

8

Leonard leaned back and looked over the seat at Gadget. He said, “She looks like some kind of angel got caught up in a fan.”

“I hit her,” I said.

“And boy did she have it coming.”

“I feel like a bully.”

“You had to do it.”

“I still don’t like it.”

“Had she been wearing a nose ring, would you have felt better?”

“Just a bit,” I said. “I really hate those things. Seriously tattooed arms would have helped too.”

Leonard grinned and shook his head. “You worry too much about things that are done, my brother. She’s taken beatings for no reason and you punched her because you wanted to keep your eyes in your head and get her away from those boneheads. Give yourself some slack.”

“Hitting women is not on my list of gentlemanly activities.”

“Well, whipping people’s asses and throwing their dog out the window might not be on the list either.”

“Yeah … well… At least I didn’t shoot anyone.”

“That’s right, point that out, put it all on me. But unlike you, I don’t feel guilty… Listen, man. You did what you had to do. And now we got to do something else. The .38 and dickhead’s automatic.”

◆

We drove down some back trails and stopped by a little run of water that was just off the road and flowed out into the woods.

The road was pretty messy and I figured if it rained harder it would be difficult to get down it, and even more difficult to get back out.

Climbing out of the truck, Leonard got some gloves from the toolbox fastened to the bed and wiped the .38 clean and threw it into the woods, into the shallow water there. He took the automatic and did the same.

We got back in the truck and I got back on the main road. “They find that stuff,” Leonard said, “it don’t mean a thing. We didn’t own the automatic. And your .38 was as cold as the cunt between a dead nun’s legs … Hey, Gadget. She’s coming to.”

Gadget sat up in the back and I watched her in the rearview mirror. She had a hand to her head. Right where I had hit her. “You hit me,” she said.

“Right between the eyes,” I said.

“He feels bad about it,” Leonard said.

“That don’t mean a damn thing to me. My head hurts.”

“He did it with love,” Leonard said.

“Who the fuck are you?” Then it struck her. “Ah, I know … My grandpa’s friends. Hank and Larry.”

“Hap and Leonard,” Leonard said. “I’m Leonard, and he’s Hap. You can remember the names because he’s a white guy and I’m a black guy.”

“I can see that… I know who you are.”

“Yeah, but can you remember which of us is which,” Leonard said. “Black guy, Leonard. White guy, Hap.”

“Why did you do it?” she said.

“Your grandpa asked us to,” I said. “And he’s a friend, and we remember when you were a baby and everyone thought you were going to grow up to be worth something.”

“That don’t mean nothin’,” she said. “I don’t even remember you guys.”

“In truth, you may not mean all that much to us,” Leonard said, “but Marvin, he means a lot. Come on, gal. What the hell you doin’? We know you got raised better than that.”

“You don’t know nothin’.”

“We know that,” I said. “We know you weren’t raised to bang drug dealers in a trailer with roaches in the walls and dog shit and a near empty jar of cheap peanut butter on the floor.”

“Don’t forget the cocaine,” Leonard said.

“That too,” I said.

“And a criminal dog,” Leonard said. “That pup y’all got, he has done gone over to the dark side.”

Gadget took a deep breath, narrowed her eyes. “I remember Grandpa said you two thought you were funny.”

9

As we arrived in No Enterprise it started to rain heavy and the sky took on a hazy green look like nature had vomited into the heavens. The wind hit the truck hard enough to move it. Looking at the town through wet swaths made by the wipers, it was even more depressing, a weak hope thrown together with brick and glass. Someone thought the railroad would come through there many years ago, and it didn't. What was left now was nothing more than a hope and a dream.

The rain was running deep in the streets and in the gutters. My gas gauge pinged. We drove back to the place where we had eaten and parked under the overhang where the fuel pumps were. Leonard got out and began putting gas in the truck. The rain pounded on the overhang. The water splashed all around us. It was pretty dark for the time of day. I glanced at Leonard standing by the pump working the gas nozzle. He gave me a weak salute. I shot him the finger. He shot me the finger back. I never said we were mature.

I looked back at Gadget.

"How'd you get that name, Gadget?" I said. "I used to know, but I forgot."

She was slow with the answer. "I liked fixing things when I was a girl. I had a knack … Look, Grandpa shouldn't have asked you to do this. This isn't good for me or anyone. Other day, when he hit Tanedrue with the cane—"

"Hold up," I said. "How many times did he hit him? I just got to know."

"A lot. He did it quick. I thought Tanedrue was going to shoot him. I begged him not to."

"Your boyfriend sounds like aces. Goddamn, I bet you're proud."

“You got to take me back, Leonard—”

“I’m Hap.”

“Whatever. Or let me out here, and I can call someone.”

“We’re someone.”

“I mean someone Tanedrue knows. I can’t call him. Cell phones don’t work out there, and that’s all they got. Cell phones. They like it that way. Hell, I don’t even have a phone. Just let me have yours, so I can call someone in town they know, and then you can go on. I see them, I can tell them something, whatever you want, make it some kind of misunderstanding, and I can say you apologized—”

“Not likely,” I said.

“You don’t want to get into this any deeper and drag me down too. You do, and hell will be coming.”

“Too late,” I said. “Did you really like it out there, Gadget?”

Again, hesitation. “I don’t know.”

“That means no,” I said.

“I loved Tanedrue.”

“Loved?”

“Love. I love him.”

“You want to go back because you’re using. That’s it, isn’t it?”

“No.”

“I think it is.”

“I said it isn’t.”

“It isn’t Tanedrue you want, it’s the monkey.”

“I just like it. I’m not hooked.”

“That’s what they all say.”

She held her stomach.

I said, “You hungry?”

“I don’t know.”

“Let’s start with the idea that you are.”

“Sometimes, I try to eat, I throw up.”

“That’s the drugs, or …”

“I’m not pregnant. I been careful about that.”

“So, you do have some common sense. Damn, girl. You don’t have to do this, live like trash.”

“You a social worker?”

“No. Unlike social workers, I really care.”

She took a long time to respond again. That was okay. I was getting used to it.

“Tanedrue, he said he was gonna quit dealing, soon as he got us a nest egg.”

“A rotten egg.”

“He meant it. He loves me.”

“You are young, aren’t you?”

“You don’t know everything.”

“I don’t know anything. Older I get, less I think I know. But I know this, and I’m going to be crude to make my point. What Tanedrue has is a dumb bitch he can screw and lie to and feed drugs to, and when he’s through with you, when you get so fucked up you can’t tell the difference between a fat mouse and a full-grown elephant, he’ll get rid of you, kid. You won’t be fresh meat to him no more. You won’t be pretty, and you won’t be nothing but a whining whore with a habit. Maybe just some dumb dead bitch in a ditch somewhere.”

“I ain’t no whore.”

“You will be. That’s how it’ll work. He’ll turn you out, baby. So he can make a few more bucks off his horse before it dies. He’ll tell you how you’re doin’ it for the two of you, and it don’t mean nothin’, not really—”

“Shut up! You don’t know everything.”

“You said that already, and I even agreed with you.”

Leonard opened the door, said, “Give me some gas money.”

“You pay”

“I haven’t got any money.”

I gave him some money, hesitated, said, “Let’s get some coffee. Gadget here, she might could eat something.”

“I’m not hungry,” she said.

“Then watch us drink coffee,” I said. “And if you run off, we’ll just chase you down. We don’t care how it looks or what anyone thinks. We are wild and crazy guys.”

“What if Tanedrue and the rest of them come and find you?” she said.

“That would be bad for them,” Leonard said. “Didn’t you just hear Hap say we were wild and crazy?”

10

I parked us near the garage between some yellow lines and under the overhang. The rain plunked on the aluminum above us like buckshot. The guy who had been reading *Poontang Palace* was still inside the garage, but now he was digging around in a toolbox, probably trying to find a big enough hammer to beat some sort of automotive problem into submission.

Inside the joint we got the same table as before and the guy who waited on us before came over, said, “You must like it here, back in the same day, and now with a friend.”

“We don’t like the fries, just want to go on record with that,” Leonard said. “But the hamburgers do the alligator rock. And she’s not a friend.”

“What?” the waiter said.

“He likes the hamburgers,” I said. “He doesn’t like the fries. The girl is not a friend. She’s a friend of a friend.”

The waiter didn’t look at me. He studied Leonard for a moment. Leonard smiled. There was always something about that smile. It was less like a smile and more like a snake trying to grin up a frog right before it struck and ate it.

The waiter looked away from Leonard, looked at me. “What happened to your face?”

I reached up and touched the scratches on my cheeks. “Briars.”

“You ought to see his ass,” Leonard said. “That’s where the real work was done.”

“That right?” the waiter said. “Sorry I asked. Here’s menus.”

When the waiter went away, I said, “What you going to have, Gadget?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“That crummy way you feel, that’s because you’re so hungry your belly thinks your throat's cut. Have some soup. They got soup here. I don't know how it is, but stay away from the French fries. Soup, any kind of soup, if it's fresh, it's pretty hard to mess up."

She didn't order anything, but when the waiter came back I ordered a cup of coffee and a bowl of chicken soup and Leonard ordered another hamburger, minus the fries, potato chips instead.

When the waiter was gone, I looked at Leonard, said, "You just ate couple hours ago. Maybe less. You want another hamburger?"

"Whipping the pure-dee-dog-doodie out of people makes me hungry. Don't it you?"

"A little."

The food came and I drank the coffee and pushed the soup over close to Gadget. I said, "I don't want the soup after all. Why don't you give it a taste? It smells pretty good."

She shook her head. "I know what you're doing."

I nodded. "Suit yourself."

Leonard dug into his hamburger. "Oh, Jesus, this is so good it makes you want to hold down a wild hog and fuck it in the ass."

"That passes for manners at his house," I said to Gadget.

"I've heard worse."

I noticed she had picked up the spoon and was starting to stir the soup. I pushed the crackers over close to her. She opened one of the cracker packages and bit a corner off the cracker. She crumbled the rest in her soup. I turned at an angle so I wasn't watching her. I got up and went over and ordered some pie and a glass of milk. When my pie and milk came, Leonard had to have the same, and now Gadget, finished with her soup, wanted some pie and milk too.

By this time she was starting to look better. I had a feeling it had been a long time since she'd eaten anything besides cheese crackers, potato chips, peanut butter and Cracker Jack. My guess was she was the neatnik who put the paper towels over the dog piles.

I paid the bill because Leonard didn't have any money, or said he didn't, and we drove out of there. The rain had died out and everything, even the crummy little town, looked better than before, spit-cleaned by nature. We hadn’t gone a mile before we looked back and saw Gadget had gone to sleep in the backseat, her belly full, and maybe, for a moment, satiated.

Of course, there was that hairy old cocaine monkey, and when she woke up, it was sure to chatter and show its ass.

I tried to tell myself we had done all we could do. What Marvin had asked. But somehow I didn’t feel satisfied that we could say “job well done.” I kept thinking about what Tanedrue had said, about what Gadget had said. About how we didn’t know what we had done and that hell was coming.

11

When we got back to LaBorde, Gadget was still sleeping. We drove through the wet town on out into the country where Marvin Hanson stayed. He lived there with his daughter and his wife. They had once been a very close family then Marvin's pecker had gotten excited about a young woman; the same young woman I had liked. She was dead now, and Marvin had gone back to his family and I had gotten over my feelings of wanting to skin him and nail his hide to the side of a barn and throw knives at it. Got over it long ago. Me and him and Leonard had gone through a lot, and we were bonded, as they like to say.

Marvin and his wife, Rachel, had gotten back together, and they were doing all right. But during that time, their daughter, JoAnna, had gone through some stuff, and then she had a daughter of her own, Julie, aka Gadget, by the guy who had run off. I didn't know that until Marvin told me. I knew I had never met him, but then again, much as Leonard and I liked Marvin, his family didn't hang with us, didn't even send us a Christmas card. They could have had three more kids, and close as the three of us were, we might not have known.

Now they all lived in a small two-bedroom house out in the country, trying to pull everything together and live happily ever after.

The house was off a rain-slick red clay road, and we started down it just as Gadget awakened and sat up in the backseat.

"If you hadn't had such a bad day," I said, "I'd have made you wear your seat belt, and I should have anyway."

"You're not my daddy," she said.

"No," Leonard said, "and from what I've heard, your daddy, whoever he is, isn't claiming you either. You weren't nothin' to him but a hump and a squirt."

Gadget crossed her arms and sat back in her seat and looked mad. I gave Leonard a look that could have paralyzed a chicken at twenty paces. If it bothered him, struck a nerve anywhere inside that hard black hide, I didn't notice it.

We drove up to Marvin's house and I got out and opened the back door of the truck. Gadget got out with her arms still crossed and walked briskly toward the house. I tried very hard not to notice that from the rear in those very short shorts she had what might be a championship butt. If not, it was certainly a top contender.

Marvin came out on the porch with his cane, and Gadget walked by him like he wasn't there, went inside and slammed the door. Marvin looked back at her through the screen. I could see his shoulders slouch. JoAnna, Gadget's mother, came out on the porch. She looked at us and tried to smile, then went back inside. I heard her call out for her daughter.

We hadn't moved away from the truck. We leaned against it and waited. Marvin came out and nodded at me. "Thanks." He looked at Leonard. "Thanks."

"We didn't have anything else to do," Leonard said. "Me and him, we usually save this day for a little Bible study, but all the dirty parts we've read so much they don't do anything for us anymore."

Marvin ignored Leonard, as was often his custom, looked at me, said, "You got her back, but other than that, how did it go?"

"Let me see," I said. "We went to the trailer, and the guy you beat with the cane was playing with his balls, which he kept in a somewhat overly snug pair of Scooby Doo boxer shorts. Leonard jerked him out of the trailer and bounced his head, and then we went inside and some guy got kicked in the balls a few times. A guy got his face flattened on a wall. The guy who was playing with his balls pulled a gun and Leonard shot him and I stuffed the bullet hole with a shirt."

"Bullet hole?" Marvin said.

"Yeah," Leonard said. "I shot the guy you beat with a cane."

"You shot him?"

"In the fat part of the thigh."

“He was shooting to kill,” I said. “But he missed and only wounded him.”

“He was going to shoot us,” Leonard said.

Marvin shook his head. “Damn, I’d have gone myself, guys. You know that, hadn’t been for this bum leg.”

“You think we don’t know that?” Leonard said.

“You could catch some shit for shooting someone, even if it wasn’t life-threatening,” Marvin said.

“Yeah, maybe,” Leonard said. “Hap, he threw a dog out the window.”

“It was trying to bite me … We got rid of the guns and Leonard lectured them on fixing the place up a bit. Gave out a fashion tip … Oh, and there was dog crap all over the place. Oh yeah, I broke their CD player and stomped the shit out of a really bad rap CD.”

“That’s an oxymoron,” Marvin said.

“They had drugs,” Leonard said.

“And not just a little,” I said. “Not some baggie of grass. Gadget… she’s got some juice in her moose, man. She’s hooked on the snort. She’s not just smokin’ weed.”

“No,” Marvin said.

“I’d recommend some kind of clinic, and quick,” I said. “You give her any slack, she’ll be back out there snorting some of what I flushed down the toilet. She thinks she’s in love with numb nuts, Tanedrue, but down deep I think she knows he’s what nature wipes its ass on. Just isn’t ready to face it. Not yet. Way I figure, Tanedrue has got her hooked on drugs so he can use her until he doesn’t want to use her. Hell, man, I don’t need to tell you that. You know how it works. Sorry we got to lay it on you like this.”

“Yeah,” Marvin said.

“It ain’t good news,” Leonard said, “but it’s the news.”

“I think we’re home free, far as those yo-yos are concerned,” I said. “All done.”

Marvin thought for a moment, then said, “Cops over there are dirty as a wino’s drawers. Drug dealers own them, so don’t be so sure they won’t try and screw you over, bring in some artillery, a mechanic to go with it, and it'll be my fault. I shouldn't have asked you."

"No one else to ask," Leonard said. "No one else would be so stupid."

"You have a point," Marvin said.

"My take is the dirty cops might not like we fucked with their guys," I said, "but I can't see them doing anything about it. They don't really know who we are. Gadget didn't tell them, 'cause she didn't even get our names right. They know we're connected to you, though. That I'm sure of."

"I sort of let slip how much I enjoyed you beating Tanedrue's ass with the walking stick," Leonard said. "But then again, I wasn't really trying to hide. We didn't do no sneakin'. I did want to mention, however, that Gadget said you said we thought we were funny, as if it weren't confirmed."

Marvin ignored that.

"It was pretty much our usual plan," I said. "We just went in there and beat the hell out of 'em, tossed a dog out a window, shot one of 'em in the leg, and messed up the paneling. It got a little wilder than we thought. I know that's a synopsis of a synopsis I already gave you, but that part about us not being really funny, that really hurt, man, and I didn't want to revisit that territory."

"I see scratches," Marvin said, nodding at my face.

"He tried to fuck a cat," Leonard said, "and the cat didn't like it."

"Those look like some pretty good claws," Marvin said. "Like maybe Gadget did it."

"Now I remember why you were a good policeman," I said. "I had to hit her. I'm not proud of it."

"You did what you had to do, I'm sure," he said.

"We got to go," I said. "Gadget, she's got to have some serious detox, buddy."

"That costs serious money," Marvin said.

"Maybe so," I said, "but unless you're going to lock her in a room and feed her soup through a straw while she's tied down to a bed wearing a strait jacket, you got to find a way, man.”

“I know,” he said. “And I will. But I am worried about you guys. When I asked for help I was thinking about Gadget, and not much else. I should have known better. I did know better. All I could think about was her, and the only people I knew to ask were you. I knew it could have consequences for you, for all of us. But I had to get her out of there. Listen, I know two, three guys we could get for protection. There’s Jim Bob, and maybe that friend of yours, Veil.”

“I hope Veil doesn’t hear you address us as friends,” Leonard said. “He might shoot us all. As for Jim Bob, no need to stir him up.”

“And there’s another guy that owes me. He could help.”

We shook our heads.

“You fellas sure?”

“We been over this,” Leonard said. “We don’t need anyone, and you don’t owe us a thing. Besides, those guys today, they don’t want to mess with me and Hap again because we are two badass motherfuckers. Didn’t I tell you Hap threw a dog out a window?”

◆

As I drove us away, I said, “Two badass motherfuckers?”

“Sound convincing?”

“It sounds like you have been watching too much *Shaft* or *Superfly.*”

“Marvin has enough to worry about. We knew what we were getting into when we took the job.”

I nodded. “Absolutely.”

We chatted a bit about how we actually thought things would be okay. About how they were small-time goobers and they wouldn’t mess with Marvin either, ’cause there was no mileage in that.

By the time we got back to LaBorde, we had almost convinced ourselves that we were in fact badass motherfuckers. Had we felt any tougher, we’d have stopped by the side of the road to shit in plain sight and wipe our asses on dried grass with sticker burs in it.

12

By the next day things seemed to have gone back to normal. You know, the basics: killing another perfectly good day and knowing you weren't going to get it back.

Brett was working at her nurse job, and I at a typically shabby day job at a construction site. Actually, it was a crummy two-day job picking up lumber and nails and all the stuff the major workers dropped. When I was hired, my boss, a black guy, told me, "You're just one of the niggers, or wetbacks. Used to be they did what you're doin'. I did what you're doin'. Now you got to do it. That's the job, take it or leave it. You're late, I hire a beaner at half your price."

I took it. I got paid by the day, and that was good. I still had a little money from another job I'd done that had to do with the sort of stuff Leonard and I excelled at. Intellectual work, like kicking someone's ass up under their ears and convincing ourselves it was for the greater good. It was rough on the knuckles, bad on the shoes, and tough on the conscience, or at least it was on mine.

Anyway, in the money department, Brett and I weren't rich, but we had most everything paid off and weren't hurting. And, as always, another job would pop up. Also, Marvin was starting a private investigations company and Leonard and I had been promised work from him once he got that up and running. I couldn't wait to peep in windows and take pictures of the wrong couples coming out of cheap motels.

I got off work and went home and showered the sweat off and read a little from a book by an author who didn't use quotation marks and was scared to death his work might be entertaining. I gave up on the book and put it in the to-be-swapped pile for the used bookstore, went upstairs, and watched TV

There was some good History Channel stuff, and some

Discovery Channel stuff on, but I watched a show about some dumb blondes who had access to a lot of money and didn't do much of anything all day but plan ways to spend that money. I couldn't take my eyes off the program. I told myself down deep they couldn't be as dumb as they seemed and that there was something spiritual about them. I think their most spiritual aspect was their lack of clothing. Their benefactor was an eighty-year-old gray guy who walked around in a house robe and took Viagra so he could bang all three and sleep in the bed with them all at the same time. He was my hero.

When I heard the front door slam, I switched the channel. Brett was home. I found a history program about Genghis Khan. I had seen the program before and had enjoyed it. Seen it twice even, but by this go-round I knew Genghis was dead and he wasn't coming back.

Brett came upstairs. She looked cute in her nurse's uniform. Her flame-red hair had slipped out from under her cap and was hanging over one eye. She took off the cap and sighed and threw the cap on a chair. She came over and turned her back to me. I sat up on the bed and unzipped her dress. She wiggled out of it.

"I want to order pizza," she said, "and then fuck like a couple of greased weasels."

"My lucky day."

"And don't you forget it."

She sat on the edge of the bed and picked up the phone and called the pizza place. I unsnapped her bra and played with her breasts while she called.

When she hung up, I said, "Bet we could do it before the pizza delivery gets here."

"He's ten minutes away," she said. "What fun is there in that?"

"About ten minutes' worth."

"You are correct, sir," she said. She rolled onto the bed and I took her in my arms and we kissed. "Will you wear the bunny slippers, baby?"

"Oh, hell yes," I said.

But I didn't. The rest of it just happened naturally.

13

We ate the pizza downstairs and Brett read the newspaper and I read part of a Western novel and thought it was pretty good, even if the author did talk about starting his herd with two steers; that didn't exactly endear me to his Western lore or his grasp of basic biology, but the story was all right. Then there was a knock at the door. I went to the curtain and pulled it back and looked out. The glass was fogged over from the cold outside. I had to wipe it a bit, and then I could see Leonard standing by the door, looking toward the curtain. When he saw me he lifted a hand.

I let him in, and felt the air blow past. It had really turned chilly.

"Winter's here," Leonard said. "My nuts have frozen up to the size of raisins."

"Now, don't brag," I said.

Brett got up from her chair and came over and hugged Leonard, said, "We still got some pizza, baby, you want it."

"No thanks," Leonard said. "Well… how much pizza?"

"Couple of pieces?" Brett said.

"I can do that. And then I could maybe have some of those cookies Hap got for me and some of the Dr Pepper he got me special too."

"I like that stuff myself," I said.

Leonard winked at me. "You are so cute," he said.

I sat at the kitchen table with Leonard while he ate and Brett went back in the living room to finish reading the paper. When Leonard finished eating the pizza and was ready to start on the cookies, I put a pot of decaf on, said, "Okay, what's going on?"

"What?" Leonard said.

"Why are you here?"

"Because you're my bestest goddamn buddy in the whole damn world. My brother. My doppelganger. My—"

"Yeah, but why are you here?"

"I always come over."

"And you're always welcome. But where's John? Why haven't you mentioned him? You know better than to jack with me, Leonard. I know you better than anyone in the world. Better than you know you."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Leonard pushed a vanilla cookie around on his plate. "John and I aren't doing so good."

"Could it have anything to do with you crappin' in the bed?"

"I was mad."

"You? Oh, say thee not such foul lies about your own sweet self."

"I said some things."

"Another surprise."

"I've sort of been staying somewhere else."

"Where?"

"Motels. I get off the security job, I been picking a different one each night. Quite the thrilling experience. One of them, it has one of those old-time beds where you put a quarter in a machine and the bed vibrates. … Course, it doesn't work. But the mechanism is still there, and you can't imagine how the nostalgia comforts me. Hey, and there's this one cheap motel, the sheets, they got shit stains on them. I stayed there twice, two different rooms, shit stains on blue sheets. I guess it saves on laundry soap, leavin' them like that."

I got up and poured us some coffee and got some sweetener and cream. We fixed our coffee. I stirred mine longer than was necessary. I said, "Have you tried to talk to John?"

"I have."

"And what's the sticking point?"

"He doesn't like me."

"Bullshit. What's going on?"

"The queer stuff."

"You're both queer, Leonard."

"Really? Well, that puts some things in perspective."

"So, John feels guilty about being gay?"

"John's brother hates him because he's gay. He tells him he doesn't have to be gay. He's telling him God doesn't want him gay."

"Even if God made him that way?" I said. "Provided there was a God."

"If there was one, and he made someone gay wouldn't God his own goddamn self be responsible?" Leonard said.

"In my book, yes. But in the Christians' book, that rascal can do no wrong. Someone survives a hurricane, it was God's mercy. Someone drowns, it was God's will. I don't like him. He's a bully."

We touched fists. It's a manly bonding thing.

"Or maybe," Leonard said, "God is gay and it's the rest of you people who are messed up and going to hell. You ever think about that? Maybe there's another Bible out there that tells us to stone you guys and not to lie with women because it's strange. It is, you know."

"Brett and I like it."

Leonard sipped some coffee. "You see, John is starting to feel he's not supposed to be gay, and unlike us, on some level he believes that God stuff. He thinks he's violated God's law, so he's going to church counseling to get straight."

"Oh, for heaven's sake."

"That's what he thinks. For heaven's sake."

"It's a figure of speech."

"I've tried to tell him that even if there is a God, the New Testament is the one to go by, and it's not tough on us queers. It's just the old mean version of God that gives us a hard time. Motherfucker in the Old Testament won't even let us have a pork chop."

"God must have finally got laid between the Old and the New

Testament," I said. "'Cause between those two books, he sure mellowed out."

"Who'd he lay, male or female?"

"Either … Look, Leonard, I'm sorry about John."

"Not half as sorry as I am. I've called him, I wrote him a letter. I even did an e-mail from one of the hotels on my laptop."

"You got a laptop?"

"John bought it for me. At home I even got a printer and some paper to print out on."

"You are so cosmopolitan."

"Tell me about it. But the thing is, he's going to take these classes so he can tell his brain and his dick that he's been confused and he likes women. I can't think of anything yuckier than learning to like that old pink snapper.… No disrespect to you and Brett."

"I get your point. You want me to talk to him?"

"I don't know. I thought about that, thought about asking you. But it won't matter. He thinks he's on the road to hell and wang and butt hole are no longer on the smorgasbord."

"Leonard, thy middle name is romance. You and Tanedrue, you should get together, write a book on courting. Look here, you're not staying in any motel. You'll park your happy ass on the couch tonight."

"Thanks, Hap."

"I'm just afraid you keep trying to hook up those motel Internet connections to your laptop you'll put your eye out. So I want you here, safe and sound."

"Thanks, brother. Can I have the last cookie?"

"No."

We sat there and looked at the cookie. I said, "You haven't given up on John yet, have you?"

"No. But I got a rule. If you're ashamed of being gay, I'm ashamed of you. I say, Queer up. I take into account John's getting some shit and was raised in such a way as to not think he's on the right path, but I was raised that way myself. I got over it by the time there was hair on my balls. Actually, John shaves them for me, but you know what I mean."

"Too much information, partner. Besides, I think a man ought to have hair on his balls."

"Now that John won't be doing that for me anymore, are you interested in doing the shaving?" Leonard said, and smiled.

"I'd just cut them off, problem solved. Actually, several problems solved. Your relationships would be less strenuous and that pesky hair problem would be over with. You could just hang out with Bob and be happy."

Leonard sighed. "And if things aren't bad enough, Bob died."

"Oh, man. Sorry."

Bob was Leonard's pet armadillo. They had been close. Well, Leonard had been close to Bob. It was hard to tell how Bob felt. But he did hang around and would sniff Leonard's hand and eat out of it. He lived in Leonard's closet a lot of the time. Went outside to do his business, like a dog. Had a bowl with his name on it.

"It was like his little clock ran down," Leonard said. "I buried him out back near a little wallow he had made. You know how he liked to dig."

"He was an armadillo, Leonard. It's what they do."

"I know. But he was kind of cool. I liked him.… Hell, Hap, I don't know. Short time back, life was good, felt like I was fartin' perfume and crappin' chocolate candy. Now things suck the big ole donkey dick. John, the way he's actin', and now my 'dilla goin' down. It sucks the oxygen right out of you."

I couldn't tell if Leonard was more upset about John or Bob. I studied his face, decided it was a draw.

"Sorry, man," I said. "Really."

"Thanks. It don't help worth a damn, but I'm glad you said it," and his voice wavered a little. "Actually, I'm thinking of trying to write a soap opera, call it *Lives of the Homos.*"

"Leonard?"

"Yeah."

"You can have the last cookie."

14

Leonard stayed with us about three days. After work we played chess, talked nasty, read books and discussed them; we talked about which was cooler, Marvel Comics or DC. Leonard thought Marvel. I thought DC. Brett liked Archie Comics. That immediately excluded her from the discussion and a bit of respect was lost. We listened to music. We rented movies and played Monopoly. Brett proved to be adamant about having the silver dog as her token, and she won a lot. I saw her steal some money from my pile once, but let it go. I called her on it when we went to bed and she made it up to me and the authorities were not called, though Archie Comics was not entirely forgiven.

It was fun having Leonard around for a while, and we hated to see him go, but he finally rented a little apartment on the other side of town, said he was calling John daily, that they were talking and he was guardedly optimistic, hoping things would resolve quickly because the hair on his balls had grown back.

I came home from work one day, sweaty and dirty and feeling like something the dogs had dragged under the porch and gnawed on, and there was a police car parked out front of the house at the curb. There was a big black guy with a cop's uniform and a cowboy hat about the size of a life raft sitting in one of my lawn chairs smoking a cigar big as an erect horse dong. When I parked in the driveway and got out, the stench of that damn cigar wafted over to me and damn near curled the hair on my eyebrows.

I went over, said, "Let me guess. No Enterprise Police Department."

"Ah, hell, man, you ain't that smart," he said, turning his head as if he wanted to pin me with just one eye. "You read that off the side of my car."

"You're right." I sat down in a lawn chair and looked at him. I said, “So, you took a wrong turn or what?”

“No. I’m in the right place. They said you were a smart-ass, both of you were, and I figure you’re the white guy.”

“That’s observant.”

“Yep. I had a whole month of cop college and I read a book on fingerprinting once. I took a couple of courses in identification too.”

“Wow!”

He grinned at me around his cigar. He had strong creases around his mouth when he grinned and his eyes were slightly bloodshot. One ear floated out from the side of his head as if signaling for a turn. He didn’t strike me as over fifty. He had a hard body with a bit of a gut and arms that could twist a full-grown pig like wet wash. I remembered that Marvin had told me he was one of two fat guys. Boy, was he full of it. This John Law was big enough and mean enough looking to use an elephant’s ass to store his shoes and make the elephant like it.

“You already talk to my buddy?” I asked.

“No. Thought I’d talk to you. Hear you’re more reasonable and you don’t have lace on your panties.”

“You’re right. I am. And that lace remark, not smart. Leonard heard you talk bad about him like that, he might stick you in your hat and piss in it after you.”

“Doubt that.”

“A man with confidence,” I said. “I like that. I know a lot of confident men Leonard has handed their teeth.”

“Yeah, I hear you two think you’re tough guys. Be that as it may, what I know about you and him and me, I’d say I’m doing some better than either of you.”

“Probably. Less graft in the jobs we have.”

For the first time he didn’t look amused. “All right, let’s get formal. My name is Budd Conners. I’m half the law out of No Enterprise.”

“Do the two of you count as one lawman?”

He thumped ash from his cigar on the ground. “Let me tell you why I’m here.”

"Let me guess. I stuck my dick in your territory."

"Something like that. You can wise off all you want, but I'm here to do you a favor."

"I could use some yard work done."

He leaned forward. "Listen, asshole. Listen good, and tell your partner what I'm going to tell you."

"Should I take notes?"

"You can take notes, or you can just let it whistle through your ears. This way, I came to you and told you and I'm giving you a chance. Those guys you fucked over, shot one in the leg, took that girl from, flushed their dope down the shitter, they didn't like it."

"Well, I hope not."

"They're mad at you, and the more connected guys who work the dope through them, guess what? They're pissed too."

"Get in line. Me and Leonard piss a lot of people off."

"I can believe that. I can believe you two are not going to listen and you're going to wind up with your body parts in separate trash bags in different parts of the county."

"This isn't the first time we've been threatened."

"I don't doubt that, peckerwood. But this has put a little pressure on me. The organization that runs those turds you slapped around, they got folks that run them, and they are bad folks. The Dixie Mafia."

"Do they have Dixie flags and still whine over the South being unionized into the rest of the country? Do they talk about cotton a lot? Get weepy about the Old South? I don't know about you, but nothing—absolutely nothing—touches me less or bores me more than those assholes. I was you, a black man, I'd throw my rag in with someone else."

"It's bigger than any of that. Some of them, they come out of the Aryan Nations, out of the prisons. But they aren't so down on the brothers anymore. They just don't want them to fuck their sisters. They feel they can do business with them, anyone else for that matter. These guys, they don't care about any war but their own little money war. They're all about commerce and respect, ass-wipe."

“Watch your language. I’m sensitive, and I just might go sensitive all over you.”

He leaned back in the chair and grinned. “I’m twice your size.”

“And I’m twice your mean.”

“So you say. Do you want to hear me out or not?”

I looked at my watch. “Might as well. It’s still a couple hours till dinner.”

“They aren’t getting their dope back, so maybe they’ll think to make some kind of example out of you. That would be their way. The low guys on the turd totem pole can’t take care of you, then they’ll bring in the middle guys. That don’t work, then the middle guys will bring in the top guys, and those guys will hire someone that’ll be meaner than a bucket of rattlesnakes. They won’t dirty their hands. They’ll bring in real talent. But they probably won’t have to go that far. Enough guys with no real talent is still a lot of fuckin’ guys.”

“So how do they know it’s us done all this? Could be two other guys of equal handsomeness and anger management issues.”

“You’ve already admitted it was you.”

“I was just playing.”

“Sure. Tanedrue figured you were friends of Marvin Hanson, the grandfather, and all he had to do was ask around. You weren’t that hard to figure. You could maybe pay back the money they lost.”

“Oh yeah, that’s gonna happen. If it cost a dollar to fart I’d have to sweat instead. Don’t be an idiot. We aren’t paying anybody anything, and mostly because we don’t want to. And, by the way, how do you, a fine law-abiding police officer, know all this? Could it be because you’re in cahoots with them? My God, say it ain’t so. Aren’t policemen here to protect us? If that isn’t true, my world has been turned upside down.”

“You know what I make in salary?”

“I could care less.”

“Not a lot. Drugs are all over. You think I stop some drug traffic I stop drugs? That I stop people from wanting to use them?”

“No. But it is your job.”

“Look, I’m gonna tell you something, ’cause it’s just you and me in your crappy yard. Drugs go on. Money is being made. It’s like pussy. Someone is always gonna sell it and someone is always gonna buy it, and sometimes, that pussy, it’s got a disease and it kills people. You takes your chances. No one makes you buy it, use it. So what if me and my partner, who is a nice fat white guy named Reggie who is like a brother to me and will hate your guts if I hate your guts… what if we get a little piece of the action? They’re gonna buy from someone. So who the hell does it hurt if they’re getting what they want?”

“The people who are paying you not to take a piece of the action. And you might toss in the ones it kills or the ones get addicted. Until it’s legalized and they got that stuff in a vending machine, your job is to not make money off of it.”

Conners took a big suck on his cigar, blew the smoke toward me. I was so manly I didn’t wave it away, just squinted my eyes, trying to look like Clint Eastwood. I probably looked like a guy with smoke in his eyes.

“I’ve heard some things about you and your boy,” Conners said, “and you sound a little self-righteous, considering what I’ve heard you’ve done.”

“Don’t believe everything you’ve heard, lawman. And let me give you another line, right out *of Billy Jack*. Ever see that movie?”

“No.”

“There’s a line where he says: ‘When policemen break the law there is no law.’ After that he beats the crap out of some guys, but that’s not the point. It’s corny and it’s movie crap, but it’s right. I don’t owe you a fucking thing. You come to warn me and you think I’m supposed to thank you for it, but mostly you want me to stay out of your business, because you are the scum at the bottom of this big old pond and what you’re afraid of is that me and Leonard are going to ripple the surface so much that the big frog on the big lily pad is going to hop on your head. You aren’t doing me any kind of favor. Now get out of my yard before I take that cigar out of your mouth and shove it up your ass.”

He stood up so fast he knocked over the lawn chair. “I ought to kick you into next week.”

I stood up carefully. “Start kicking. You’re out of your jurisdiction.”

He stood there with his fists clenched. A vein vibrated in his neck like the string on a stand-up bass. Provided the string was really big.

I didn’t want any part of him, but I didn’t want him to know it. I managed not to piss myself, tried to look like I was thinking about something pleasant, like a politician waiting for a free blow job.

He took a deep breath. “All right. I tried. You warn that fart, Hanson, warn him that he’s in this too. I was him, I’d take that split-tail you two rescued, pack all of you in a bus and head for the high country, or just some goddamn rabbit hole. Change your names. Change your sex. ’Cause they’re comin’, smart-mouth. And when they do, you ain’t gonna like it. It might be the little fucks first, but they ain’t nothin’. You might take care of them. But then it’s the others, and I tell you again, you ain’t gonna like it.”

“Neither are they,” I said.

Conners tossed his cigar on the lawn, gave me a last look that told me there was nothing he’d like better than to reach up my asshole and jerk me inside out. “When it comes down,” he said, “remember your old Uncle Conners tried to tell you how it was going to go.”

“That’ll certainly cheer me,” I said. “But I wouldn’t count me and Leonard out just yet, Uncle Tom … Oh, sorry, that was Conners, wasn’t it?”

“You don’t know a thing. Ain’t no Uncle Toms no more, just a fella trying to do business.”

“One way of looking at it, I suppose.”

“It’ll be a clean sweep,” he said. “Not just you and Leonard, but those around you. You have a woman, don’t you? That’s what I’ve heard. And Hanson, his family. I don’t want to see that, something happening. Truly, I don’t.”

“Here’s a feather for your cap. I ever think you have anything to do with screwing around with me and mine, some morning you just might find yourself dead.”

“You threatening a law officer?”

“I don’t consider you much of an officer. Besides, you couldn’t arrest a fly here. You’re nothing but one of a two-man operation in a little town that has its presidential elections in a filling station. You two are so small-time you probably share a dick. So don’t come in here and act like the FBI. You are nothing to me. And yeah, that is a goddamn threat, with bells and whistles on it.”

“Have it your way, pal. But next time you see me comin’, man, you better run.”

Conners went out to his car and drove away.

15

"He came here to the house?" Brett said.

I nodded.

We were sitting at the kitchen table, she still in her nurse uniform, me still in my sweaty, filthy work clothes. She was sitting out from the table, had her legs crossed, and the nurse dress was hiked up pretty far. I liked that, and she knew it. I liked the little hat she was wearing too. I'd have liked her without the hat. I'd have liked her without the dress. She could lose those nurse shoes too. I don't have a fetish for stuff like that, but I do have a fetish for her.

I was laying out what had happened with Conners, and I was drinking a cup of coffee. I had fixed some for both of us, and Brett was stirring creamer into hers. She even made me horny doing that. I know. I'm a bad dog.

"He threatened you here in our yard?" she said.

"He threatened that other people were going to do something to me that probably wouldn't pass for a manicure and a haircut. And maybe those same people would do something similar to those around me. He also said next time I saw him I better run."

"And he's a policeman?"

"A big goddamn policeman. One of the two of No Enterprise's finest on-the-take assholes. Actually, don't tell Leonard, but between me and you, he was kind of scary."

"It's okay, pumpkin," she said and patted my hand. "If we're going to be killed, it might as well be together."

"Sorry, hon."

"Don't be. You're my man and you do things others wish they could. I like you just the way you are. Most of the time. Though I do wish you could remember to change the toilet paper, and on top of the hamper is not where your underwear belong. They go inside, dear.”

“But you have to lift the lid on the hamper.”

“I know. It is a bother.”

I gave her a look that I hoped made me look like a big-eyed puppy instead of a startled marmoset. It didn’t have the effect I hoped for—deep sympathy and a desire to pat my head. She drank more of her coffee.

I said, “I’m a middle-aged man with a crummy job that’s over as of today and you may be a little less thrilled with me if this turns bad.”

“It’s been bad before. And besides, you’re cute and well hung.”

Now that was the response I wanted. I said, “That’s the first I’ve heard of that.”

“Considering the circumstances, it seemed like a kind thing to say.”

“Oh.”

“Now don’t get pissy. Remember what Bessie Smith sang. It’s not the meat, it’s the motion.”

“Okay. I can live with that. Brett… this policeman, I got to tell you, he had a loud voice and a big hat and an ugly cigar and his face was all wrinkled and he had a funny ear and he talked kind of loud and I don’t think he’s very nice. He uses bad words.”

Brett smiled, looked me in the eyes. “Do you think this is really serious, baby? I mean, really?”

“Yeah. I do.”

“What do you think will happen?”

“No way to know for sure, but my guess is the little guys, the ones me and Leonard gave a bad time, might think they got to get back at us to save face, so they can point to us and tell their bosses they got those nasty boys who destroyed the dope and made them lose all that money and insulted a perfectly nice pair of Scooby Doo shorts.

“Course, we can flip that and say maybe the guys in the middle don’t believe the guys at the bottom. Not all of it anyway. The head dudes might just decide to take it out on the bottom-feeders because they might think they're lying, that they took the dope, made up a story, and are settling other scores with us. All the middle guys know is they didn't get a piece of the profit. And the guys at the top, what they know is they didn't get their slice of it. So instead of them solving the problem, they could want the two layers in the cake below them to solve the problem. Most likely, the top layer gets involved, they'll bring in someone special and skilled. That's the way it usually works. But I wouldn't bet on any one scenario. We might be dealing with all of them."

"So what do we do?" Brett asked.

"First, I'll have Leonard move back in."

"That means more cookies and Dr Peppers and probably a box of shotgun shells."

"Absolutely," I said. "You have some time off coming, don't you?"

She nodded. "Two weeks. Three if I really need it."

"You pack your highly attractive ass up and you and Marvin and his family head for the hills. Go someplace where no one knows you. Stay there until I tell you to come back."

Brett reached out and took my hand. "I don't really have family anymore. My daughter isn't exactly one to keep in touch. You know, the whoring business is so time-consuming, and her plans for college didn't work out, she said."

"Oh yeah," I said. "Something about having to get up early."

"That's right. I love her, but she's grown and made her own way, and I'm here if she needs me. But she doesn't have a family bond, and maybe that's my fault, but it's the way it is. Except for you and Leonard, I'm about tapped out in the family department. I don't want to leave you. I can use a gun, and I'm not afraid."

"Yeah, but I am. Even if I wasn't, I'd want you to go. Someone has to keep telling Marvin he has to stay with his family. He's a great guy, but frankly, he's not at his best right now. Bum leg and all."

"You actually think Marvin will run? That doesn't sound like him to me. Does it to you?"

I waved it aside with my hand. "When I explain things to him he'll be happy to stay out of it," I said.

16

“Absolutely not,” Marvin said.

I had Leonard and Brett with me and we had gone over to explain how things were. We were sitting in his living room and Rachel was there, and so were Gadget and JoAnna. The three women looked so much alike it was amazing. All dark and beautiful and soft, T-shirt-and jean-clad. Well, actually, Gadget didn’t look so soft. She scratched at her arms constantly and her eyes darted. The dope was calling collect and she wanted to answer. She was still attractive, just itchy and a little hard-looking around the mouth and eyes.

“I got you two in this trouble,” Marvin said. “I’m not about to bail on you.”

“You’re not bailing,” Leonard said. “You’re running like a spotted-ass ape.”

“Oh,” I said, turning in my chair to look at Leonard. “That helps. He’ll feel better now. You are like one of those, what do they call them … diplomats.”

“Figure of speech,” Leonard said.

“So far,” Brett said to me, “your powers of persuasion are not quite up to the standard you presumed.”

“Hap should know me better than that,” Marvin said.

“I’ll tell you what I know,” I said. “And let’s cut the crap. You did get Leonard and me into this. You didn’t tell us the whole gig, about how connected these guys were.”

“I didn’t know. Completely. I mean, I had an idea. But I didn’t know.”

“Exactly,” I said. “You didn’t stop to consider. Me and my brother just thought this was a trailer trash episode. We whipped some ass, threw a dog out of a window, shot a guy, took Gadget and brought her home. We went, we saw, we conquered, we came back. And now our asses are in the soup. We want you and yours, and Brett, out of here. And, no offense to Gadget, but you don't tell her where you're going till you get there. And you have the only cell phone between you. Not that I don't trust mother and daughter," I said, smiling at them. "But one cell phone can be controlled more easily, and you don't want a lot of people calling you anyway. Any little thing might leak out and you might then involve someone else. And I don't trust you, Gadget. The monkey on your back howls the loudest at midnight, when everyone else is sleeping. You might decide to decamp."

"Just let me go back to Tanedrue," Gadget said. "He's not going to bother me."

"Except when he's making a field goal with your head," Leonard said. "There's that, and, oh yeah, about a ton of drugs you can suck up your nose."

"You don't know how it is," Gadget said. "I'm … I'm in pain. And Hap hit me too."

"Yes," Leonard said, "but it was swift and beautiful and full of the power of love."

"Ha!" Gadget said. "He still hit me."

"You had it coming," Marvin said. "Never thought I'd say such a thing, but you did."

Gadget's lip went pouty. She said, "You still don't know how it is."

"I don't know how it is," I said. "But I've seen it before."

"Just let me go back," she said.

"Don't be ridiculous," Leonard said. "These guys suck rat bag. And you're on your way to being just like them."

"At this point," I said, "I'm not even sure Tanedrue might not blame you for their situation. There's no future there for you, Gadget."

"There's no future for me anywhere," Gadget said. "Just let them do what they want."

"That's the drug willies talking," I said.

"We're going to get her help," JoAnna said, and she reached out and touched Gadget's shoulder.

Gadget shook her head. "No use, Mama. I'm lost."

"No, you're not, honey," Rachel said, and I saw the fire in her eyes. She had it, always did. I knew what Marvin saw in her first time I met her, and right now I was seeing it again.

"Don't talk that way, baby," JoAnna said. "You're not the first one to make a mistake. I've made a few."

"Yeah, but I made more than a few in less time," Gadget said.

That floated for a moment, then I said, "This business boils down to this: Marvin, you and your family need to pack up some things and hit the road."

"You act like these guys are fucking CIA," Marvin said. "They're a bunch of goobers."

"It's not the original goobers I'm worried about," I said. "It's all them other goobers."

"With me and Hap here, the rest of you gone," Leonard said, "it makes for a smaller target. And we're not an easy target."

"I can vouch for that," Marvin said. "I thought you two would be dead years ago."

"Gee, thanks," Leonard said.

"Actually, that was a kind of a compliment," Brett said.

"Oh," Leonard said. "My bad."

"But this is my mess," Marvin said.

I nodded, said, "Now I'm really going to pour on the juice. You're a cripple and you'll just get in our way. We need you to whip someone's ass with your cane again, we'll call you up. But we're past that. Maybe way past. Way I see it, Tanedrue may just let us out of the picture. He's got nothing to gain. He's not getting his drugs back, and I bet he can figure pretty quick we don't have that kind of money to pay back what it was worth. So he could let us go."

"That's what I think," Marvin said. "That's what I always thought."

"On the other hand," I said, "he lets us go, then he can't even tell his bosses that he avenged the loss, and I think he's the kind of guy that thinks he's some kind of player, wants to look good in front of his posse. Last time he tried that, he got his ass kicked. So he could feel vengeful. Power, control, being in charge, that's all very important to these little sucks, and it's even more important to the middlemen and the men at the top. The other thing"—and I looked at Gadget when I said this—"they may come for Gadget. Not because Tanedrue loves her—"

"He does, you know," Gadget said. "He does."

"Sure he does," Leonard said. "That's why he beats on your ass."

"I get out of line," Gadget said.

"Honey," Brett said, "that is pure-dee ole bullshit. Unless you're trying to kill him and he's fighting back, you aren't out of line enough to warrant any kind of physical beating. You think we're in fucking Afghanistan. Pardon my French."

Gadget put her head on the table. JoAnna put her hand on Gadget's back and looked hard at Brett. Brett looked back equally hard. JoAnna averted her gaze. I could sympathize. When Brett put "that look" on you, you didn't want to mess with her. In her eyes you could see the next world war.

"What Hap was saying," Leonard said, "guy like this, he might come and try and get Gadget. He might even come to kill her."

Gadget lifted her head. "He wouldn't. He loves me."

"There's no way to argue with that," I said. "She believes it and you can't talk her out of it. Not until the drugs are out of her system. And even then, not easily."

"You don't know nothin'," Gadget said, jumping up from the table, running to the back of the house, disappearing into a bedroom, slamming the door.

JoAnna looked at me, said, "No use being hard on her. It doesn't help."

"She shouldn't get off scot-free," Marvin said. "Problem with this world is we've lost the idea of shame and guilt. We need a little of that. No one thinks they ever do bad anymore. They just do different."

"I'm sorry we've disrupted things this morning," I said to Rachel. "I didn't mean to scare you or your family, but this is how it is."

"I'm not so scared," Rachel said. "I once fought a serial killer with a hammer. JoAnna was with me. We aren't shrinking violets."

Marvin nodded. "She did. When I was on the job in Houston."

I had heard the story before, but I didn't let on. Every now and then Marvin brought it up and told it over. About the Houston Hacker. It had been his biggest case as a big-city cop.

"My granddaughter, my family," Rachel said. "I got to do what's right for them. I'll tell you honestly, I don't like you two, never have. And Brett, I just don't like you on sight. You act like you're better than everyone else."

"Well, duh."

"And you're a smart-ass."

"That's all right," Brett said, looking prim and beautiful. "I'm not selling happiness, and when I go to bed at night I have my witty repartee to keep me company. And Hap. And since we're expressing ourselves, you aren't exactly at the top of my love list either."

They locked eyes for a moment, then Rachel looked at me and Leonard. "But I'll say this about you two—you're straight with things. You know how to do what you do. I don't even want to know what it is you do, even if I have a pretty good idea. So me and JoAnna and Gadget, and yes, you, Marvin, we're leaving here tomorrow."

Brett raised her hand. "Don't forget me."

Rachel looked at Brett with those hard eyes of hers. Brett looked back. Neither broke gaze. "And yes," Rachel said. "You too, Brett. We can hate each other politely."

"I ought to stay," Marvin said.

Rachel stuck her finger in Marvin's face. "I've been through a lot of shit with you, baby, and I've held it together. I been through you mess-in' with another woman. I've been through your cop days in the city and in LaBorde. I've dealt with your accident, your leg, and all manner of hell. I've set by your bedside watching them feed you through a tube, and I've fed you like a baby when you didn't have the strength to lift a finger. You are going, or we're going without you, and don't look for us to come back if you don’t go.”

Marvin nodded. “All right,” he said. “I’m going. We’ll pack some things tonight, go to the bank tomorrow morning for some money, then we’re gone.”

17

Way we figured it, Leonard was going to keep working his security job, which had switched from days to nights. Brett was going to put in for her two weeks the next day, and since my job had played out, I wasn't going to look for anything right away. Truth is, if it wasn't for the money I'd just hang out and not work. I should be ashamed, but I'm not. I'm so lazy Leonard has to call me and remind me to work out, threaten me a little. I actually like the workouts soon as I start them, but it's easy for me to get sidetracked and want to read a book or see a movie or eat a sandwich, or do the bump with Brett.

I drove Brett to the hospital the next morning, very early while it was still dark, and they let her have the two weeks. She said it was an emergency, that she might be back early, before the two weeks were up, but right now her daughter was sick and she had to go check on her.

They grumbled a bit, but they allowed her the time. Brett was a hell of a nurse.

Brett had her suitcase in the pickup, ready to go. I started driving us through town, on my way to drop her off at Marvin's place. It was a very still morning, no traffic except for a beige Cadillac that was going our way. The moon was still up, a silver scimitar in the sky, and we had the heater on low because it was chilly out, though not exactly cold.

Brett was armed, had the little .38 automatic she sometimes wore strapped to the inside of her thigh. That was when she had on a dress. Today she had on jeans and a T-shirt and she had an ankle holster. I was armed too, with the gun that was registered to me and the one I had the conceal/carry papers on. A nine-mil automatic in a clip holster snapped to the back of my belt under my open windbreaker. I had a twelve-gauge pump shotgun in the backseat under a blanket, and of course, a pocketknife for whittling and a clear throat in case I had to resort to vulgar language.

We didn't go around armed normally, so for us the guns weren't fashion accessories. I hated the damn things, but, alas, I ran with a rough crowd from time to time, and of consequence, so did Brett. Way things had been going lately, I thought it best we be prepared.

She sat close to me that morning, like a teenager on a date. She kissed me on the cheek, and when she did, I felt wetness. She had tears.

I turned and looked at her, said, "Come on, baby. It'll be okay."

"I'm not scared," she said, as I turned to look back at the road, check the mirror to make sure the Cadillac behind us wasn't about to run up our asses. "I just don't want to leave you to it by yourself."

"I have Leonard."

"I know. And I'm glad. But that's not what I meant."

"I know what you meant."

"I could stay, Hap."

"I need you with them. Rachel might need an ass whippin', and you're just the gal to do it."

"She's okay," Brett said. "She's just protecting her family, but you know what?"

"What?"

"There's a part of me that would like to throw down with her, just to see how it would come out."

"I know how it would come out. You'd lose a bit of that beautiful red hair and she'd be in the hospital."

"You're just saying that to make a girl feel sexy."

I laughed.

The Cadillac passed us. I gave it a glance. Four guys were in it. No one from Tanedrue's trailer was inside the car. Not even the dog. The car went on ahead, got about three car lengths in front of us. The driver was, as so many drivers are, on the cell phone. Who the hell do you call at this time of the morning? I thought

We crossed Gibbon Street, and as we did, a shiny black crew cab pickup with a big sunroof and tires about the size of a small planet came burning out and swung in behind us. I glanced in my rearview mirror. I recognized the truck's driver. Tanedrue. Beside him I could see the ball-kicked guy and in the backseat the guy who was mad about me tossing his dog, and beside him some red-faced guy I had never seen before. Between them was Gadget.

"It's them," I said. "And Gadget's with them."

Brett turned to look. "That bitch."

"I'm going to try and outrace them," I said. "Call Leonard."

As Brett popped open her cell phone, I hit the gas and started around the Cadillac. The Caddy weaved in front of me.

"Get off the phone, asshole," I yelled at the Cadillac just like the driver could hear me.

I heard Brett say, "Leonard, we got trouble. We're on Main, just crossed Gibbon, about three blocks from our street. Yeah."

Brett clapped the phone shut. "He's on his way."

"This goddamn Cadillac," I said, and weaved the other direction. It weaved with me. I glanced in the rearview mirror. The red-faced guy in the truck had a cell phone to his ear. I glanced at the Caddy. The driver was still on the phone.

"They're in cahoots," I said.

Brett was looking back, she said, "Oh hell."

I looked in the rearview. Red Face was lifting up through the sunroof with a shotgun. It looked as big as a howitzer to me.

I tried to get around the Caddy. No luck. They had us between a patch of houses and trees, no side streets.

I turned quick, bumped over a curb, went through a lawn, bashed a couple of lawn gnomes and a pink flamingo, which might be considered a public service, then bounced through a driveway and clipped the tail of a parked car just enough to knock it out of our way. I weaved between an oak and an elm and took out a yard swing, a birdbath, and a Vote-for-Some-Republican sign. I gave myself an extra two points for that.

The Caddy and the truck ran along beside us on the street. Red Face's shotgun banged and a back side window went out on my truck. Brett let out a yip like a surprised dog.

“You hit?” I asked.

“Just my pride.”

I saw an alley between two houses up the way, took a sharp right, and saw it was a screwup immediately. There was a wooden fence at the end of it. I yelled to Brett to hang on and put my foot to the floor. The pickup jumped and I hit the fence and lumber went out in all directions and we roared on through and down a little hill. There was a clump of trees in front of us and a low area I knew was a creek, so I hung a hard left and took out another wooden fence and went through a backyard and made a cocker spaniel jump for cover. I took out a matching fence, whipped hard left through a side yard in time to see our pursuers whisk by on the street, make several car lengths ahead of us.

I started back in the direction we had come, saw people in the yards now, out rubbernecking. I don’t know what possessed me, but I waved at a couple of them. In the rearview I saw the truck had turned and so had the Caddy. They were coming down on my ass pretty snappy-damn-quick. I had my foot all the way to the floor when I tried to make a turn, and that’s when I lost it. My truck skidded, fishtailed, then got itself together and looked like it was going to be all right. Another shot banged behind us, and this time the back glass of the pickup shattered. I caught some sting in the back of my neck. Brett yelled, “Goddamn it,” and flipped over the seat and got the twelve-gauge and brought it up and started pumping. She poked it out the busted window in the back, got off three rounds faster than a buck rabbit can fuck, and their truck spun to the right, went into a yard, right into a house with a sound like a cannon going off. Steam rose up from their hood.

I checked the rearview, saw the Caddy was still behind us. I turned my head and saw the truck rammed up in the house, bricks in the yard. Red Face and Tanedrue were out of the truck, guns in hand. Red Face was moving quickly. Tanedrue was limping toward us, due to his gunshot, but he looked lively enough and dangerous enough to me.

I said, “Put your seat belt back on, baby.”

Brett climbed over the seat like a monkey, snapped the belt around her waist, clutched the shotgun like a life raft.

I hit the brakes. The truck spun almost completely around. I gave it some gas and turned the wheel and we were heading right at the Caddy. I got the nine out from the small of my back and sent my driver's window down with a touch of a button, stuck out my arm and fired left-handed. I starred the glass of the Caddy and it whipped to our right and passed us and swerved and hit the back end of my truck and made us spin like a Tilt-A-Whirl. Then we were rolling over and over. Next thing I knew, we were upside down, hanging by our seat belts. A curious weenie dog was looking in my open window, possibly hoping for blood.

I unsnapped my seat belt and fell in a heap, found my nine on the roof of the truck, reached for it. I could hear Brett cussing like a longshoreman. "Goddamn it, sonsofagoddamndogshittin'bitches."

And then she was loose from her belt. She got hold of the shotgun as I crawled out ahead of her, my head hazy, my vision blurred. The damn weenie dog bit me. I slapped at him with the back of my hand, got on my feet and leaned back against the upside-down truck. The yard and the sky kept jumping around. The dog grabbed my pants leg and tugged and growled and I had to kick him loose.

Brett came out on her hands and knees, dragging the shotgun after her.

"Goddamn it," she said. "Motherfuckin'cocksuckin'dicklickin'ball-suckin'sonsagoddamnshitsuckin'monkeylickin'sonsabitches."

Even I was a little embarrassed.

18

My head cleared enough to see the Caddy had veered off and hit a tree. The ass end of the car was sticking out in the street leaking gasoline and some other fluids; tree bark floated in the liquid. I started walking that way limping. After a few steps I was walking straight, but my stomach was twisted and sour and my balls had tried to shrink up and hide and had almost succeeded.

I could see that air bags had popped and the driver wasn't moving. Same for the passenger in the front. The back door opened and a guy fell out with a gun in his hand. He crawled on the ground a bit, then stood up. I shot him in the head and he fell down in the pool of gas and a swirl of blood. The sunlight caught the blood and gas and the color they made was not something I could identify. When the shot went off the weenie dog took to his dog paws and tore a path around the back end of my overturned truck, across a lawn and out of view, went away from there so fast he damn near left a vapor trail.

There was another guy moving in the back passenger seat of the Caddy. He opened the door and stepped out. I shot and missed. I grabbed at Brett, who was standing out in the street with the shotgun, her legs spread wide, cussing—"Shiteatin'assholelickin'"—and pulled her around to the side of the truck as a blast peppered the opposite side of it and a shot whistled by my ear like a rocket-propelled bee. Just as we got around to the other side, I heard a sound like someone scalding a cat to my right, glanced that way, saw a dark Chevy flash down the street like something out of Buck Rogers.

It was Leonard.

I peeked around the end of the truck and the guy at the Caddy had moved to the front of it so he could see us. He steadied his gun hand on the hood and fired, and the shot took out my upturned back tire. I opened up on him with three shots, but none of them hit him. I heard the shotgun pump beside me, and then I heard a blast and heard Brett say, “Fuck you.”

I fired a shot at the Caddy and broke and ran for it just as the guy raised up for another shot. I fired and he ducked down behind the car. I jumped, planted a foot on the hood, nearly lost my balance, came down on top of him with both feet, knocking his gun flying and losing mine in the process.

We came together like a couple of wild sheep, actually butted heads and knocked each other down. Across the street, moving out of the yard, taking position behind trees, I saw Tanedrue and his posse trying to cross over to us. I saw Gadget lying facedown in the yard beside the pickup, her hands over her head, crying loudly.

I bit the guy I was fighting so hard I took part of his nose away. He let out a bellow and I leaped forward and poked a finger in one of his eyes. As he staggered back, I kicked and caught the inside of his kneecap and it made a pleasant sound like a drover cracking a whip. He fell with one hand on his face, the other clutching at his knee. I picked up my gun and walked over to him and shot him in the head.

I started crossing the street. I had lost my brains. I was crazy. I saw Leonard. He was walking up the street, on my right. Tanedrue was firing at him, and so were the other three, and I knew Leonard was as good as dead.

But he wasn’t. I heard his Colt .45 revolver bark and I saw the top of the ball-kicked guy’s head tear off and sail across the curb and roll down a ways and spin like a furry hubcap. I shot at Tanedrue and missed and hit the house behind him. He yelled and started firing at me with an automatic pistol, fast as he could. The bullets plucked at my hair and the sleeve of my shirt, and I shot him dead center of his chest. His right leg jumped back behind him and he crumpled back with an expression on his face like he’d just found a kidney stone in his oatmeal. He went to one knee, dropped his gun, said, “Don’t shoot.”

I walked right up to him and shot him in the face; he’d dug in his shorts for the last time. Another bullet whizzed by me. I should have been dead ten times over. But now I was emboldened by luck and success, and that’s the kind of thinking that gets you killed. Leonard, still wearing his security guard uniform, walked up beside me. The two remaining gunmen, including Red Face, fled back to their truck and were trying to get inside of it, maybe start it up and drive out.

My adrenaline rush fell off, and I let out with a deep breath. I felt light-headed. My knees were shaking. I heard Brett behind me.

“Yeahbuddythat’srightyoubunchofpussyassmotherfuckersaren’tso hotnowareyoupigsuckin’goatfuckin’ …”

The truck’s engine was going now, but the truck didn’t move. It was hung up good. Gadget didn’t move. She was still facedown with her hands over her head, crying. The two came out of the truck firing. I felt something tear at my neck. I fired and missed. Brett cut down with the shotgun. I caught a glimpse of what looked like a splash of red paint and then I saw Brett’s shot had torn Red Face almost in half. Leonard walked toward the other guy firing. It took a few shots bouncing off the truck and the brick house, but with bullets whizzing around his head, Leonard finally hit the shooter.

The guy flipped backwards, turned completely over like he was doing a tumbling act. He was lying on his stomach. He raised his head. There was a sound coming from him like a busted manifold.

“Dirtyfuckin’ratshiteatin’dickcheesesuckin’,” Brett said, deep into her French.

“What she said,” Leonard said and fired, hitting the man on the ground in the mouth, making it the size of a manhole cover, knocking his head so hard on the neck it snapped sideways and teeth tumbled out on the grass.

“Hey,” Leonard said, looking over at me, his eyes bright, his mouth in a kind of rictus grin. “How’s it hanging?”

I didn’t have an answer. I got weak and went to one knee. I turned away from the carnage we had just made. I saw the ball-kicked guy’s skull down by the curb. The weenie dog appeared, grabbed it, headed off between a couple of houses, running like he had just caught a touchdown pass.

* * *

Leonard and I walked over to the Caddy and looked in at the guys in the front seat, ones pushed back by the air bags. One of them was moving.

“Should I shoot him?” Brett asked. “I want to shoot him. Other one’s alive, I’ll shoot him too.”

“No,” I said, pushing the shotgun down. “We’re done.”

I could hear sirens wailing, coming closer and closer.

“Glad you could make it,” I said to Leonard.

“Me too,” he said. “Your neck’s bleeding.”

I put a hand to my neck. I had been grazed. I couldn’t believe it. That was the worse I had got, except for a stray shotgun pellet and some broken glass.

Brett handed me the shotgun. “Wait right here. I’m fixin’ to slap the shit out of Gadget.”

I didn’t stop her. She went across the street, jerked Gadget to her feet, and slapped her so hard it knocked her down again. “Get up, bitch,” I heard Brett say.

Gadget didn’t move.

Brett kicked her in the ribs. “Get up, bitch, or I’ll stomp your head in.”

Gadget reluctantly got up, and Brett slapped her down again.

People were starting to poke their heads out of their houses, move out into their yards. Four police cars and a medical unit arrived. We dumped our guns on the Caddy’s hood, walked out into the street slowly with our hands up.

Brett didn’t move. She stood in the yard looking down at Gadget, who was crying louder than before.

“Get up, bitch,” I heard Brett say, “and I’ll give you something to cry about.”

19

They separated us and put me in a poorly lit cell with a burly tattooed guy with greasy hair and a lot of muscles and a way of looking at me that made me feel like a pork chop with a butt hole. At least he had all his teeth and no pustules on his face. We would at worst make healthy if not overly attractive children.

He was sitting on his bunk and I was sitting on mine. My hands were shaking a little bit; they still tingled from all the shooting and I could smell cordite on my clothes, and there was another smell inside my head, a cloud of death and doom.

The cell's walls were as pink as a baboon's ass and we were both wearing pink jumpsuits to match. It was a new jail philosophy. Tough guys didn't want to go back to jail because they'd have to wear pink and sit in pink jail cells. Some thought it was an idea that worked. I didn't believe it. Some redneck decides to shoot his wife over the fact she burned his squirrel potpie, I could hardly believe he'd be considering before the deed: Well, damn. I better hold up on this killing. I stick a broom handle up Bessie's nose, set her on fire and shoot her eye out, I'll have to wear pink and sit in a pink room, and them's girl colors. What if the fellas see me?

I wondered how the fella across from me felt about wearing pink. Maybe he didn't like it, but it certainly hadn't been enough to keep him out of jail, and from the looks of him, he'd been here before, maybe had a pillow with his name stitched on it.

Fuck rehabilitation. Go for the pink to embarrass them.

My partner put an Elvis smile on his face, eyed me for a while, said, "You don't get much pussy in jail."

"That's a natural fact," I said.

"It ain't available."

"You, my man, are like an oracle. You see things the rest of us don't. You are Nostradamus in pink. You are a ripe cherry blossom in an orchard of dullards."

He eyed me for a moment, trying to figure out if what I said was an insult or a compliment. Then he picked up where he'd left off. "Not real pussy."

I was already tired of this guy.

"Sometimes, you got to make your own nookie," he said.

"You got you a theme, don't you, buddy?"

"You hear what I'm sayin'?"

"Are you suggestin' that I'm pretty in pink?"

"Poontang is where you find it, boy."

I saw where this was going, and it was where I'd figured all along. I jumped off my bunk and was across our little gap before he could open his mouth again. I hit him as hard as I could, right across the cheek; it was like I dropped a fucking anvil on him. He fell backwards on his bunk, but his ass was hanging off and the weight of it pulled him onto the floor. He lay beside the bunk twitching like a Pentecostal having a Jesus rigor. There wasn't any blood, but he was going to have a bruise and a headache and his pink jumpsuit was going to have floor nasty on it.

I backed to my bunk and sat down and watched until he quit twitching. Then I turned my attention to how many years I would be behind bars before they put me to death by lethal injection for the shoot-out we had just been in. Maybe they could put me and Brett and Leonard in a room together. We could hold hands from our cots while they put the needles in our arms. I looked at the guy on the floor, the man without pussy.

I sat there and thought on things and tried to figure how I had come to this. Mama always told me to stay away from guns, and though I could use one and I was a good shot, I had never been comfortable with them. Though I agreed that guns didn't kill people, people killed people, guns sure made it a lot easier and far more successful than hunting down victims with a pointed stick.

If I hadn't been armed today, I'd have been deep napping inside my truck amidst broken glass and a bloody car seat with a hole in my head, Brett dead beside me, a yard gnome and a Vote

Republican sign still standing. So there had to be something good said for guns, and maybe we could even throw in a few kind words for erratic driving, but if we had all been carrying those pointed sticks it might have been less of a massacre. When you really think about it, humans are a scary branch of evolution, especially the male division. Man can turn anything into a weapon, even his tongue.

Perhaps living in Texas was my problem.

Maybe if I had been born in Connecticut.

Nah. They talked funny and it was cold up there.

I thought about Gadget and Tanedrue and the trailer, and how me and Leonard had whipped those guys' asses. I thought about those birthday and Christmas cards on Tanedrue's mirror; his mother had meant something to him, and he to her, and now she'd have him to grieve over. I thought about the shooting, the way I had acted and felt, about how something had clicked inside of me and turned me hot as the core of the sun, about how the bloodlust had taken me over and wrapped me up tight until I exploded. I thought about how Leonard was, and Brett. I had seen something close to joy on their faces. I figured mine had probably looked the same. Maybe we all deserved execution just because we could do what we did and not blink an eye. It wasn't just self-defense. When it all came down and I felt that click inside of me, I had been scared but exhilarated too, and in the moments of the happening I had felt born to kill. Now I just felt small and sick to my stomach and a little weird. Like it had all happened to someone else and I had watched it from a distant rooftop.

My life had been too full of quick punches, blood, and gun smoke. I wanted to go with Brett to some island and live off coconuts and screw until it killed us. I wanted to never throw a punch again. Never see a gun again, not even from a distance, not even a picture in a magazine. I wanted to never be mad again. I wanted to not have to worry about my code of honor. I wanted it not to matter. I even wanted to get away from Leonard.

I was tired of the whole dirty, bloody thing that was my life. I was beginning to consider heavily that old saying about being careful when you fight monsters so that you do not become one. In that moment, I was feeling pretty monstrous. It was as if I had been born under a violent star.

I wondered what Leonard was thinking about.

He was probably in his cell sleeping on his bunk, dreaming of vanilla cookies and Dr Pepper. Happy in pink. He was alive and had helped keep me and Brett alive. For him, that was enough, and for me it should have been.

The guy on the floor stirred and started to sit up. I thought: Fuck it. In for the snout, in for the tail. I stood up and kicked him in the head as hard as I could under the jaw. He went down again and didn't get up. This time he bled. I sat down on my bunk and watched the blood run out of his mouth.

Hap Collins, you are one walking, talking contradiction. I also decided I didn't deserve execution after all. I probably just needed a spanking. Maybe someone could call me some names and send me home without my supper. I felt myself tremble as if something cold had crawled up my spine.

I watched some shadows advance down the hall. I heard some prisoners yelling and talking. Somewhere someone was watching a television. There was no television in my cell. Not even a deck of cards. Just the man without nookie, lying unconscious on the jailhouse floor.

After a while a big shadow came down the hall. It fell into the cell, and pretty soon there was a guy following it. He was one of the cops who had arrested us. He was a big guy with a belly that was teasing the buttons on his shirt. He was bareheaded and he didn't have much hair. He stood at the door to my cell, looking through the bars. He stared down at my pal on the floor, said, "What happened to him?"

"Faintin' spell," I said. "Saw a mouse."

"A mouse, huh?"

"It was a big mouse."

20

They brought the three of us, wearing handcuffs, into an interrogation room that smelled strongly of Pine-Sol and too much mop soap and more than a sprinkle of urine. The floor was a little slick. A roach lay legs up in the corner.

There was a mirror on the wall, long and narrow, and I figured it was one of those see-through jobs where they could watch into the room from the other side. They couldn't fool me. I had seen TV and movies. The mirror was smeared in places with fingerprints and nose prints, and some stains that were probably not worth knowing about. There was a single fat bulb hanging down from a frayed, dust-covered wire and the dust was so thick and dark it looked like fungus. I half expected the wire to snap and spray the room with sparks and set the place on fire. I saw a video camera in the top corner of the room on metal struts. Boogers were smeared on the wall, and some of them were big enough to use as bricks in construction. I had the uncomfortable feeling that one of the larger ones was looking at me.

They put us on one side of a long table with initials and fuck-you messages carved into it. I looked up. The camera was pointing right at us. I gave it a smile.

They had already talked to us separately, right before tossing us into our individual cells. Now they had us as a trio, the three of us sitting there in all our jail-suited glory, pink roses in a light green booger-dotted room. They brought us there and went away, and we sat alone for a moment, and then the door opened and two men came in. They were not in uniform.

I knew one of them. His name was Drake and he was a detective and we got along all right. We had had reason to meet before. I hadn't shot anyone that time, and he knew Marvin, so he had been nice to me. I got off easy. I hit a man at a Dairy Queen because he hit his wife when she dropped his DQ Dude on the way to their table. I thought this was a bit excessive, even though Dudes are good and inexpensive if you go with the basket, French fries, and a drink. The wife got mad at me and I was the one that went to jail. As the old saying goes, no good deed goes unpunished.

Drake was whip-lean, black as straight coffee, with a soft-looking face and a boxer's flat nose. His shirt was lime-colored. It matched the paint on the walls. He didn't have on a tie. His top button was unbuttoned and his shirttail was pulled out. If he was trying to look any more casual he'd have come in his underwear carrying a teddy bear and a pacifier.

Drake knew Leonard too. Who didn't? Brett he also knew of. I could understand that. A lot of men knew of her and wished they knew more of her.

I had no idea where Gadget was, or the two who had been in the front seat of the Caddy. I wondered if my cell mate was still napping. I wondered if the weenie dog was somewhere hidden, nibbling on his prize.

Drake had another cop with him. A pink-skinned, redheaded guy with freckles and fat lips. Kelso was his name. He was leaning in the corner of the room acting like he couldn't believe what the human condition had come to.

Drake sat on one side of the table and we sat on the other. Brett in the middle. The chairs were shorter on our side of the table. It's an old trick the cops use to make you feel less significant than the interrogator. We didn't give a damn, though. We were tough enough to tear doughnuts in half.

Kelso kept his corner, turning his head to take us in with those disappointed eyes. Drake lit a cigarette and asked if we wanted cigarettes or coffee.

"Have you got those little flavored creamers?" Leonard asked.

"No," Drake said.

"Any cookies?"

"Nothing like that," Drake said. "Some coffee. Standard shitty creamer with some sugar packs. Or Sweet'N Low. But maybe we can bring in some caviar and nice crackers."

"Could you?" Leonard said. "That would be damn nice."

Drake made a point of ignoring Leonard. He looked at me and Brett. We asked for coffee. Drake nodded, turned to Kelso, said, “Is the camera on?”

He knew we knew how it worked, so he wasn’t trying to be cagey.

“Nope,” Kelso said.

“Good,” Drake said. “Leonard, you can go fuck yourself.”

“From your lips to God’s ear,” Leonard said.

“Go on, man,” Drake said to Kelso. “Get the coffee.”

Kelso left. I guess it was his day to be fetch bitch.

Drake looked us over. “So, you people have had quite a day. Enough dead to put a dent in the population. If only you could have set fire to downtown and shot a busload of orphans, it would have been perfect.”

“Hap ran over a yard gnome,” Brett said. “That damn sure ought to count for something.”

“Yep,” Leonard said. “It was a big day, and frankly, I can’t speak for everyone, but I’m a little tuckered, and this pink outfit makes me feel like I’m in my jammies. But, just to let you know, I really feel humiliated. This suit, it’s got to be the right cure for evil. Wearing this, no one would ever stray again from the straight and narrow. You wouldn’t even catch me jackin’ off in the men’s room if I thought I’d have to wear this fucker again.”

“That’s a relief,” Drake said.

“Thought you’d want to know,” Leonard said.

Drake tapped his fingers on the desk, said, “You’re going to call it self-defense?”

“Our lawyer will,” I said. Of course, we didn’t have a lawyer yet, but I wanted to sound like a big-time experienced criminal.

I turned to Leonard, said, “I met a guy in my cell who wanted to fuck me. I knocked him out. Was that anti-gay?”

“Did you write any anti-gay graffiti on him or the wall?”

I shook my head.

“I think it’ll be all right,” he said.

“No talking amongst yourselves,” Drake said. “You know you did a bad thing, you three?"

"Yep," Leonard said.

"What about those guys in the Caddy?" Brett asked.

"They'll live," Drake said.

"Gadget?" I asked.

"She's under arrest."

Kelso came back in, but he didn't have our coffee. He leaned over and whispered in Drake's ear.

"What?" Drake said.

Kelso nodded.

"Goddamn it," Drake said.

Drake got up and went out. Leonard said, "What about that coffee?"

"Fuck the coffee," Kelso said.

"That's some kind of goddamn way for a public servant to talk," Leonard said. "And you with the camera running."

I kicked Leonard gently under the table.

"I saw that," Kelso said. "And that's good policy. You should shut the hell up. And the camera is still off, dick cheese. That way, I wanted to kick your ass it wouldn't get recorded."

Leonard just smiled. Even with handcuffs on, Leonard would be a load and he knew it, and I could tell Kelso knew it too.

Kelso glared at me, said, "The jailer said you hit your cell mate."

"He didn't buy the mouse story?"

"Drake said you two think you're funny."

"There's that insult again," Leonard said. "It could take the edge off our comic timing."

"I think you're funny," Brett said, reached her handcuffs over and patted Leonard's hand.

"Thank you, dear," Leonard said.

"Laugh it up," Kelso said. "We'll see what the jury says."

We were the sort that when we were nervous we couldn't help but run our mouths to show we weren't nervous. It's not a good habit, but it’s ours. That comment shut us up, though. We sat there in silence, brooding in our pink jumpsuits, until the door opened and Drake came in and looked at us and sighed. He stood there for a long moment, just studying us, like we were a species formerly thought extinct. I thought any moment the rubber hose would appear, maybe a blowtorch and some pliers and a couple of angry German shepherds. He turned to Kelso. “Take their handcuffs off.”

21

After our handcuffs were off, Drake and Kelso went out, leaving us alone. We sat and waited, looking in the mirror that most likely had someone on the other side. At first I counted smears on the glass, boogers on the wall, anything to keep me busy. But that grew boring.

We turned and looked at one another, as if one of us might offer some sort of solution. No great answers unfolded. The nature of the universe was still safe. Stephen Hawking still had the inside track.

We sat there for a long time, then finally began to talk. Brett said, “What’s the point of this?”

“They want whoever is on the other side of the glass to take a good look at us,” Leonard said.

“Why?” Brett asked.

I patted her knee. “Because you are so pretty.”

“Oh. Well, of course,” she said, “duh, there *is* that.”

“I got a joke,” I said.

“Not now,” Leonard said.

“It’s pretty good.”

“Not now,” Brett said, and I knew that was the end of that.

“I don’t know about you two,” I said, “but I miss Kelso already. He had such sweet, if electrified, eyes.”

“You’d think they’d wipe these boogers down,” Brett said. “I don’t know who they think that intimidates. It’s just nasty.”

“I hear that,” Leonard said.

“And that piss smell,” she said. “It could hold your coat.”

“It could wear it,” Leonard said.

The door opened and Drake came in, and there was a guy with him that had a head like a concrete block. His haircut had something to do with that, gold as an Aryan dream, waxed up in front, flared out on the sides. He had a big hooked nose and thin lips and seemed to have more teeth than a human ought to, something a crocodile might envy, only straighter. His eyes were big and dark brown, like two unwiped butt holes. He reminded me of a villain out of those old *Dick Tracy* comics.

Drake went over and leaned against the wall, got a whiff of the piss, moved to another corner. The guy with the square head leaned back against the mirror. He said, "There's nobody on the other side."

"You say," Leonard said.

Drake said, "No. He's right."

"Damn, glad we got your word on that," Leonard said. "That makes it all right, then."

"I locked the door leads into the investigation room," Drake said.

"You got the only key?" I asked.

"No."

"Ah," I said. "No one else would of course use their key and go in there and look at us. … But frankly, we don't care. Ask what you want. It was self-defense."

"I know," Drake said.

That sort of stunned us, but lawmen are tricky.

The door opened and two guys came in. One of them was the guy who had been in Tanedrue's trailer, the one who wasn't with the batch we shot up today, the guy whose profile was gone, whose nose was splinted now and taped over good with tape so thick he looked like the Mummy. His forehead looked as if someone had broken in his ball bat on it. A shock of thick hair poked up from the top of the bandages like a rooster's comb. He went over and leaned against the wall and looked at Leonard. It wasn't a look of adoration.

I thought, What the hell?

The other guy was a short fat guy in a black suit with a black tie and some black shoes that needed a shine. He looked like an undertaker in a pet cemetery. He blew some breath out between his fat lips, went over and leaned on the wall next to our friend with the tape and the bruises.

The room was starting to get tight. If one more person came in we'd all be wearing the same suit of clothes, and I was sure I needed to change my underwear.

Brett looked at the two leaning on the mirror, said, "There's boogers on the wall and there's something on the mirror I don't think will pass for mayonnaise. Just a word to the wise."

They stopped leaning.

Leonard glared at the taped-up man, said, "What the hell is the Phantom of the Opera doing here?"

Drake said, "We'll come to that. But first, we got a little deal for you guys."

"A deal?" I said. "Think we're going to rat each other out? There's people saw what happened. We didn't go looking to be shot at. I might run over that yard gnome again I got the chance, but getting shot at like that, trust me, I'd rather pass. And you said it yourself, self-defense."

"You're going to get the charges dropped, or rather they're going to definitely turn into self-defense," Drake said. "No court. No problem."

"No shirt. No shoes. No problem," Leonard said. "What kind of bull is this? There's always court. What's the catch?"

Drake didn't say anything. He crossed his arms.

I said, "There is a catch, isn't there?"

"That's one way of putting it," Square Head said. "It's more like we got your dick in the zipper and we're pulling it up tight. In your case, ma'am, I guess it's your tit we got caught up."

"Then you better have a lot of zipper," Brett said, "'cause I'm serious in the tit department."

No one opposed this opinion.

"Agent Tenson here," Drake said, nodding at the *Dick Tracy* villain, "he's with the FBI, and he and his buddy here, Captain Bandage—"

"Man, that's some funny shit," Captain Bandage, aka the Mummy aka the Phantom, said.

“They want to talk to you,” Drake said. “Me, I’m just a lowly fucking public servant who’s always got the raw ass from these fed guys sticking their dicks in it, and I hate them.”

“Come on,” Tenson said. “There’s no need to turn this ugly. You and me, I’m sure we got things in common, Drake.”

“Yeah,” Drake said. “These guys, that’s what we got in common. May have been self-defense, but it didn’t just come out of nowhere, these folks wanting to kill them. There has to be a backstory. I don’t like lettin’ them off. They shot a lot of people. They ought to at least have a paddling, a night in jail, noses in the corner. This isn’t right, man.”

“What I want to know,” Leonard said, “is why is the fucking Mummy in on this?”

The Mummy’s voice sounded snotty, which isn’t unusual when your snout is packed with cotton. “It’s Milhouse. I was working undercover. Thanks a lot, asshole, you fucked up a real sting operation just to take some whore home.”

“Her granddaddy doesn’t see her that way,” Leonard said.

“Yeah, but me, I’ve had surgery, and I got to have some more. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Leonard said, and the Mummy came off the wall and Drake stepped over and put a hand against the Mummy’s chest.

“After what he done to you,” Drake said, “I wouldn’t push it. I think he can do it again. And we took the handcuffs off.”

“Yeah,” Leonard said, still sitting, holding his hands up. “They took the handcuffs off.”

“We ought to all just beat him down,” the Mummy, aka the Phantom of the Opera, aka Captain Bandage, said.

“We ought to,” Drake said, “but we won’t.”

“You were undercover,” Leonard said. “Might have been nice had you warned us Tanedrue and his mutts were going to take a run at us.”

“I didn’t know,” Milhouse said. “Had no idea. I told them I had some family concerns, got out. My figuring was some higher-ups were gonna come down on them, and I didn’t want to be there when it happened.”

The fat guy said, “Way it was gonna work was we was gonna let Tanedrue and his dopes take care of you guys, then we were gonna come down on them, spread their asses all over Kingdom Come. Guys like them are too stupid to deal dope, and let me tell you from experience, that’s putting them in a real stupid place. We got guys working for us that are damn near retards and they do better. One guy in Dallas hasn’t got any legs and goes around in the streets on a wheeled board selling dope and peddling ass for us, and he does a better job than those fucks.”

“And who are you?” I asked. “My first guess is since you got people selling dope and ass for you, you’re not a cop, though these days, hard to say. And though you could be a priest on vacation, I’m doubtful.”

“I’m the guy that wanted you two killed,” the fat man said.

Leonard shifted in his chair. Drake said, “I got a gun, Leonard.”

“I don’t like people want to kill me or Hap,” Leonard said. “Fact is, it seriously chaps my ass. I don’t like you bringing him, whoever he is, in here to lord over us like he’s somethin’. What the hell is going on here? Tell us or arrest us or shoot us or do some goddamn thing or another. I’m fed up.”

“Hold it a minute,” I said. “Didn’t someone say something about a deal? I mean, there’s some kind of deal, I want to hear it.”

“Oh yeah,” Drake said. “These guys got deals out the ass.”

22

A day after they let us go, after they offered us the deal, Marvin gave us a short-lived holiday. He owned a boat and he took me and Leonard and Brett out to a lake near LaBorde to go fishing. It was a nice lake with a big dam. Marvin had some kind of membership there, and you could only get in with a key to a gate that had a sign on it that said BEWARE OF ALLIGATORS. It was an open boat and had plenty of seats and a lot of room, a place to lay your rods and clamp them down. There was a container in the floor of the boat and we had some cold drinks in there, but it was too cold to want them. We also had a couple thermoses of coffee, some bologna-and-mayonnaise sandwiches, some bags of potato chips that were more inviting.

Marvin steered the boat out to the middle of the calm water, making it less calm as we went. Small, dark birds were in the willow trees across the way and the grass near the trees was tall and still green even in the brisk beginnings of winter; it grew out from beneath the trees, ran across the bank and into the lake like a green tattoo. Once we got settled and the wake of the boat had subsided, the water around us looked like a huge sheet of tin. There was the faint smell of dead fish in the air and there were a number of old logs floating on the lake's surface. After a while one of the logs swam away.

It was an alligator, probably sneaking up on a frog. It had fooled me. I cast my line away from that direction, but watched the alligator, the way it split the water and gave the lake a darker color wherever it swam.

"I certainly got you guys in a mess," Marvin said.

"You did," Brett said, frowning at the little green rubber lizard she had on the end of her line for bait.

"I know, and I regret it. Thanks for having them cut Gadget loose, Hap."

“I didn’t have them do anything special,” I said. “I just told them they wanted a deal from us she had to be cut loose.”

“It’s the only way they would have let her go,” he said.

“No problem,” I said. “How’s she doing?”

“She’s in rehab, out in Arizona. Rachel and JoAnna are with her. I convinced them, after what you two did, I couldn’t go. Had to be here to help you. But Gadget, I guess she’s doing all right. Rachel said she’s still in a kind of shock. She feels guilty going back to Tanedrue, didn’t know they would come after you and take her with them, didn’t know it was going to be like that. She doesn’t love that dead fuck anymore, sees him for what he is and what he was doing to her. Now, after all that garbage she finally sees. She’s as naive as a fresh-born baby sometimes. Said to tell you, Brett, she deserved every slap you gave her, and then some.”

“Hell, I know that,” Brett said, and cast her line. She looked cute today, in a heavy coat with a tan cap with earflaps and big cream-colored puffy boots full of warm stuffing. Her long hair was tied back in a ponytail, and it was bloodred against her back because of the way the sun was falling on it.

“The FBI sort of got us over a barrel,” I said. “That had something to do with us telling them yes, trying to better our situation. We’re not all that noble, Marvin.”

“Speak for yourself,” Leonard said. “I am one noble sonofabitch, and way special. If I weren’t so tired I’d walk on water and kick that alligator’s ass.”

“You’d have got off anyway,” Marvin said. “There would have been a trial, and a lot of time taken up, but in the end, they’d have let you three off and fined you for the shotgun. I don’t know, might have been some jail time. Witnesses, though, they were on your side. There was one fellow upset about some yard gnomes, another about some pink flamingos, but other than that it came out all right.”

“Death to gnomes and flamingos,” I said.

“Bottom line,” Marvin said, “is I know why you did it, and you can downplay it all you want, but I know why you did it, and I won’t ever forget. Already owed you guys, now I really owe you.”

“We owed you some too,” Leonard said. “For something or another, though I kind of forget what. But after this we'll be even. We can start running tabs on each other again."

❧

We fished all day in the cold, dry weather on the flat gray lake beneath the pearl-colored sky, eating the sandwiches and chips, drinking the coffee and talking a little, but not too much. I cast my line without purpose, and with no real hope of catching anything. I was fishing a wish and nothing more. I reeled my line in time after time, watching it cut the water like the thin edge of a knife. I cast and recast until the sun was falling down behind us and the sky that had been clear and pearl-colored at my back turned red as a whore's lipstick, then was stained with purple like the insides of a plum stretched out. I reeled in my line and turned to take a good look at the sky. I thought it might be the last time I saw a sky like that, or went fishing. Might be the last day and night I saw Brett, because in the morning I was sending her away. It had been a battle, but I had convinced her. She was going out to Arizona too, to join Gadget and Rachel and JoAnna. Secretly, I think events had unnerved her. Not that she was fearful of what might happen to her—well, no more than someone should be reasonably fearful—but because she had enjoyed it all too much; there was something inside of her that had snapped. It was the same thing that had allowed her to set her ex-husband on fire and beat him with a shovel, and pistol-whip a midget. It hadn't frightened her before, but now it had. She had seen its full face and it was gruesome. This time people had died. I didn't question that they needed to die, but they had, and by our hands, in an explosion of blood and urine and feces, a whiff of gun smoke on the air.

I knew how she felt. Problem was, that thing inside of me had clicked loose so many times it was starting to feel normal, like the necessary lancing of a wound. I had looked into the abyss so much it was no longer just looking back at me, it had its arms around me and was puckering to kiss.

I wanted to just let it all go, do the jail time, forget about the FBI deal. But then I thought some more about that jail time, and since I had already done prison some years back and I could remember it as if it were yesterday I didn't want any more of that.

I cast my line toward the setting sun and the stained sky, and when I started reeling it in a fish hit. I reeled it until it was close enough for me to reach out and take hold of the line just above the fish. It was a moderate-sized perch. I loosened the hook from its mouth and gently tossed it back in the water.

We started ashore then, my fish having been the only one caught. Marvin hadn't driven the boat far toward shore before the night overtook us, collapsed over the water and made it dark as the River Styx. When we got to the boat ramp there was no more light except a thin ray of rising moonlight that was slowly being bagged by some fast-moving clouds. The wind picked up and really turned cold. The weather had changed in a flash. Welcome to East Texas.

We used flashlights and got out at the front of the boat without stepping in the water and fastened the crank line to Marvin's trailer, then used the automatic crank and put it in place. We drove away, along with a rumble of thunder, and soon after, out on the highway, there were thin streaks of lightning, like bright varicose veins cutting across the black sky. We drove to Marvin's place and put the boat in the carport and closed it up, then he drove us home in his big Ford truck, and he and Leonard spent the night at our place.

*

We put Leonard on the couch and we got a blow-up bed for Marvin, some extra pillows for them from the closet. We weren't supposed to have guns, but Marvin had brought a shotgun for himself and one for Leonard and he gave me and Brett handguns. We talked for a long time in the dark, sitting in the living room, then finally Brett and I went up to bed, placing the handguns on the nightstand.

Brett and I were fiery that night and at first I feared they would hear us downstairs, then after a while I didn't care at all. When we finished, we hugged for a while, then she said, "You're sure Jim Bob's coming?"

"Oh yeah, he said so, so he'll be here. Marvin arranged it. I just wish we could have found Veil. But you know how he is. Locating him is like trying to find a virgin in a whorehouse."

"Jim Bob, he's good."

"Real good," I said. "After Leonard, he's who I would want at my back. Veil, I'd kind of like him there too."

"He's like that character the Shadow."

"He is. Kind of gives me the creeps, but he's a good one to have on your side. Wish we could have found him."

"What about this guy Marvin knows that's comin'? Tonto?"

"Marvin says he's good, so I reckon he is. He's one more, and that's good."

"Yeah," she said, "that's good."

"Marvin said Tonto owes him a big favor. He won't say what the favor is, but he says he'll pay him back."

"Not everyone pays favors back," she said.

"Marvin said Tonto does, so I got to believe him."

We were hugging close and I could feel Brett's warm tears on my cheek. I said, "It'll be all right, baby."

"I feel bad leaving you."

"I don't feel bad you're going," I said. "It's the right thing to do."

"All right, then," she said. "There's nothing else to say, is there?"

I shook my head. "Nothing else."

She pulled her big T-shirt that said SHEN CHAUN, MARTIAL SCIENCE over her head, kissed me, and rolled over and went to sleep with my hand on her hip. She could do that a lot of the time, just go down into dreamland no matter what was on her mind. Wasn't that easy for me, not when I had plans for the next day, especially the kind of plans we had to set in motion.

The rain outside picked up. I sat up and put my pillow behind my head, against the wall, listened to the rain grow savage. Thunder shook the upstairs windows with a sound like dice being rattled in a cup. Lightning was jumping around outside. The rain made a sound like a giant snake hissing, and the roof was taking some serious shots from drops that were hitting like artillery fire.

Brett didn’t stir. She was snoring.

I looked at her for a while, taking in everything I could about her, and then I thought about what it was we had agreed to do, me and Leonard. When it was all done, it wouldn’t surprise me if what was left of my soul wouldn’t fill a thimble.

23

In that booger-lined room with the greasy mirror, the deal they offered us sounded easy but with all things that sound easy there is often something at the bottom of it all that makes it stink. It's always something that begins with "All you got to do," or "This won't take much of your time." That should be enough of a cue to make you throw your hands over your head and run the other way. But not us; no one ever said we learned from our mistakes, not me and Leonard. Besides, we sort of had our asses in a crack over this killing a whole bunch of people deal, and our options were thin.

The fat guy in the black suit was from the Dixie Mafia, whatever that was exactly. His name was Hirem Burnett and he was turning state's evidence. In a nutshell he was one of the middle boys in the organization. You had your water carriers like Tanedrue and his buddies, then you had Hirem, and above his fat ass were Satan's Angels.

That's what Hirem called them, Satan's Angels. They sounded like a motorcycle gang, and thing was, there was a connection to some biker gangs in Houston. Some of the guys at the top had been bikers, then prisoners in one or several of our fine institutions, mostly for drug deals and violent acts. Bunch of guys tattooing themselves in cells and doing shank hits in the rec yard, running some dirty work from prison via messengers, a few of them getting out and turning into businessmen, their tattoos hidden under long-sleeve shirts, their formerly greasy hair trimmed and spruced up; sometimes they went as far as to wear a suit and tie and not scratch their nuts in public.

Lot of them were still Aryan Nations guys at heart, worrying that a strain of black blood would make soiled whites want to throw spears and run with watermelons, piss on the Dixie flag, maybe vote Democrat and wish for socialized medicine. Still, as

Conners said, they were businessmen and green was their true color, and as time had gone on, they had lost some of their interest in racial purity but none of their interest in crisp folding money

It was Hirem who told Tanedrue and his posse to hit us. And to bring in a whole bucketload of irony, now me and Leonard were going to have to do him a favor, and all because of Gadget. I rewound the bitch slapping Brett had given her in my head and enjoyed all the details I could remember. I might even have gussied up my memory some. I even quit feeling bad about punching her.

Hirem's son, one Tim Burnett, had bucked Daddy's ideas and had gone to college to be an environmental engineer. He didn't want to grow up to sell dope and run pussy. He ran off with a black girl and about three hundred thousand dollars' worth of drug money in a duffel bag. The guys at the top wanted the money back and they wanted the son to pay. The girl had to go down and not get up. They couldn't let word get around a colored gal had taken up with one of their mid-management fellows' sons and helped swipe a chunk of their money. Just wouldn't do.

She had to be whacked and they had to get all the money back, and the son, well, he had to take it and like it. That way Hirem wouldn't find him in a damp cardboard box inside his garage next to the garbage can. Those were Hirem's words, said it was the exact threat he had gotten from one Cletus Jimson, the upper-level man with a plan.

Hirem knew everyone in the business. He had been there when it was run by old fat guys in Hawaiian shirts wearing needle-nose Italian shoes. Back then, families were left alone. You didn't bother them no matter what a member might do, not unless their family was part of the business. Cops were also left out of the mix. Killing a cop was considered bad form. Business was between those in the group and no one else.

These days they were a lot more freewheeling. They'd kill anyone or do anything to maintain business. That included Hirem's son and girlfriend, and now that he had come forward to help the cops, it included Hirem himself.

The bad guys were also unhappy that a good chunk of their potential earnings had been flushed down the crapper by me, and Leonard had helped me do it. Couple of goons from a nearby town coming in and slapping their lower-level errand boys around, that didn't look good. That's why there had been a hit on us.

In that booger-dotted room Hirem said, "Wasn't nothing personal, you two. It was business."

"What about her?" I said, nodding at Brett. "What did she do to you?"

"Not a thing. And in the old days, she wouldn't have been part of it. But these ain't the old days, and I'm not in command. New guys at the top, they're younger and meaner and more demanding, and they keep me on a tight leash. Most likely, ten years ago this would have just been a business loss and we'd have taken care of Tanedrue and his morons and that would have been the end of it. But that's not the way they play these days."

"Just for the record," the Mummy said, "I wasn't really one of their morons."

"Informer, double agent, whatever you are or were," Hirem said. "In the old days, we figured you were a cop, we might have let you go. And a thing like this, my son getting jungle fever, wanting to ride a porch monkey, taking off with a bag of money, it would have been handled differently. I could have paid it back, made him apologize, sent the shine girl packin', maybe she would have caught a bullet, but no one else. Not like that anymore."

"Shine?" Leonard said. "That word is still in the vocabulary?"

"It's right next to colored," I said. "Just south of porch monkey."

"Oh," Leonard said.

Bottom line was, Hirem was under the gun, literally, and instead of following through with what the Dixie Mafia wanted him to do, he decided he'd had enough and it was time to pull the train out of the station. He had come to the FBI to tell them about the hit on us, that he had been behind it. Came to tell them lots of things, some of those things not yet spoken, and the reason for that was he had to have a deal before he let out all the juice he knew.

But the thing was, he needed some patsies to find his son and the money. Some muscle. And since we had our asses in a crack, self-defense or not, and considering the cops figured they could probably find two more just like us to do Hirem's work if we refused, we got picked and we accepted.

So the FBI, represented by the Mummy and the *Dick Tracy* villain, they said to us, and I paraphrase: You scratch our back, and we'll scratch yours. You help Hirem get his son back in one piece, save that girl, and get us the money, since it isn't exactly earned legal and it could be used by the United States government to continue the war on crime, we will wipe your slate clean. They could do that, they said. No trial, nothing. We would be helping the FBI, 'cause when Hirem got his son back, he was going to sing like a goddamn canary and we would be the recipients of all kinds of goodwill.

Course, on the record, we weren't working for anyone. If the Dixie Mafia punched our tickets, the FBI wouldn't know anything about it. If we said at any point we were working for the FBI, they would deny it. They could always find replacements for us in the wings, other fuckups they could take advantage of. They said just that.

"Yeah," Leonard told them, "but you aren't gonna find any bigger fuckups than us."

No one argued.

We could leave the offer, of course, take our chances at trial, but Flat Top said, "Might not go so good you don't help."

"Isn't that blackmail?" I said.

He said, "Uh-huh."

I looked at Drake. He looked toward the wall.

And so that was how Leonard and I had come to unofficially work for the FBI so they wouldn't have to get their hands dirty. They said if we wanted to, we could get help, but the help was in the same water we were. No one would know them and no one would protect them. It was us and our friends and whatever moxie we might have against the world, and that was it. Oh, and we did get their best wishes, and if we couldn't get the duffel bag back, they'd let that go.

24

About four a.m. I heard a car pull in the drive. I had a good idea who it was, but I wasn't taking any chances. In my pajamas and rabbit slippers, a gun in my hand, I left the bedroom. Brett was still snoring. I went downstairs with the rabbit ears flapping and found Leonard and Marvin in their shorts and T-shirts holding their shotguns.

After a few moments there was a knock on the door, and a voice said, "Ya'll about to shoot, don't. It's me, Jim Bob. I'd like to keep my good-lookin' ass intact."

Leonard opened the door. "Hell, man, knowing it's you is what gives me reason to shoot."

Jim Bob, tall and broad-shouldered, thin but not skinny, came into the house and Leonard shut the door. Jim Bob took off his gray Stetson. The hatband was a thick strip of cloth in a cheetah-skin pattern, and in the band were toothpicks and little feathers. The hat was stained in a lot of spots. Without the hat, Jim Bob looked a little off; it was like seeing a rooster remove his head. He was red-faced and his hair was short, wheat-textured and orange-colored. He had a scar on his face I didn't remember from the time before. He had on a light green snap-pocket Western shirt, blue jeans, and a pair of brown boots that looked as if most of the world had worn them for a while and then given them back. He looked at me, studied my bunny slippers. "You look like an idiot."

"Don't be jealous. I can hop real far."

Jim Bob grinned, said, "Ain't there no coffee?"

"There will be." It was Brett, at the top of the stairs. She had pulled on some men's boxer shorts under her T-shirt and she had on some flip-flops. "You loudmouthed guys don't know how to let a girl get her beauty sleep."

“Well, now,” Jim Bob said, looking up as Brett came down, her red hair tousled around her shoulders, her braless breasts bouncing pleasantly, “it’s good to see there’s still women know how to make coffee.”

“I didn’t say I was making it,” she said when she got to the bottom of the stairs. “I said there will be coffee. Right, Hap?”

“I’m on it,” I said.

“You look lovely,” Jim Bob said, flashing a grin at Brett that had probably charmed trailer-trash women from LaBorde to Memphis out of their panties and their Beanie Baby collections.

“And you are still full of shit,” Brett said.

“Yes, ma’am, I am. And you are still so lovely my back teeth hurt.”

“Just your teeth ache?” Brett said. “If that’s the case, I’m losing my touch.”

“Well,” Jim Bob said, “I was trying to be polite.”

There was the sound of another car outside, so I put down the coffee makings and went to the living room window for a look.

I peeled back the curtain and had to wipe the frosted pane clear with my arm to get a view. The rain had slacked and there was only a bit of the garage light to see by, but it was all I needed. A big black van was pulled up behind Jim Bob’s classic red Cadillac, the one he calls the Red Bitch, and when the driver got out, came around the back of Jim Bob’s ride, started for the house, it was as if the great shadow of Armageddon had fallen across the cold winter earth. He was at least six foot seven, with shoulders wide enough to make football players slash their wrists with envy. He had legs like trees and arms like smaller trees, a face that appeared to have been knocked into shape from granite and then beat on with a sledgehammer. His muscles moved under his clothes, like animals trying to escape a sack. He had long black hair tied back in a ponytail and he wore a black denim shirt, black leather jacket, black jeans, and black round-toed boots. He walked swiftly, like he was anxiously leaving a prayer meeting and was on his way to a whorehouse with a wallet full of money and a pack of rubbers.

“I hope this is Tonto,” I said. “Otherwise, I’m heading out the back door at a run."

"That must be him," Marvin said, "'cause that's the usual response. Keep in mind he's a little shy."

When we opened the door, I said, "Hello," and Tonto nodded, stood where he was for a moment, wiped his feet in a slow, methodical manner, like a trained horse trying to count for its master.

When he came in, he ducked a little to go through the door and stood in the center of the room, saw Brett, held that view for a while, then looked over at Marvin.

"You needed me?" he said to Marvin, and it was as if this big man's voice was on vacation and he had borrowed a voice from a child, soft and musical, almost feminine.

"Yeah," Marvin said.

"I pay my debts."

"I know," Marvin said.

"I never thought you'd ask."

"Never planned to."

"Then it's important."

"That's right," Marvin said. "It's important. To me."

"Tell you what," I said. "Let's have some coffee and talk about things. I don't think it's been completely explained."

"I came because Marvin asked," Tonto said. "I don't know anything. There's nothing been explained to me."

"And me," Jim Bob said. "I'm here 'cause my plastic fuck doll ran out of air. Wasn't nothing else to do."

"My guess," Brett said, "is the doll pinpricked herself and committed suicide."

"Now, honey," Jim Bob said, "that's just an ugly thing to say."

25

We pulled some kitchen chairs up and got some folding chairs out of the closet and congregated at the kitchen table with coffee and Leonard's cookies, which from the look on his face I could tell he didn't appreciate. Through the kitchen window I could see the rain had cleared and the almost pink sky with the bone-white clouds above it looked like some kind of strawberry brew topped by foam.

"Curious? We got to kill somebody?" Tonto said. "Not that I mind, but I like to know. Well, sometimes I mind. I got scruples, they're just flexible."

I thought, man, how did I arrive at this place, with a man with flexible scruples? It was bad enough I was suspicious of my own.

He took off his jacket and he had a twin pearl-handled .45 in a shoulder holster under each armpit. He was wearing a crucifix on a chain, and he pulled it out from under his shirt and let it lie on the front of the cloth in line with the buttons. Nothing says I love Jesus like a crucifix and twin .45s. He was sitting in one of the folding chairs and I feared at any moment it would wrap around his big ass and drop him to the floor.

"That's something we want to avoid," I said. "But one never knows. We're not dealing with priests here."

"So," Jim Bob said, "instead of an ass fucking from one of God's finest, we're talking about bullets."

"That would be yes," Leonard said.

I explained, mostly for Tonto, about the kids who had run off, about Hirem, how we were patsies, and how we could expect zip help from anyone outside of our little group. I told him we had no real idea where the kids were, but that we were supposed to talk to the FBI and Hirem one more time, and then the only time we were to see them or talk to them again was when the mission was over, provided we survived. All nonsurvivors could pretty much count on being buried beside the road in a shallow grave with nothing to mark their passing except a wild-flower or the droppings of the random dog or armadillo.

“And what do we get out of this?” Jim Bob said.

“Well,” I said, “me and Leonard get to not go to jail, or maybe just avoid some long, inconvenient court time. You get the pleasure of our company.”

“Doesn’t sound like much of a deal,” Jim Bob said.

“It’s not,” I said.

“Well,” Jim Bob said, “considering that we get nothing out of this, and I’m doing this just because I know you guys and sort of like you better than guys I don’t, count me in.”

I looked at Tonto.

He nodded, said in his almost sweet little voice, “I owe Marvin one.” He glanced at Marvin. “And after this, we’re through. Right?”

“Right,” Marvin said. “We’re even.”

“Everyone in?” I said, and held my hand out over the table.

“So we’re supposed to put our hand on top of yours?” Jim Bob said. “All for one, and one for all?”

“Yep,” I said.

“Too silly,” he said.

Leonard put his hand on top of mine. “I’m in.”

Brett put her hand on top of his. “Actually, I’m not going to be here, but hey, in spirit, okay?”

Marvin got up carefully from his chair with his cane and edged over and put his hand on top. “I will do what I can, all things considered. Hell, I got all of you into this, so I got to show solidarity, right?”

“Damn right,” Leonard said.

“Oh, hell,” Jim Bob said, and put his hand on top. “I always was a sucker for that musketeer jive.”

Tonto grinned. He even had big teeth. “Hell, why not.”

He put his hand on top of Jim Bob’s.

“Maybe we could have some kind of saying,” Leonard said. “You know, something that’s just for us. A slogan. A motto.”

“No,” Tonto said, removing his hand. “Maybe we won’t have that.”

“Yeah, that idea sucks,” Jim Bob said, pulling his hand back.

“Even I don’t like that,” Brett said, and picked up her coffee cup.

“Got to vote no,” Marvin said.

“Yeah, I’m out on that one too,” I said.

Leonard looked hurt. “Spoilsports.”

26

After finishing up the coffee and cookies, we had a real breakfast of eggs and toast and bacon, and Brett did the cooking; then I left with her and drove to the bus depot. It was one of the hardest things I had ever done, and I knew then—well, I had known before, but I knew all over again, down deep and tight to the bone, that I loved this woman dearly and that she was a part of me, like a heart or a liver. I had loved my first wife and she had been a shit and I had loved her anyway. Then she betrayed me, got herself killed, and nearly got me and my buddy Leonard killed. I still loved her for a year after that. But not the way I loved Brett. It's only right that when you find the one you care about that you keep that part that's you and not give it all away, but by the same token I'm old-fashioned in that I feel when you do find the right person you are part of a whole, and when the other leaves, a bit of you is no longer there. And when they leave and you think you might never see them again, it's like more than a part of you is gone. It's like being ripped in half and your half has been cast to the wind.

She was dressed in jeans and sneakers and had on a big sweater and a sweater cap that her hair stuck out from under like a flaming waterfall. The bus depot had very few people in it, and we sat down on a bench. A bus depot is one of the loneliest places in the world, and it doesn't help when the bench you're perched on is near the restrooms and they stink of recent trips, and when people walk out, the tile, dampened by urine and bad flushes, makes a sound like someone pulling duct tape off a hairy dog's ass.

We sat for a while, the sun rising higher and eating away at what was left of the darkness, and then we heard a bus come and they called it over the speaker. It was Brett's ride. I walked her out. There were others getting on, and we stepped back and let them. She had a small bag with her. It had a few clothes and her toiletries in it, a book and some magazines. She set it down by her feet like a trained pet.

“Well,” she said, “don’t get yourself killed.”

“I won’t.”

“Promise? For me?”

“Hell, I promise for me and you.”

“Cross your heart?”

“Big-time,” I said, and crossed my heart.

“Make sure Leonard doesn’t get killed either.”

“You got it.”

“I guess you can kind of watch out for Jim Bob and Tonto.”

“All right.”

“It’s hard to know about Tonto, isn’t it?”

“So far,” I said.

“He’ll always be hard to know. I can promise you that. You all have screws missing, all of you, but he’s like an empty parts house. It’s not just the screws that are gone, but all manner of stuff.”

“I think you’re right,” I said.

“Marvin, he’ll be all right at home, won’t he?”

“Sure. Wherever he ends up, he’ll be okay.”

I wasn’t sure of that, and she knew I wasn’t sure, but it was a little game we were playing. I saw a tear in her eye and I took hold of her and we held each other, and finally we kissed, and she took up her bag and gave me a smile and started to get on the bus. I patted her butt. She said, “Why, thank you.”

I laughed and she got on the bus.

I stood there until I saw her take her seat, and then I still couldn’t go, so I stood there until she turned to smile at me. She looked as if she was about to bust out crying, which was exactly how I felt. I watched until the bus started to move and she lifted a hand, and I waved back. Then with a turn of the corner and a fart of exhaust, the bus and Brett were gone, on their way out to Arizona.

* * *

It was solid daylight when I drove over to the cop shop and went inside and asked for Drake. I was lucky. He was in. The dispatcher picked up a line and Drake appeared and gave me a not-so-friendly drag of the hand, indicating I should follow him.

We went along the hall and passed the booger-lined room with the greasy mirror, turned into another room with a long table and some chairs and a counter with a pot of coffee brewing and a couple boxes of doughnuts holding court next to them.

Drake went over and picked up the pot of coffee and poured some into a Styrofoam cup, asked if I wanted any. I looked at the coffee. It was thick and very dark, like sewer sludge.

“No thanks,” I said.

Drake got a couple of doughnuts out of one of the boxes and put them on a napkin. He didn’t ask me if I wanted a doughnut. He went over to the table and set the doughnut-laden napkin on the table and set the coffee beside it, then put his ass in a chair and crossed his legs. I sat across from him.

“You know,” he said, “I’m the unluckiest man in the world. I wasn’t supposed to be working this shift. I wasn’t working it, I wouldn’t have you.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I thought you and me, there was a kind of spark, you know.”

“No spark,” he said. “What do you want?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “These FBI guys, this all on the up-and-up?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, they gonna keep their part of the bargain if we help them out?”

“I assume the ‘we’ you refer to is you and Leonard, ’cause it sure isn’t me and it definitely isn’t the department. We got nothing to do with this.”

“Yeah, that’s what I mean.”

“I have no idea what they’ll do,” he said, sipping coffee, pausing to bite into a doughnut. “The FBI, they do their thing and we do ours. Unfortunately, sometimes the things clash.”

"Just like sex."

"No. There's no fun in it. Not even a little bit. All I can say is Hirem knows all manner of stuff the FBI would love to know, and it's stuff worth them knowing, but I got no love for them FBI boys. They come in here like we're dog mess on the bottom of their shoes, like they're the goddamn ghosts of J. Edgar Hoover hisself."

"If they were the ghosts of Hoover," I said, "they'd be wearing dresses."

"What?"

"He was supposed to be a transvestite. You know, transvestites put on dresses. I think he was gay too."

"I hadn't heard that."

"Oh yeah. Big-time."

"Huh? I'll be damned."

"Sorry. Didn't mean to interrupt."

"You're sure about that dresses thing?"

"That's the story. I'm not sure about anything."

"I'll be damned. Hadn't heard that."

I let him contemplate. He said, "You know, considering how Hoover was, the way these guys act, that's kind of funny."

"Yep. But about the FBI guys …"

Drake shrugged. "What I can tell you is, if they're wanting you to do something like this, it's more than an ask. It's a kind of push, and it might be a lot nastier than you think. It might be worse than a trial and a jury. But if you've come to me to know more about them, more about what they want, you're in the wrong place. I understand you defended yourself, you and Leonard and Brett. But I can't feel good about citizens doing what you done and all you get is a slap on the wrist. I don't buy you were just driving around armed to the teeth and they came out of nowhere and decided to kill you."

"It was still self-defense."

"I guess it was, but some of them were shot in the back of the head."

"They were shooting at me, and I didn't want them to get up again," I said. "Shooting them in the back of the head was a way to assure that."

"I still don't like it, and I don't like the idea of Hirem getting a light sentence by getting you guys to do something I'm pretty sure is against the law but is done in the name of the law. I know that's the game, but it's a game that stinks and I don't have to like it."

I sat there for a moment and said nothing.

"I don't know what you thought I could tell you," Drake said.

"I have no idea," I said. "I guess I was looking for some reassurance."

Drake shook his head. "Can't offer you any. You might call your mother, you want that."

"She's dead," I said.

"There you go, shit out of luck. All I know is these guys want to help Hirem's son out and get some money back, and I got no idea what you'll have to do to make that happen. I don't know what they're asking, and I don't want to know. I'm just a simple cop, one level above working parking tickets and jaywalkers. I come in here and do my job and see some nasty stuff I'd rather not see, then I got to go home to the family and act like it don't bother me and that I didn't bring it home with me. Like there's nothing more I'd like to do than have a picnic or go to a movie. But all the time I'm thinking about murders and dope deals and some penny-ante shit too, and I can't ever let it go. Not really. I'm making love to the wife, I remember having to deal with some rape, or a rape and murder, and that doesn't exactly make me hard as the Rock of Gibraltar, and then I got to fake an orgasm and act like things are cool. 'Cause I tell her what's on my mind, that's worse. We aren't exactly Houston here, but we got our crime and it's a lot more consistent than you think, and there's plenty for me to handle without having to think about you and the FBI. So, again, for you, I got nothing. Not even a doughnut, so quit eyeing them. About all I can give you, and I do it reluctantly, is my most sincere heartfelt go fuck yourself. I got absolutely no sympathy for you or Leonard. You're always into something, and I'm sick of it. Around here, they call you the Disaster Twins, and the way I look at it, you keep coming up with crap on your shoes it's because you keep steppin' where you ought to not be steppin'. I don't care if down deep in your hearts you have good intentions and you're after the same bad guys I'm after. It is not your job, and I don't give a damn if you and Leonard are fucking Francis of Assisi in your souls, I am goddamn sick of all of it."

I sat for a moment not saying anything. Drake gnawed at a doughnut like he was biting my throat out.

"Well," I said, "I'm glad we had this time together, and thanks for nothing." I got up and went out.

27

Tonto's black van was nicer inside than it looked on the outside and it was very large and souped up under the hood and had big wide tires with tread deep enough to lose a quarter in. I wasn't one of those guys who could talk about cars or fix them up or identify everything on the road. I had always been practical about cars. I wanted them to start and drive me around, get me where I was going and start up when I left. It was considered a Southern failing not to know this kind of thing, the insides of cars, all their clicks and sparks and little growls. All the men I knew who were car buffs, and that was most, looked at me as if not knowing about cars was the equal to not knowing about sunrise and sunset. So when Tonto told me about his van and what it had under the hood and what it could do, I forgot it faster than I forgot the combination to my old high school locker. But I remember this: Tonto claimed his van could run a Corvette down and bitch-slap it, which seemed a little much to me, but it did hum down the road with a sound like a hive of bees. The scenery tossed past us in a blur and we zipped past cars like they were nailed down. I had to admit it was some machine. In that van I felt like one of the Scooby Doo gang. I was probably Scooby himself. A big dumb dog without a dick.

The van had three rows of really comfortable seats and a place in the back to put some luggage and gear, and under the floor carpets and beneath sliding floorboards were secret compartments where we put our weapons, except for the ones we were carrying, which in my and Leonard's case was nothing more than a pocketknife (me) and a pack of gum (Leonard) and we both had combs. Mine was green, Leonard's was black. Tonto still had his good-buddy .45s under his armpits, and Jim Bob had a snub-nosed .38 holstered at the small of his back and a clasp knife clipped inside his front pocket and a nut sack packed tight with testosterone.

Marvin had stayed at my house with a shotgun and a cup of coffee. His job was to watch the home front, keep close to the phone in case we needed something he could provide. We gave him directions to where we were going to meet up with the FBI and Hirem, and from there our plan was to keep him informed as we went, because we didn't know what our plan really was, not yet. With Marvin at the house, we always had a home base. It was a good idea, I thought, and a way to keep him a part of things since he couldn't do much else with that bum leg.

The day was clear and cold and the sky had turned a bright polished blue and the sun was a yellow blaze hanging at the ten o'clock position. I was sitting in the passenger seat, Tonto drove, behind me was Jim Bob, and next to him was Leonard. Tonto had a CD cranked up, and we listened to Jerry Lee Lewis's greatest hits as he tooled us along, nodding his head to the music like a bobblehead doll.

When the CD played out, and before he could put in another, I said to Tonto, "That your real name?"

He didn't turn to look at me, said, "Nope."

"Guess you don't want to talk about it."

"Nope."

"Hokeydoke."

I leaned back in the seat and Jim Bob said, "Hap, I had a woman like the one you got, I'd just go to court and take the jail time. You could get your ass killed, and what for?"

"I could ask you a similar question. You could get your ass killed and your hog farm would go to hell," I said.

"Sold all the hogs, and they wouldn't hold a candle to Brett."

"Okay, we agree on that. Brett is better than hogs, and you could get yourself killed easy as any of us."

"Yeah, you're right about that, though I always assume I'm going to come out on top and it's the other guy who'll wind up with the stick in his ass. But you know, lately I'm starting to think maybe it could go the other way. It's a new kind of feeling and I'm not too fond of it. I never feel like I really belong anywhere. I think a lot about a line in a Frank O'Hara poem that goes 'I'm always tying up and then deciding to depart.' Story of my life."

“You read poetry?” Leonard said.

“Just when I’m tired of masturbating,” Jim Bob said. “My reading poetry shock you?”

“That you can read shocks me,” Leonard said.

“So, if you can read and have a way to while away the hours, why are you doing this?” I asked.

“We got a kind of connection,” Jim Bob said. “We’re part of a rare kind of club.”

“That right?”

“Yeah,” Jim Bob said. “It’s made up of guys who think the world ought to work smooth and people ought to treat each other right, and when they don’t we go out there and try and fix things and every time we do, we change us into them, and yet we keep hoping and we keep trying and maybe one day we’ll realize we’ll never get it right and we’ll just give in. I don’t know. I sound like a tired philosopher.”

“You sound like I feel,” Tonto said.

“I think you’re reading your books backwards,” Leonard said.

“Again, why are you doing it then?” I asked.

“There aren’t many of us left, Hap, and I’m trying to keep you from becoming totally one of us by taking in the slack I don’t want you to handle. It’s not my job and it shouldn’t matter, but Leonard here, he can’t do it alone. You aren’t a delicate flower, my man, but there’s still something of the hopeful in you and I’d hate to see all of that get sucked out. Probably too late for the rest of us.”

“You don’t know me,” Tonto said.

“Oh, yes I do,” Jim Bob said.

Tonto didn’t argue back. Jim Bob said, “Hap, you ought to be a social worker, not a tough guy. You’re tough enough, but your heart isn’t in it. Soiled as you are, underneath the dirt there’s pretty good linen.”

“I keep telling him that,” Leonard said. “That he’s soiled, I mean. I don’t know about the linen part.”

“And you,” Jim Bob said to Leonard. “Shouldn’t you be home too? Ain’t you got you a boyfriend? You’re a little farther gone on the scale, but at least you've got some sense of normalcy going on, got a relationship going."

Leonard sighed. "Actually, it's on the fence."

"That's a shame."

"Why do you really do it?" I said to Jim Bob. "I think you're dodging the question."

"Man, this is like getting in touch with our feelings, isn't it?" Jim Bob said. "I told you why."

"It isn't about me, and you know it," I said. "I see you only now and then. What about the rest of the time? Why do you damn near get yourself killed on a regular basis? Private gun for hire, that kind of thing. Let's expand that question beyond you, my good man. What the fuck is wrong with all of us? And it's got to be more than just wanting to set the world right."

"Too many cowboy movies," Leonard said.

"All right," Jim Bob said. "Here it is. I do it because if I don't I've got nothing but myself, and though I dearly love myself, I'm a little tired of being me right now. Sometimes I feel like I'm laughing in the dark all by my goddamn self, because I am, and what I got to show for it is a paid-off house with no one in it, not even a dog, because I'm gone too much and when I'm gone I can't see a whole lot of reason to race back. I had a woman like you got, Hap, I'd hold on to her until the crack of goddamn doom. Can you understand that?"

"I wish life was that simple," I said.

"I'd just like to come home and have John there," Leonard said. The words sprang from his mouth like an escaped prisoner.

"You've talked to him?" Jim Bob said, pushing his hat back on his head.

"I've tried."

"Leonard's idea of talking," I said, "is telling people how it is. Not the same thing as a true discussion. The signal of his love for John was that he climbed up in the bed and shit in it."

"Yuck," Jim Bob said. "I wouldn't like that."

"Yeah, he took it hard," Leonard said. "I'm just not a talker about some things, you know. Not like you share-your-feelings guys.”

“So you go straight to shitting in the bed?” Jim Bob said.

“It’s a statement,” Leonard said. “And I’ll have you know, at the bottom of it all I’m a sensitive motherfucker.”

Tonto, who had been listening quietly, watching the road, said, “Hey, Leonard, were you saying you’re queer?”

“The queerest,” Leonard said. “You got a problem with that?”

“Where’s the dick go?”

“Anywhere I can put it.”

“Oh,” Tonto said. “No problem. Just curious. Hap, you’re pussy-whipped.”

“I know.”

“That’s all right,” Tonto said, his voice growing higher than before. “I wish I was pussy-whipped. What about you, Jim Bob?”

“Well, currently, I don’t have a pussy in this fight.”

“You know,” Tonto said, “I think we are bonding like some righteous cocksuckers, don’t you?”

“I assume,” said Leonard, “that you are speaking symbolically because to the best of my knowledge I am the only cocksucker present.”

“Righteous sonsabitches then,” Tonto said.

28

We bonded righteous sonsabitches stopped at a McDonald’s on the other side of Tyler about two hours later. We went in and got some drinks and Tonto got a couple of burgers and then he gave me the keys to the van.

“Something happens to us,” I said, “you may be a long time with Ronald McDonald.”

“This one still has a playground,” Jim Bob said, as he and Tonto took a seat in one of the plastic booths.

“Well, in that case,” I said, “you boys play pretty.”

*

I drove Leonard and myself over to our meeting place with the FBI. They didn’t know about Jim Bob and Tonto, which was all right. We had agreed to do what they wanted, try to find those kids and get the money back so Hirem would tell all he knew about the Dixie Mafia organization, but we hadn’t said how we were going to do what we had agreed to do and we hadn’t said with whom.

The FBI guys gave us directions to a house at Lake Tyler where they said they were keeping Hirem secluded like a rare animal on the endangered species list. Before we went out there we drove to a place nearby and stopped and used a screwdriver Tonto had given us to take off the plates and put on some others that I think he had had made special. It was a precaution. We didn’t want them to know where we got the van or who it belonged to, so if they ran the plates, they’d come up belonging to someone Tonto made up.

Finished with the plates, we got in and drove. It had turned windy and the blue had gone out of the sky because gray clouds had come in, hiding the sun. The lake house wasn’t on the good side of the lake where there were fine homes and the grass was always freshly mown and there were nice boats docked up close to shore. It was down a precarious red clay road with ruts deeper than the ass crack of time, and the road just kept winding around the evergreens and barren oaks until it died out near the lake. Then you had to park and get out and walk across a messy clay clearing toward a cabin nestled near some pines and beneath a couple of massive cyprus trees from which moss draped like feather boas. The wind whipped the boas and it whipped at us.

It wasn't much of a cabin. Pretty small and made of logs. The logs had been treated poorly and they were starting to rot, and the cabin leaned downhill toward the lake, which was visible like a blue patch through the boughs of the trees and the mossy boas. The porch was caved in near the steps and there was a window missing and a slab of Sheetrock had been nailed over it from the inside and the Sheetrock was obviously damp and all it would take to knock it loose was a strong cough or foul language.

When we were close up on the cabin I stopped and hollered out, "Hello, the house."

Some time passed and then the door cracked and I heard Tenson's voice call out, "Come on up, but you got guns, you need to lose them."

We had already left them in the van, under the floorboards, so we walked straight to the cabin, wiped the caked clay off our shoes on a stone near the steps, and went inside. Soon as we did I saw Hirem sitting in a rickety chair at a card table, and then I saw Tenson standing in the corner with his gun drawn, dangling by his side. Hirem had lost the suit. He had on casual clothes and a light jacket. Tenson was wearing a dark shirt and jeans and sneakers.

The Mummy was still well wrapped and he stood in a spot on the other side of the room without his gun drawn. There was a humming sound in the room, and it came from small rectangular plug-in heaters on either side of the place. The coils in the heaters glowed red and there was just enough heat to make you glad you were inside instead of out.

The Mummy came over and told us to turn around and put our hands on the wall and spread our legs. We did. Leonard turned his head and looked at the Mummy, said, “You are so butch.”

“Fuck you,” the Mummy said.

“See,” Leonard said. “Told you.”

The Mummy patted us down and took away our combs and my pocketknife and Leonard’s gum.

Tenson said, “All right, relax.”

“We want our combs and I want my pocketknife back,” I said.

“Don’t forget the gum,” Leonard said.

The Mummy gave them back. There were only three chairs. Hirem was in one and the Mummy and Tenson occupied the other two. That left us leaning our backs against the wall. Tenson never put his gun up. He sat with it on his knee.

Leonard looked at the Mummy, said, “How long you got to wear that getup?”

“Too long,” the Mummy said. “I wasn’t even one of them, you dumb ass.”

“How was I to know?” Leonard said. “Wrong place, wrong time, both of us.”

The Mummy didn’t look appeased, or so I thought. Actually, you couldn’t tell much about how he looked. You mostly got what you got from him in the way he moved his eyes or his busted mouth, the way he shrugged his shoulders.

“Hirem here,” Tenson said, waving the gun like a pointer, “he’s got something to tell you, maybe will lead to his boy, but he’s not telling us. He tells you, you take the lead and go after the boy and his poke and bring the money back. FBI gets the drug money, Hirem gets his kid back, the girl doesn’t get shot, and Hirem tells us what he knows and we make all kinds of arrests and you guys go free, no trial, and everyone’s happy, or mostly. You following this scenario?”

“A few dance numbers might liven it up,” I said, “but for the most part, we’re following.”

“Now,” Tenson said, “here’s what we do. You two go outside with Hirem, and we’re gonna stand on the porch so we can see you, and you’re going to walk out a ways and Hirem is going to tell you something he won’t tell us, and that’s okay. That’s how he wants it and we can live with that. We'll get our results. You hear what I'm saying?"

We nodded, Hirem pulled a heavy coat over his lighter one, and we went outside, across the porch and down a little trail that led into the woods. The wind was picking up and it was carrying a lot more cold with it now, and it hit us like ice picks. I tugged the collar up on my coat and put my hands in my pockets as I walked.

After we were out a ways, Hirem said, "I got to see you guys are wearing a wire or not."

"You saw him pat us down," I said.

"Wearing a wire for them," he said. "They could pat you down all they liked and not find it."

"All right," I said and we stopped walking and I held up my arms. Hirem patted me down, then did the same to Leonard.

"Good," he said. "Now, let's walk a bit more."

29

As we started to walk, Tenson yelled from the porch, “Don’t go too far. We start to worry you aren’t so we can see you, Hirem. And you don’t want us worried, do you?”

Hirem didn’t answer, but he turned to us, said, “They know I’m not going anywhere. I want my boy back and I’ll do what I got to do until that’s done. They just like to harass me. Hell, I came to them, wasn’t like they brought me in. They been trying to nail my ass for years. I finally had to hold the nail for them.”

“You got some idea how to find your son,” I said, “but you’re telling us, not the FBI?”

“That’s right,” Hirem said. “I don’t trust those guys. I don’t trust the law. I don’t trust my mother-in-law all that much, and she’s dead some ten years now.”

“But you trust us?” Leonard said. “Didn’t you send those bozos to kill us?”

“It was business, but I can tell about you guys, and I can trust you.”

“Say you can?” I said.

“I think I can. You’re like the old guys in the organization, you got a sense of honor.”

I didn’t believe the organization, as Hirem referred to it, ever had a sense of honor, but I listened.

“Bottom line is I like you better than them,” he said. “Let’s put it that way and call it close enough. What I think is I’m gonna get a better shot with you than them.”

“You’re the one gonna sing to them,” Leonard said. “You’re gonna tell them everything, so why not tell them this?”

“Get my kid back safe, I’ll tell them whatever they want to know. After that, it don’t matter for me. I should’ve been a barber. My daddy was a barber and he offered me into the business, but I didn't take it."

"There's still time to hone up your skills," I said. "But you do, you'll be giving prison haircuts."

"Listen now," Hirem said. "I'm gonna tell you guys some things I need you to know, so you got some idea who might get in your way."

"Sort of figured this might not just be a bring the kid home kind of thing," Leonard said. "It never is."

"What I know some others can figure out," Hirem said, "and the people I worked for, they can figure better sometimes than the FBI. These feds may have our phones tapped, and they may have all kinds of law on their side, but these guys I work for, they been around awhile now, and they got people more expendable than the feds got. You hear me?"

"We're all ears," I said.

"First and foremost, get my boy back."

"And the girl?" I said.

"She ain't nothing to me," Hirem said. "But it makes Tim feel all right to have her around, I can get over her being coated in chocolate."

"So that's what this is," Leonard said, holding out his hands, looking astonished. "I just thought I was dirty, and it's been chocolate all the while."

"Not now, Leonard," I said.

"Ain't got nothing against your people," Hirem said, looking at Leonard. "Just never figured I'd have a boy fuckin' one of them."

"Now that makes me really feel tight with you," Leonard said.

"I'm not used to all the changes in things," Hirem said.

"Civil rights happened … let me see," Leonard said, "about mid-sixties, right? And the Civil War, it was over some one hundred years before that. Good to see you're catching up."

"My boy never did cotton to what I do, the way I think. And maybe that's good. I'm not so sure about things I was sure about just a few months ago."

"Death threats and prison terms can change a man's perspective," I said. "We know."

Hirem nodded. "Thing is, I don't really know where my boy is, but I have a maybe. He was a little kid, we were close. His mother was dead and it was just me and some hired help. We had a place we went to, rented a cabin by the lake and fished. He mentioned it from time to time, though we quit going there some years ago. It had good memories for him, back when he thought I was just a businessman and his daddy. We went there and fished and talked, and from the way he talked, I knew then he wasn't like me, that there was something different about him. I'd had any sense I'd have gotten out of the business and gone into the barbering."

"Shoulda, coulda, woulda," Leonard said. "Ain't nothing in that story matter to me except where you think he is. I want to get this done and go home."

"You'll keep him from being hurt?" Hirem said. "He's only nineteen."

"That's the plan," I said. "We'll do everything in our power to make sure he is protected. We'll protect the girl too."

"She's your choice," Hirem said. "Something happens to him, you got to make sure whoever did it gets theirs."

"That's not our business," I said. "Not part of our agreement."

"All right," Hirem said. "Just protect him if you find him. Place we used to go, place I think he may have went because I noticed a couple of his rods and reels were gone—I don't think he understands the deep doo-doo he's in. Him and that girl, they don't got a clue. They've run off with dirty money and they took some fishing poles with them."

"I'm sure they don't know what they're into," I said. "I'm beginning to suspect that neither do we. Where's the place, Hirem?"

"Lake O' the Pines. There's a series of cabins up there, fella named Bill Jordan rents them, or used to. They're on the east side of the lake. Ain't much. And there's no guarantee my boy's there, but he might be. He's not there, maybe I can think of something else. But right now that's all I got."

"That's it?" Leonard said. "Man, you got a con on these feds, don't you?"

"Not if he's there," Hirem said. "He is, it's no con."

"Guess that'll have to do," I said.

"Let me give you a word to the wise," Hirem said. "The organization has done had me try and hit you guys, and you're harder to kill than anyone would have thought. But they got other people. They may send some of the regular toughs one more time, some tougher and smarter than Tanedrue. Couple of those boys with Tanedrue, they were real professionals, and you handed them their asses, so they'll be more careful next time. They might just pass GO and jump to the big time."

"Big time?" Leonard said.

Hirem nodded. "That's right. They got people don't work for them directly. Freelancers. Hitters. And they're a whole 'nuther ball game, fellas. These people they hire, one or two in particular, bad sonsabitches. There's no one quite like them. They're like those, whatchacallits, the Jap guys in black."

"Ninjas," I said.

"I know, sounds like some kind of movie, but they're for real. I know their work, but I don't know them, and I don't know anyone that's ever seen them. They get a call through some kind of contact, the job gets done, and they get paid. So keep your eyes peeled and your ears open."

"I got a question," I said. "Conners, the cop. He have anything to do with the hit?"

"Conners helped put it together," Hirem said. "He didn't like the way you talked to him, Hap. He thought he'd go over there and show his big ass and that would be enough. You'd start some kind of payment plan on the dope you flushed. Or go to work for them, something like that. When you didn't, well, he came to me. And I've told you how it is these days with the upper management. They ain't much on compromise or negotiation. It's all about respect. They learned that in prison. You don't get respect there, you either wind up with a shank in your gut or a dick in your ass. They come out of prison, they're still the same. And you two, you disrespected them big-time by beating up their hired help. But Conners—he has to get permission, but he's the contact for the hits. He knows all the hitters, and the management likes it that way. Something comes to him direct instead of them, that's all right with them. It's more distance from the deed, and as long as things get done, they're happy. And now you've killed off some of their help. It's not that they care about them, it's that they don't like that disrespect part, the loss of that dope money, and they can't have you two dropping their soldiers like cigarette butts."

That must have reminded him, because he reached inside his coat pocket and found a pack of cigarettes and put one in his mouth. He patted around on his pockets for a moment, said, "Goddamn it, they took away my lighter. You guys got anything?"

We shook our heads.

I said, "Your kid. What was he driving?"

"He took my Escalade. It's black."

"Anything else?" Leonard said.

"Guess not," Hirem said.

Hirem put the cigarette pack back in his pocket but kept the cigarette in his mouth. He wagged it in his lips when he said, "I just got one thing for you. A bit of fatherly advice from a fella tried to have you killed. You guys are pretty confident guys. You think you got the world by the tail, even if you're just day laborers with an attitude. And you may be tough as you think you are, hard to kill. Like a cockroach you can't step on right, keeps running out from under your shoe. But remember, now and again even cockroaches get crunched."

30

After we walked Hirem up to the cabin, the Mummy came out with us. He walked us to our van. I kept expecting a scarab beetle to come out from under his bandages. He said, “It would be a lot easier you just told us what he had to say right now.”

“It would be for you,” I said.

“For you too. Your job would be done. We’d go get the boy and the girl and the money, and everyone would be happy.”

“We kind of gave our word,” I said.

“To him?”

“That’s who we were talking to,” Leonard said.

“You’re yankin’ me?”

“I don’t think so,” Leonard said.

“You gave your word to a guy tried to kill you, and you won’t tell the FBI what he said?”

“That’s pretty much it,” Leonard said. “Hey, remember back at the cop shop? He said it wasn’t personal, so why should we be mad?”

The Mummy shook his head. “I don’t get you guys. We’re doing you the favor. We could call this whole thing off right now, have you locked up. Might even take Hirem out back and see what he thinks about having his ass kicked until he talks.”

“He won’t talk and you know it,” I said. “Otherwise, you’d have already done it. And you do that, find the kid, you won’t get all the other information you want to get out of him. All the inner clock workings of the Dixie Mafia.”

The Mummy looked at us. His eyes peeking out of the mask were dark and narrow, his lips had turned beet red from the cold. It made him look pretty damn creepy. “You go get that boy and girl and that goddamn money and you go get it quick.”

“Gee,” Leonard said, “can we stop for dinner, take a pee?”

“You do what you got to do,” the Mummy said. “But you make it quick as you can. Today would be good.”

“It might take a few days,” I said. “I don’t know exactly. Things may not fall in line just the way we like it.”

“I can tell you this,” the Mummy said. “We’re tired of hanging out in this shit hole. We want to go home, be warm, not have to hang around with Hirem. You hear me?”

“If you’ll reinforce your words with sign language,” Leonard said, “we might get a clear message.”

The Mummy shot Leonard the finger.

“There,” Leonard said. “I understand that. See, I get you now.”

“Make it quick,” the Mummy said and walked back toward the cabin.

◆

In the van, driving away, I said, “From one cockroach to another, I don’t think the Mummy likes you very much.”

“I think it’s because I beat his ass.”

“Think?” I said.

“Uh-huh. You know, odd how the Mummy and his buddy think we ought to believe them just because they’re from the government.”

“It’s like religion,” I said. “You accept it on faith.”

“Well, that’s stupid.”

“I said it was like religion, didn’t I?”

“Oh yeah, so you did. What you think about that Conners guy?”

“I think he doesn’t get out of this business unscathed,” I said.

Leonard nodded. “I was thinking pretty much the same thing, and I’ve put him on the list.”

“Okay, but put a couple of stars by his name,” I said.

31

Hadn’t gone far before we stopped and switched the license plates, hid the ones we had used under the floorboards again, then drove back to McDonald’s. When we came in, the table where Jim Bob and Tonto were sitting was piled high with food bags and drink cups.

“So,” Jim Bob said, “you’re back and hopefully without bullet holes or the clap.”

“Yep,” I said.

We ordered some food for ourselves, then slid into the booth and told them what we had been told.

Tonto said, “That’s pretty thin, that the kid went fishing some spot where he went when he was little. That’s damn thin.”

“He took fishing rods,” I said.

“That makes it absolute,” Tonto said. “Why didn’t you say that in the first place? You know, he could be jackin’ with the old man, ’cause he thought Dad would come after him because of the girl, and of course the money, and maybe he’s just wanting the old man to show him how much he cares.”

“He’s nineteen,” I said, “and I don’t think he’s that smart. Anyone who would steal that much money from a bunch of cutthroats and know they’re cutthroats can’t be all that bright.”

“Naive, anyway,” Leonard said.

“My goodness,” Jim Bob said. “Was that a positive comment on a member of the human race? What in the world have you been drinking, Leonard?”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Leonard said. “That was oddly optimistic. I’m giving up Dr Pep … I’m giving up Diet Coke as of this moment.”

“You don’t drink Diet Coke,” I said.

“See how it’s working?” Leonard said.

I said, “Thing is, it’s what we got, and the way I figure it, Hirem knows his son, or at least thinks he does. Most sons in one way or another want to please their fathers, or at least capture some good moment in time they had with them.”

“Speaking from experience?” Jim Bob said.

“Yeah,” I said. “I am.”

“I don’t have those feelings,” Tonto said. “If I went somewhere and was waiting on my father to find me, waiting on him to care or even miss me, I’d have been waiting one long goddamn time.”

“You’re the one said that might be what he’s doing,” Jim Bob said. “So maybe you know more about this kind of thing than you think.”

“Maybe,” Tonto said. “Guess I’m not all that big on parents of any stripe.”

“It’s not always that way,” Jim Bob said. “There are even parents who like their kids. Mine liked me, in spite of myself.”

“Way I look at it, between the pussy and the asshole is no-man’ s-land,” Tonto said. “You either come out a baby or a turd, and I think I came out of the wrong hole. Nobody much cared I was around.”

“Who lives in No Man’s Land?” Leonard said.

“I’m uncertain,” Tonto said. “It wasn’t a very good example.”

“All right,” I said, “all turds aside, here it is again. It’s what we got, and that’s why we check it out. They’re there, we bring them home if we have to tie them up and toss them in the back of the van. Or at least the boy, and more importantly, the money. I think they get the money back, lots of feelings are gonna be less hurt.”

“I been thinking about that,” Tonto said, sipping a soft drink through a straw, then pausing as if he were seeing something far away. “What say we find the money and split it and go home?”

“That wouldn’t help mine and Leonard’s situation any.”

“No,” Tonto said, “it wouldn’t. But it would help our billfolds big-time. Split four ways, that’s not so bad. And there’s also this: the boy and the girl, they could end up dead. They end up that way and no one knows me and Jim Bob was in with you, we can just say, hey, the bad guys, they got there first and all the money was gone. They must have got it back."

"That still wouldn't help us," I said, "and I wouldn't do that. You don't know me, Tonto, but I wouldn't do that. Neither would Leonard."

"Absolutely not," Leonard said.

"I know that," Tonto said. "Hell, I know that, but it's something I could do, and I had to try it out, see how it fit."

"It doesn't fit," I said.

"I wouldn't do that either," Jim Bob said. "Maybe we aren't exactly on the same team after all, and we are not self-righteous cocksuckers together."

"That was changed to sonsabitches," Leonard said. "Remember, we established that."

"In fact we did," Jim Bob said.

"I'm not as pure as you guys," Tonto said. "I'm here because I owe Marvin Hanson a favor."

"Doing it that way wouldn't be much of a favor," I said.

"No," Tonto said, "it wouldn't. Forget I brought it up."

32

Doing something like we were doing can make a man paranoid. I thought I saw the same car two or three times that day, and wondered if it had followed us out of LaBorde, wondered if it had followed us to the McDonald's, and then followed Leonard and me on out to the cabin in the woods and back again. I thought about that a lot, then decided I was starting to see things. The car was an old brown Ford, and I had seen a lot of them that day, and when I finally started noticing the drivers, I realized they were all different, and the Fords were all over the place, and that was a popular color that year for that make and model.

When I told the boys about it, Tonto said, "I been followed by the best, and I always knew they were there. I been watchin' too, and I've seen some brown Fords. I've also seen some green Chevys and all manner of cars, but I haven't seen anyone I thought was following us."

"You ever been wrong about being followed?" I asked.

"Not yet," Tonto said.

"Could there be a first time?"

"Unlikely," he said.

"I ain't someone easily followed either," Jim Bob said, "but then again, I haven't been paying any attention."

"Then you can be easily followed," I said.

"Not when I don't want to be. Being followed wasn't something I expected or was looking out for. I was too busy daydreaming about what I'm gonna be when I grow up, and I was countin' on your guys. If we're being followed, then you sonofabitches have let me down."

"Whatever it is you're gonna be when you grow up," Leonard said, "I hope it pays better than this."

“Me too,” Jim Bob said.

◆

When we neared Lake O’ the Pines, I convinced the others we ought to pull in somewhere for the night and get some rest and make sure we weren’t being followed, make sure it was just my paranoia, and that tomorrow we could check out the cabins by the lake.

Just outside Lake O’ the Pines the woods grew thicker and we could see dark water between the trees and on the water were spots that looked like blue oil slicks and the sun made parts of it shine like a mirror. In the woods were lots of vines and moss, and they were twisted up thick as Brer Rabbit’s briar patch, and in some spots the water had run out of the woods and onto the road and we had to splash our tires through it. We found some old-fashioned cabins not far from a dark patch of deep woods and a big worn-out peeling sign with a fat preacher on it holding a Bible and pointing his finger in the air. The sign said: JESUS IS COMING. I thought he ought to hurry some, because it had already been over two thousand years.

The place we came to is called a motel these days, but once upon a time they were called tourist courts, and the original ones, of which this was a survivor, were small and simple and close together. This one was a row of brown-red buildings that were starting to strip paint and shed shingles.

Leonard and I rented a room from a guy that seemed surprised to see us, or most anyone for that matter. He was a bald little guy seated on a tall stool behind a counter, and there was a little brown and white dog sitting on the floor by the stool. The bald guy looked us in the eye and the dog looked up at us, its mouth wadded up, as if it was angry or missing teeth.

Tonto and Jim Bob rented a room too, all of it paid for with Marvin’s money. He had given us a thousand dollars, and anything over that Leonard and I had vowed to pay, which meant we were trying to keep it cheap and keep it real.

The tourist court was cheap and the rooms were small. There were two narrow beds with worn bedcovers and a desk with a mirror and two chairs and a little TV on a wall mount. It didn’t have a remote so you had to change channels by hand and all it got was three stations and some static. There was dust on the windowsills and the tub in the bathroom had a creaky-looking shower; there was a rim around the drain in the tub that was either rust or dried blood from when the last depressed occupant had slashed their wrists. Home Sweet Home.

The room Tonto and Jim Bob got was next door to us and it was the same as ours, except they had a microwave that didn't work and the inside of it housed the remains of an exploded burrito. We visited with them briefly and left.

In our room I peeled back the dusty curtains and looked out the window to see if I saw a brown Ford, but I didn't see one. I watched the old cracked highway from the window for a while. A lot of cars went by. Some were Fords, but none of them were brown.

"Hap," Leonard called from the bathroom, "will you come hold my dick while I pee?"

"Go to hell, Leonard."

"Will you wipe my ass? I'm tired."

"Fuck off."

"I'm gonna shower. Will you come wash my back?"

"Die," I said.

I kept looking out the window all the while the shower was running, and I kept getting the same non-results. I gave it up and sat on the bed and got the paperback Western novel out of my bag and put one of my guns next to me and read for a while. When Leonard finished his shower, I took one. There was no soap and no shampoo and the water was almost hot.

* * *

We dressed and joined up with our pals next door, and with directions from the bald guy behind the tourist court counter, we drove a few miles to a small town and a little cafe that was doing brisk business. The waitress was slightly overweight but cute. She walked like she had just had horseshoes removed. She gave us a booth with a table that was still sticky from having just been wiped. We sat with our hands in our laps while it dried, waiting on the menus she forgot to give us.

When the menus came we studied them and got coffee first. I said, “Way I figure it, instead of a whole pack of us going to look at the cabins where Hirem said his son was, me and Leonard will go, and call you when we need you.”

“You need us,” Tonto said, “you won’t have time to call.”

“If you’re right,” I said, “and no one’s following us, we’ll be fine because we’re not up against anything but two kids and some fishing rods and about three hundred thousand dollars, minus pay for some gas and a meal or two.”

“I could be wrong, though,” Tonto said. “Been having a feeling things aren’t right.”

“What’s it based on?” Jim Bob said.

“My gut,” Tonto said.

“I don’t believe in that sort of thing,” Jim Bob said. “I believe you feel that way, it’s because you’ve noticed something, something that hasn’t registered consciously but it’s there. Something has struck you. Seen something, thought someone didn’t look right. It may have been on some deeper level, but you know something because there’s something to know—or you’re just fucking paranoid.”

“That’s a lot of somethings,” Tonto said.

“Doing this kind of work can make you paranoid,” I said.

“I believe in premonitions,” Tonto said, “and I believe in my gut. My gut’s telling me this isn’t going to be a cakewalk, and that it’s going to turn ugly, and that we’re already into it and we don’t know it yet.”

“My brown Ford,” I said.

“Haven’t seen any brown Ford,” Tonto said. “I tell you simple, it’s my gut telling me things.”

“Right now,” Leonard said, “my gut is telling me I’m going to order some fried chicken and some mashed potatoes with gravy, and maybe afterward, a slice of some kind of pie. And then, if I’m feeling really rowdy, I might wipe my hands on my pants.”

“You are such a tough guy,” I said.

“And don’t you forget it.”

33

On the way back to the tourist courts, Tonto stopped and got a six-pack of beer and Jim Bob bought some Jack Daniel's. Leonard bought a bottle of malt liquor, to keep up stereotypes, he said, and I bought a six-pack of Diet Coke and a peanut pattie, also to keep up stereotypes. I almost got an RC to go with it. That would have been even more perfect. Maybe a couple of MoonPies too.

In Tonto and Jim Bob's room, we all drank our poison and talked. After three beers, Tonto began to talk. It just sort of flowed out of him like sweet maple sap in the springtime.

"You know, I grew up in Louisiana, not really all that far from here," he said.

"No shit?" Jim Bob said.

"No shit," Tonto said. "My dad, he worked offshore on an oil rig, and one time there was a big storm. They say it was so big the waves climbed up high enough to look like the walls of the world. That's what the survivors said. See, they were supposed to have a helicopter fly them out, 'cause they got word of the storm, but the helicopter got delayed, and then when it finally got out to the rig, the storm was swirling up the sea and swallowing up that big rig like it was made of pipe cleaners and a whore's best wishes. My dad, he went down with all that steel. They never found his body, so I guess it's still down there, or is all ate up from the fishes and such. I think about him nonetheless, and here's the thing. I didn't even like him.

"When he wasn't beating me he was calling me stupid, and this went along with what they called me at school, and that's where they started calling me Tonto, on account of I look like I'm an Indian."

"You're not?" Leonard said.

"Nope. Greek. Full-blood. But they called me that so much I started going by it. Got so it didn't hurt if it was my name. See what I'm saying? You can't call me a thing and make it bad if that's the name I got. So, in time, that's what everyone knew me by, and soon enough my real name was forgotten. I even almost forgot. My dad was dead, that left me with my stepmom and some nuns at school, and I want to tell you now, I got the Lord beat into me and he's in my skin and in my blood and down in my bones. I love the Lord and I disobey him every day. My stepmother, she was lonely like, and I was a pretty big boy, and pretty soon she's greasing my weasel, and my little brother finds out, and then it gets around to the nuns at school, because my brother, Jimmy, he's jealous, 'cause my stepmom, Trish, she's a looker, and he's wanting to get him some of that too. She was that kind of woman, went around the house half naked. She was askin' for it, and I gave her what she was askin', and at the time it seemed like pretty good stuff. Now, all these years later, I feel dirty about the whole thing, but you see, it was like I was fucking what my father fucked, and I was showing him, even if the old bastard was turning round and round at the bottom of the sea. Showing him I could take his piece of tail and be as good or better than him. That fucking asshole beat me with a big leather belt that he kept hung on a nail by the door. He hit us, me and my little brother, with it so much that when it was laid across the nail it hung flat. It was damn near worn out from slapping ass.

"When I got into Trish I told myself I was a man from then on and wasn't nobody going to use a belt on me. No one was going to lay a hand on me. And then one morning I got up and she was gone and I never saw her again. I took to doing push-ups, by the hours. I got so I could do hundreds, and I got stronger and I grew bigger, able to bend a tire iron over my thigh. You don't believe that, I can show you."

"I'll take you at your word," Jim Bob said.

"Not me," Leonard said. "I want to see it."

"Later," Tonto said, and took a deep drink of beer and crushed the can. "One day my brother, Jimmy, he run off because the nuns were rapping his knuckles and a whole bunch of people at school were calling him names, and like I said, it was known at school about me and Trish, and I was getting called stuff too. Guess Jimmy couldn't take it no more. I never did see Jimmy again, at least I don't know for a fact if I did, though one time in the Houston airport I saw a fellow I thought was Jimmy. He was with a woman and a baby. I studied him for a long time, and he looked over at me a time or two, and I got this feeling he knew me and that it was Jimmy. But I just walked on by and never knew for sure, and didn't want to. Not really. I had gotten used to him being gone and not having a brother. I liked it that way.

"But after Jimmy run off, the meanness that was divided on me and Jimmy all turned on me. Even the nuns got worse. I think maybe they thought they could beat the evil out of me, and one of the worst was a younger nun who I always thought was looking me up, trying to think if she could figure some way to get her a little of what I was toting between the legs. It could have just been my thinking, 'cause I always did want to fuck a nun. Anyway, I don't know that for a fact, but it could have been true, and she maybe thought about it so much and got so much a feeling of being a sinner that she took it out on me with that ruler. One day I took it away from her and broke it and threatened to stick it up her ass and break it off again. I was a pretty big boy then, even if I was young, and it scared her. I got sent home for a few days, but when I went back she never did hit me with that ruler no more. But it didn't change the way the kids talked, especially this one fella, Danny Sonier. He wouldn't let it go, and he went around saying I was fucking my mother. Well, she wasn't my mother. She was my stepmother, and I don't even think she and Daddy were married. I think she was just some whore he brought home from Shreveport.

"Anyway, one day this Sonier boy followed me home with a couple of his buddies, and as they got closer to my house, walking behind me, calling me names, saying things, I finally got fed up and stopped in the middle of the road, grabbed up some rocks and threw them. They bolted. But when I got to the house, which wasn't much of a house, by the way, I was going up on the porch and turned around and there was Danny Sonier, standing in the yard. His buddies were gone. It was just him.

"He was calling me names and acting all tough, and I came off that porch like a rocket. We went together hard at it, fists flying, and all I remember was everything turned red, and when it wasn't red anymore, I was looking down at Danny and his head was like a big squash that had dried out and been broken open, only it was leaking blood, and I had a big stone in my hand. I had pulled it out of the ground and beat him like a snake, and I didn't even remember it. He was dead. I dragged his body off out to the swamp, where I knew there were alligators, and I dropped him in. I sat there on the bank the rest of the day and the body floated. It didn't sink like I thought it would. It floated. And it was just about night when a big old gator came up and grabbed the body by its mashed head and took it down. Happened so sudden it made me jump to my feet. And when I did, I heard a scuttling, and behind me was two more gators. I made a run for it, but they went straight into the water. I saw this when I got to a tree and went up in it. Those gators went in the water where the other gator had taken Danny down and there was all kind of rolling around in the water, a flashing of gator tails, a glimpse of big teeth, and it went on like that for some time. And then just when I was fixin' to come down from that tree, I see that an old bull gator had crawled up under it, this old cypress, and he was just waiting there, his head lifted, and his mouth open, like he was expectin' me to drop into it.

"Well, I stayed up there in the tree, and fell asleep between two limbs. When I woke up and looked down the next mornin', the gator was gone. I climbed down and went home. When I was able to go back to school, I did, but with Jimmy gone they sent out some social workers and discovered the stepmom was gone too, and I got put in foster care for a while, but I didn't get along with nobody, so ended up in an orphanage until I run off at sixteen.

"Course, before that, Danny was missed and he was looked for, and his buddies said he followed me home. I told the nuns and the cops I had thrown rocks at them, and they had run off, and that was the last I had seen of Danny. They didn't believe me, but that was my story and I stuck the fuck to it. In time they gave up on me, and that's when I went to those foster homes, and then the orphanage, and then I run off. They brought me back twice, but finally I was old enough to get emancipated, and that's what I did. Then, one night, in Houston, in a bar, I was sitting on a stool, minding my own business, which was drinking a beer and chattin' up a good-looking brunette with a set of titties you could use as a water float, when in comes this fellow all pissed off. I had just put my hand on her thigh, and she was wearing a dress so short, when she moved, her skimpy underpants looked like something crawling. This fellow, he had a knife and he meant to use it, and did. He cut my arm with a slash, and then I took it away from him, and in the commotion the girl ran off and the guy ended up with the blade in his throat, and when it was over, I looked up and the bar was empty except for the bartender and four guys in Hawaiian shirts, and one of them, a big guy with a nose that spread over his face like it was some kind of animal, says to me: 'That was pretty nifty, Injun. You want a job?'

"And so they cleaned up the place and threw away that dead guy like he was trash, and when the cops came I was gone and no one left there remembered a thing, 'cause they all worked for the big man who had spoken to me and this made their memories bad. Well, there was the bartender. But he said he hadn't seen a thing either, and all them other people had run off, including the good-looking brunette with the good tits and the crawling undies. I found out all this from the flat-nosed guy, 'cause I made a deal to meet him somewhere and go to work for him, and the work was to my liking. I killed people for money."

Tonto paused and opened a can of beer and drank a big sip. "And I been at it ever since, except for a time when I was an investment banker."

"That's a joke, right?" I said.

"Big-time," he said.

"You don't mind my asking," I said, "how come you owe Marvin a favor? Why are you here?"

"Simple thing," he said. "I ended up with this gal who was better for me than I was for her, and she didn't have any idea the job I had. She thought I was an insurance salesman. We had this boy. Good-lookin' kid, and I loved him, and I thought I might go straight. Planned on it. Just couldn't quite get out of the business. Like a drunk looking for the next drink, you know. Wantin' to quit, but getting too much out of it.

"So when my boy, Kevin, was twelve a guy talked him into a car and did things to him, and my boy, he didn't live. They found his body beside the road, and my wife, she cut her wrists, and if there was any chance of me being the Christian I thought I'd grow up to be, be anything like the nuns said I ought to be, that was it, it was over. I was already fucked, but this was the big fuck. I believe, and I'm loyal to the faith in my heart, but in my hands and in my mind and in my deeds I'm not. But the guy did it, he got caught and he was tried, and they couldn't prove it. And when he got loose he got drunk and admitted he did it, and the guy he told at a bar, he told the papers, and then it was all over the place, and this guy, he said, 'Yeah, I did it, but there's no second bite at the apple.'

"Even child molesters usually have enough sense to know what they do shouldn't be admitted to, but not this guy. He was proud, and it was his philosophy, the whole man/boy love bit. This guy lived for little pink boy butt holes. So I wait a few months, and I go over to his house and I kick in the back door and I find him in bed with a bunch of lit candles and some child pornography, and he's naked and probably pulling his rope, but he won't never pull it again, 'cause I get hold of him and twisted his neck so far around ain't nobody could sneak up on him from behind, provided he hadn't died from it.

"So, Marvin Hanson, he's a cop in Houston, and he figures it's me right away. He didn't have nothing on me, but he knew who I was and what I did, and he had a pretty good idea I'd do just what I done. So they found some fingerprints there, and though I had been careful, I was so mad, when I got hold of that fucker's head and twisted it, the gloves I was wearing ripped, and I left a fingerprint on his neck. Can you believe that? On his fuckin' neck?

"Lieutenant Hanson, he came to me at my house, and he has the evidence with him, and he says something like, 'I don't cotton to what you're doin', Tonto, and if this was some other thing, some other murder, I'd crawl so far up your ass every time you took a shit my life would play before your eyes instead of yours.' And he took a match and he lit the evidence and he tossed it in the kitchen sink and leaned his back against it and looked at me. He said, 'Got nothing for child molesters. Especially proud ones.' And he started out, and I said, 'Look here, man. You ever need anything, anything I can do, all you got to do is call and it's done.' And he said, 'Not likely' But the other day, I got the call. And here I am. I owe him. Got to tell you, it was a joy to twist that cocksucker's head in my hands and hear his neck snap like a goddamn chicken bone. I liked the way he looked at me and the way he tried to yell when I twisted his goozle. Liked the way the light went out of his eyes. I've seen a fish on the dock do that. You catch him and he flops and he flops, and then slowly the eyes slick over. Only with this chicken fucker, it was quick. Real quick. I just wish he had been there to feel that rolled magazine I shoved up his ass. I couldn't help myself. And I didn't grease him none. Had he been alive, the paper cuts alone would have made him bleed out. Or so I like to think. Anyway, that's who I am, and I ought not to have told any of that. Haven't ever told anybody about it, and didn't intend to ever, and it's probably a mistake. But there it is, on my sixth beer and having sucked down four or five shots of Jack Daniel's, and I'm with guys I like, and because there ain't many guys I like, I've talked my ass off, and that's the whole thing downloaded like a fuckin' movie off the Internet."

We all sat silently for a while.

Jim Bob said, "So, Tonto, you've had a fairly uneventful life, have you not?"

Tonto slowly grinned.

34

I was in my bed and Leonard was coming out of the bathroom buttoning up his pajama top. It was an ugly set of pajamas. White cloth with anchors on it; matching shirt and pants. No footsies.

"So," I said, "where did the pajamas come from?"

"John."

"Were they a gag gift?"

"No."

"He think you're a sailor?"

"No. He thought they were cute."

"Trust me," I said. "They aren't cute."

"I have a little red teddy I could wear, you prefer."

"Most definitely not… you don't, do you?"

"Now what do you think?"

"I don't know what to think about much of anything anymore. I was actually thinking about Brett. And I was thinking about that story Tonto told us."

"You believe it?"

"I do."

"Me too. Do you think he can bend a tire iron?"

"I do."

"Yeah, me too."

"He scares you a little, doesn't he, Leonard?"

"Me? Hell no."

"He scares me."

"Really?"

"Yep."

“Well, all right. He scares me a little. I think he made me pee-pee some in my pants.”

“Is that fear or sexuality?”

“I do kind of find him attractive,” Leonard said, “but, alas, he’s not my type. He’s heterosexual. That always puts a damper on things. And another thing—he’s a killer.”

“So are we.”

“Not for money. Not for any reason that isn’t self-defense or the defense of someone else.”

“So we’re noble?”

“Nope,” Leonard said. “We’re two guys trying to be like heroes, and the problem is, we’re just two guys. Though I, of course, am highly attractive and hung like an elephant and have nifty pajamas and smooth black skin.”

“I have bunny shoes.”

“Yep, but you didn’t bring them.”

“There is that.... How about John? How’s things? Have you called home since we been on the road?”

“I have. He told me to eat shit.”

“Not good.”

“Nope. Not good. These days he doesn’t find me that attractive, which is something I can’t quite wrap my mind around. I look in the mirror, I’m pretty satisfied.”

“So what did he say?”

“He said don’t call anymore, he has things to work out.”

“That stinks.”

“He thinks Jesus is pulling his ear, trying to get him over there on the good side with the straights. Thinks suddenly he’s gonna lose interest in the rod and go to the hole punch.”

“Maybe it’s the devil pulling his ear.”

“Whatever it is, I don’t like it. We had a good thing going.”

“Sucks.”

“He used to suck, and I liked it. Now he doesn’t suck. I don’t like being without him, Hap. I don’t like someone’s mythology getting in the way of my romance.”

"I know."

"It's like you being without Brett."

"I know that too. And I miss her."

"We should really give up on the adventures and stay home."

"Yep. But we didn't really have a choice here."

"We could have gone to trial. I think we'd have been no-billed. It was self-defense."

"But it was nasty self-defense."

"This is Texas," Leonard said.

"There is that. Let's go to sleep."

"Hap?"

"Yep."

"Will you tell me a story?"

"All right. There were four bears."

"Four?"

"This is my story. There were four bears. Two of them were not as smart as the other two because they were really at heart nicer bears, and they kept getting themselves into rotten situations, and eventually two of the bears, the ones that weren't so smart but were nicer, they got themselves killed."

"Those two dead bears? That us?"

"Yep," I said.

"I don't like that story."

"Me either. You want to hear a joke?"

"Hell no. Not one of your jokes. Go to sleep."

"Spoilsport. … There was this dog—"

"I said I didn't want to hear it."

"—and he came limping into this Western town—"

"You've told this one."

"And he held up his injured foot, said, 'I'm here to get the man who shot my paw' … get it?"

"I get it. You tell this to me at least once a month."

"You see, paw and pa, like the old Westerns. Guy comes into town—”

“Hap. I get it. It stinks. It stunk the first time and it stinks this time.”

“Brett laughed.”

“I don’t believe that. You’re lying. You made that up. I’ll call her.”

“There’s no need to call her.”

“Aha.”

“Well. She smiled.”

“She was embarrassed.”

“Maybe.”

“Good night, Hap.”

“Good night, Leonard.”

35

Lake O' the Pines is a big lake, man-made, like all the lakes in Texas except Caddo Lake. It was made a long time ago and on this cold morning the water was looking blue as a Patsy Cline song. I thought that by midday, we didn't get any cloud cover, the cold could burn off a little and it might be a fairly warm day. But if the clouds came in, it could turn damn cold damn quick because a wind was starting up, and as we drove by the lake, I could see through the trees along the bank that the water was rippling the way coffee will ripple when you blow on it to cool it.

We drove around, trying to follow the directions Hirem gave us, but there were a lot of little cabins. Finally, about lunchtime we came out from around the lake and stopped at a gas station and mini-mart and got some gas. There was a couple there with a break-down cage that you could put up easy and dismantle easy and haul away, and in the cage was a bear. It was a pretty good-sized bear. They had a deal where you could get your picture taken with the bear, Cindy. Of course, Leonard had to do it and I had to do it with him. When we went inside the cage and were introduced to Cindy, she was sitting on a stool like a human being, as if on break. I half expected her to be smoking a cigarette. She saw us, got up, waddled over, and stretched out her arms and put them over our shoulders. She had done this before and it was a livin'. The muscles in her arms felt like steel cables.

Jim Bob and Tonto, being smarter, didn't have their picture taken. They stood outside the cage and looked at us as if they soon expected to see us eaten. When the photo was taken, Cindy moved her arms and went back and sat on her stool. It was a double cage, two rooms if you will, and part of it had photographs of Cindy the Bear swimming in her pond on her owner's property. They told us all about it. The bear was a Russian bear.

"Is she a vodka-drinking commie?" Leonard asked.

"The Soviet Union is no more," said the lady owner. She was a blond woman with a nice build and the attitude of someone who had never met a sense of humor. Her old man was skinny and he grinned. I don't know if he thought what Leonard said was funny. I think he just grinned a lot.

We got our photograph of us with the bear, which they put between two pieces of cardboard, and then we went inside the station. As we did, Jim Bob said, "You guys are pretty weird, you know."

The station had a little stove and grill, and there was a glass cover where you could see what they had cooked. There was some fried chicken on greasy white paper and hot links and there was a place where you could get some slices of bread and put mustard and relish on it if you wanted, make a sandwich with the links. There were also a few sides, like some suspicious-looking baked potatoes and a Crock-Pot of red beans in a congealed soup that looked as if you might need a pickax to crack the surface.

We got a little of this and a little of that, picking potato chips and some candy bars and sodas to go with the chicken and links, and went to the back of the place, where there were a few tables, and had our lunch. There was enough grease in the chicken to lube up a whorehouse on a sailor's Saturday night, but it tasted really good and so did the links. We ate not only because we were hungry but because we were bored. Where I was sitting I could look out the big window at the pumps, and I could see the van parked up front near the door. And I could also see something else. A brown Ford. It slowed out on the highway, and as it did, I stuck an elbow in Leonard and he turned to look.

"Brown Ford," I said.

"Yep," he said.

Jim Bob and Tonto looked too. The Ford pulled up at a pump and a guy about the size of Tonto, and then Tonto again, got out. It wasn't just that he was tall. He was no taller than Tonto, but he was wide as a truck and had a chest big enough to store a winter's worth of corn in it. His legs were bigger around than my waist and his head looked like someone had anchored a medicine ball to his neck. He had blond hair and a little goatee and the kind of tan that comes from solar lamps. I figured he had fallen off Jack's beanstalk and was learning to make his way in our world.

There was another guy in the front of the Ford, and two in the back, and they just sat. After a while, when the gas was done, the others got out and they all came in.

We watched them carefully. The big guy who had been driving and who put in the gas looked back at us and nodded. Just a regular guy, bigger than most regular guys, seeing some other regular guys, acknowledging us. We nodded back.

We kind of huddled over our food and whispered.

"They might not be anything," Leonard said.

"Maybe not," I said.

"Lots of brown Fords," Jim Bob said.

"Yep," I said.

"Bullshit," Tonto said. "They're somebody. They got guns. I can see the bulges under their shirts."

"Maybe those are cell phone cases," Jim Bob said.

Tonto looked at Jim Bob. They both smiled.

"But," Jim Bob said, "probably not."

"If they've been following us without me seeing them," Tonto said, "they're good. And Hap, you're good. You spotted them and I didn't."

"They want us to know they're following now," Jim Bob said. "They want us to know they're tired of playing."

"I didn't know we were playing," Tonto said, "but now that I do, I'm ready to get out the toys. Ah, here they come."

They came back and sat at the table next to us. My side of the bench was closer to the big guy, and on the other side of our table was Tonto, and he shifted a little so that one of his hands was under the table and the other was lying on top of it next to a gnawed chicken leg.

They were all big guys. Only the driver, the guy on my side, was as big as Tonto, but the others were easily bigger than the rest of us. I got to thinking we weren't nearly as nifty as we thought. These guys had been on us for a while, and though I had gotten glimpses of them, they were good, damn good, at least as far as sneaking went. Thing I was wondering was when exactly did they get on us, and were they FBI guys or guys from the Dixie Mafia. I was voting pretty heavily on the latter.

The big guy had some chicken and was about to eat it. I said, “That chicken isn’t nearly as nasty as it looks.”

The big guy paused with the chicken close to his mouth. “Yeah. That’s good to hear. I was worried.”

“The links, they’re not bad either. You guys, you don’t look like fishermen.”

“Neither do you,” said the big guy.

“We’re just riding around,” I said.

“That’s a coincidence,” the big guy said. “So are we.” He bit into the chicken and chewed, then looked at me and nodded. “You’re right. That’s pretty damn good.”

He paused and wiped his hands on some paper towels that were on a roller in the center of the table. He shifted on the bench and turned toward me, said, “We’re more the hunter type.”

“Now that,” Jim Bob said, “is one big goddamn fucking coincidence. So are we.”

“Really?” said the big guy.

“Oh, yeah,” Jim Bob said. “Big fucking time.”

“What do you hunt?”

“Skunks mostly,” Jim Bob said.

“Oh,” the big guy said. “I don’t believe there’s a season for that.”

“What makes it thrilling,” Jim Bob said. “Ain’t nothing better than sneaking up on a skunk, or a weasel, and blowing them right out from over their ass.”

“I can see that,” said the big man, and he pushed the paper plate with the chicken on it away from him. “It sure was good to chat with you boys. You know, the weather looks as if it’s going to turn bad.”

“Yeah?” Leonard said.

“Oh yeah, big-time. I think I heard it on the radio. Thing is, I wanted to share that because you don’t want to get caught up in a big old storm that might blow you away. That would suck."

"Yeah, and it would mess up our hair," I said.

He gave me a smile thin as the edge of a razor blade. "You got any information for us? You might know where we can find a good place to stop for the day, and get some things we need, and then maybe the storm won't come."

"And what kind of place is that?" I said.

"Someplace with a couple of dumb kids with lots of money who aren't any of your business."

"Shit," I said, "you know what another big coincidence is?"

"What's that?" the big guy said.

"We're in the same business," I said.

"Are we?" he said.

"Sounds like it. We too are looking for two sweet kids with lots of money that could be a port in the storm, and we think of them as our business, all the way."

"Huh," he said. "Well, we wouldn't want to cross up, would we?"

"It could happen, though, couldn't it?" Jim Bob said. "I mean, us both looking for two sweet kids and some money and a nice place to ride out the storm."

"Storm like the one that's coming," the big guy said, "it could blow your little port flat out of existence."

"We've ridden a lot of storms," Jim Bob said.

"Hell," Leonard said, "we're like storm chasers. We're like *the* storm chasers."

"I think you're a bunch of amateurs," the big guy said. "I think a good wind comes along, might just blow you completely out of the ball game."

"You know," Jim Bob said, "you were going pretty good there with the storm analogies, and then you got to go and screw it up with the ball game thing. That doesn't scan."

The big guy looked at Tonto, said, "What about the Indian? He talk?"

"Just smoke signals," Jim Bob said. "And you know what, none of your buddies are talking, so I don't think that's fair to ask."

"My buddies aren't my buddies, and they say what I tell them to say and when I say it," the big guy said. "And before I go, just so we stay with the storm analogy, you best not go out without your slickers and your hip boots, and maybe an umbrella."

"We got umbrellas out the ass," Jim Bob said.

Big Guy studied us for a moment, said to his boys, "Wrap this shit up, and let's go."

The big guy and his bunch wrapped their chicken and links, put them back in the sacks, and carried them out.

I watched them through the glass as they walked toward the Ford. I said, "Just so I'm certain, when he said slickers, boots, and umbrellas, he was talking about guns, right?"

"Yep," Leonard said. "That was my take."

"And they're the storm?"

"Bingo."

Tonto, who had just taken a bite of a link wrapped in bread, said, "This would be a lot better with hot sauce, some of that fancy mustard that's got a tang."

36

Full as ticks, we drove to another store near the lake where they sold fishing supplies and rented boats, and parked in front of it and sat in the van. Out front was a rack with T-shirts on it with Lake O’ the Pines logos. The wind moved them about.

The place was doing pretty brisk business for the time of the year. There were cars parked to the left and the right of us and people got out and went in and came out carrying fishing supplies, coolers, snacks, and items like caps and bait. One of the people who parked and got out was a blond woman in jogging pants with a tight top and a baseball cap with her long hair tied up in a ponytail hanging over the stretch band at the back of her cap. The jogging pants were tight and I worried a little about her circulation and watched her out of biological interest until she went into the store. I didn’t see her face, but she had the kind of body, hair, and walk that assured you she looked good and knew it.

Over the top of the joint the sky was losing its blue and turning the color of polished silver and there were starting to be dark puffs of clouds. The lake could be seen on either side of the building and the water was growing choppy; little white waves like nightcaps rose up and fell down. Jim Bob opened up the flooring and got out some handguns. I took a .38 automatic with a clip holster and put it on under my coat. I preferred revolvers—more dependable—but, alas, the times were a-changin’ and nearly everyone these days carried an automatic for more firepower. Leonard took a nine with clip holster and Jim Bob clipped on a .38 automatic similar to mine under his coat. Tonto had never stopped being armed. He still had his twin .45s.

“What makes me nervous,” I said, “is the fact we weren’t armed back there, unless you count a chicken leg and a link sausage.”

“I was,” Tonto said.

“Yeah, but what about the rest of us?” I said.

“You had my best wishes,” Tonto said.

Leonard said, “Here’s my question. They’re so goddamn sneaky, how come they decided to come to us like that?”

“Way we were wandering around,” Jim Bob said, “my figure is they thought we knew they were following us. They didn’t know we didn’t know what the hell we were doing, so they thought we were giving them a hard time, being clever. And I think they thought they’d be all scary and we’d tell them what they wanted to know, then they’d run us off and they’d find the boy and the girl and all that money.”

“They obviously didn’t know me and Hap had our picture taken with a bear,” Leonard said. “They ain’t so tough. You see me give that bear a bad look, Hap?”

“No.”

“I haven’t been followed like that in a long time,” Tonto said. “Thought I was being careful, and I’m pretty damn careful, and still, they were following. That takes some chops. I mean, I haven’t never been followed before where I didn’t know.”

“You said it couldn’t happen,” I said.

“I was wrong,” Tonto said. “Those guys are good.”

“The big guy,” Jim Bob said, “he knows what he’s doing, all right.”

“You think they’ll take a run at us?” I said.

“I think they still hope we’ll lead them to something,” Jim Bob said.

“How did they get onto us so quick?” Leonard said.

“Someone somewhere told them something,” Tonto said. “You got to wonder who and when, but the thing that matters is, time comes they’ll stop fucking around and come for us. They’ll maybe think they can make us talk by pulling out fingernails or cutting off eyelids or some such thing, sticking a stick up our dicks.”

“That eyelid part,” I said. “I want to be up front and go on record right now. I’ll talk like you haven’t never heard anyone talk before if that’s done to me. I’ll be like a whole flock of canaries. They won’t have enough paper to write down what I got to say. And they start threatening my dick, I'll start making stuff up to go along with it."

◆

We had tried to do it the easy way, which was drive over to the side of the lake where Hirem said the cabins were, but the easy way turned out hard, so we were going to cut to the chase and ask directions. We waited until the traffic at the store played out, then I went inside and found the owner behind a counter that contained whoopee cushions, fake dog shit, and all manner of redneck yuks. An older woman with gray hair and a face only a blind, prideless mother could love was behind the counter arranging a stack of little Texas flags on sticks in a large decorative coffee cup.

She said, "What can I do you for, honey?"

I gave her my winning smile, though I couldn't remember the last time it had won me anything. "Me and some buddies, we were supposed to meet a friend here on the lake, but we're kind of confused."

"Lake's out back of here. How confusing is that?"

I grinned like that was the best I had heard since my joke about the dog with the shot-up paw. Come to think of it, Leonard was right. That joke sucked.

"This buddy of ours said he was gonna meet us at a cabin on the east side of the lake—"

She pointed. "That's east."

"Yes, ma'am, we been over there. But the problem is, we can't find where we're supposed to meet him. He said a fellow named Bill Jordan had some cabins—"

"Bill Jordan. That old fart is in the ground, some three years now. He don't own them anymore."

"Oh, well, that puts a damper on things."

"A crippled fella with a funny haircut owns them now, but he don't rent out much. Got a pension."

"I see. Well, I'm pretty sure my friend is meeting us there. That's what he said anyway. He hasn't been here in a while, so he probably rented from the other fella."

"It's kind of hard to get to actually," she said. "Road is near washed out and it winds up in the pines. Good hunting up there, though. I know a fellow killed a wild hog there big enough to tussle with an elephant."

"That a fact?"

"Of course not. Ain't no hogs big as elephants. But it was big."

"I see. So, you go around on the east side, but where do you turn? We were all over that place, and we couldn't find what we were looking for."

She got a piece of paper and a pencil and drew me a map, explaining as she did. Pushing it across the counter, she said, "Now, you got to watch all the ruts and potholes, and it's narrow and there's limbs all grown up around it. I was up there last year taking the crippled fella with a funny haircut some supplies. He calls up and I deliver. For a little extra fee, of course."

"Of course."

"Anyway, it's like the goddamn Amazon up there."

"Well, thanks."

I started to go out. She said, "You know, you wanted to, there's an easier way. It'll take a little longer, but it's still easier, and you'd have to get going before the storm comes up, 'cause one is coming."

"So we were told."

"You could rent one of my boats, take it straight across the lake, and you could just dock at the place."

"How long would that take?"

"About an hour, maybe two if you get some tough wind and you ain't no hand with a boat. You go now, you got to rent the boat for overnight. Or you can rent if for a few days if you'd rather be over there awhile."

"How much is the boat?" I asked.

37

In the van I explained about the map and the boat. I said, “Me and Leonard can take the boat across, and you guys can follow the map. Thing is, I think you don’t want to go over there right away, because you do, they might follow.”

“They won’t fool me again,” Tonto said.

“Just in case they do, however,” I said, “we could go across by boat, which they may not expect, see if we can find Hirem’s boy, the girl, and the money. It might even be a sneakier way to come up on them if they’re there. We can maybe call you when we get there and you can come around.”

“Checked my phone a little while ago,” Jim Bob said. “No signal out here.”

“All right,” I said. “Go do something that will give us two hours before you arrive, and we’ll take the boat across. We get there early we’ll hold our own until you show up. I think we can handle two kids and a pile of money.”

“But if that big fellow and his pals show up before we do,” Jim Bob said, “you might have your hands full.”

“They been full before,” Leonard said.

❧

We spent some of our money on fishing poles and a bucket of minnows for show, a can of gas, bought a couple of sandwiches and a bag of vanilla wafers and a six-pack of Dr Pepper. The owner of the store, who told us her name was Annie, took us down to the boat and gave us instructions, and we set out.

It was really choppy and the boat rode high and dropped low. It was making my stomach queasy. The motor churned the water behind us and I pointed the bow due east, like Annie had suggested. There was a big stump in the middle of the lake she had directed us to, and when we got to that, she said we ought to start following a line of orange buoys and then those would go away and we had to hold due east until we saw a strip of land. She said it would be a lot farther away than we thought it was. Thing then was, when we got closer, we'd see a rise of pine trees and a dock out front of them, and there was a little trail that led up from the dock to the cabins.

For the moment, that stump in the distance was my bearing.

When we were out a ways, we overturned the minnow bucket into the lake and let all our guys go. Leonard said, "Swim, little fishes. Go, make your way in this big wet world. Make us proud."

* * *

The stump showed up and then the orange buoys. We followed those until they played out, but we couldn't see a strip of land. Not yet. It was a big lake. All we could see was water, and the sky had darkened and it had started to rain, and we didn't so much as have an umbrella.

The rain grew thick, and then I got nervous because the boat was holding water. Leonard took the minnow bucket and started bailing. I kept hold of the motor throttle and thought maybe I might regain some religion, because the water was jumping now and the rain had gotten so wild I could hardly see my hand in front of my face, let alone a distant strip of land sporting pine trees.

I decided keeping my hand on the throttle and using my wits would probably do me better than religion, and I kept at it. The rain kept at it too. We bounced up and down, and at one point the boat listed to port and water splashed in heavily, and Leonard was really working that bucket.

"That damn rain is cold," he said.

"What, you think I haven't noticed?"

We went on like that for a while, and I feared we had gone off point and were traveling in the wrong direction, maybe even boating in circles. But then the rain slacked and I saw a strip of land and some pines rising up. I glanced at my watch, putting it close to my face. We had been at it for an hour and a half.

The wind was really whistling now and the boat was struggling. Leonard was bailing like a maniac.

“Almost there,” I said.

The engine sputtered and died. We were out of gas.

“Now,” Leonard said, “if a goddamn whale will swallow us, it will be a perfect day.”

38

The gas can was under one of the seats, and I pulled it out and went about trying to pour some of it in the outboard tank. Way the water made the boat hump up and down it was hard work, and some of the gas went into the lake.

I finally finished with the can, but by that time we had drifted a considerable distance. I didn't care. It didn't matter to me right then if we got to where we were going or if we just made land, any land, and because of that, when I saw a glimpse of shoreline, I took the boat in that direction. I hoped we wouldn't bring the boat up against a stump, 'cause at the speed we were going if we hit one, we'd be flung into the cold deep churning water, and that wouldn't be good. Still, I couldn't seem to slow the throttle down. The rain was slamming us and it was cold and I wanted off the lake.

Something went wrong, and we went into the water, the grateful minnows we had released would save us. Like Aquaman, we would call to them and they would come and lift us out of the water on their shiny backs and carry us ashore.

But I wasn't counting on it.

Most likely, we'd drown like rats.

* * *

I saw it just before we hit it. I thought it was a log, but it was an alligator, and when we struck it the boat jumped and I went out of it as if shot from a catapult. I caught a glimpse of Leonard, still clinging to the handle of the minnow bucket, go up and over and make a nice little flip into the water and disappear under the waves.

I swam and my arm hit the gator and I screamed like a little girl. The rest of the gator sailed on past me and I could smell a rotten odor, realized the big bastard was dead, and had been awhile. He might have died up in the reeds along the bank and the storm had stirred him loose. He sailed past and the waves rolled over him and took him under and then I went under. When I came up the minnow bucket was floating past me. I grabbed at it like it was a life raft.

Holding on to it, I kicked toward shore, but shore had moved away. Or so it seemed. The water had carried me out farther and quicker than I could imagine. The lake was so cold I could hardly get a breath. I looked around for Leonard and didn't see him. I looked around for the boat, didn't see it either. Annie was going to be pissed.

I kicked toward what looked like shore and hoped a live alligator didn't find me, hoped in this weather they would be somewhere cozy. Then again, I wasn't sure if alligators liked it cozy. Maybe they liked the rain.

I called out for Leonard, but the wind took my voice and carried it away and all I got out of my yelling was a hoarse throat.

And then my feet were touching ground. Not well, but they were touching. I pushed on toward some reeds, and after what seemed like enough time for the Big Bang to have happened and all the species on the planet to have developed and moved on out to the stars, I made it to some waving grass and reeds and stumbled into that, went down a few times, came up with a mouthful of muddy water. As I tromped through, barely able to stand, hardly able to see, I came across a long four-foot-wide fragment of our boat. On his back in the water, hanging on to the fragment, was a big black guy.

"Leonard," I said.

He let go of the board and sat up in the water and said, "Well, Ahab, that boat trip was sure a good idea."

I checked for my .38. I still had it.

Leonard checked for his automatic. Still there. Well, at least we had that going for us. We were in a position to add to the worst nature of man and the final downfall of the world. By God, we had our guns.

Leonard stood up slowly and looked around. The minnow bucket had floated up into the tall grass and was hung there. He focused on it, said, “I guess the cookies and the Dr Pepper didn’t make it.”

“Missing in action,” I said.

“Now that’s a blow,” Leonard said.

◆

Slogging along the shoreline through the rain, we saw a boathouse and made our way over there. It was wide open and we went inside. There was a boat floating in a stall and there was fishing tackle in the boat, and on one wall were some croaker sacks for hunting and some nasty-looking towels that were probably used to wipe the boat down after fishing. There were four rain slickers on nails. A fairly large dead fish floated belly-up near the boat and the waves washed at it until it went under the flooring, out of sight.

We used the towels to dry off and to dry our weapons, hoping they’d still shoot. The towels made us dry enough, but they left us smelling like fish. We sat on the edge of the boathouse dock with the heavy damp towels over our shoulders and looked out at the boat that was docked there. There were paddles in the bottom of the boat and no motor. The boat was bouncing up and down and we could see the lake from where we sat, and the rain was furious. Everything was gray. It was as if the sky and the lake had joined together.

I pulled my cell phone out of my pants pocket, shook the water out of it. It was still working, but there wasn’t any signal, like Jim Bob had said. I put it away.

“I saw a dead alligator,” I said.

“Yeah, well, I think I saw him too,” Leonard said.

“Was he big and dark?”

“Yep.”

“That was him, all right.”

“Say he was dead?”

“Very.”

“Thank goodness for small favors.”

◆

We waited for the downpour to slack off, but it didn't. Freezing, we toweled off again and took a couple of slickers off the wall and put them on and went to where we had come in and stood in the open doorway and looked out at the rain.

"I don't want to," Leonard said.

"Me neither," I said.

"But, alas …" Leonard said, and we went out into the rain.

39

I had no idea where we had ended up, but my guess was near where we wanted to be. But that didn't change the fact that near was not the same as being there, and every tree looked pretty much like the other, and I didn't see any trails. We wandered around in the rain, damp inside our slickers but better off now with the hoods pulled up and the cold rain not coming right down on us.

Ending up again where the boat had come apart, or at least where part of it had been in the tall grass with Leonard, we again saw the foam minnow bucket caught up in the grass, and floating in the water where it hadn't been before, pushed up in the shallows, was our six-pack of Dr Pepper.

Leonard waded out in the water and got the six-pack, carried it by its plastic holder onto the shore. He set it down on the ground and pulled one of the Dr Peppers off one of the plastic rings, pulled the tab, and nearly drank the whole thing with one big gulp.

He peeled off another and handed it to me, and then got another for himself. We both drank. When he was finished he dropped the can on the ground with the other one and said, "I'm tough enough today to litter."

Even under the circumstances, anal as I am about such things, I wanted to find a trash can but figured it might be best in this situation to be able to draw the .38 more than be an environmentalist and tote an empty can around. Reluctantly, we left the three remaining Dr Peppers there and wandered around like a couple of geese.

I saw a narrow trail and pointed it out, and Leonard said, "Who the hell knows? Let's try it."

The trail went up a steep hill, through some pines. The pines were close together and the soil there was sandy and had turned the color of milk-and-flour gravy. The rain ran down the hill and into ruts that tires had made, and the whole thing was just wide enough for a car. After we had walked halfway up the hill, the trees got thick enough to cut the rain a bit, and finally we broke out at the top of a hill into a clearing, and there was a line of little cabins that made our tourist court digs look like the Taj Mahal. There was one cabin that wasn't in a row, and it was a little off to the side. I presumed that would belong to the owner, the fellow Annie had called The Crippled Fellow With A Funny Haircut.

There was a car in front of one of the cabins. It was the only car present. It was a black Escalade.

"Dat dere, Brer Bear," Leonard said, "be duh goddamn car we be lookin' for, and in dat dere cabin—"

"Leonard. That's enough."

"Okay. I figure they're inside, with the money. Or what's left of it."

"So what do we do?"

"Well, I don't see any brown Fords, and I don't see our guys yet, so my suggestion is we waltz ourselves over to yon cabin and knock on the door and stick guns in their faces."

"That'll work," I said. "And if it doesn't, we'll improvise."

❧

Observing the cabin briefly, we decided Leonard would go around front and I'd go around back. I ducked under a low window and looked toward the big cabin to see if anyone was watching me from there. If they were, they were very clever. I wondered too if anyone was in any of the other cabins. I thought not. No cars. But they could be gone for a bowl of chili. Perhaps they were all over at Annie's, chatting and laughing it up about some plastic dog shit and a whoopee cushion.

Around back, I pulled the .38 and pressed up against the door, pushing my ear tight. I listened. The rain was so loud I couldn't hear myself think. I pushed against the door to see how sturdy it was, decided it wasn't that sturdy.

I heard the front door budge, and I knew Leonard was in. I hit the back door with my shoulder and was in, stumbling. There really wasn't anywhere to go. The back door led through a little kitchen and right into the bedroom/living room, where our two lovebirds were sacked out in a bedraggled bed. The boy reached for an automatic lying at the bedside, but Leonard was already there and he grabbed it and pulled it back. He now had a gun in either hand.

The boy sat up in bed, and when he did the sheet fell back from the young lady. She was wearing a thin white bra. It was cold in the room, and the tips of her breasts punched at it like ice picks. Leonard said, "Don't panic, kid. We don't want to hurt you."

"We'll give the money back," the boy, Tim, said. "We don't want it."

"You wanted it when you took it," I said.

"I didn't think it would matter then," the boy said.

"So why does it matter now?" I said, pushing back the hood on the rain slicker.

"I guess I knew better, but we been thinking it over. We want to give it back. Just let us go and take the money."

"Looks like to me," Leonard said, "you been doing more than thinking."

"Please don't hurt us," Tim said.

"We don't want to hurt you," Leonard said, closing the front door he had knocked open, cutting back the cold wind. "We're on a mission from your dad … sort of. We're also working for the law and for ourselves."

"You're not… with the organization?" Tim asked.

"Organization?" I said. "You mean the Dixie Mafia?"

Tim nodded.

"Nope. We are freelancers."

The girl, who had not spoken, said, "You want the money for yourselves?"

"That would be nice," I said, "but no. That isn't the deal."

I studied her closely. She was worth running off with. Her hair was cut short, almost man style, but she was a fine-looking girl with a long, sleek neck and deep eyes you'd like to fall into, especially if you were a young man, and from what I could see of her body she wasn't going to make anyone turn their eyes away in disgust.

We lowered our guns. Leonard pushed back his rain hood and sat on the windowsill. I went and shut the back door to the kitchen, came back and found a chair. I said, "You two just stay there for a minute. What we're gonna do is we're gonna wait for some friends of ours, and then we're going to load you, along with the money—where is it, by the way?"

"Under the bed," Tim said.

"Under the bed?" Leonard said. "That's as sneaky as you get? You put it under the bed? They put it under the bed, Hap."

"You're not very good criminals," I said. "But you're lucky we're the ones found you, and we found you for your dad, and we're taking you and the money back and things are maybe going to be okay, except for the part where your dad squeals about his business and you all have to go into witness protection. Maybe your dad does some prison. Up in the air right now."

"Oh hell," Tim said.

"Yep," I said. "Oh hell."

I looked at Leonard. He was turned slightly so he could see out the window. Rivulets of rain ran down the window and it was clouded over. Leonard used the palm of his hand to wipe the inside a bit, and then he said, "It just keeps on coming." He looked at me, said, "Brown Ford."

40

“Drop your cock and grab your socks,” I said, looking at Tim. “In fact, forget the socks. Nab some drawers pronto, ’cause it’s about to get interesting in here.”

“Oh hell,” Tim said, threw back the covers, and scrambled out naked, grabbing some pants off the floor. The girl, whose name I had yet to know, came out of the bed on the other side, pulling on jeans.

Leonard said, “You know what’s really swell, both the goddamn doors are already broken in.”

I went over to the window and looked out. The big guy we had met over chicken and links was wearing a raincoat with a hood and he was standing by the Escalade, looking it over like a prospective buyer. He had an automatic with a silencer in his right hand. The other three guys were out of the car now and one of them had a double-barrel shotgun and the other two had handguns. I felt my asshole pucker, and in that instant every good meal, hot fuck, blue sky I had ever experienced jumped through my head.

I didn’t know how they had found us—hit or miss, or maybe they had talked to Annie, bought some whoopee cushions and a box of fake dog shit in exchange for information about what it was some guys might be asking her about.

It didn’t really matter now.

Big Guy looked up at the house, and Leonard and I moved away from the window.

“There’s nothing left but for you two to get under the bed with the money,” I said. “And hope things go better than I think they will.”

They did as I suggested. When Leonard and I were dead, it would be easy pickings for Big Guy and his posse. Pop these two and take the dough, stop off for photos with the bear and a couple of hot links, then home.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Leonard said. “The cavalry has arrived. Sort of.”

I looked.

Tonto’s van had pulled up and he and Jim Bob were out of the car. They weren’t wearing rain gear. Tonto had his coat pushed back and the .45 holsters were empty; the guns were in his hands. Jim Bob was carrying a pump twelve-gauge with a shortened barrel. They were walking toward the Ford and the four guys as if they were meeting for tea.

Big Guy said something, and then two of his guys, one with the shotgun, the other with a pistol, went back toward where they had parked the Ford. Big Guy eased toward us slowly, and one of the other guys started around the cabin, toward the back.

“Who you want?” I said.

“The big motherfucker,” Leonard said.

“Good.”

I hurried into the kitchen and stepped up on the counter that was near the door and pointed my weapon, waited. There was a slight sound at the back door, and then it was pushed back gently. I saw a hand with an automatic poke in, and then I heard a shot from the front of the cabin, Leonard’s or Big Guy’s weapon. I didn’t know for sure. And then the guy at the kitchen door, perhaps smelling blood in the water, charged in and I shot him above the ear and he fell back against the wall and his head stayed propped against it while the rest of him spread out in that relaxed manner only the dead have. There was blood on the wall.

I jumped down and charged into the other room. Big Guy had Leonard by the neck and was lifting him off the floor with both hands. Leonard’s gun was on the floor between Big Guy’s legs, and Big Guy’s weapon was thrown up against the wall. I wasn’t sure how things had got that way, who had fired and who was hit, but before I could blow Big Guy’s brains out, I heard a shotgun blast outside, and then another, and then Leonard went sailing across the room, slammed onto the bed hard enough for the slats to break and the girl to scream from under there, and then Leonard was up and the kids were crawling out from under the bed, cowering in the corner.

I lifted up my .38 and shot Big Guy directly in the chest. He stepped across the room quickly and grabbed my gun hand, and slapped the hell out of me with the back of his other hand. I did a nice backwards roll, and when I got it together, Big Guy was firing at me with my .38.

Leonard leaped like a panther and hit Big Guy above the knees with the side of his body, trying to clip him. Didn't work. He bounced off.

I got the gun from the dead guy in the kitchen, a nine-mil, and went back to help Leonard. Leonard was grabbed again, and Big Guy was slinging him around like wet laundry. I couldn't get a good aim.

All of this was going on at the same time there was a lot of racket outside. Gunfire, cursing, screams.

Finally Big Guy tired enough, that Leonard, still hanging high while this guy choked him, was able to slap his hands over Big Guy's ears. Big Guy dropped him. I tried to shoot Big Guy as he came rushing toward me, but the gun jammed.

Typical.

He grabbed me around the waist and pushed me backwards and slammed me into the wall so that the back of my neck hit a bookshelf and the shelf came loose and fell and the one above it fell too, hitting me on top of the head dead center. At least the owner wasn't a reader; no books fell on my head.

Next thing I knew I was pitched against the far wall next to the open front door. I got up and saw Leonard throw a right hook into Big Guy's body and jerk back his hand with a sour look on his face.

I knew then why my bullet hadn't hurt Big Guy. He was wearing a bulletproof vest.

The kids, both barefoot and Tim bare-chested, yanked a duffel bag out from under the ruins of the bed. They headed out the door before I could get off my ass, and when I did, the cabin felt as if it was moving.

I started to go after them, but when I looked back, Leonard was being slammed by a punch that might have killed a steer. My head was mostly back together, so I rushed Big Guy and threw a hard round kick into his thigh. It was a perfect kick, hitting right on the nerve in the outer thigh, and I had used it before, dropping the leg right out from under strong men, but if it bothered Big Guy his expression didn't show it. He came rushing at me, and without really knowing I was going to do it, I started backpedaling and went right out the front door.

A gun barked to my left and I saw one of Big Guy's team on the ground and Jim Bob walking over. I got a glimpse of Tonto, but I didn't see the other bad guy. The two kids and their duffel bag had disappeared.

Big Guy came charging out into the open, practically foaming at the mouth.

I'm a little ashamed to say I turned and bolted. I thought I was running like a goddamn deer on steroids, but Big Guy was tight on my ass as a dingleberry, and the next thing I knew he had me and we're tumbling down the trail, rolling like a couple of doodlebugs. When we came to the bottom of the hill, I got hold of his ear with my teeth and bit it as hard as I could, taking off a chunk big enough for a small sandwich.

He jerked his head up and came to his knees and let out a bellow. I tried to make a quick exit, stage right, spitting out the chunk of ear as I went, but he got hold of my rain slicker with one hand and hit me so hard with the other I thought I had accidentally stepped onto train tracks and been hit by a locomotive.

He was about to hit me again when I heard a grunt, and Leonard, doing a Superman, flew down the hill and hit Big Guy. The two of them went tumbling down some more, covered in mud, and ended up near the water's edge. Big Guy came up on top and he was giving Leonard a pounding.

I ran down there and kicked Big Guy in the head. It was a pretty good shot, and it did more damage than the kick to the thigh. He was knocked over and into the water. He tried to get up and I kicked him again, but because I had to step out into the water to do it, it wasn't as good a kick, and it only knocked him back. And then Leonard got hold of the minnow bucket and slammed it over Big Guy's head. It was a tight fit. Leonard chopped Big Guy across the throat, twice in rapid succession. Big Guy stood up. Leonard slipped behind him with one smooth motion and tried to choke him with his forearm. The guy's neck was like a tree, and Leonard might as well have been squeezing one. The guy shook like a dog and Leonard went into the water, scrambled up and out of it and onto the shore to meet me. We both stood there looking at the monster with the minnow bucket on his head. Big Guy clawed at the bucket, started pulling it loose. Leonard said, "Run like a motherfucker."

And we did. We ran. We were like little children being chased by the Big Bad Wolf.

Leonard said as we ran, "Where the fuck is that guy from?"

"Hell," I said.

We were coming up on the boathouse. I said, "Goddamn it. Let's take the boat and get away from that sonofabitch."

Looking back, I saw Big Guy minus his bucket, and he was really coming. When we got in the boathouse the kids were there with the bag of money. They had the other rain slickers on and the towels over their shoulders. They were just standing on the platform looking at the boat as if they thought they might be magically transported into it. The rain was really coming down outside the boathouse, and it could be seen through the big opening at the back where the boats went out and came in, peppering the water like buckshot.

"What the hell are you waiting on?" Leonard said to the couple. "Get in the boat."

"I'm scared of water," the girl said.

"Something comin' through that door you're gonna be a lot more scared of," Leonard said, and at that moment Big Guy came in, flinging the door back so hard it slammed against the wall.

The girl was in the boat faster than a jackrabbit. Tim just froze. Leonard and I crouched. Leonard said, "This time, we got to get him."

Big Guy, who seemed to have lost his wits, came charging along the planks and Leonard and I, as if through some mind-meld of knowledge, went for his legs, went low and lifted high. It wasn't quite perfect. Big Guy went a little to the right, out over the platform and hit headfirst in the boat. The boat cracked, rolled, sent the girl into the water with a scream. Tim, who was standing behind us and had caught some of Big Guy's body as it was thrown, was knocked the length of the platform.

The boat righted itself, and there was Big Guy, hanging on to the side of it. The girl, who was crying loudly, was clinging to the bow. I got down on my belly on the platform and grabbed one of the paddles floating in the water and stood up and cracked Big Guy over the head with it. It took about three licks before he went under.

There was movement at the door. I turned my head. Tonto came through, followed by Jim Bob. Somehow, Tonto had ended up with the double-barrel shotgun.

Big Guy was back, clinging to the side of the boat, trying to climb inside. Tonto came over quick and stepped off the platform and onto the boat. It was a graceful move and the boat only rocked a little. He got Big Guy by the hair and stuck the double barrel in his open mouth and pulled the trigger. The back of Big Guy's head jumped out onto the water, and something, pellets, skull shrapnel, rattled against the clapboard wall across the way.

Big Guy, missing most of his head, went under, except for one hand that clung to the side of the boat. Tonto squatted and took hold of the fingers and peeled one of them off and then they all came loose.

Leonard said, "You better find that sonofabitch and drive a stake through his heart. I don't want him coming back."

Tonto made his way to the bow of the little boat and pulled the girl out of the water, then handed her up to me. I set her on the platform. She was shivering with the cold, just like me and Leonard and Tim. Tonto climbed up on the platform and took a deep breath. He smelled like the shotgun blast.

"The others?" I asked.

"They're napping," Tonto said. "Deep napping."

"Yeah," I said. "There's one in the cabin, and he's kind of sleepy too."

41

At the top of the hill, with me carrying the bag of money, and it was a big bag and pretty damn heavy, we discovered that the two thugs were indeed napping by the Ford. While they were napping some red stuff had run out of them and onto the ground and had been mixed up and thinned by the rain so that it looked like spilled strawberry Kool-Aid. They were lying on their backs and they had some holes in them and their open mouths were filling with rain.

We grabbed the stuff from the cabin that belonged to the kids, got the guns, and wiped the place down of blood and fingerprints as best we could, hauling the dead guy out of the kitchen, putting him and the other two in the Ford. Jim Bob drove the Ford, Tonto drove his van, and Leonard took the keys of the Escalade from Tim and drove the rest of us out of there, me in the back with the boy, the girl beside Leonard. The windshield wipers beat methodically as he drove and the heater made it cozy. It was hard to believe that a moment before we had been in a gunfight, a fistfight, a wrestling match, and the like. It seemed surreal, though my ears were still ringing from the gunfire in the small cabin and I hurt all over.

We followed Jim Bob down a narrow clay road with trash thrown out on both sides. He parked the Ford and left it and joined Tonto in the van. Tonto and Leonard found places to turn around and got us back on the main road, which was a strip of aging blacktop.

We followed along behind the van. No one in our car had said a word. And then: “That man,” the girl said. “He … he was so strong.”

“Tell me about it,” Leonard said. “And he had a bulletproof vest on to boot.”

“You noticed that too,” I said.

"I did," Leonard said. "For a moment I thought Superman had gone bad, and it was a real relief to discover he was just a man."

"He was just plenty of man," I said.

"I hurt all over," Leonard said. "I feel like I been chewed up by a wolf and shit off a cliff and my pile got stepped on by an elephant."

"I hear you," I said. "I'm dizzy and I got a headache and I want my teddy bear. Bastard must have taken something. Some kind of drug. Damned if I know. But I'm going to dream about him, and I'm not going to like it."

"I used to have a teddy bear," the girl said out of nowhere. "His name was Lew. I think my momma still has him."

We let that sail around the car for a moment, then, "Figure guy owns the cabins has already called the law," Leonard said.

"No," Tim said. "He said he would be gone a few days. Went off somewhere with his brother. We paid in advance."

"I hope you left a dead body deposit," I said.

"We didn't give our real names. He wrote down our plates, but they're false. I switched them."

"Normally, I wouldn't want to encourage such criminal enterprise as license-plate switching in the young, but let me, at this moment in time, give to you a symbolic high five."

It was entirely symbolic. Neither of us moved.

Tim said, "So … are you going to hurt us?"

"Nope," I said. "We already would have if we were. But you got to go back."

"My dad … he turned himself in."

"For you. And he's going to talk to the feds. Putting himself in danger from the Dixie Mafia for one reason and one reason only. You."

Tim was quiet for a moment, then said, "He's done some bad things."

"He has, and I suppose he's actually going to get away with having done a lot of them if he tells the feds the right things, things they want to know. But there is this. He loves you pretty damn strong to do what he's doing. Putting himself in danger, maybe going to jail, or having to be in the witness protection program. Something you may have to do too. Thing is, he's doing what he's doing for you so you can maybe do something a lot better than he's done with his life."

"You think so?"

"I think so."

"What about me?" the girl said.

"I don't know yet," I said. "We'll figure something out."

"He just couldn't stand we were together, her being black."

"He got over it," I said. "He only wants you happy."

"He said that?"

"Yep."

"Are you friends of his?"

"Nope," I said. "Not even close."

"Then why are you doing this?"

"We sort of have our asses over a barrel and we got picked because we were expendable."

Leonard said, "Girl, what's your name?"

"Katie," she said.

"All right," Leonard said. "That's good to know in case I want to call you to supper. Hap, are you okay back there?"

"A little traumatized. Not every day you meet Dracula and live."

"Ain't that the truth? We owe Tonto one."

"We owe that shotgun one. Maybe we can take it to lunch."

42

Leonard wheeled us away from the lake, and Tonto, who was driving in front of us, pulled the van to the side of the road and parked. We pulled up beside him, real close, lowered the window on the girl's side. Tonto lowered his window, said, "Now what?"

"I think we ought to think this over before we do anything," Leonard said.

"What's that mean?" Tonto asked.

Leonard looked back at me. I leaned forward in the seat and spoke loud enough for them to hear. "I'm with Leonard. I think now we've done the deed, we should regroup a little. Gonna hand these kids off, I want to make sure I'm not dropping them in the lion's den. We maybe hole them up somewhere, then me and Leonard see how the lay of the land is, figure what to do next."

"I'm just along for the ride," Tonto said.

"Me too," Jim Bob said.

"All right, then," I said. "Let's drive over to Shreveport, put the kids in a hotel, and we stay there with them. Maybe we'll take a day or two and consider what we ought to do next."

Leonard turned, looked at Tim in the backseat, then at Katie. "You're not going to give us shit, are you?"

"I just want to go home," she said. She turned and looked at Tim. "I just want to go home, baby."

Tim reached over the seat and patted her shoulder. "I know. It was a dumb idea. I don't know why I had to take the money. That was stupid."

"Thing is," Leonard said, "we want to make sure it's okay you two go home, that you're safe. So we'll do it the way we're talkin' about, and we'll use some of the money you stole to pay for it. We'll tell the feds we had to use some to get the bulk of it back.

Expenses. I think they'll go for that."

"Got a feeling," I said, "Dixie Mafia might hold a grudge, we spend their money."

"Not like we're giving it back to them," Leonard said. "Once we give it to the feds, we're out of this deal and the organization is still out the money."

"I don't think we'll be out of hot water that easy," I said.

"Me neither," Jim Bob said from across the way. "It's not just about the money with these guys. For them, they get it back or they don't, they aren't going to like us much either way. Especially you guys. They know who you two are. Me and Tonto, maybe we can just go home, put our feet up."

"But you won't," Leonard said.

"Of course not," Jim Bob said. "Well, speaking for me, anyway."

"My favor isn't done till the job is done," Tonto said. "And it's not like I got kids waiting at the house. So count me in too."

◆

The Louisiana border wasn't far, and neither was Shreveport, so that's the way we went after we found a quiet place to switch license plates on the Escalade and the van again, doing it out in the rain.

I thought about what would happen if we were pulled over and for some reason a cop wanted to take a look and found the stuff under the flooring; the van was packed with enough weapons and license plates that the four of us could go up for about three thousand years wearing thumbscrews and without possibility of parole.

We drove into Louisiana, and not much longer after that, made Shreveport. Stopping at a filling station we got some gas, then we went to a nice hotel and spent some of the Dixie Mafia's money to put us in a connecting room with the kids, and to put Jim Bob and Tonto in a room together.

We had our clothes in overnight bags that we had left in the van, and we carried those into the elevator, and the kids carried their two suitcases, one of which, the girl's, was on rollers. Leonard carried the heavy duffel bag of money over his shoulder. When we got to the room, which was on a high floor in the hotel, Leonard and I pulled off our slickers, and then the four of us took turns taking showers in the two bathrooms and dressing in clean clothes. The way the suite was set up, there was a bedroom on either end with a bathroom in it, and in the middle was a big room with a couch and television set and chairs, and there was a kitchenette. Through sliding doors was a covered deck surrounded by Plexiglas. It gave us a good view of the city and the casinos and hotels.

After looking at a menu, we ordered up some bowls of chili and a pot of coffee, which seemed like a pretty damn good idea after the cold and the rain, and we went out on the protected deck to sit at the table there while we waited. A short time later, a waiter arrived pushing a wheeled table and we had him take it out on the deck, where the four of us sat and ate and drank our coffee with very little to say.

The day was dark and the lights turning on inside and outside the hotels and casinos on the strip made everything look surreal and strange through the rain. As we sat and ate, and gathered our thoughts, and let the food seep into us and renew us, night dropped down over the city and the multicolored lights appeared brighter than before and almost Christmas-like through the deluge.

I guess we sat there for nearly a half hour before I felt like I was actually going to live. Still, my back hurt where I had been slammed into the wall, and my head hurt where the shelf had cracked me, and when I had taken a shower and looked in the mirror, I was no longer surprised at the way people had looked at me in the lobby, the way the little guy behind the hotel desk had stared at me. I thought it was the old rain slicker that smelled like fish, and that most certainly was part of it, but my face looked like it had been through a buzz saw. Leonard, being darker of skin, didn't look so wounded if you didn't look right at him, but by the time we finished our meal one of his eyes had swollen near shut, and he was starting to look like an ebony Cabbage Patch doll with an attitude. I had found some aspirin in my shaving kit and took four of them, shaved while I was in there, and it was a tender job. When I looked at my hand, I noticed it was trembling slightly. I managed to cut myself only a little, brushed my teeth and went out and got a look at everyone else.

Spruced up, Tim was a pretty good-looking kid, and Katie was the sort of girl that if she told you she was a model for a clean-cut catalog like JCPenney's, you'd believe her. Even with her hair cut close like that, she was a knockout. Coltish in white shorts, with long legs and that long neck and a way of moving that made you wish you were young and single and cool and had a pocketful of money. Maybe enough to steal money and a car from your dad.

Out on the deck, I sat down and said, "We can tie you two up, or you can act like you got some sense and get a good night's sleep. Thing is, you'll be better off with us than out there on your own."

"We'll do what you say," Katie said, and looked at Tim. He nodded.

"It's for your own good," I said. "We don't want anything to happen to you. You're kind of our calling card for better treatment concerning a problem we have. You and the money. Just listen to us and do what we say, and everything will be all right."

"You won't let anything happen to us?" Katie asked.

"No, we won't."

"You promise?" she said.

"Yep," I said. "I promise."

She looked at Leonard. He smiled. "When he promises, or I promise, baby girl, we're promising together."

43

The kids got one bedroom, and Leonard won the other due to a coin toss. I got the couch. It was a good way to make sure the kids didn't get a wild hair up their asses and want to sneak out in the middle of the night. I doubted that would be the case, but insurance seemed like a good idea.

Leonard helped me move the couch close to the front door, which was the only way out of the room, and then I picked up the phone and called over to Jim Bob and Tonto's room to see how they were doing. Jim Bob was watching TV and he said Tonto had gone over to one of the casinos.

We bantered a little, but neither of us was really up for it. After I hung up the phone, Leonard and I took some time to clean and oil the guns we had with a little kit I carried in my overnight bag.

After that, Leonard went to bed and I got a pillow and blanket and turned out the lights and lay on the couch and went to sleep immediately. It was a deep sleep, but there were bad things down there in the deep with me, and so I came awake about three a.m. I lay there for a while, then finally sat up, and saw that Tim was out on the deck, sitting at the table looking at all the lights, which were clearer now, because the rain had stopped at last.

Pulling on my pants, not bothering to turn on the light, I went out there barefoot, and when I pulled the sliding door back, he turned in a kind of panic.

"It's me," I said.

"I don't know who I was expecting."

"Probably the guy you saw killed today. I keep thinking he's going to come back from the dead."

"Tough guy like you thinks that, I don't feel so bad."

"Don't fool yourself, kid. I'm not that tough."

"You look tough."

"I look tired, that's what I look."

I sat down at the table, and Tim said, "I couldn't sleep. Katie, she can sleep anytime. No matter what's happened, she can sleep. I wonder why that is?"

"I'm like you," I said. "Brett, my girlfriend, she's like Katie. We can have an argument, or something can go wrong that will stress me out and I won't be able to sleep, but she can lay down and hibernate like a bear."

Tim nodded. He said, "I really didn't mean to cause trouble."

"You know what your father does for a living."

"You know I do. For some time now."

"You know he has people to answer to."

"Sure. I just didn't think it would amount to this. I thought they'd be mad and he'd be mad at me, and what I did was a kind of vengeance."

"For the work he does?"

"It's not work. It's drugs and whores."

"I agree with you. It's not work and it's not good. You should have just run off with the girl. That said, my bet is her parents are worried sick about her."

"I'm sure they got the cops out after her," he said.

"The cops, the FBI, and us."

"What happens to the money?"

"The FBI gets it."

"And what do they do with it?"

"Good question. Three hundred thousand dollars is lot to do with."

"Three hundred thousand?" Tim said. "It's more than that."

* * *

I went into the living room with Tim trailing along behind me. I got the duffel bag with the money out of the closet and dragged it out and opened it up and poured the money on the floor. It was a mixture of hundred-dollar bills and twenties, some tens and fives.

I said, “Get down on the floor there with me, and let’s count it.”

We did that, and when we had it counted and in stacks, I said, “Just short of five hundred thousand dollars. That the way you had it figured?”

“Sure. I’ve counted it a few times. It was five hundred thousand when we started. We been living on some of it.”

“But your dad is saying three hundred thousand is missing.”

Tim shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

“I don’t know either, but I tell you what. Let’s put it back in the bag and put it away and go to sleep. Tomorrow we’ll see if something comes to us.”

* * *

Lying on the couch I thought about the money, and I thought about what we had been asked to do, and I thought about Hirem. Something was niggling at the back of my mind, but I wasn’t able to grasp what it was. I’d feel as if I almost had hold of it, and then it would move away from my grasp. I fell asleep dreaming of Big Guy coming out of the water with most of his head missing, climbing into the boat and onto the platform and chasing Leonard and me along the lake shore, and when I’d look back at him, he’d be wearing that minnow bucket over his head.

44

Next morning, Jim Bob joined us in our room for breakfast. Tonto was still out on the town. He hadn't come in last night. We ate out on the deck. It was fun spending someone else's money.

The lights were no longer on and the rain had gone, but the day was gray and the air was misty. Everything that had looked bright and amazing the night before now looked grim and sad, sort of sordid, like a used condom tossed in the gutter. Tim and Katie finished up eating and went back to the bedroom. They looked as glum as a couple of coffin carriers.

"Dumb kids," Jim Bob said.

"Love is dumb," I said, "and sometimes that's what I like about it."

Leonard tossed a thumb at me. "He's so cute."

"So Tonto's out on the town?"

Jim Bob grinned, said, "Funny guy, that Tonto."

"Yeah, ha, ha," I said.

"He kills people and then goes gambling," Jim Bob said. "Of course, I haven't lost my appetite."

"None of us have," I said, and then I told everyone about the money.

"That's a lot more money than your man said was missing," Jim Bob said.

"Yep," I said, "and I smell a rat about the size of a possum covered in slime."

Jim Bob poured himself some coffee and looked out at the misty morning. "You know, I got a kind of idea about what's going on here."

"There's a little something coming to me too," Leonard said. "A guy tells us there's three hundred thousand dollars and there's more than that, you got to wonder if it's that big of a miscount on his part—about what's missing, I mean—or he's just a goddamn liar."

"Yeah," Jim Bob said. "I think the thing is your man, Hirem, he made a special side deal with two FBI agents that doesn't involve the agency. You two go out and do the dirty work, bring the money back, not having counted it, and they slice them off a nice piece, turn in the three hundred thousand Hirem said was missing, and they get as good a deal as they can find for him in the system, witness protection, and they promise to protect the kid, and you two get out from under your charges. If you two decide to keep the money, then you're fugitives and you got this charge hanging over your head they could manipulate out of being self-defense and into being murder. You could go up for a long time."

"They could pull that trick anyway," Leonard said.

"Yeah," Jim Bob said, "but the way they see it is it'd be better for everyone all around if they got their money and Hirem got his deal and you two went back to being you two, which is kind of a full-time job."

Leonard and I touched fists. "Yeah, baby," Leonard said.

◆

About an hour later there was a knock at the door, and being paranoid, I carried my pistol with me and looked out the peephole. It was Tonto.

When I let him in he looked as fresh as he had the day before, and he was carrying a newspaper under his arm. He followed me out to the deck and sat in a chair and put the paper on the table, and poured himself a cup of coffee. He said, "You know that woman you rented the boat from?"

"Yeah," I said.

"You won't have to pay for that boat sinking. She's dead."

He reached over and flipped the paper open, scanned it briefly, put his finger on an article. I picked it up and read it. It said the woman had been found dead in her store, shot through the forehead. One of her fingers had been amputated.

I read this aloud, and when I finished, Leonard said, “Damn. I think somehow this is our fault.”

“I think someone wanted to know where we went,” I said, “and she didn’t want to tell, and whoever wanted to know cut off a finger to show they were serious, and then when they got the information, they shot her as a cleanup procedure.”

“What I don’t understand,” Leonard said, “is why didn’t she just tell them? She didn’t owe us a thing.”

“Her own ethics, I suppose,” I said. “You can’t just let anyone come into a novelty shop and push you around. Next thing you know, you’ll be giving the plastic dog crap away because bullies want you to.”

“Damn,” Leonard said.

“I guess our friends in the brown Ford were watching us when we rented the boat,” I said.

“Hell,” Tonto said, “I’m glad those guys are dead. They were kind of spooky. I thought I was kind of spooky, but those guys—”

“You are spooky,” I said.

“But sweet around the eyes,” Leonard said.

“Thing is, boys, there might be another player,” Jim Bob said. “Reason we didn’t see a brown Ford all the time was because it wasn’t just a brown Ford following us.”

“You mean we were being double-teamed,” Leonard said. “That’s why they could keep up with us, why they could watch us and we didn’t see them. They decided to let us know about the Ford, put all our thinking there, but there was someone else watching.”

“Why didn’t they join with the Ford at the cabin?” I asked.

“Maybe they got their wires crossed, something as simple as that. Whatever, it didn’t go according to plan.”

“So whoever was the backup is on our tail now,” Leonard said. “Maybe the ninja Hirem warned us about.”

“There will be someone else,” Tonto said, “and maybe someone beyond that, but it won’t be quite so James Bond as all that. I’m going to get some sleep. I suggest we take another night to get it together, maybe go out and get a steak and have a little entertainment, find some poontang that don’t cost more than an arm and a leg and won’t give us the ball rot, then we head back.”

“Since the poontang isn’t USDA-inspected, I’ll pass on that,” Jim Bob said. “Come to think of it, these days, not so sure that inspection would mean much.”

“Brett doesn’t let me date,” I said.

“Battin’ for a different team,” Leonard said.

“Whatever,” Tonto said. “Me, I’m going to get some sleep.”

Tonto finished off his coffee and went out.

“He’s even more confident than me,” Jim Bob said, “and that’s a scary thing. I’ve been around, and I’ve seen some things too, just like you boys, and what I’ve learned the hard way is confidence is a lovely thing, but too much of it will get you cut a new asshole.”

45

It wasn't that hard to convince Leonard and me to stay another day. We weren't the type that got to spend nights in good hotels and eat hotel food on murdering scumbags' money. I was also stiff and sore from our encounter with Big Guy and not exactly in the mood to deal with much.

That next night Tonto talked us into going to a karaoke bar he had found, and it wasn't far from the strip and it was pretty nice, and purposely ill lit, except for the stage where karaoke took place. We all went: Tonto, Jim Bob, Tim and Katie, and Leonard and I. They had alcoholic drinks, and I had one Diet Coke after another. I had long ago given up liquor, at least for the most part, and felt better having done so. Still, on this night I was thinking maybe I might have a whiskey, but the closest I got to one was thinking about it.

We were in the front row near the stage and the karaoke was as painful as it usually is.

And then one fine-looking blond woman came up and set her little white purse on the stage in front of her. She wasn't very big, looked to weigh about one-twenty, but was probably a little heavier because she was muscled in a lean sort of way that certainly gave her more weight, but it was weight carried in all the right places. She was young-looking, mid-twenties maybe, wearing white pedal pushers with white shoes with thick elevated heels, and she had on a white top. Her hair was gold as fresh wheat and she had a very fine face, and even from where we sat, we could see that her eyes were bright blue and she had a killer smile, and in the lights from the stage she looked as if all she needed was wings on her back and a message from Zeus.

Way it worked was the singers picked their tunes, and they were supposed to get two songs if they wanted it, and she got up and sang, and the thing was, she was good, very good. The first song was “Driving Wheel,” and she did it justice. Her voice was strong and it kind of surprised some of the drinkers, who actually shut up and listened. A few couples began to dance, including Tim and Katie. When the song ended there was a lot of applause, and we, out there in the front row, were giving up a lot of it ourselves. While she had been singing, she had been looking at Tonto, and I glanced to see if he had noticed, and he had. He looked like a little kid that had just gotten attention from the best-looking girl in class.

The second song was Dion’s “The Wanderer,” and she knocked it out of the park, changing certain words to fit a woman’s point of view, which made it clear to me she had done the song before and had given it thought. She moved a little as she sang, not much but a little, and with this girl not much was plenty. There was a seductive quality to her moves without them being overdone, and she had her eyes locked on Tonto.

Jim Bob leaned over to me, said, “Lucky sonofabitch.”

“What’s he got that I haven’t got?” I said.

“No girlfriend that will kill him, and from the size of him, about two extra inches on his dick.”

“Oh yeah, there’s that,” I said.

When the song was over there was applause again, and she ended up doing a third song, “Jim Dandy,” and then she stepped down and a guy about half in the bag got up and sang a bad version of some tune I didn’t recognize. The girl walked by Tonto and smiled at him. He said, “Buy you a drink?”

“Come to my table?” she said.

He did just that, and though I was happy for him, and wouldn’t have bothered with her had she been interested in me because I loved Brett, I was also a little jealous. A woman like that could make a Baptist preacher kill his wife and set fire to his church. I glanced over and saw Tonto with her. He was helping her into a brown leather coat, and the way she stood she was out of the light and cloaked in shadow, and the light from the back door was on Tonto, and his dark face seemed oddly cherubic. I turned away and looked out at the dance floor.

Tim and Katie were still dancing, and the way they looked at each other, held each other tight, made me miss Brett something terrible. I was thinking about this when Leonard said, “I’m thinking of getting up there and singing.”

“Now or never,” I said.

Leonard caught a turn and got up and sang Charley Pride’s “Is Anybody Goin’ to San Antone,” and he was good. He got some applause, and when he climbed down, we exchanged a few words, and then I looked where Tonto and the girl had been. Gone.

I said to Leonard and Jim Bob, “I think Tonto is trying to round up the cattle, and here we sit. If he goes off all night and drags in tomorrow about noon, I’m going to be pissed. He said we were leaving in the morning.”

“Women will make you do crazy things,” Jim Bob said, pushing his hat back on his head. “You got a sane guy, goes about his business, and then that gets wagged in his face, sanity and business go out the window. And for all his professionalism, I get the feeling Tonto can be pulled around by his ying-yang.”

“But not us,” I said.

“No sir, not us,” Jim Bob said.

“Ha!” Leonard said.

“You know,” Jim Bob said, “maybe it’s a small thing, but the money, it’s hidden under the floorboard of the van, and Tonto decides he’s going to go off with missy, I don’t like the idea of it being there. No biggie, but I’m going to see if I can catch him. I’ll pretend it’s laundry or something so the gal won’t know.”

“Let’s all see if we can catch him,” I said. “I’m ready to go back to the hotel.”

Leonard went out on the floor and got the dancing kids, and as we were starting out, Jim Bob said, “You know, Tonto would probably have said something to us, he was leaving.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But we got two vehicles. He’s probably thinking we could ride tight we had to. In fact, he’s probably not thinking that much. Not with the good head.”

“Point,” Jim Bob said.

*

We were parked out back, so we went out the back way. The Escalade was next to the van in the lot, and when I looked at the van, I saw the interior light was on, but I didn't see Tonto or the girl. The air was chilly, and our breath came out in clouds.

Jim Bob said, "This whole deal smells funny all of a sudden."

We looked around the lot and didn't see anybody, just cars. Pulling our guns, we put them by our sides and walked out to the van. Jim Bob went around the front and I stayed on the right-hand side, and Leonard went around back. I told the kids, "Stand back."

They went over and stood on the other side of the Escalade.

I looked in the side window and saw Tonto lying facedown across the backseat. He looked as if he had just stretched out. His pants were down and his ass was like a big moon. I took a deep breath. Leonard opened the door on the other side the rest of the way—that's why the interior light was on, the door was partially open.

Jim Bob and I went around and joined Leonard and we looked down at Tonto. His face was turned to one side and his ear was full of blood. Jim Bob leaned in and looked and said, "Ah, goddamn it to hell. The woman."

Leonard leaned in and looked. "Something sharp, right in the ear. Ice pick maybe."

"Where the hell did she keep it?" I said.

"Purse," Jim Bob said.

Leonard checked Tonto's pulse, looked at us, shook his head. Blood was now running out of Tonto's ear and down his cheek, collecting on the seat.

"Just happened," Jim Bob said, turning to look around the parking lot. "Seconds ago. Damn."

We had put the duffel bag with the money in the back under one of the traps in the floor. We went around and looked. The trap was open. The money was gone.

"Knew where to look," Jim Bob said. "Guesswork, maybe, but good guesswork."

We closed the door, cutting the interior light, put our guns away, and all of us went over and got in the Escalade, Leonard behind the wheel. Jim Bob, sitting next to him, said, “I was just starting to like that asshole.”

“He lived this long,” Leonard said, “and then he decided to throw in with me and Hap. That was his mistake.”

“I can’t disagree with that,” Jim Bob said. “Look, you guys, you go back to the hotel and get the bags, and I’ll meet up with you later. Don’t worry about me. I’m going to drive the van and take Tonto somewhere.”

“And where will that be?” I said.

“I don’t know. But I’m not just leaving him. He’s part of the team. He’s got someplace, or I’ll find someplace. Marvin will know something. He was our connection to Tonto.”

“We should have gone home,” Leonard said.

“We should have done a lot of things,” Jim Bob said. “You guys, you take the kids back, the money. Don’t go back to your place, Hap. Call me at some point. I’ll meet up with you.”

“We—we have a blanket in the back,” Tim said, “you want to cover him.”

“Yeah,” I said, “that’s a good idea.”

“We ought to look for her,” I said.

“No point in that,” Jim Bob said. “She’s a pro. That little darling is cool as an ice tray. She let him think he was about to throw the spear in the bull’ s-eye, and then she got him. Had to have practice at it. One good shot with something sharp in the ear, and he never knew what hit him.”

Me and Leonard and Jim Bob got out and I had the blanket. Leonard gave the car keys to Tim, said, “We’re going to cover him up, you hear? Stay in the car.”

Tim nodded. Katie took Tim’s arm. “Cold,” she said. “I feel so cold.”

“You want,” Leonard said, “warm the car up.”

We went back to the van, and when we were sure no one was in the lot, we opened the door and pulled Tonto’s pants up, got the van keys out of his pocket, and left him facedown with the blanket over him. Jim Bob shook the keys, said, “I’m going to take him now.”

Jim Bob got in behind the wheel and pulled away. We watched him go.

When he was out of the lot, Leonard turned to me, said, “Hey, I didn’t unlock the Escalade. It was already unlocked.”

A chill went over me that wasn’t due to the weather. We had been so distracted by Tonto, we hadn’t really noticed, not then, and that meant she had jacked the car open, and then got out of there fast. Maybe when we came out the back we surprised her, came out and didn’t give her time to lock things back

I turned toward the Escalade. Tim had climbed behind the wheel and Katie was sitting up front with him. We started walking that way quickly, and then I saw Tim move slightly, and though I couldn’t see what he was doing, I knew he was about to start the car, get some warmth from the heater.

I started to run, but then the car came apart in what seemed like slow motion and the parking lot turned red and there was a hot wind that picked me up and carried me away.

⁂

I was lying on my stomach, had the feeling I had been out for a moment. I rose up on my hands. My ears were ringing. I looked at where the Escalade had been sitting. It was a gutted wreck and flames were licking at it and I could see two dark shapes in what had been the front seat, burning. There was nothing to be done there.

Glancing around, I saw Leonard. He was lying on his face and he wasn’t moving, not making a sound. The back of his coat was feeding a little blaze. I tried to get up, but didn’t have the ability. Crawling toward him, I got there and slapped at his back with my hands, putting out the flames on his coat. Reaching out, I touched his pulse. He had one. Grateful for that, I put my face down on the cold parking lot cement and passed out.

46

The air was a little chill and my ears were ringing and throbbing and I didn't feel so good. I turned my head. It was a chore equal to the labors of Hercules. It was a hospital bed. I tried to call out, but my mouth was so dry I could only croak. I closed my eyes and went back to sleep.

◆

When I awoke this time there was a man in a chair by my bed, and I knew him. Drake. He looked at me like he really wanted to be somewhere else. He said, "When you two boys fuck up, you like to compound it, don't you?"

I didn't answer. I thought about nodding, but was afraid my head would fall off. Overall, I felt as if I had been rode hard and put up wet, and then shot for having bad ankles.

Drake got up and poured some water from a pitcher into a plastic glass with a straw. He brought it over and took hold of a little control on a cable and touched it. The head of the bed raised up, and when it was positioned, he stopped it and held the water for me to sip.

It was the best water I had ever had. I was convinced it was the best water anyone ever had. When my throat was wet enough, I managed to say, "Leonard?"

"They have to dig some more car shrapnel out of his thighs, but he's pretty much in the same condition you are, which is burned a little and banged up a lot."

"How bad?" I said.

"Not that bad. Not so bad the two of you won't recover and retain your native good looks."

"What are you doing here?"

“I’m asking myself that,” Drake said. “Thing is, they found you boys in the parking lot, and whoever was in the car. That would be Hirem’s boy and the girlfriend, right?”

I nodded.

“That’s all I know about the deal,” Drake said. “You were supposed to find them and find some money.”

“Batting zero,” I said.

“I figured.”

“Again, how come you’re here?”

“Your license, Leonard’s. Had your address on it. My town. So they called me, see if I could find out who you were, what you were doing here. I knew both of you, of course.”

“And you bothered to come?”

“I’m trying to figure why. I was thinking you two got off easy, and then they call, tell me what happened, and I’m thinking maybe not so easy. So I call a contact I got in the FBI, and he says you two are off their charts, officially anyway. But some things have changed, and they’re feeling kindly.”

“What’s changed?” I said.

“Someone popped those two FBI agents, and that same someone didn’t do Hirem any good. Tortured him.”

“They wanted to know where we were searching.”

“That’s right, and it looks like they found out. And any information he would have given the FBI, any money might have been recovered from illicit business, they aren’t getting that now. But the main thing was the names Hirem would have named didn’t get named, and now there’s nothing but his corpse. Done deal.”

“I think the bad guys killed a lady named Annie too,” I said, and told Drake about it.

He said, “The FBI has decided not to forget you. They’ve decided your heart was in the right place. They’re going to make sure there are no charges.”

“If there were charges,” I said, “what would they be for?”

“They have no idea, and neither do I, but we figure you did something. And they figure the something you did was to their benefit. And they figure it was a good thing they found these four guys in a Ford over near Lake O' the Pines, and they were good and dead and they all had records, and somehow, they think it just might be possible they are connected to problems they have, and it just might be possible you and Leonard solved those problems. As for the explosion, and the guns they found on you, you guys are getting a clean slate soon as you're able to get out of here. There's local cops watching your rooms. FBI is sponsoring that indirectly. Directly, they aren't doing squat, and everything I told you they would deny. They found out you had a room in a hotel, that there were two rooms. One for the kids?"

I lied. "Yep."

"They had your bags sent over, after they went through them. Oh, by the way. The local newspaper, it read that four people had died in that blast. That would include you and Leonard. So there are some bad people think you're dead. At least for the moment. Best just to take this as a freebie and not ask any questions."

"How long have we been here?"

"Three days."

"Damn," I said.

"What about Brett?" Drake said.

"She doesn't know what happened," I said. "I'd like to keep it that way for now. She's out of sight and maybe out of mind of these tin-pot gangsters. She knew I was hurt, or Leonard, she'd be here. I don't want that. Not now."

"I can understand that."

"This isn't exactly your jurisdiction," I said.

"Yeah, I got no authority, but I got concern for my citizens, and that includes you two jackasses. And my friend in the FBI, I'm sort of his and the agency's unofficial mouthpiece. What they want you to do is be finished."

"All right," I said.

"And mean it."

"You know, the person who blew up the car, they got the money."

"It wouldn't be stashed away somewhere, would it?" Drake

said.

“Not by us.”

“That person blew up the car, you know who it is?”

“No,” I said, and I didn’t mention Jim Bob or Tonto. I was hoping he didn’t know about them, and I was hoping the FBI didn’t either. I didn’t mention the woman who had killed Tonto. She was mine. I didn’t mention the money had been in the van, figured Drake would logically think it had been taken from the Escalade, maybe our hotel room.

“These cops watching you, they’re only going to be here one more day. So you got to get well quick or hope nobody from the bad side of life is hunting you two down.”

“I’m feeling perky already,” I said, and this was true.

“Another thing, no charge for the hospital stay. FBI, they’re giving you a gift out of some funds they don’t have and didn’t give you. Understand?”

I agreed that I did. I said, “I’m surprised the FBI even cared.”

“Covering their ass is all,” Drake said, standing up. “Well, I’ve had it with you two. I’m going home. And next time I see you, if it’s just a parking ticket, I’m going to see there’s some way to throw you under the jail.”

He was almost to the door when I said, “Drake.”

He turned.

“Thanks, man.”

He nodded and went out.

* * *

I lay there and tried to put it together. Jim Bob had been right. There had been someone else in on the deal. Maybe an accomplice to our Dracula, Big Guy, or maybe as hired backup. Could have even been someone Big Guy didn’t know about. Someone to watch the watchers. Did that watcher do the torturing of Annie and Hirem and the FBI folks, or was it Big Guy and his pals? Probably never figure that one out.

Bottom line, the she devil was on our ass when we left Lake O’ the Pines, and Tonto was not quite the super ace he thought. Or he'd just gotten tired and, in the end, horny. She lured him out there and killed him and took the money. She had seen the kids and me and Leonard in the Escalade, and we were the hired hits. Anyone else got in the way like Tonto, they had to go. But she figured one bomb would take Tim and Katie and me and Leonard out. And if she was lucky, it would take the van too, Jim Bob, or anyone else in that wrong place at the wrong time.

She had made one error. Leaving the door on the Escalade unlocked. Probably because we came out more quickly than she expected and she had to get away, forgot the door. Had seen us come out and was gone like a ghost before we knew it. Bottom line was she had succeeded with the bomb. Set it so when the engine cranked, or when the heater was turned on, it would blow. It was just luck Leonard and I had survived.

I really hated that bitch.

Good-looking as all get-out, but still a bitch.

47

A little over two weeks later and out of the hospital we joined Marvin, and we all went out to Arizona. Leonard had tried to patch things up with John again, but John had got religion, and when that happens, common sense, logic, and the obvious fly out the window of the brain like a horde of bees.

Jim Bob we had talked to, and he had taken care of the van and Tonto. Turned out there was no real home where Tonto lived, just a cell phone number that wouldn't be answered again and a post office box where any mail he might get would pile up. Marvin told Jim Bob all of this, and Jim Bob took Tonto in his van and drove the van off to a place run by people he knew who owned an auto farm, old cars with a car crusher that made them flat. They used the crusher with Tonto in the van and then they put the cube of metal in the back of a truck and it was dumped in a deep wet place not far from Houston. Jim Bob said the people did it for him were longtime friends and that there were other crushed cars with crushed people in them in the deep waters nearby. He said he was on call if we needed him again, and we might, but I didn't want him now; didn't want to put anyone else into what we had created. It was our mess to fix.

There was one other thing. He said he had found the photograph of me and Leonard and Cindy the Bear in the van before he had it crushed with Tonto in it, and he mailed the photo to us.

Leonard and I, and Brett, we were all in Arizona now, but we weren't all in the same place. Marvin and his family were together with relatives, and we had been there to visit but the atmosphere was not warm. Gadget couldn't look us in the eye, and her mother and grandmother and great-grandmother made us feel as though we were only begrudgingly welcome. We didn't stay long. Brett, who had been there, was glad to leave; her ass whipping of Gadget hung over the household like a little dark cloud. We were given a rental the family owned that was empty. It was a condo with a little backyard next to other little backyards. There was limited furniture in the joint, just a bed, a couch, a table, and some chairs, and Leonard slept on the couch. On this day we were all sitting outside and the weather was cool but not too cold. We were wearing coats and sitting at a table, Brett and I close together holding hands. On the table were some empty plates that had recently held tuna fish sandwiches with apple cut up in them, heavy on mayonnaise, and there had been potato chips and coffee. I was sitting there enjoying the thought of what I had eaten, simple but good, and thinking about some of the vanilla wafers we had in the house.

“So, this hit person, she thinks you’re dead?” Brett said.

“For now. But before word gets out, we thought we might go see her in person.”

“You think you could hurt a woman, Hap … on purpose?”

“Hey, he punched Gadget,” Leonard said.

“You’re talking about killing her, though,” Brett said.

“Woman, man, shemale, they come after me with a gun, a knife, a pointed stick, I don’t like it. And I don’t want her coming around again. Thing is, she’s the best they’ve sent after us, and it’s only luck I’m here to hold your lovely hand.”

“And you didn’t get your dick blown off,” Brett said.

“That too,” I said.

“I consider that an important part of our relationship,” she said.

“As do I,” I said.

“You got it blown off,” Leonard said, “you’d be holding hands with a plastic love doll. Brett would be out of here.”

“Not true,” Brett said. “He’s still got a tongue.”

“That’s a little too much from the instructional manual,” Leonard said.

“Yeah, since when are you grossed out by anything?” I said.

“Since I’ve had a tragic near-death experience. Did you know, when I was knocked out on the ground out there, shrapnel in my shapely loins and lower stomach, I saw a white light, and I wanted to go to it, because when I got there, and if God was there, I was gonna whip his ass for what he'd let happen to us."

Me and Leonard touched fists.

Brett leaned over and kissed me. Her eyes were misty. I said, "I'm fine."

"We could stay here," she said. "I could get a nurse job, you could find work. Arizona is nice."

"Need those East Texas trees," I said. "And besides, I couldn't live with myself I didn't find that bitch and put a bullet in her head. And yeah, I can do it, woman or no woman. I don't want to live under the umbrella of her coming back. She thinks she's safe and we're dead, but I'm going to find her."

"Ditto to that," Leonard said.

"Can I go back with you?" Brett said.

"You do whatever you want to do, as always, but I'd rather you not. I think it'll be easier you don't. Leonard and I have been in this kind of thing before."

"Maybe not just like this," Leonard said.

"All right," I said. "Not just like this, but we can handle ourselves, now that we know what we're up against."

"That didn't sound all that convincing," Brett said.

"Well," I said, "I guess I'm not all that convinced. But I'd prefer you stay here, let us go after her."

"What was she like?" Brett asked.

"We don't know. All we know is what we told you, but when it comes to getting the job done, she's something. The whole thing with Tonto, that probably happened so quick he was still getting his hard-on. And the way she wired that bomb up, she's experienced."

"Didn't look that old, either," Leonard said.

"No, she didn't."

"You have some idea how to find her?" Brett said.

"Yep," I said, "I do. Let me ask you something—how's Gadget?"

"You could feel the cold air back at their place, couldn't you?"

"Yep."

"Marvin, he tried to make me feel welcome, but it got so I expected the women of the household to jump me. Except for Gadget. She had had her butt whipped soundly. I tell you, I was ready to take them all on, do a little head knocking."

"You're just the woman to do it," I said.

"Damn right," she said.

"You can stay here, alone?"

"Better than at their place. The atmosphere there is poisonous."

"Good. And now, Leonard and I, and because you are one of us by proxy, should celebrate our survival from a big car bomb with some vanilla wafers."

"Nope," Leonard said. "Ain't gonna happen. I got hungry last night, and I felt I needed a personal celebration."

"You ate them all?" Brett said.

"Everything but the sack, and I licked that."

"You turd," Brett said.

"And there are no more Dr Peppers. I had a kind of festival of life."

48

Marvin wanted to go back with us, but we made him feel bad about his leg and told him what a burden he would be and it was best he stayed out of action; it was true, of course. We did get some information we needed from him, though, and then we were in Leonard's car and he drove us back to East Texas in a two-and-a-half-day run, except for a four-hour stop in Cross Plains, Texas, where we slept a couple hours in a motel, and then we had to go over and see the Robert E. Howard house because Leonard liked his Conan stories and wouldn't hear of passing it up. I tried to explain to him that we were in a hurry because we had to find and shoot someone, but he wasn't moved, so we did a tour there and then got back on the road.

In the car Leonard said, "I get killed, I know I've seen where one of my favorite authors lived and shot himself to death."

"You get killed, what you saw isn't going to matter."

"Good point," Leonard said.

◆

With the information we had gotten from Marvin, we drove to my place briefly to get a few things, including a sawed-off shotgun, handguns, and a deer rifle. Then we drove over to No Enterprise in the dead of night, on out to where Marvin told us Conners lived. As Marvin had explained, it was out in the country some, and you could take a road that went up a hill, and you could look down on Conners' place, which was on a few acres with a little pond and a lot of junked cars that in the night looked like huge insects. We drove up there behind a little clutch of pines and some gnarly persimmon trees and sat. There were no lights in the house, which meant Conners could be asleep, but there wasn't a cop car in the yard, so we figured he wasn't home yet. Probably out doing something corrupt.

Being true professionals, and having driven really far, we both fell asleep.

When we awoke the day was bright and the sun was high. I looked out the windshield between the trees and saw the house looked the same. Still no cop car. We got out and crapped in the bushes and wiped on napkins we had in the car, and a little later on we took pee breaks and drank some bottled water and peed some more. That's the trouble when you're an over-forty tough guy. You have to pee a lot.

We got out of the car and washed our hands with some of the bottled water, and washed our faces, and tried to figure if we were well hid up on the hill, and decided as long as no one came up the little hunting road, we were snug as bugs in a rug. From down there, Conners' house, the only way we could be seen was if someone was looking for us.

We had some vanilla cookies with us, and a couple of cold burritos, and we ate those for lunch and drank some more of the water. If our guy didn't show soon, we'd be out of food, water, and napkins on which to wipe our asses.

A hawk flew into a tree above us, and we looked up at it and it looked down at us. We didn't worry it any. It was a large hawk and it cast a big shadow in the cold, bright day. Bored with us, it flew off.

We took turns taking walks along the hunting road to keep our circulation up, and then we took turns sleeping in the backseat of the car while the other watched the house below.

After a couple of hour naps, I felt pretty good, and got a paperback of an Andrew Vachss novel Leonard had in the car and read from that, and then it was his turn, and he read from it, losing my place in the process.

The sun dipped down and the night soaked in, and it got cold. I had slipped out of my jacket during the day, but now I was in it again, and we climbed out of the car and eased down among the trees, closer to the edge of the hill, and looked at the house and waited for some kind of revelation.

Leonard pulled his jacket around him and hunched his shoulders. He reached into his coat pocket and took out a blackjack and gave it to me. He said, “I got one, now you got one.”

“We are same alike,” I said.

“Only I am a handsome black color, and you are white of skin and small of dick.”

“Except for that, we’re same alike.”

Another hour or so passed, and then we saw headlights on the road below, coming toward the house. The road ran past the house, but it didn’t go far before it dead-ended, so we figured this had to be our man.

Sure enough, the car was a cop car and it pulled in the drive, and two men got out, dressed in cop clothes and holstered guns. One of them was Conners. He had looked big to me before, but recently I had seen Big Guy and he made everyone look small, even Conners. The guy with him was short and fat, but he had broad shoulders and carried himself in a manner that gave the impression he might be a load if you messed with him.

We, of course, were going to mess with both of them.

The fat guy was carrying a six-pack. They went inside the house.

Leonard said, “Ain’t that a shame. Man of the law buying beer, carrying it around in his patrol car.”

“Let’s go down and see can we have a little talk with them, maybe set them right on their civic duty.”

“All right.”

“But we don’t shoot anybody. I’m all worn out on shooting. At least until we get to our gal.”

“I will do my best,” Leonard said.

◆

Lights came on in the house as we walked down the hill and the lights were all concentrated in one place, and there was a thin white curtain at the window in the lighted room. We could see their shadows moving across the back of the curtain and eased up close to the house with our guns in hand.

I crept up to the window and looked. I could see through a crack in the curtain. They were sitting at a table and Conners was saying something that was making the fat man laugh.

Leonard slipped away from the window and went around back. I ducked under the window and slid over to the front porch and went up on it and nudged back the screen door and touched the knob, seeing if it was locked. It wasn't.

I took a deep breath, carefully turned the knob, and gently pressed the door back and edged in and then closed it without really pushing it all the way shut. Now I could hear them talking and I could see a slit of light that let me know there was a doorway and hallway and that the hallway led into the kitchen. I looked across the room, letting my eyes adjust, then made my approach through the opening across the way and down the hall. When I got to the lighted door I saw that the back door was at the far end of the hall, and that's where Leonard was. If it had been unlocked, he would have already been in.

With the gun held ready, I peeked around the corner and saw the fat man had his back to me and Conners was crossing to the refrigerator. I walked across the open doorway with my eyes on them, but made it all the way across without being seen. I tiptoed to the back door and figured out the lock by touch, and was able to twist it so that the sound it made was hardly noticeable. Then I opened the door and Leonard came in.

We went down the hall, and then with me in front, we stepped into the kitchen. When we did, Conners, who was coming back from the fridge, saw us and started to draw his gun. I said, "I wouldn't, unless you want a hole in your belly."

The fat man with his back to us dropped his hand to his holster. Leonard said, "That goes for you too, fat boy."

49

Leonard switched his gun to his other hand and reached in his pocket and pulled out the little blackjack and hit fat boy across the back of the neck hard enough to make him fall out of his chair and land on one knee.

"Goddamn," the fat man said, holding the back of his neck. "That hurt."

"No joke," Leonard said. "That's to show we mean business. We been shot at, beat on, nearly drowned, and had the shit scared out of us by some guns and Big Guy and a dead alligator, so we're in no mood to screw around."

Conners was still standing. I had my gun pointed at him. Leonard reached from behind and took Fat Boy's pistol away.

I said to Conners, "Unfasten your gun belt and let it drop."

While he did that, I kept my pistol pointed at him. When the belt hit the floor, I said, "Kick it my way."

He did and I picked it up and slung the belt over my shoulder, his gun at my back.

"Sit down, Conners," I said.

"Get up, fat man," Leonard said. "Find the chair."

When they were both seated, I went over and leaned on the refrigerator, said, "You know we heard you kind of set things up for shooters for the Dixie Mafia."

"They don't call themselves that," Conners said.

"I don't care if they call themselves the Dixie Bowling League. You know what I mean."

"You say," Conners said.

"Don't he love to talk?" Leonard said. "Hey, fat boy, ain't you got nothin' to say?"

“I don’t know a thing,” the fat man said. “I did, I wouldn’t tell you.”

“I think you would,” Leonard said, and swung the blackjack again, hitting Fat Boy on the neck, knocking him out of the chair.

“You just stay on the floor,” Leonard said. “It’ll save you the trouble of getting up.”

“You’re tough with that sap in your hand,” Conners said. “You wouldn’t be so tough without it.”

Leonard put the sap in his coat pocket and took off his coat. “We can see.”

“Nope,” I said. “I know you can whip him.”

“Yeah, but he don’t,” Leonard said.

The fat man on the ground said, “Conners would tie you in a knot.”

“See,” Leonard said. “He don’t know it either. Get up, Conners. Let’s you and me dance.”

“Not a good idea,” I said. “Having a macho queer moment. Don’t do it.”

Conners got up and I decided I wouldn’t shoot him. I pointed the gun at the fat man on the ground. “You crawl over this way a piece.”

Conners came around the table. Leonard moved a little to the side of the table, and then they were facing each other, six feet apart. Conners hulked over Leonard, though Leonard’s shoulders were easily as broad as his.

Conners had his hands up. So did Leonard. They stood that way for a long moment. Leonard said, “You waitin’ on an engraved invitation?”

Conners moved then, swung. Leonard ducked under it and hit Conners in the nuts with a right uppercut, then he swiveled and kicked at the inside of Conners’ leg, catching him just above the ankle. It brought him down.

Conners did a push-up and Leonard let him. When Conners was up, he said, “Them chink tricks ain’t gonna help you none.”

“They seem to be working all right,” Leonard said.

Conners came again, throwing a right cross that was so slow you could have gone out and bought a paper and been back in time to dodge it. It went over Leonard's right shoulder, and Leonard kicked out and caught Conners on the side of the leg, mid-thigh. The nerve cluster there lit up and Conners went down with a yelp. When he hit the floor, Leonard kicked him in the jaw. Conners fell on his back and groaned.

"You can get up if you want to," Leonard said.

I will say this, Conners could have just lain there, but he didn't. He got up and came again, and this time Leonard moved to the right and jabbed right-handed and caught Conners over the eye enough to make him step back, and then it was like a wolf at the slaughter. Leonard hooked Conners in the belly with a left, and then it was a double right jab to the face, and finally Leonard kicked out with his front leg and caught Conners in the lower abdomen and sent him flailing back against the table, which crashed underneath his weight, causing the fat man to slide on the floor and out of the way.

Conners lay in the wreckage of the table, bleeding from the mouth.

Leonard looked at Fat Boy. "Now, how about you?"

The fat man shook his head.

"Damn skippy," Leonard said, then looked at me. "That's what I meant to do to that big guy."

"Me too," I said, "but it didn't work out."

"Yeah, I just couldn't get warmed up."

"Was that it?"

Leonard toed the fat man a little, making him roll over on the floor so he could get to the refrigerator. He found a can of beer in there and brought it out and popped the top and took a foam-dripping swig. "There, assholes. I drink your beer. I kick your ass. And you will give us some information."

* * *

When Conners and the fat boy were back in their chairs, Leonard took the sap out of his pocket, said, "Just so you know, I'm ready to warm you up again."

“Tell us about the hit folk,” I said. “We’re tired of getting shot at. Tell us about who you sent after us, and just to make it easy on you, don’t say you don’t know what we’re talking about. Just talk or I’m going to give you to Leonard again.”

“We just do as we’re told,” Conners said.

“And why is that?” I said.

“Why do you think?”

“Money” I said, “and now that you’re in, you don’t want someone coming after you, am I right?”

“Something like that.”

“But you’re a bigger dog in all this than you’ve let on. You, and probably your fat friend here—certainly your fat friend—you pick the hitters, so you’re pretty well connected. What the fuck is your name, fat friend?”

“Sykes,” he said.

“I prefer Fat Boy,” I said. “Now, how goes it, Conners? How’s it work?”

“I’ve made some connections over the years,” Conners said. “I’m a cop. You meet people that know people, and you find you can make deals.”

“Sweet deals.”

Conners nodded.

“So, to get right to the fuckin’, no foreplay where is the woman you hired to kill us?”

“Woman?”

“Yep. She hit one of our pards, and blew up Hirem’s kid and girlfriend, and put me and Leonard in a hospital for a while, and just so you know, we’re mad.”

Conners smiled. “Vanilla Ride. I didn’t even know it was a woman. I got her contact a couple years back. She’s made ten hits for what you call the Dixie Mafia. She’s made hits for others. Made them through me. Sometimes those hits are more than one person. You two are supposed to be dead.”

“It wasn’t from want of trying,” I said.

“I’ve never even seen her, or a lot of the hitters. I got contacts, I told you.”

"Tell us how to contact Vanilla Ride. Me and Leonard thought we'd drop in, say hello."

"I contact her by mail. No e-mail. No phone number. I drop her a letter from a false address to a P.O. box, and the letter has names on it, some general information, where these people are. Then we get a FedEx from her with the names we gave her and she's got a line drawn through them when the job is done, and then the big dogs pay her at that P.O. box. She, huh? A woman. Now that's something. I thought Vanilla Ride was some big guy with a shotgun. And you guys, you were on her list with lines drawn through your names, drawing flies somewhere. That's what I was thinking, what I was hoping."

"She speculated a bit too much," Leonard said. "We're still here. Tired and pissed off, but here. She was on our tail, but she got cocky."

"Got a question," I said. "Did Vanilla Ride return the money?"

"No, not yet," Conners said. "Someday it'll just turn up on the right doorstep. No one will see who dropped it, it'll just show up. She knows everyone in the business, where they live, what they do. That's what makes her so deadly. Damn, a woman. Sounds like my kind of broad."

"What's the address?" I said.

"I give it to you, you'll kill us," Conners said.

"You don't give it to us I'll kill you," I said. "I'm in no mood to play games, man. Give me the address."

"You'll let us go?" Conners said.

"I don't want any more blood on my hands than I already have."

Leonard looked at me. I said, "I mean that, Leonard."

"Yeah," Leonard said. "I know you do."

"He wants us dead," Sykes said.

"Yep," Leonard said. "I do."

"So how's it gonna be?" Conners said.

"It's gonna be nice enough, you give us that address."

"It's a post office box in Arkansas."

"All right. Give it to us, and let me just say this. If we go on a wild-goose chase, or anyone gets on our tail, we will come right back to you and kill your asses dead, and then shoot you daily for a week just to make ourselves happy. Tell us what we want to know, this is a way you get out of it scot-free, but you screw with us, we hold a grudge."

"Hell, I hope you find her," Conners said. "No idea she was a woman, but you find her, from what I know of her work, you'll wish you hadn't."

"You tell us how to find her, you get to live," I said. "Hell, man, it's your choice."

Leonard looked at me like a puzzled dog, said, "They hired Vanilla Ride for the Dixie Mafia. She tried to kill us. What makes these assholes so special?"

"I want who hit our man and those kids and took the money and tried to blow us up, so I'm willing to trade."

"How do we know your word is good?" Conners said.

"You know as much as we know yours is good," I said. "Make a choice. Now."

50

Stopping by the all-night station/store in No Enterprise, we bought some traveling goods and filled up the gas tank and I looked for the guy in the garage, but he and his fuck book were not present and the door was locked. It was too late to work and too late to read. Maybe he was home doing what he had been reading about. Most likely he had the book in his left hand and himself in his right.

One of the things we bought was some bright blue stationery and envelopes. I wrote down the address Conners had given us on it, put it to Vanilla Ride, and then I wrote Conners' address, which he had been so kind to give us, in the left-hand corner as the sender. Since they couldn't phone her or find her any quicker than we could, I wanted to get things started. I wrote "Hi" on a piece of the blue stationery and folded it up and put it in the bright blue envelope and laid it on the dash of the car, waiting until we could buy a stamp.

We started for Arkansas, cruising along not listening to music, just quiet for a long time. We had left Conners and Sykes tied up in their kitchen with lamp cords and stripped sheets. I figured they'd work themselves loose in a couple hours or so.

Leonard finally broke the silence, said, "You know that was stupid, letting them live?"

"I do. But I think I have to draw the line somewhere."

"You draw the line on them but you're traveling all the way to Arkansas to kill Vanilla Ride."

"It seems a little more personal."

"I see them all as one big nest."

"I'm sure you're right, but I guess I've decided to focus my anger all on one, the one put the bomb under the car and killed Tonto and those kids and gave us a stay in the hospital."

“All right,” Leonard said. “But you know those guys aren’t through with us.”

“Yep.”

“We’ll deal with them again.”

“Yep.”

“I thought Conners was at the top of our list. You said to put stars by his name.”

“Yep.”

“So why didn’t we just nip it in the bud?”

“I’ve tried my best to explain.”

“And your explanation sucks.”

“I just couldn’t shoot them out of their chairs like that, in cold blood.”

“What if Vanilla Ride is sitting in a chair?”

“I’ll ask her to stand up.”

“You’ll be killing a woman.”

“She may be of that gender, but she’s no woman to me. I’m not even sure she’s human. Conners and Sykes do it for money, and Vanilla Ride gets paid, but, man, I got a feeling she loves that stuff. She liked baiting Tonto along like that, getting him to the point where he thought he was gonna get him a piece, and then, wham, he’s out of there. That’s cold, brother. And those kids.”

“I still don’t see a difference. She took the money. In the end, it’s all about money and they all want the money.”

“Maybe, Leonard, truth is, in the end, there’s no difference at all. Them. Us. We’re all killers, and in the end, the worms sort us out.”

◆

There was no real address for Vanilla Ride, just the P.O. box Conners had told us about, and the rest of the address was a town called Sylvester, Arkansas. What I had in mind was staking out the post office, waiting till she came to collect her mail. It wasn’t exactly a plan up there with Robert E. Lee, but then again, it was me and Leonard. We’re not dumb, but strategy is not our long suit.

It was about three hours to Arkansas, and it was still night when we got there, and we stopped at a station and put more gas in the car and checked our map to make sure we were heading the right way, then pushed on, like Mounties after our man, or in this case, our woman.

Daylight was breaking as we drove into the mountains amongst the trees, and there was a light frost on our windshield. The roads grew narrow, the trees thickened. Leonard rolled down the window to get some air, to keep himself alert, so as not to drive off a cliff. He let it blow cold on his face for a while, then touched the electric window button and sent it up. I looked ahead at the sun-stained road and the countryside and listened to the hum of the heater.

51

Sylvester looks almost unreal, a kind of holdout from frontier days, but the truth is it isn't all that old. It was founded some fifty years ago and built to resemble a frontier town, and they've kept it that way. Traffic was pretty intense for a place that claimed twenty thousand people, but the traffic would be the tourists, because there's a nice lake nearby with plenty of fish and the scenery is beautiful. It's the kind of place people come to rest and not Jet-Ski or mountain-climb or party all night. There are a few restaurant clubs, and from what I could see they catered to the older set as well. We parked and headed toward the post office. I read on a sign for a place called the Buckin' Horse Saloon that it opened at four for dinner, had entertainment, and closed at ten. If the horse bucked, it did it quietly and at reasonable hours.

At the post office, which was one open window commanded by an old man in a plaid shirt with a postal name tag (Jake), I bought a stamp for our bright blue envelope and mailed it. We walked around the post office and saw there were rows and rows of mailboxes with thick glass windows in them so you could see when you got mail, and finally we located the one that went with our envelope.

"All right," Leonard said. "She has to come here."

"Except she won't," I said.

"Surrogate?"

"Of course. She'd be too easy to find otherwise. Why do you think I got that bright blue envelope?"

"Ah, but what if she gets lots of mail and whoever picks it up mixes it with other envelopes, and we're watching from a distance. What if it's night?"

"Oh. Well, I didn't think about that."

Leonard sighed. "Guess we got what we got."

◆

We walked across the street to a hotel and Leonard stayed outside to watch the post office while I went inside. At the desk I talked the clerk into giving us a window facing the street, so we could enjoy the view, and then I took Leonard's spot on the sidewalk and he walked back to the car for our little bit of supplies.

For the next week we hung out in that hotel room, looking at the post office out the window, hoping we'd be able to spot the blue envelope come out in someone's hot little hands. From time to time one of us would walk over to the post office and look through the little window of her mailbox, and we could see the blue envelope was there, waiting, and no one had been in to get it.

We took shifts so one or the other could go out and buy food. We also bought underwear and we didn't shave, under the odd notion that maybe if Vanilla Ride saw us she wouldn't recognize us unshaved. It was lame, but again, it was what we had.

First day we were there we started seeing some interesting-looking guys showing up at the post office, watching for what we were watching for, I guess. But had they been smart enough to send her a brightly colored envelope? I thought not.

They couldn't hang around the place any more than us, but they did get a room in, you guessed it, our hotel. I passed one of them, a lean, greasy-haired fellow, on my way out to pick up some sandwiches. He was sitting in the lobby, and when he saw me, he watched me go out, and I didn't let him know I was watching him. Across the street, in front of the post office, another guy sat in a car, getting out now and then to feed quarters into the parking meter. He was tall and fat, with very little hair on his head. Sometimes he moved the car and parked elsewhere, but he was always parked so he could see the post office. I guess the other two were out buying sandwiches and underwear, same as us. But they all swapped out from time to time, and it was my guess they weren't lawmen and they weren't from the IRS and I doubted they were the men in black since their wardrobes were varied. All I was certain of was I had seen four of them over a period of time.

Back in the room with our sandwiches, Leonard said, "You know, this sucks. Those guys were sent here from Conners, and had we put a hole in his head, him and his fat friend, we'd be sitting here without contention, except for Vanilla Ride herself. But now, thanks to you, we got her and them."

"I know."

"You don't mind?"

"Hell, yeah, I mind," I said. "But I did what I could do, Leonard. That's it. I don't know what to tell you. It's my flawed nature."

Leonard shook his head and patted me on the shoulder. "I love my little idealist. In a gay sort of manly way, of course."

"Of course."

"Look at it this way: if we'd killed those two, you wouldn't have to kill these four. Or, worse yet, get killed by them."

"You are a goddamn sage, Leonard."

52

One day we're in the hotel room, looking out the window, having sucked down too much coffee, my personal plumbing backed up to where my insides felt like a brick factory, and I'm thinking a little fruit juice might be good, when Leonard, who is nibbling around the edges of a vanilla cookie, said, "These guys, they here for us or Vanilla Ride?"

"Maybe both," I said. "Could be they've decided she needs to go too. Maybe because she hasn't returned the money."

"You think she'll keep it?"

I shook my head. "I don't think that's her plan. I think she's a professional. But I also think the people she's dealing with are falling apart. The talent they've sent out has cost them big-time, and it would probably be nice to get the money back, but they want us because we're a couple of amateurs who have survived everything they've got, including Vanilla Ride. My guess is they haven't paid her because she didn't finish the job, because we didn't die, and now she's got their money on top of having not wiped us out."

"She's got more money than they think," Leonard said.

"That too."

"So, Hirem lied about the amount of money, which was probably because there was extra he was going to give the Mummy and his friend to make sure his son got a good deal with the FBI, and then they got whacked, and then we got the money, and then Vanilla Ride got the money, and she's thinking, well, they don't pay me, I got a little windfall. They do pay me, I keep the rest."

"That's the way I figure," I said. "And the Dixie Mafia is thinking they're running low on guys, and they aren't considered such bad dudes if they can't stop a couple of yokels from East

Texas, and if they just quit, that looks bad too, so they got to keep them coming. And now, since Vanilla didn't finish the job, and we're on her tail, they're starting to see her as expendable. That way they don't pay her and she's dead and they're rid of her. I bet on top of all that, finding out she was a woman chapped their ass."

"If only she had been black," Leonard said.

"Yep, that would have been aces."

"And gay."

"Better yet. And we may have it all wrong," I said. "Guys following us could be just very persistent insurance salesmen."

53

One night I'm at the window, and the brilliance of the streetlights is all there is in the way of action, and what do my wandering eyes see but a lemon-colored Volkswagen pulling up at the curb in what might be called a sprightly manner, or what I might call in my East Texas vernacular, pretty goddamn fast. A young man, gangly as a puppet, with a dark mustache and a cap from under which shoulder-length black hair hung, got out and went into the post office, walking heavy.

I looked at my nifty Warner Bros. Looney Tunes watch with all the great cartoon characters on it with my flashlight and saw the time was three a.m. The post office lobby was always open. You could go in at any time. Just an old-fashioned town with an old-fashioned mailbox connected to an old-fashioned killer who liked to live quietly in Arkansas. I figured not a lot of folk were out and about at three a.m. in a town like this, and if they were, how many just decided it was necessary to check the mail at this time of night?

It could happen, but it made me curious.

He came out quickly and got in the Volkswagen and started up the hill. I yelled Leonard awake, and since he was already dressed, he only had to roll into his shoes, and then the two of us were on our way downstairs, pulling our coats over our holstered handguns and our manly buttocks.

The fat guy had his turn in the lobby chairs, and when he saw us he stood up and a magazine fell out of his lap and flapped to the ground. Leonard gave him a little wave. We went out and got in our car, Leonard driving, and he cranked it up and started up the hill in the direction the Volkswagen had gone. I looked back and saw the fat man was on the curb with a cell phone to his ear. They weren't any niftier than we were, which in real life is often the case. There just aren't that many James Bonds or Mike

Hammers outside of the pages of books or the brightness of film.

Of course, Vanilla Ride, now she was another matter altogether. That woman was spooky like Tonto was spooky, only more so, because she had killed Tonto right when he thought he was about to visit the fun house.

That's just mean.

◆

The road wound up through the mountains, and at one point, going around a curve, I could look back through a split in the trees and see car lights moving along the road behind us. I said, "I figure that's them."

"Yeah," Leonard said, "that is some good deduction there, Sherlock."

We hadn't caught up with the Volkswagen, which had to be hauling some serious ass, and we weren't all that far ahead of our friends the ugly thugs. I said, "When we get around this corner coming up, let me out."

"Are you nuts?"

"If it goes well, I'll catch up with you at the bottom of the hill. If you look back and see it isn't me running down the hill to leap into your arms, and instead it's them in their car, or even on foot, then I suggest you drive like you're in a stock-car race."

I climbed over the seat and pulled the backseat down and got the sawed-off shotgun out of the trunk and a box of shells. When we climbed up the hill and got to where it curved, Leonard stopped and let me out, said, "Nice knowing you, dumb ass."

"You just watch for me."

He motored away and I got back in the woods a bit and hunkered down and waited. More time went by than I expected, or so it seemed. Out here there were no streetlights and the moonlight wasn't much, and it took me a while to start to adjust to being able to see in the dark. My mouth was dry, and hunkering down like that was starting to hurt my calves, and I was about to switch positions when I saw headlights coming and then I heard the roar of a car.

When I could see the car well enough to determine that it was the car I had seen our trackers in, I braced the shotgun against me and waited until the car was almost even with me, and fired a little in advance, the blast lighting up the night and knocking the right front tire to shreds. The car swerved and twisted and threw up dirt as it went over the other side of the road and down a hill and out of sight. I heard a crash, trotted across the road and looked down. It was about a thirty-foot drop, but they had most likely rolled most of the way, and the slant was just enough so there weren't a lot of hard falls on the trip down, at least not as hard as I would have liked. The car was lying on the driver's side, and the right-side passenger doors were heaved open, and out came the four dark figures. No, seven. They had been stuffed in that car tight as impacted turds in a colon. One of them fell out on the ground, then got up to one knee and stayed there a moment. I could see the car was near a little deer path down there that dipped into the woods and ran back in the other direction, up toward the road where they had been driving. It wasn't much of a path, but if they could get the car upright, and if it still ran, they might be able to drive out of there.

I turned and started running up the road as fast my legs would carry me. I could tell when I was about halfway up the hill that I needed to get back to road work because my heart was pounding against my ribs hard enough to break them and my vision was a little blurry. I looked back and saw one of the thugs coming up over the edge of the hill, carrying a long gun of some kind. I took to the woods and went along there, getting whacked in the face with limbs for a while, and then when I was sure the road was sloping down, I stumbled out of the woods and went down the hill where I saw Leonard's car, and Leonard outside of it, standing by the passenger side with the deer rifle.

I huffed out some cold air and waved the shotgun above my head and started down at a speed I didn't know I had in me. Leonard got in the car and cranked it up, and when I made the passenger side, I was nearly out of wind. Climbing in, closing the door, I looked over at Leonard, said, "There are seven of them."

He said, "You dumb ass."

54

“Now where’s the Volkswagen?” Leonard said. “You’ve caused us to lose it.”

“But I managed to knock the bad guys off a hill and now they’re on foot.”

“Okay I guess that’s something. You get a pass. Seven, huh?”

“It was like a goddamn clown car.”

We continued driving and where there hadn’t been roads going off the main road there were now plenty. Leonard said, “He took one of these, or we would have caught up to him by now. I’m driving this thing like it’s got a real engine in it.”

Pausing at a dirt road that turned to the right, I got out of the car and bent down and tried to check the ground in what little light there was. Finally, Leonard backed the car so that the lights shone on the ground, and then I could see there were recent tire marks.

I got in the car, and Leonard said, “Well, Hawkeye?”

“There are tire tracks that look fresh,” I said. “It could be him. It could be someone else, but it could be him.”

“It’s what we got,” Leonard said, and started down the road. It was dark down there and the trees ate up the sides of the road until there was only room for the car, and then we came to a bridge that looked as if the headless horseman ought to be on the other side of it. We rattled over it and went around a curve that climbed through some trees with winter-dried moss hanging down. When we broke over the hill there was a clearing and an A-frame house, not too big, sitting at the peak of the hill and we could see the Volkswagen parked in the yard. There was a little road that went into the trees on the right and there was one on the left. Leonard took the one on the right and we drove down it a piece and found a place where the road was a little wide and parked on the right-hand side and got out, me with the shotgun and him with the rifle. We were carrying our handguns and we each had a nifty blackjack and a jaunty stride.

When I loaded up the shotgun, Leonard said, “Here, you’re a better shot. I should have the shotgun.”

We swapped, and I gave him the shells. I took the box of shells for the deer rifle and put the whole box in my coat pocket.

“How long will it take them to get up here on foot?” Leonard said.

“A lot longer yet,” I said, “and then they have to be smart like us and look at the tracks.”

“I’m going to give them that much smarts,” Leonard said. “Let’s get this over with. Maybe we can be in and out and in our car and down the hill before they realize it’s us coming back and they’ll be so startled they won’t shoot at us.”

* * *

We started crawling up the hill, down close to the earth, in line with the Volkswagen. It took about a century for us to make it that way, but we thought it might be preferable to being spotted and shot. When we got to the Volkswagen, I stood up behind it and glanced in. My blue envelope was on the seat next to the stationery I had written “Hi” on, and beside it was a black mustache and a cap with a headful of black hair.

I hunkered back down behind the Volkswagen, said, “Unless the driver has some kind of skin disease and his mustache fell off in the altogether along with all the hair in his hat, the guy who picked up Vanilla Ride’s mail was Vanilla Ride.”

“A master of disguise.”

“Well, I think maybe for us she doesn’t have to be all that masterful.”

“That’s certainly true. Now what?”

“I think the now what is I get my wind back.”

“Too many late dinners and not enough exercise, Hap. I’ve been telling you that.”

“Yes, you have. Now shut up.”

“So, in a couple hours when you get your wind back, what do we do?”

“We split up. You go right and I go left.”

“That’s it?” Leonard said. “You complained to me that we didn’t have a plan last time, and now your plan is you go one way and I go another.”

“Okay, what’s your plan?”

Leonard was quiet for a moment. “I go left and you go right.”

55

We were about to start our plan when we heard boots on gravel, looked up into the smiling face of Vanilla Ride, standing by the Volkswagen pointing an automatic pistol at us. It certainly seemed to be a big automatic. She had come up like a ghost while we were putting our war room together. She had her golden hair tied back in a ponytail, and she looked like some kind of female goddess of war.

"I have systems on top of systems," she said. "I knew you were here the moment you entered my perimeter."

"Damn," Leonard said. She got a determined look on her face, like she was about to pass an anvil through her bowels, extended the automatic, ready to pop us, and then a shot rang out and the window on the Volkswagen above me splintered and some of the glass rained down. Vanilla took a turn around the Volkswagen on one end, and Leonard and I scrambled around to the other side. We ended up behind a tire, close as lovers, and Vanilla was behind the other tire. When I looked at her, she jerked the automatic at us.

"Truce," I said. "They want us too."

She studied me for a long moment.

"You're wondering if you can trust us," I said, "and I know this isn't much right now, but we keep our word. Truce. For now, anyway."

After a moment, Vanilla Ride nodded, said, "I can kill you anytime I want."

There was an explosion as a low bullet caught the tire we were behind and rang off the rim and the pressure of the exploding tire blew us back about three feet. Vanilla darted for the A-frame, and Leonard grabbed me by the coat collar and started dragging me. I let him, clinging to my deer rifle like a child with a teddy bear.

When we were inside and the door was slammed, glass began to come out of the windows as shots rained down. It was a two-story house with a short stairway up to what was more a loft than a room. The middle floor had a low section and some standard couches around it. Except for some exercise equipment off to the side of the living room, the place looked as impersonal as a cheap motel room.

I got off my belly and on my knees and looked at Vanilla Ride. She was crawling across the floor toward the corner. She popped the flooring up there with remarkable deftness, took out a long, sleek black weapon with a very large banana clip, and she pulled a spare clip out of there too. She crawled back to where the glass was still dropping from the big window. The glass splattered around her like falling stars and she stood up and let the spare clip drop to the floor and cut loose with the gun. Down below, where their shots were coming from, the dirt leaped up in heaps and the trees whipped and then she went down again, behind the high windowsill where Leonard and I were lurking, but on the opposite end. We were bookends. Same alike. Except we were guys and she was a girl and she had a big gun that would shoot faster than ours.

“They got their car out of the ditch,” Leonard said.

“It was more of a drop-off than a ditch,” I said. “I didn’t think they could turn it off its side and drive it out. Not that easily.”

“You were wrong,” Leonard said.

“Yep,” I said.

“You didn’t do as good as you thought.”

“Nope.”

“Kind of typical, isn’t it?”

“It is,” I said.

“You see, they got it running, and now they are after our ass, and here we are with”—Leonard turned and looked at Vanilla Ride—“her.”

Vanilla looked at us and smiled. Damn, she was a beauty. “How have you two lived this long?” she said.

“Our sterling personalities,” Leonard said. “We charm just about everyone.”

I eased over so I was near the corner of the windowsill and the wall, and then I raised up. I could taste the cold air coming in through the shattered window and smell the pines down the hill, and I could see one of the men coming along where the hill spread up toward the house, and though there wasn't much light, I could see him well enough. He was the greasy-haired guy and he was stooped slightly, his head down, running for the Volkswagen, the only real cover he had.

I rose up and beaded in and shot and hit him in the top of the head and knocked him rolling down the rise.

I sat down behind the wall and looked at Leonard. He said, "Haven't lost your touch."

Vanilla Ride smiled at me.

Leonard said, "You wait until there's some real light, he can shoot the balls off a dog tick."

"My guess is they won't wait until it's light," I said. "They like it better this way. Daylight comes we can see them better from here than they can see us, and we got cover. In the light, they got dick, so they'll either cash in now or come soon. I vote that they come ahead."

Leonard looked at Vanilla Ride, said, "They may not even be after you, though I'd say that shot hit the Volkswagen was close to all of us."

"It doesn't matter," Vanilla Ride said. "They've invaded my home. So have you."

"But we have a truce, right?" I said.

"You came to kill me, didn't you?"

"That's right, we did."

"You're not too good."

"We're tougher and smarter than you think," I said. "Except for getting sneaked up on. That part, well, we're not so good."

"You want the money?"

"It's not about money," I said. "It doesn't even belong to us. You killed a couple of kids and a friend of ours."

"Business," she said.

"It didn't seem like business to us," I said.

She shifted slightly to a kneeling position, behind the wall. The gun she held shifted too. She said, “I don’t have any reason to believe you two about anything.”

“No, you don’t,” Leonard said. “But I will say this: I just saw one of those bozos cutting low across the bottom of the hill, moving to the left of the house. They’re trying to circle us. They got six and we got three, and we got the house, so in one way we’re better off. In another, they know where we are and we don’t know where they are, and there are more of them than there are of us. So that’s the situation. How’s it gonna be?”

Vanilla Ride was quiet for a few moments. She said, “I keep my word.”

“We keep ours,” Leonard said.

“Then we have to trust one another, don’t we?” she said.

“So we’re going to maintain the truce?” I said.

“Certainly,” she said.

◆

It wasn’t like I expected. They were brave. Either that or stupid. They came at us hard and they came at us quick. What they did was they opened up with automatic weapons that made the walls jump apart and a splinter from the wall popped into my cheek and it felt like fire. Without really thinking about it, Leonard and I crawled toward the center of the house, toward where the floor was lowered and the couches circled it. We crawled down in there and kept our heads ducked while the stuffings leaped out of the couch and things came off the walls and glass broke.

I looked up once, and there was Vanilla Ride, standing up, bullets buzzing around her like hornets, and she was letting down on that automatic weapon, and it didn’t even seem to jump in her hands, and I could see through the big open window where she was shooting that the ground was churning up, and I could see one body there where she had caught one of the guys, and then everything went silent. She hit the floor and the clip went away, and she pulled the other clip out and slipped it on the weapon smooth as a gigolo sliding on a condom.

The back door burst open with a kick and we raised up, saw a tough-looking guy with a shotgun. Leonard raised up and shot at him and missed. I lifted the rifle as the intruder's shotgun wheeled toward us, and just before I fired, I knew he had me beat, so I jumped and covered Leonard. The shot tore at the couch and I felt pellets hit my ass so hard one butt cheek slammed against the other. I came up scrambling and firing the rifle twice, and both shots hit the shotgunner as he pumped another load and I saw one of his eyes go big and red and then he was down and two were coming through the front window.

Vanilla Ride was no longer at the window. I wheeled around to shoot, but by this time Leonard was up, and he fired, caught one of them in the kneecap and he dropped with a yelp. Then a shot came from upstairs, and the other one took it through the right side of his head as he was stepping over the spot where the window had been. He seemed to lean against the sill, and then he turned his head slightly, like someone had called his name, sat down hard on the sill, dropping his weapon, his head falling forward in his lap. The guy Leonard had hit in the knee was screaming loudly. It was so loud and strange it made my skin knot up. He quit screaming when Vanilla Ride leaned over the stair railing and shot him through the head. He just lay quietly then, bleeding out.

"That leaves two," Vanilla Ride said.

56

“Someone’s got to die!” a voice called from outside.

“That would be you,” Leonard called out.

“Why don’t you chicken farts just come out and face us?” the voice said. “What’s stopping you?”

“Bullets,” Leonard yelled out.

“Chickenshits,” the voice called.

“Absolutely,” Leonard said. “Why don’t you just come and get us? We’ll put the coffee on.”

“We got two, you got three,” the voice said.

“You started with seven,” I said.

“Vanilla Ride,” the voice said, “we ain’t got nothing against you. We want them.”

“You fucked up my house,” she called out. “You nearly shot me trying to shoot them. You pick this moment to come after them. No. I think you’re ready to retire me because I know too much. Me and you, we aren’t friends.”

“I don’t have any friends,” the voice said.

“That makes us even,” Vanilla Ride said.

◆

They went silent out there and time slipped by slowly and the beginnings of light seeped in under the trees and rose up between them like a gentle flame. The back door was wide open, and it made me nervous, that and the big front window open as well. I moved once, just to see if I could make it to the back door, and a bullet plowed into the couch about a quarter inch from my face, so I got down and played it close to the floor, my ears perked.

This went on for a long time, and Leonard said, “Fuck it. Let’s you and me go get them.”

“You can’t hit the ass end of an elephant with a shotgun at two paces. That would be some shoot-out.”

“I can hit most anything,” Vanilla Ride said. “And you seem to be a good shot.”

I looked up at her on the landing, in the shadows.

“With a long gun,” I said.

“What about a short one?”

“Nowhere as good.”

“But he can hit stuff,” Leonard said. “His bad is someone else’s good. He’s got an instinct.”

“My instinct is to stay right here,” I said. “I don’t like where this is going.”

“I’m tired of waiting,” Vanilla Ride said. “You can go, or you can stay.” Then she turned her attention away from me and yelled outside. “Hey, you still out there, loudmouth?”

“I’m out here,” came the voice.

“You two, you show yourself, handguns only,” she said. “I’ll meet you outside, guns by our sides.”

“You mean that?”

“Hell yeah, I got better things to do with the morning.”

“Oh, you aren’t going to end up doing all that much today, Vanilla.”

“I guess we can find out, swizzle dick.”

There was a long moment of silence. Then the voice yelled back. “Deal.”

“Damn,” I said to Leonard. “You know I got to do it now.”

“Yeah, I know. I’ll do it, you know that, but—”

“You can’t shoot for shit.”

“Bingo,” Leonard said.

I took a deep breath and put the rifle on the floor and pulled the automatic from my belt. Leonard said, “If you get killed, I’m running out that back door like a goddamn rabbit.”

“No you won’t.”

“Yes I will.”

“No. You’re a macho queer.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. Maybe. Christ, Hap, let them come for us.”

“Either way scares the hell out of me,” I said. “I’m always scared. I’m not like you.”

“Hey, I’m scared. You get killed, John doesn’t take me back, where am I to stay?”

Vanilla Ride came down the stairs carrying her automatic pistol in her hand. I eased away from the couch and along the wall near the window. I said to her, “Think they’ll keep their word?”

“Of course not,” she said.

Easing over to the edge of the window on her side, she called out: “There will be two of us, and two of you.”

“That sounds good,” came the voice from the dark.

“One of us will step out, and you’ll show one of you, with a handgun only.”

“High noon,” the voice yelled out.

“High morning,” Vanilla Ride said. She stepped through the gap where the window had been. A tall man with dark hair came up over the rise. He had his hand down by his side. I could see a handgun in it. I stepped out, but kept close to the edge of the windowsill.

The other man came up over the rise. I could see his handgun. He held it in such a way that it was in front of him and resting against his thigh. The sun was still coming up, and though the sun in our eyes should have been a hazard, this early in the morning and coming through the trees it wasn’t so bright and all it did was outline our targets neatly.

“Let’s walk out a ways,” said the tall dark-haired man.

“They’re going to fuck with us,” Vanilla Ride said so only I could hear.

“But we’re going to go on out a ways in spite of that, aren’t we?” I said.

“We are,” she said. “I got to tell you, I always wanted to do this.”

“Not me,” I said, and I could feel my hands shaking. It was all I could do not to break and run.

“What happens we get killed?” she said. “What about your friend?”

“They’ll have hell coming in and getting him,” I said. “It won’t be any cakewalk, that you can depend on.”

“Good,” she said.

“Do we have to do this?” I said.

“No.”

“Then what the fuck are we doing?”

By now the two had spread out. One was going wide, in the direction of the Volkswagen, and I knew he was my guy, as he was on my side. The other guy going the other way, I decided not to think about him. He belonged to Vanilla Ride.

My guy brought his gun up and a shot went by my head so close I felt the heat from it. I jerked my automatic up and fired. If I hit him, he didn’t show it. He started running low along the ground, and I fired again. He did a kind of bunny hop and went down. I heard shots to my right, but I didn’t turn my head. I could still see out of the corner of my eye that Vanilla Ride was standing.

She said, “Goddamn,” and then my guy leaped forward from where he lay, grabbed at an automatic rifle he had planted earlier, in the dark, hid it there waiting to grab it and cheat. I stepped forward and took my time, aiming one-handed, the way I had been taught, not with two hands, and when he lifted up I shot him somewhere along the jawline. It took part of his face off and he rolled on his side and lost the rifle, but he came up then, as if the pain had given him a jolt of power. He stumbled forward. He had another handgun, drawn from under his coat, and he was coming toward me fast, his face seeming to drip. He fired a shot and I found myself standing sideways all of a sudden, looking in the wrong direction. And by the time I had turned, having realized I had been hit, he was firing again, and this time one of his shots punched my coat but missed me, and I took careful aim and fired, hitting him in the center of the chest, but he kept coming. I fired again, and he must have been firing too, because there seemed to be shots popping all over, and I’m thinking I missed, but he went down, propped on a knee. I shot him another time and his body jerked and he went to his right side and lay there, his ruined face in my direction, his body kind of horseshoed behind him.

Turning, I saw Vanilla Ride was standing with her arm to her side, her gun in her hand. Her man lay on the ground squirming, holding his groin.

“Right in the goober,” she said, and started walking toward him.

He saw her coming. One hand went away from his groin and clawed in the dirt for his dropped handgun. He never got to it before she stood over him and shot him twice in the head.

She came walking back toward me. I could see her right side was stained with blood. She didn’t seem to notice. My left arm had grown heavy, and then I felt as if it was being set on fire. The way she walked, the way she was coming toward me made me nervous. I said, “We still good?”

“We are,” she said, and walked right past me.

57

“If she hadn’t been good,” Leonard said, “I was going to shoot her.”

He was standing at the edge of the house with the deer rifle. He had gone out the back door. He said, “You’ll find the guy you shot, he’s also got a rifle shot in his chest.”

“I thought I missed.”

“Nope. You hit him. I just hit him again.”

“That was cheating,” Vanilla Ride said to Leonard. “Ganging up on the guy.”

“Damn straight,” Leonard said. “You think I’m going to let that motherfucker kill my brother?”

She grinned at him.

My knees buckled and I fell down.

* * *

Inside the house on the couch, Leonard looked at my wound. Vanilla Ride came over. She had removed her shirt and was wearing a sports bra and a bandage around her waist, different blue jeans. She said, “I got hit, but it went through.”

“He’s still got the bullet in his arm,” Leonard said, as he pulled the splinter out of my face.

She took hold of my arm, looked it over, making me wince. “You’ll be all right, tough guy. We got to push the bullet all the way through. It’s in the fat of your arm. You didn’t lose a lot of blood.”

“Any is too much … what did you say?”

“You’re lucky it missed the serious muscle,” she said.

“About that pushing it all the way through business,” I said.

She went away for a while and I lay on the couch, kind of going in and out. She came over and I looked up and she had a kitchen knife, about half of it glowed red-hot.

“Now wait just a goddamn minute,” I said.

“Hold him down,” she said.

Leonard got on top of me and kept my back pinned to the couch, held my injured arm down and at my side. “It’s for your own good, dumb ass,” he said.

“I hate you,” I said.

Vanilla Ride took the knife and stuck it quickly into the wound and pushed and I felt the knife touch the bullet inside of me, and then I passed out. When I woke up, she was cutting at the back of my arm, freeing the bullet. I passed out again.

When I came to I was bandaged up and sick to my stomach. There was a lot of sunlight now, but it was very cold. Leonard was sitting on the couch with the rifle across his knees. He said, “She’s gone,” and when he spoke a cloud of white mist came out of his mouth. “We should have killed her, I guess. She had it coming, Tonto, the kids and all. But she did help save our ass.”

“What?”

“Gone. She left us four hundred thousand dollars. Took the Volkswagen, told me to tell you if she was older, or you were younger, you might be her meat.”

“She said that?”

“She did.”

“But we came to kill her.”

“Doesn’t seem to hold it against us. I feel sort of mission unfinished, you know, but she patched you up, brother, so what was I gonna do?”

“What?”

“You keep saying that.”

It was because I was so stunned, I didn’t know what to say. After sitting there stunned for a moment, I found a few words. “The money. I don’t get it.”

Leonard patted the duffel bag, which was lying next to him on the couch. “Look, man. Focus. She gave me three hundred thousand to return to the Dixie Mafia, with her regards, and gave us a hundred thousand to keep, or pretty close to it—minus what the kids spent, we spent, and she spent. But, man, it’s still over ninety thousand. She kept a hundred thousand for herself.”

I sat up on the couch. “She trusted us to return the money?”

“I know. What you gonna do? She asked for my word.”

“And you gave it?”

“Of course.”

“And she accepted it?”

“Duh. I got the money, don’t I? What the fuck is wrong with your hearing?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “The world feels like a big banana.”

“What?” Leonard said.

“I don’t know,” I said. “It don’t mean nothing.”

“You’re delirious,” Leonard said.

“Maybe,” I said, and passed out again.

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It was a few days later and I had my arm in a sling, courtesy of a veterinarian Marvin knew who wouldn't report he had treated a gunshot wound. He said whoever had done the first aid had done a good job.

Anyway there I was in a sling and we were in No Enterprise sitting in the little station/cafe with connecting grease monkey shop. It was me and Leonard and Marvin Hanson, Conners and his fat friend, and two other guys. One of them was Cletus Jimson, and he was a fortyish guy with tattoos on his knuckles that I couldn't make out but were meant to be some kind of symbols. I guess they were Chinese, which, considering he was supposed to be a stone racist and the current head of the Dixie Mafia in this part of the country, seemed odd to me. Marvin had managed to get us in touch with him through Conners. The guy with Jimson had a lot of bulges in his coat. Some of them were muscles, some of them were guns. His head was shaved and he had a crease on the side of his head that looked to have been put there by a blunt instrument.

"So, you kill a bunch of our guys, and you want to come and make a truce?" Jimson said.

"That's about right," I said. "We also bring gifts."

"Gifts," Jimson said. "What kind of gifts?"

I had a box with me and it was tied with ribbon. I picked it up and put it on the table and he untied the ribbon and picked up the lid and looked inside. I knew what he was looking at. Three hundred thousand dollars.

"That's not a gift. That's what's owed me."

"Not by us," I said. "We sort of came into this deal sideways."

"Yeah?" Jimson said.

"Yeah," I said.

“He come over and pistol-whipped us,” Conners said.

“Actually, most of it was done with a blackjack if I remember correctly,” Leonard said. “Oh yeah, and there was that part where I just plain ole pure-dee whipped your black ass with assholes and elbows.”

“Yep,” I said. “That’s the way I remember it too.”

“So you brought me my money home,” Jimson said.

“Courtesy of Vanilla Ride,” Leonard said.

“She really a woman?” Jimson said.

“Oh yeah,” I said.

“How about that,” he said. “A split tail that’s a gunner. That’s some precious stuff, that is.”

“Precious,” I said.

“Conners here,” Jimson said. “He tells me he knows Marvin here, says Marvin says you guys went to kill her and didn’t, but killed my guys instead.”

“That Marvin, what a blabbermouth,” I said.

Marvin Hanson chuckled.

“It seemed like the right thing at the time,” I said.

“I don’t like that,” Jimson said.

“Get some better guys,” Leonard said.

Jimson sat back in his chair and looked at Leonard. If he thought Leonard was going to flinch he was out of his mind.

“So,” Jimson said, “you two, you’re tough guys, huh?”

“That’s about it,” Leonard said. “But we’d like to end this. We got put into this when we didn’t want to be.”

“How’s that?”

I explained.

“That’s some story,” Jimson said when I was finished.

“It’s true,” I said. “I say you’ve wasted a lot of guys on us, and I say it’d be best we didn’t shoot at each other anymore. There’s your money back.”

“It wasn’t about the money,” he said.

“I know that,” I said, “but it’s our peace offering, your money back.”

“Yeah,” Leonard said, “and now we’re going to sweeten it.” He reached inside his coat pocket and brought out ten thousand dollars in ten one-thousand-dollar bills.

“That’s nothing,” Jimson said.

“It’s ten thousand dollars,” Leonard said, “and it’s money we don’t owe you. Call it a present, a peace offering.” Of course, Leonard failed to mention that there was a little over eighty thousand dollars we had left for ourselves.

“Like I said,” Jimson said, “it’s not about the money. I spent more trying to have you guys hit.”

“And what they’re telling you,” Marvin said, “is why spend any more?”

“I could pop you right here,” Jimson said. “All of you.”

“No,” Leonard said, “I don’t think so. You could try, but I don’t know it’d work out.”

“You people,” Jimson said, “you always got to be smart-asses.”

“When you say ‘you people,’” Leonard said, “do you mean queers or niggers? I’m a little perplexed on the matter.”

“You’re queer?” Jimson said.

“I’m so queer queers call me queer.”

“Wow,” I said. “That’s pretty queer.”

“Isn’t it?” Leonard said.

“You aren’t going to do anything here,” Marvin said to Jimson. “That would be plain stupid.”

“I got some law here,” Jimson said. “I could make it look the way I want.”

“Maybe,” I said, “and maybe not, but it won’t do any good if you’re dead, now, will it?”

Jimson grinned. “All right. All right. You guys, I give you this, you got you a set, both of you, queer or not.”

“It’s just me that’s queer,” Leonard said. “I’d rather not be included with heterosexuals. Bad for my reputation.”

Jimson turned and looked out the window, then picked up his coffee and drank. “We call it even, that means you stay out of my business, right?”

“Unless that business gets into our business,” I said. “And I don’t know how Vanilla Ride feels about things. Me and Leonard and her have a truce. But you guys, I don’t know. She might not like you sent men to kill her.”

“I sent them for you.”

“Well,” I said, “far as I know, they’re still in Arkansas.”

“I’ll worry about Vanilla Ride,” he said.

“Just a polite warning,” I said.

“Fair enough,” he said.

“But we owe them one,” Sykes said. “Me and Conners.”

“That’s your problem,” Jimson said. “Me and them, we’re done.” He hesitated a moment, then turned to Conners and Sykes. “And you know what, you two, you’re done too. Leave them alone. They come around on some other matter, that’s something else. But on this, you’re done. You took a lickin’. Learn to like it.”

“Good advice,” Leonard said.

“Don’t push it,” Jimson said, stood up and pushed his chair back. His man got up at the same time. Conners and Sykes got up too.

Leonard said, “Been good doing business with you, and just one last thing. Keep your word. We expect it. You don’t, we won’t like it.”

Jimson smiled. “Say you won’t?”

“Absolutely,” Leonard said.

“Yeah … well,” Jimson said, and he and his man and No Enterprise’s finest walked out and got in their cars and drove away.

We ordered pie.

59

Couple months later, upstairs in our bedroom, my arm all healed and wrapped around Brett, she said, “You’re not exactly hot with the flesh pistol tonight.”

“No,” I said, “I’m not.”

“A lot on the mind?”

“You know it.”

“You told me everything, didn’t you? Got it off your chest?”

“Yep. But I still feel like I have a hole in me.”

“You’re healed up fine.”

“I don’t mean that, and you know it.”

“It’ll pass, baby.”

“I hope so. I just don’t think I was cut out to do what I do and not feel bad about it.”

“Leonard’s not bothered.”

“No, he’s not. He said, ‘If they deserve it, I got no problem. They don’t deserve it, then I got a problem. They deserved it.’”

“Words to live by.”

“I guess.”

“Vanilla Ride … Leonard said she sort of liked you.”

“He has a big mouth. And I think she said what she said as a kind nod to my courage. Truth was, I was scared to death.”

“But you went out there and did a stupid thing knowing it was stupid.”

“That’s called stupid, not courageous.”

“I have to agree.”

“I guess I was caught up in the moment. Thing I got to think—to consider—is Vanilla Ride. Beautiful young woman like that, what was done to her? Why is she like that? Why did she learn the skills she learned?”

“Some man is at the bottom of it, I can promise you that,” Brett said.

“Most likely. Probably childhood. Bottom line is she killed Tonto. He wasn’t any friend, but he was our partner, so we were supposed to do something. The kids, they didn’t deserve it. They were just stupid. Shit, she tried to kill us. All that, and in the end we let it slide.”

“But she helped you against the others.”

“True.”

“And she cut out the lead in your arm.”

“Also true. It makes the whole thing kind of confusing, at least in the sense of trying to figure where loyalties lie.”

“So, she was beautiful?”

“Not like you.”

“You liar.”

“Really.”

“Keep on.”

“You are the beauty of all beauties.”

“That’s what I want to hear. Bet her real name isn’t Vanilla Ride.”

“Bet you’re right.”

“But you’re thinking about her, aren’t you?”

“She’s got me stumped. She let us go. She could have killed us.”

“You like that she had a sense of honor, don’t you, baby?”

“I guess I do. But I still wonder why she is the way she is. The killing part… I’m not like her, am I?”

“You do what has to be done and for the greater good. She does it for money.”

“That’s what I keep telling myself.”

“You do odd jobs, Hap, and you’re an honorable man, but you don’t do psychology. Quit trying to figure her out, or yourself. There’s no clear answer.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“Say you could figure out all the ills of the world, it wouldn’t stop them from happening. Humans suck.”

“When you’re right, you’re right. How was it in Arizona with Marvin and his family?”

“It blew. I like Marvin, hate his family. Gadget is a little bitch who not only needs rehab, she needs a daily beating and someone to cuss her for an hour every Thursday.”

“You’re open for that, aren’t you?”

“If it was a paying gig. What about Leonard and John?”

“You talk to him all the time. Why are you asking me?”

“I didn’t want to ask him about that. I thought it might make him sad.”

“But I can ask him?”

“You two talk about stuff like that, and you know it. What’s the skinny?”

“Not working out. Not yet anyway. They talk now and again. Leonard has his own place, not a motel room but an apartment. Just got it. Me, I’m not that hopeful they’ll work it out, but then again, tonight I’m not exactly full of cheer.”

“You have half of eighty thousand dollars,” she said. “A gift.”

“A little more, actually. Leonard split it right down to the penny.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“I keep thinking about where it came from. Women flat-backing and dumb asses mainlining, or whatever.”

“So it’s bad money you can put to the good for eating and renting this house and you also don’t have to work out in the weather for a while.”

“Yeah, I thought about that. A lot.”

Brett snuggled up close to me and rubbed my stomach. “You want to try again?”

“Not just now. I think he’s sleeping.”

“It’s okay. I love you even if you are a failure sexually.”

“Thanks. I needed that.”

“You know I’m joking.”

“Sure.”

“Now don’t brood. There’s always tomorrow morning. And afterward, I’m going to make waffles.”

We snuggled awhile, and then Brett fell asleep. I thought about Vanilla Ride and the way she had looked, the way she had marched around with that bandage across her stomach, and wondered if she had been hit worse than she let on. I had wanted to kill her badly, and now I wondered where she was and why she was what she was, and if Brett was right about me and Vanilla Ride being all that different. Down deep it seemed to me that at some point, me and her, we were exactly the same.

I lay there trying to sleep, my head turned, looking first at the dim outline of the photograph Brett had framed of me and Leonard and Cindy the Bear. It was on the nightstand. I rolled over and looked out the window. The moon had turned nearly full and it was very bright out and the light came through and fell onto the carpet and onto the end of the bed. I felt funny about that light, like if I stretched my foot out, it would move away. It was as if something inside of me had shifted and gone deep inside of myself, into the shadows, and no matter where I sat, stood, or lay, no light would, or ever could, shine on me.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joe R. Lansdale has written more than a dozen novels in the suspense, horror, and Western genres. He has also edited several anthologies. He has received the British Fantasy Award, the American Mystery Award, seven Bram Stoker Awards, and the 2001 Edgar Award for best novel from the Mystery Writers of America. In 2007 he won the Grand Master Award at the World Horror Convention. He lives in Nacogdoches, Texas, with his family.

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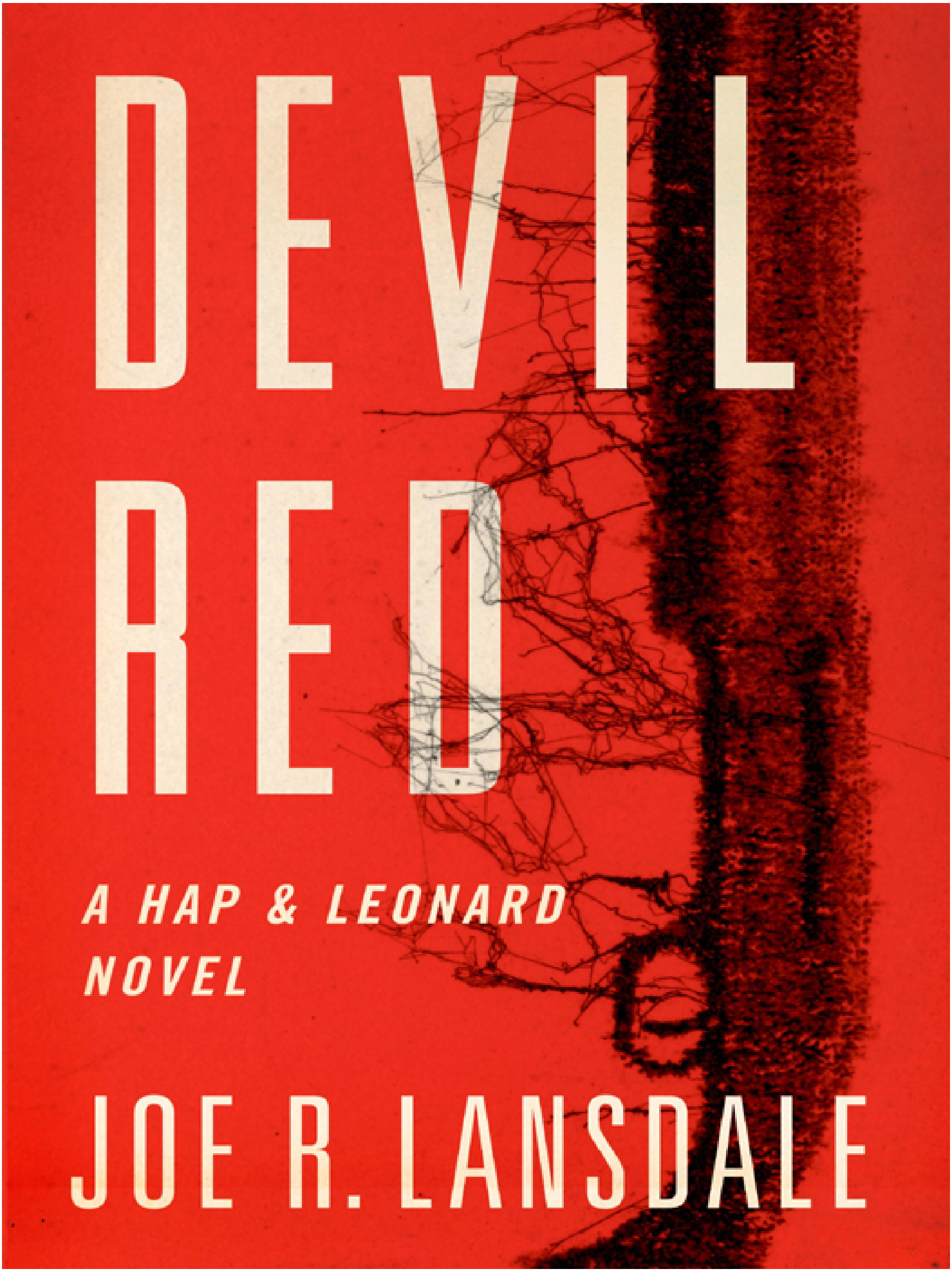

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This one's for Karen

You are what you do.

—*Old proverb*

if I bet on Humanity I’d never cash a ticket.

—*Charles Bukowski*

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A Note About the Author

1

We were parked at the curb in Leonard's car, sitting near a busted-out streetlight. We were looking at a house about a block up. It was a dark house on a dark street next to another dark house, and beyond that was an abandoned baseball field grown up with summer-burnt grass that had died two months back but was still standing, the tops curved over like bent sword tips. A fresh fall wind was bullying some dead leaves about and we had the windows rolled down and the air was cool and soothing. Beyond the baseball field it was dark too.

The whole area wasn't exactly what you'd call a great place to hang out. You did, there was a chance they'd find you next morning in a ditch with your throat cut, your pockets turned inside out, and sperm in your ass, or perhaps a sharp instrument. It was the kind of place where the mice belonged to gangs.

But there we sat. Sacrifices to fate.

I said, "I feel like a hired leg breaker."

"You are a hired leg breaker," Leonard said.

"This is pretty mean."

"He beat up an old woman, Hap. Took her money. That's so mean the mean has to wear a hat and tie."

"A hat and tie?"

"It's an expression."

"No it's not."

"All right. I made it up."

"Of course you did."

"Thing is," Leonard said, "the cops didn't do dick."

"They took him in for questioning."

"Whoop-te-doo," Leonard said. "And it was Mrs. Johnson's word against his and now he's free and he's sleeping in that house, him and his bud, and they got the old lady's money."

"The bud didn't hit her," I said.

"Yeah, well, the bud ought not to hang around with the wrong people."

"I hang around with you."

"But I'm charmin'," Leonard said, cracking his knuckles. "You ready?"

"I don't know," I said.

"What's to think about? We took the job."

"The money for one. Twenty-five dollars, to split. Really? That's our payment?"

"Since when do you worry about money?"

"Since it's twelve fifty."

"It'll pay us back for those cheap-ass baseball bats," Leonard said.

"It will at that. We might even make a quarter or two when it's all over."

"So what are you complainin' about? You're comin' out ahead."

"We could go to jail. That's one complaint. It could be me and you and Marvin and Mrs. Johnson, all of us sitting on a cot in a jail cell knitting sweaters with the words DUMB ASS across the front."

Leonard sighed, leaned back in his seat, and adopted a tone akin to a father about to explain to a son why making bad grades in high school won't get you far in life. "This douche bag ain't gonna say squat. He's got a badass reputation to maintain. Think he wants to say he got caught off guard and beat up by a worn-out honky and a handsome majestic queer with baseball bats?"

"Reputation? He beat up an old lady, what kind of reputation is that?"

"He probably doesn't advertise that part, just the stuff about him being a big gangster and all. He's a legend in his own mind. We're just here to get Mrs. Johnson's money back."

"We're going to rough somebody up for eighty-eight dollars?"

"And some change."

"Yeah, don't want to forget that, Leonard. He got another forty-five cents."

"Forty-six. If you're living on a fixed income, it matters. And, hey, we're getting twenty-five dollars of it, and Marvin, he's got a cut comin'."

“You know we won’t take any of it, and he won’t either, and that this isn’t a real job. This is a favor. Marvin to her, us to him.”

“Yeah, but we can pretend,” Leonard said. “It’s fun. Didn’t you ever play pretend?”

I gave Leonard a sour look. “While we’re pretending, guys in the house might be serious. And I’m tired of beating up people and getting beat up.”

“All right, then. I’ll do the hitting. You don’t break anything. Him or the furniture. We’ll just let him know we don’t like him doin’ what he’s been doin’, and I’ll hit him on the meaty parts.”

“You’re just saying that, aren’t you? You’re going to break something.”

Leonard was silent for a time. “He broke her hand, so I got to think maybe his hand has to get broken. But you don’t have to do dick in that department, brother. Just come and watch out for his friend. The big guy, Chunk. I might not want him runnin’ up my ass.”

“Isn’t the friend’s supposed to be pretty damn big,” I said.

“Would it put you in better spirits if you broke the guy’s hand and I watched for the big guy?”

“No.”

“Hell, man. You get to choose. Which is it?”

I sighed. “You do the breaking.”

“So we’re on?”

“Yeah, but remember, when we’re doing a stretch at Huntsville, I didn’t like the idea.”

“Noted,” Leonard said. “I’ll even give you my bread in the prison cafeteria.”

“What’s this guy’s name again?”

“What’s it matter?”

“I like to know who I’m beating up.”

“Thomas Traney took the money. The big guy, he’s called Chunk, that’s all I know. You heard this already.”

“Yeah, but I wasn’t listening so good. I didn’t think we were really going to do it. Next we’ll be twisting grade-schooler’s wrists to find out who took whose lunch money. Or maybe we can take their lunch money ourselves, being tough guys and all.”

“You through bitchin’?” Leonard said, pulling on a pair of skintight gloves, then handing me a pair.

I nodded, put on the gloves, leaned over the seat and got the baseball bats, and handed one to Leonard.

2

We got out of the car and started across the dark yard, went over the dry grass, and up on the back porch. I looked back toward the baseball field and the dark there, just in case someone was watching.

Nothing.

Leonard leaned an ear against the door.

“Quieter than a politician’s brain,” Leonard said.

“We ought to leave it that way.”

Leonard touched the door and pushed gently. “This is a weak and shitty door,” he said.

I didn’t say anything this time. I knew it was too late. It was on.

Leonard stepped back and stomp-kicked the door hard. The door’s lock broke and there was a sound of splintered wood and the door swung wide and slammed against the wall, and we were in.

There was a hallway, and we went along that quick. There was a room to the left with the door open, and I looked in there. There was nothing but heaps of trash. I looked at Leonard and shook my head. The house stank of cigarettes.

Leonard went down the hall ahead of me, a man on a mission. I rushed to keep up. He boldly opened a door on the right and went in and I looked in after him. There was a mattress on the floor, and a woman on it, and there was a window to her right and a bit of moonlight coming through it. All I could tell about her was she was dark-skinned and her eyes were wide and she was nude from the waist up; the rest of her was covered in bedclothes. I knew from the way her head went a little to my left that she was watching someone in the corner, and I said, “Watch it!”

Leonard wheeled and a gun fired and everything went bright for a moment and a bullet whistled through the air and smacked into the wall. I saw Leonard move, and he was across the room fast as an arrow in flight. I could hear the air split as he swung the bat. The gun barked again from the shadows, and I jumped. I rushed inside the room, even though I wanted to do anything but that.

Leonard had someone on the floor in the corner and his bat went up and then down. The person on the floor screamed, and I heard something behind me. I turned in time to see a black giant in undershorts fill the doorway, then come into the room carrying a cane knife, wearing a moonlit expression that wouldn’t pass for humor.

He cocked back the cane knife and I swung the bat at him, hit him in the shin. He barked and stumbled. I hit him again, this time in the side. I heard him grunt and he dropped the cane knife at my feet. I put one foot on it and pushed it back and away from me, into the shadows.

I heard Leonard’s bat come down hard, and I heard him say, “How do you like it?”

But I had my own business. The giant tried to get up and I hit him across his broad back. He made with another grunt but got up, and I swung for his kneecap. He went down screaming, rolling on the floor, clutching at his knee. His shadow rolled and crawled along the wall with him.

Leonard said to his man, “You got some money?”

The guy on the floor, who I figured was Thomas, was only wearing undershorts. Just as a fashion note, his and Chunk’s shorts did not match. He said, “You robbin’ me?”

“Nope,” Leonard said. “I’m takin’ back somethin’ you took that don’t belong to you. Where’s your wallet? And you better hope there’s money in it.”

Thomas had one hand up, to try and ward off the bat. He was otherwise stretched out on the floor, his head lifted a little.

“My pants are on the floor, by the bed. Wallet’s in the back pocket.”

“I’m on it,” I said. I went over and found his pants and took out his wallet and went over to the window where the moonlight was shining in. I stood to the side so I could watch the big man on the floor. He was still rolling around moaning and clutching at his knee. I figured I had destroyed it. It had been one hell of a swing.

“He’s got maybe three hundred dollars,” I said.

“Take a hundred,” Leonard said, standing over his victim, the bat raised. “That covers what’s owed, plus a bit for our time and him trying to shoot us, and a little extra for the bats.”

I took out the hundred and dropped the wallet on the floor. I looked at the girl. She was kind of pretty, or would be with twenty pounds on her. The last meal she looked to have had probably came out of a needle and didn’t have taste. I wanted to save her, of course. I wanted to save everyone. I wanted to be somewhere else as well, and I wanted to be someone else, and I wished I hadn’t flunked algebra in high school.

I held up the hundred. “Got it,” I said.

“Good,” Leonard said.

“You’re crazy, man,” said Thomas. “I’ll come for you.”

“I don’t think so,” Leonard said. “You’re a fuckin’ coward.”

I saw the man turn his head and look at the gun he had fired. It was on the floor where Leonard had disarmed it. It was maybe six feet away.

Leonard said, “That’s right, go for it. I’d love to make a homer with your head.” Leonard lightly tapped Thomas’s shoulder with the ball bat.

I could see by the way Thomas’s shoulders drooped that hope for the gun had gone the way of his young dreams. He was screwed and he knew it.

“Let me leave you with two bits of advice, one verbal, the other demonstrative,” Leonard said. “First, don’t rob and hurt old ladies. Second,” and with that Leonard brought the bat down on Thomas’s hand where it rested on the floor. The scream Thomas let out crawled up my back and nestled at the top of my skull and took a shit.

“That’s the demonstrative tip,” Leonard said. “That’s to let you know messin’ with and hurtin’ an old lady, that’s gonna get you hurt. You come back, you touch her, next time they find you it’ll be with this bat up your ass and your dead mouth wrapped around Chunk’s dead dick.”

Thomas was holding his hand, which, in the moonlight, looked kind of flat to me. He was breathing fast and lying on the floor, completely stretched out. A sound like a dying mouse seeped out of his mouth.

Leonard leaned over him. “Let me make it even more clear. You bother me, or send someone to bother me, or my brother here, provided you even know who I am, who he is, and I’ll kill them, and then I’ll kill you, even if I don’t know for sure you sent them. And then I’ll kill you after you’re dead. That’s how much I’ll kill you. Savvy, asshole?”

Thomas had his mouth open and was holding his hand. It was like he wanted to speak but nothing would come out.

“Savvy!” Leonard said.

“Savvy,” Thomas said.

“That’s good.” Leonard said, then went over and picked up the gun and put it in his belt. He looked back at Thomas. “I’m not just whistlin’ out of my ass. I mean what I say.”

“Yeah,” said Thomas. “I got you.”

“But do you believe me?”

“I do.”

“Let me hear an amen.”

Thomas looked at Leonard like he’d lost his mind. So did I. Leonard just kept looking at Thomas, waiting.

“Amen,” Thomas finally said.

“That’s right, ass wipe,” Leonard said, turned toward the door, stopped, and looked down at the giant. He said, “You can get big as you want, Chunk, but eyes and balls and kneecaps, they’re what we like to call vulnerable. Tell him, Hap.”

“Vulnerable,” I said.

“Don’t let me see your ass around either,” Leonard said. “You might consider a different climate. Comprehend what I’m saying?”

The man didn’t speak. Everyone in the room was so quiet, we could hear their IQs drop. Of course, they didn’t have far to fall.

Leonard kicked him on the kneecap he was holding. Chunk bellowed.

“Well,” Leonard said.

“I understand,” Chunk said.

I looked down at Chunk, and even in the dark, I could tell he was looking at Leonard the way I sometimes looked at him, like he was looking into a deep dark pit that had no bottom.

“Good,” Leonard said. “Our work here is done.”

I looked at the woman on the bed, said, “Probably goes without sayin', but maybe you might not want to say or do anything either. And you're maybe two pounds shy of organ failure. Eat something greasy."

She nodded.

"Good," I said. "Thanks."

3

Out back we slung the baseball bats in the direction of the ball field. We went and got in the car. Leonard said, “You thanked her? And gave her a diet tip?”

“It just sort of came out,” I said.

“It took the edge off my witty remarks.”

“Sorry.”

“Well,” Leonard said. “You got to be you. How about we go by Wal-Mart, buy some cookies-and-cream ice cream, some vanilla wafers to dip in it?”

“Nothing like leg breaking and dessert,” I said.

“I broke the motherfucker’s hand, and I think I got a rib too,” Leonard said. “You’re the one broke a leg. A kneecap.”

“I can still hear it crack,” I said.

“Maybe we’ll get a couple cartons of ice cream, brother.”

Leonard started up his car and pulled out.

I said, “That really made you feel good, didn’t it, Leonard? Hittin’ that guy.”

“I don’t know good is how I feel, but satisfied sort of fits,” Leonard said. “And he didn’t shoot me, so I feel good about that. Motherfucker would have done better to throw the gun at me, his aim was so bad.”

Leonard took Thomas’s gun out of his waistband and handed it to me and I popped out the clip and cleaned it with a Kleenex. I wrapped the clip in the Kleenex and Leonard drove by a Dumpster behind a mall and I dropped it in. Then we drove out to the edge of town and I wiped the pistol clean and wrapped it in a piece of newspaper from the backseat and gave it to Leonard and he carried it out into the woods. When he came back, he said, “There now, all done. I dropped it down an armadillo hole.”

“If we hear of armadillos taking over possum kingdom, then we know what happened,” I said.

We took off our gloves, Leonard drove us to Wal-Mart, and we bought ice cream and cookies. I didn’t say much when we got to Leonard’s place, which was recently rented and cheap and in a part of town only slightly better than the one we had just left. We went upstairs and sat in fold-out chairs in a corner that served as a kitchen at a crate that served as a table, and with a spoon apiece, and cookies to dip, we ate and counted roaches racing across the floor. There were a lot of roaches, and some of them were bigger than my thumb. I was glad Brett wasn’t around for a change. She would charge a rhino if she felt it necessary, but the clicking of roach legs on linoleum could run her ten miles and make her climb a tree.

When we were done eating, Leonard said, “You want to go home, or you gonna stay?”

“Drive me home,” I said. “Brett will be waiting. Besides, I don’t want to get eaten by roaches.”

“You have gotten so persnickety,” Leonard said. “I remember a time when you would have named them, made them each little hats, and called them your friends.”

4

On the drive to my place, Leonard shifted his eyes over to me and sighed. He said, “You’re sitting there all forlorn.”

“I feel forlorn,” I said.

“Some things you do, not because they’re pleasant, but because they have to be done.”

“But I’m not sure that was one of them.”

“You got way too many feelings, Hap.”

“I suppose.”

“Look at it this way, brother. I got feelings too, but they’re for those who deserve feelings. There are some people don’t have feelings, and don’t deserve yours. The only kind of feelings they got are pain and fear.”

“Governments use that tactic. Never seems to work too well.”

“We ain’t governments,” Leonard said, as he pulled into my drive. I got out and walked around on his side and looked at him through his open window. He said, “I’ll see you tomorrow at Marvin’s.”

I nodded. He looked at me for a while longer, almost said something, but didn’t. He backed the car into the street and I watched him drive away.

I went inside and locked up and went as quietly as I could upstairs and into the bedroom. I could see Brett’s shape in the bed. I took off my clothes and pulled on my pajama bottoms and got in bed as carefully as possible. When I was positioned, Brett said, “What you been doin’?”

“Killing what’s left of my soul, baby.”

Brett rolled over and put her arm across my chest. She smelled good. “You got the old woman’s money back, didn’t you?”

“We did.”

“I figured you were gonna do that.”

“Last thing I said when I went out was I wasn’t gonna do it. I told myself that when I met up with Leonard. Told myself that when we parked out front of the house where those guys were, and I told myself that up until the moment I swung the baseball bat and took out a kneecap.”

“I knew you were gonna do it.”

“But what is it about me that made you know that? What’s wrong with me?”

“You think things ought to be fair, and they aren’t, and you try and make them fair.”

“I broke a guy’s kneecap. Leonard, he broke the other guy’s hand and maybe a rib, and we scared a young woman who was there. I don’t know how fair that was. We were so mean our mean wore a hat and tie.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Brett rubbed my chest a little, said, “Was he a good guy? Guy’s knee you broke?”

“Not in the least.”

“Did you hurt the girl that was there?”

“No reason to … No. Of course not.”

“Okay. Guy’s hand that Leonard broke. Was he a good guy?”

I knew where this was going, but I went ahead with the ritual. “He’s the guy broke the old lady’s hand, took her money.”

“There you go. If he’s the bad guy, you got to be the good guy.”

“Who says?”

“Me. I just did.”

“Yeah, well, you’re sort of on my side.”

“Big-time. A guy takes an old woman’s money and breaks her hand and she goes to Marvin for help, what are you gonna do? She deserves her money back. It’s not the first time you’ve helped someone and had to get rough. Hell, I’ve had to get rough.”

“I know that. But this wasn’t self-defense, and it wasn’t personal.”

“Anytime you can help someone get back at a bully, it’s personal enough. Baby, you got to learn how to tell the good guys from the bad guys.”

“You sound like Leonard.”

“He can be wise when he sounds like me,” Brett said. We lay there for a while. Brett stroked my chest. “I got to leave tomorrow.

Early.”

“Damn. I forgot.”

“Figured you did. You been kind of preoccupied with your morality and your mortality … But it’s okay. I won’t be gone long. A week maybe.”

“That’s too long,” I said.

“Poor baby. You’re in the dumps.”

“Big-time.”

“Because you got shot a while back?”

“Well, duh, that has something to do with it,” I said.

“Would some sympathy pussy help?”

“Well,” I said. “I don’t know I’ll feel any more right about what I did, and I won’t miss you any less when you’re gone, but it certainly would improve my spirits.”

“I thought it might,” Brett said, shifting to slip off her panties.

5

I slept a short while after we made love, and then I woke up and got out of bed gently and went to the bathroom. I came back and sat in the chair by the window. I looked out at the yard where a fence rose up and another house swelled on that side slightly covered by a large tree and its shadows. The darkness from the tree made the house look like a natural formation. There was moonlight in the next-door neighbor's backyard, which was clear of trees, and there was a kid's swing set back there; it looked like some kind of Martian insect lurking.

I turned and watched Brett while she slept. The window was framed in such a way that it had four panes and the panes were filled with moonlight and the light lay across the bed and the thin slats that held the panes in place divided her like dark straight cuts. Her face was at peace and her mouth was open and she was snoring slightly. I could see her white teeth and the way her long red hair, which looked dark as the shadows, curled around her chin and spread out on the pillow like an oil spill.

I loved the way she looked and the way she made love and the way she made me feel. But there was nothing she did or could do that would make me feel good about what I had done. Not tonight, anyway.

I thought about going downstairs and reading, maybe listening to music with the earphones, but I didn't feel strongly enough about it to do it. I went back to the bathroom and closed the door and turned on the light and found a magazine on the back of the toilet, picked up the pair of Wal-Mart glasses I kept in there—I kept several pairs around the house—and put them on and sighed because I needed the damn things to read close-up print. I was too tired and too old to be beating people up. A man who was old enough for reading glasses should have a job in some place air-conditioned and his most violent activity should be sliding his zipper down.

I read from the magazine, but nothing I read stayed with me. I finally gave it up and took a couple of light sleeping pills and went back to bed, and when I woke up it was late morning and Brett was gone.

6

It hadn't been that long since I had healed up from a bullet wound, and in the process of getting that wound, I had ended up splitting some good money with Leonard, so I wasn't sure why I was working. It wasn't my style to do something when there was money already to be had. I preferred desperation and overdue bills as a work incentive.

I showered and got ready for work and thought about Brett and her whore of a daughter. Brett had gone off to see her before and had come back blue and not so friendly for a couple of days, and then she would see it all for what it was, come around, and be okay for months. Then some idea would strike her, or the daughter would e-mail her, or some such thing, and the blues would open up again like a deep hole in the sea, and down Brett would go. I couldn't do a thing for her when she was that way. She had to deal with the depths and what was down there in her own manner and in her own time, same as me. She got like that, she was nothing like she was the rest of the time, and it was really best she did leave me for a while. That way they wouldn't find my decapitated head on my pillow.

But she was never like me. She was always able to find some truth in herself. Me, I wasn't sure I knew which way was up, let alone which way was true.

As I finished getting ready, I thought too about how I had come by the money I now had in reserve. Vanilla Ride, the beautiful assassin who had been hired to kill me, gave it to me and Leonard as a gift. It had worked out strangely, with me and her and Leonard in a cabin in Arkansas. Nothing as kinky as that sounds. The three of us bonded together for a moment to have a shootout with Clete Jimson's Dixie Mafia goons. The goons didn't do well. I came out with a wound that a good veterinarian took care of. But, most important, we had parted from Vanilla with a truce intact and a pile of dough that had belonged to some unsavory characters who I liked to believe would just spend it on unsavory things. It was still hard for me to grasp the insanity of it, or to understand how someone like Vanilla could be so deadly, and yet, in her own way, honorable.

It was also hard to believe that the very man who had wanted us killed, Clete Jimson, we had also formed a truce with, primarily because we had made it not worth his while, and there was in the background the threat of Vanilla Ride, and Jimson hadn't wanted any part of that. No one in their right mind would.

I was ready just before noon and sat at the table drinking decaffeinated coffee, waiting for Leonard to pick me up. Our friend Marvin Hanson had started a private detective agency. His plan was to hire us as grunts from time to time, which was best, because as detectives we made very good grunts.

Today we were supposed to meet him at the office to talk about a real job, not getting some old lady's money back. Then we were supposed to go to lunch and put a game plan together. What I wanted to do was go back to bed and read, or watch some TV, or just lie around on the couch. But if fish could fly they'd live in trees.

About eleven-twenty, Leonard showed up and drove us over to Marvin's office. The car had a smattering of bird crap across the windshield, and Leonard tried to clean it by turning on the windshield wipers, which made a slick whitish smear across the glass. Leonard cursed at it and hit the wipers again and made it worse than before.

I made a note to self. Do not try and clean bird shit off a windshield by using the wipers. It doesn't work. Cursing does not clean it either.

7

Marvin's office was in a nice area off the main drag, down a house-lined street. We parked in front of a huge, broad oak and got out. A space of dirt had been left in a rare example of city planning. Someone, perhaps leaving it as a kind of sacrifice to the forest gods, had placed a used rubber and a potato chip bag by the tree trunk, and it smelled like someone had taken a piss, but otherwise it looked natural and lovely and gave off a bony kind of shade.

As we sniffed the urine on the fall air, brown oak leaves were dropping and tumbling across the lot with a crackling noise, like someone stepping on paper sacks, or like someone breaking a big guy's knee with a baseball bat.

Across the way, a sweet gum tree had shed messy gum balls onto the concrete in a way that made me fear for its future with the city council.

Marvin's office was in a two-story building next to a one-story comic shop with a big blue blow-up gorilla on the roof. Some days it was a giant red ant, and on other days it was a big silver alien. One day there was a great brown bear wearing Bermuda shorts with a fish in its air-filled teeth and a fishing rod in its paw.

The bottom part of the building Marvin was in was a bike shop. The building had been painted a bright yellow. A young blonde woman, who from the shape of her legs looked like she rode a lot of bikes herself, was out front, defying the cool, wearing shorts and a T-shirt and flip-flops. She was unlocking the bike shop door when we came up. She turned and flicked her long blonde hair and smiled. She had a smile that would make a family-values Republican stab a hole in the Holy Bible with a buck knife.

The stairs were metal and a little slick from the rain that had come and gone. We went up. On the door was a sign, black letters on a green plaque. It read HANSON INVESTIGATIONS.

Inside Marvin was behind his new desk and a middle-aged woman was sitting in the client chair. She turned and looked at us as we entered. She was good-looking in a church lady, next-door-neighbor kind of way. She was dressed well, but not fancy, and her hair was a little too red and so were her cheeks. She looked as if she had been crying. She had a tissue balled up in her fist, a piece of it escaping between her fingers as if the stuffing was coming out of her. I assumed this was the client he had asked us to meet.

There was a young man with her. He was pouring coffee into a Styrofoam cup. He was tall with shaggy black hair and looked fit and had an air about him that made you think he might be tough and know it. At the same time, he looked like something for the girls. He stirred his coffee with a plastic spoon, came over, and sat in another of the client chairs. That was the end of the client chairs. That meant Leonard and I had to stand. I decided I didn't want to do that, so I went around and shoved my butt onto the edge of Marvin's desk and rested there. This put me so I was right in front of the guy. Leonard leaned against the wall, near the door, not too far from the lady. He put his hands in his pants pockets.

Marvin, who no longer needed his cane as of a month back, got up from behind his desk and limped over to the water cooler and put some water in a paper cup and brought it to the lady.

He looked at us, said, "This is Mrs. Christopher, and this is a family friend, Cason Statler. He works for the newspaper over in Camp Rapture. Folks, this is Hap Collins and this is Leonard Pine. If they say something embarrassing, understand they're friends of mine and I have to put up with it."

"Nice introduction," I said.

Mrs. Christopher smiled a little, sipped at her water.

Marvin said to us, "They're clients. They want us to check into something."

From the way the woman acted, I figured she had some romantic problems, a husband straying, or perhaps her husband had died and something was unresolved and we were supposed to resolve it. Whatever, I figured it would be simple and pretty near honest work.

“So, you’ll look into it?” the lady asked.

“I will,” Marvin said. “I’ll put these two right on it.”

“They look tough,” she said.

“They are,” Marvin said.

“What I mean to ask is,” she said, “are they detectives?”

“They are operatives,” Marvin said.

I thought: Yeah, baby. Operatives. That’s us. We’re so operative, our operative wears a hat and tie.

I glanced down at the desk and saw a check there in front of Marvin. It had Juanita Christopher’s name signed on it. Better yet, it had a juicy figure written on it. I wondered how much of that was mine and Leonard’s.

“Satisfaction guaranteed, or we give you half your money back,” Marvin said. “By the way, how’d you find out about us?”

“I saw your add in Cason’s newspaper.”

“Just curious,” Marvin said, “so I have some understanding of how my advertising works. What drew you to the ad?”

“Your last name. My maiden name was Hanson, but since you’re black and I’m white, maybe there’s no connection.”

I thought to myself there might be a lot of connection. In this part of the country the richer branch of the Hanson family had been slave owners, so it wouldn’t have surprised me to discover there were some woodshed relatives.

“Oh,” Mrs. Christopher said, “I didn’t mean that to sound the way it came out.”

“It didn’t sound any kind of way,” Marvin said. “Don’t worry about it.”

She stood up from behind the desk and stuck her hand across at Marvin and he shook it.

She didn’t sit back down, and she didn’t shake our hands. “I think I’ve explained everything, Mr. Hanson. I’ll let you fill your men in.”

Hanson nodded, and she started for the door. Statler stood and spoke to her. “Do you mind if I meet you in the car, dear? I want a word with the gentlemen. You can handle the stairs fine, can’t you? And watch how slick it is.”

“I’m not an invalid,” she said. “I’m just sad.”

“Of course,” Cason said, turning on a smile that if it had been an inch wider and a smidgen brighter, might have knocked out the local electric grid.

After she went out, Cason waited a moment, picked up the check she had written from the desk, and returned to his seat and rested the check on one knee with his hand on top of it. We all watched the check like buzzards discovering what was thought to be dead might still have some life in it, and just might get away.

Cason said, "I know what she told you seems like an impossible job, because of the time factor. It's a cold case. But I want to say, she's serious. I brought her over here because she's a friend of my mom's and because I know a little about her subject. I'm a newspaper reporter. I've looked into this case, there's something to it."

"So," Leonard said, "what you're saying is don't just cash her check and hang out here drinking coffee?"

"Something like that," Cason said.

Marvin said, "I not only resent that, I resent it enough to come out from behind this desk and slap the shit out of you. Even if one of these boys has to hold me up to do it."

"It might take more doing than you think," Cason said.

"My goodness," Leonard said, "you must have had an extra bowl of oatmeal this morning."

"You want to be first?" Cason said.

"Hey, Cason," I said. "You look like a guy might be tough, but you mess with Leonard, when they're cutting you open and putting your ruptured liver in a jar, your ghost will still be trying to figure out what truck hit you and when."

Cason looked at Leonard for a long moment. Leonard said, "What he said."

Cason smiled, studied Leonard. "You two are buddies. That is so sweet."

"Yeah," I said, "we're tough, and when times are rough we can sew our own clothes and grow a garden."

"Really?" Cason said.

"No," I said. "But we're tough."

Cason smiled. "All right," he said. "We're all tough guys. It's just that Mrs. Christopher is a friend of the family. Was my third-grade teacher. Her family has money, though she doesn't look like it or act like it. Her dead husband was in oil, and he was in a lot of it. She came to me for help because I used to work for a paper in Houston doing investigative reporting. Now I'm over in

Camp Rapture, writing a bullshit column. I decided she needed help that could be on it twenty-four seven, and that wasn't me. Camp Rapture doesn't have a private investigator, but she saw your ad. I was a little reluctant, but I didn't know what else to do for her."

"Good to know we're deeply wanted and widely respected," Leonard said.

"I put those ads in every paper in a fifty-mile radius," Marvin said. "Your paper got me the only response."

"Try the online ads," Cason said. "More people read those these days. I'm lucky I got a job, way newspapers are changing. But, the thing is, I knew a lot of investigators when I worked for the paper in Houston, and I didn't think much of them. They mostly took up time and took up money. So I wanted to make sure you really would look into things."

"You can bet we'll look into them," I said. "Marvin is so honest it hurts our feelings, and we're so honest we hurt our own feelings."

Cason grinned. "Mr. Hanson has my number. You need anything, give me a call. I have a friend who is a bear for research. Maybe we can help you."

"We'll keep it in mind," Marvin said.

Cason put the check on the desk, smoothed it out where he had wrinkled it by pressing his palm across it twice, and went out. As he closed the door Leonard said, "Please do be careful of the stairs."

When he was gone, I said, "Damn, he's out of our sight, what, three seconds, and I miss him already."

"Too bad he isn't gay," Leonard said. "For him, I could ditch John in a minute. He wears Old Spice. I like Old Spice."

"Frankly," Marvin said, "he's just the kind of guy I'd like to punch in the mouth."

"And," Leonard said, "he's just the kind of guy I'd like to have put something in my mouth."

"One of you is mean," I said, "the other one is nasty."

8

Marvin locked up and we walked downstairs to the lot. The girl in the shorts was no longer visible in front of the bike shop, but I checked just in case.

"Now, what exactly is it we're saying we're gonna do?" I asked Marvin as we walked. "We're all up in Cason's face, and we're all behind you, and we don't even know what we're talkin' about."

"That isn't new for you, is it?" Marvin said.

"Ha. Ha," I said.

"For all we know," Leonard said, "you've signed us up to jack off donkeys at an animal sperm bank."

"And the way I hear it," I said, "you get through with the donkeys and go home, they don't even call or write."

"I'll explain at lunch," Marvin said. "You get the money back?"

"We did," Leonard said, "and a teeny bit more. We figured it wasn't dishonest for him to tip. Mrs. Johnson can use as much of it as she can get."

"What I'm wondering," I said, "is what if Thomas and his friend Chunk want revenge on us or the client?"

"Would they?" Marvin asked.

"Well, one of them is missing a kneecap," Leonard said, "and the other one will have to have his girlfriend pick his nose, wipe his ass, and pull his crank because his hand is kind of swollen up."

"He had it comin'," Marvin said. "The sonofabitch."

"Some people might think the same of us," I said.

Marvin gave me a confused look.

"He's been reading some self-help books or somethin'," Leonard said.

I took the hundred I had taken from Thomas's wallet and gave it to Marvin. “Here’s the booty.”

“We’ll take it to her,” Marvin said, and put it in his wallet.

9

The day had started to grow cooler, but not so cool it was uncomfortable. The sky was gray and there were strips of gloomy clouds across it and they had fuzzed out the sun so that it looked like a lightbulb burning behind gauze. In the distance, on the horizon, in line with the street, the sky was darker and I saw a strip of lightning jump and flash away. The rain that had come early in the morning and retreated now had a companion, and it was blowing our way.

We drove in Marvin's car over to Mrs. Johnson's house, which was on the edge of the area where we had been last night. We parked in her gravel driveway and got out. It was a very small house, but brightly painted in a kind of marigold color, and there were flower beds on either side of the little gravel walk. All the flowers were dead or sleeping.

The rest of the neighborhood looked like a war zone.

The house next door was up high on stone blocks, and lying just under it was a dead cat. It had been there long enough to have gone flat and was mostly an outline made of bits of white hair, scattered bones, and a skull. There was just enough flesh on the body to hold it in place. From where the cat was lying, and the looks of the place—a car out front with grown-up grass and a washing machine lying on its side—I had a feeling there wasn't anyone over there looking for their kitty. The cat, like the washing machine, was just part of the landscape to Mrs. Johnson's next-door neighbors. They might have been all-right people doing the best they could, but I got to tell you, you got a dead cat lying in your yard you ought to bury it. That's my motto. No dead animals in the yard for more than fifteen minutes.

"I don't think Fluffy is taking a nap," Leonard said.

"Nope," I said.

At her door, Marvin knocked, and after what seemed like time enough for a new species to have developed from a single cell, the door was answered by Mrs. Johnson. She looked like all the sap had been sucked out of her, she was so small and so wrinkled, but there was a hardness in her eyes that showed her life had been full of experience, and some of it might even have been good. She had a swollen right cheek and a cast on her hand.

"Marvin," she said. "And your boys?"

We were all about the same age, so I found that comment amusing. But I really liked her voice. It was like high cane syrup with a touch of sulfur and a hint of gravel.

"Yes, ma'am," Marvin said, suddenly about twelve years old. "Me and the boys, we got somethin' for you."

Marvin took out his wallet and removed the hundred-dollar bill and gave it to Mrs. Johnson. She took it and looked at it, said, "I ain't got no change, son. But if you want to go change it, or wait until I can get someone to take it to town—"

"No, ma'am. The fella who stole it, he decided he'd pay a little interest."

"He did, did he?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You're a terrible liar, Marvin," she said.

"Yes, ma'am."

"You think it's right I take more than he stole?"

"I think you have a cast and that cost money and a hundred dollars doesn't cover it."

"Would you like to come in, sit a spell?"

Marvin said, "No, ma'am, we really can't. We've got some work to do. I don't think you're gonna be bothered again. But, you see him around, or he gives you any reason to feel nervous, call us, and we'll have a talk with him."

"I always see him around," she said. "He lives in the area."

"Yes, ma'am. I know. But … Well, you have any cause to worry, you call me."

"All right, dear," she said. "And thank all of you."

Leonard and I smiled and nodded, and turned away, and just before the door closed, Mrs. Johnson said to me and Leonard, "Did you boys hurt him?"

"Yes, ma'am," Leonard said.

“So he didn’t like it much?”

“No, ma’am,” I said. “Did you break anything?”

“Yes, ma’am, I believe we did.”

“Like what?”

“Well,” Leonard said, “I broke his hand, and Hap here broke the other guy’s knee and maybe a rib.”

“I screamed when he broke my hand,” she said. “Did he scream?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Leonard said. “And he whimpered too.”

She grinned. “But you boys didn’t get hurt?”

“No, ma’am,” Leonard said. “We came out fine, though I may have strained my elbow a bit on a downswing.”

“That Thomas sonofabitch had it comin’, breakin’ an old lady’s hand like that,” she said, “and me knowing him all my life. And that Chunk just watchin’.”

We went to eat, and then Marvin took us to a coffee shop and showed us the file. It wasn’t what I expected. After coffee, Marvin took us to our car, and we didn’t say any more about it. Leonard drove me home and went home himself.

10

At home, I thought about what Marvin had shown us in the folder, what he had explained to us. I put my folder on the coffee table in the living room and left it there and walked around the house for a while, then tried to read and tried to watch television, and finally just sat on the couch and watched it get dark and start to rain in a way that made me feel sleepy and gloomy at the same time.

I didn't open the folder again, but that didn't make what was in it leave my head. I thought about it all the time. I was also thinking about that poor dead cat, lying out beside a house where people lived or had lived, and it bothered me they had left it that way.

I went upstairs and stripped down to my shorts and sat by the window. The rain plunked and splattered on the panes so hard I thought they might break. Lightning lit up now and again, and when it did I could see the house next door, appearing to stand behind a stream of bright blue beads, and then the lightning was gone, and it was as if the world had fallen down inside a pit.

I got dressed and went out to the carport and got a shovel from the shed, a rain slicker, an umbrella, and drove over to where the house with the dead cat was.

I got out of the car with my umbrella and shovel, and when I got to where the dead cat lay, I put the umbrella aside. A hard wind was blowing, and when I put it down, the wind rolled it across the yard.

It was maybe midnight and nothing was stirring. I started digging in the yard. I dug a good hole that was long and deep, and then I used the shovel to pry the cat up from the ground. I put it in the hole and carefully covered it and told the cat I was sorry. I got my umbrella and shovel and went back to the car. By the time I put the shovel away I was so wet, rain slicker or not, I was starting to sprout gills.

I still had the stuff Marvin had told us about to deal with. But I didn't have to think about that poor cat anymore. It was down in the ground, wrapped in the earth, not just some hairy outline lying on the grass, pulverized by sunlight and moonlight and savage rain.

When I got home, I undressed and toweled off and lay on the bed naked. I finally slipped under the covers, listening to the rain, the thunder. It sounded good now, not as forlorn as before, but I couldn't sleep.

I thought a little more about what Marvin had shown us, and then I thought about Brett, but that made me miss her. So I thought about something that soothed me as a kid. I was a man in a rocket ship, traveling through space, on my way to a brave new world. I was in a container with a mild unseen, odorless gas that was putting me into suspended animation. I would awake just before arrival and guide the ship in. It would be a world full of beautiful plants and weird animals, but there I would be strong. Like John Carter of Mars my Earth muscles would give me incredible strength and abilities on a world where there was lesser gravity. I would end up with a sword and I would kill monsters and get the girl in the end, and she would look like Brett.

Only problem was, that little trick didn't work this time. I still couldn't sleep.

I got up and put on a CD of selected doo-wop, but that wasn't what I needed and I cut it off halfway through. I settled on *Abbey Road* and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, played them through, and when they were done, I turned off the CD player, settled in under the covers, hoping this time I could sleep.

And then I heard a noise. It was a slight noise, a snicking sound coming from downstairs, and then someone gently closing the front door. I got my gun out of the nightstand drawer, and still naked as birth, eased open the bedroom door. A light went on downstairs. I heard the refrigerator door open.

I eased down, slowly. When I got to the bottom stair, I turned and looked in the kitchen. Leonard, wet and dripping, was sitting at the table. He was eating a sandwich and had a glass of milk beside him. A bag of vanilla cookies was open and on the edge of the table. He looked at me, put his hand over his eyes, said, “For heaven sake. Put some clothes on, Hap. I’m trying to eat here. You could make a vulture throw up. That thing looks like a spoiled turkey neck.”

11

I went upstairs and put the gun in the drawer and pulled on my pajama bottoms and a T-shirt, slipped into my bunny ear slippers, and went downstairs. Leonard was at the kitchen counter with a loaf of bread and some fixin's, making a fresh sandwich.

"I see my nudity didn't put you off eating my deviled ham," I said.

"Tuna fish," Leonard said. "And I could suggest a better brand."

"You pay for it, I'll buy it," I said, taking a place at the table. "So, what are you doing up at three in the morning eating my food and drinking my milk, and for all I know wearing my underwear and using my downstairs toothbrush? I knew I should have got that key back. I forgot all about it."

"You want a sandwich?"

"Yeah. There's some chips in the cabinet."

"Left side?"

"Yep."

Leonard got the chips down and another plate and made me a tuna sandwich with cheese, light on the mayonnaise, just the way I like it. He made his with mayonnaise and mustard, got the jug of milk out of the fridge, put it on the table and then the sandwiches. He got a diet cola out for me and sat down.

I said, "Just for the record, you are the only one in the universe that has mustard and mayonnaise on tuna, and you don't drink milk with a tuna fish sandwich. Starving people all over the world wouldn't eat mustard on tuna."

"I like milk and mustard on tuna."

"I'm just saying that makes you an alien and universally wrong and you're keeping me up."

He chewed carefully. "I figured since I couldn't sleep you shouldn't, so I came over. Your car, the hood was steaming from the rain. You went out recently. So my guess is you haven't been sleeping so good either."

"Is that really your business?"

"Of course."

I sighed and put down my sandwich. "You remember that dead cat by Mrs. Johnson's house?"

"Yeah."

"I buried it."

"You went out in the rain and buried a dead cat? Anyone see you do it?"

"Don't know, and don't care."

Leonard nodded. "Cookie?" he said, pushing the cookie bag toward me.

I took a vanilla cookie from the bag. Leonard moved the bag to his side of the table, and got up and removed a Dr Pepper bottle from the fridge, sat back down, and twisted off the cap. He took a long swig. "Man," he said. "These are the good ones."

"Right from the warehouse where the originals were made," I said.

"You are the man. Have I ever told you that, Hap? You are the man?"

"Whenever I have something you want me to keep having around, yes, you have told me that."

"Like Dr Pepper?"

"Like that."

"And vanilla cookies."

"Yes."

"Then that whole 'you are duh man' bit has power?"

"A little."

The rain was brutal now. It hit the house hard and the windows rattled. We got ourselves more to drink, turned out the lights, and went into the living room and sat in the dark.

"Isn't this where we say something like 'Well, the farmers need the rain?' " Leonard said.

"I suppose it is."

The file Marvin had given me was still lying on the coffee table. I glanced at it. Leonard glanced at it. We both glanced at it. Neither of us picked it up.

"You ain't been quite yourself for a while, Hap."

"Nope," I said. "I haven't. And you haven't been all that hot since John has been gone."

"Guilty as charged. John's brother is trying to convince him that God can make him straight. His brother says being gay goes against tradition."

"I don't always have turkey on Thanksgiving. That's a tradition. But the world keeps spinning even if I don't eat turkey."

"Yep. It's silly."

A peal of thunder made the house shake.

"Okay," I said. "That makes me think God is on the side of the traditionalist."

Leonard laughed.

12

Here's how it had gone down the day before.

At the coffeehouse, Marvin took out his big folder and gave us each a small folder from inside of it. He had asked that the information be prepared, and Mrs. Christopher, with Cason's help, had done just that.

Marvin said, "Before we open them, let me lay some things out. General information that may or may not be important. Mrs. Christopher is a widow. She has been rich all her life. But not so it shows. She lives simply. Nice home, but nothing flashy. Drives a standard automobile. Inherited money from her husband, who died of a heart attack. She had a nervous breakdown after her son's death, spent some time in a mental institution. Nothing severe. Just there to be watched and evaluated. She came out a couple months later. As far as the death of her son goes, the police believe this is a done deal. That whoever did it is long gone and there's no way to find them. Mrs. Christopher obviously doesn't believe the police know what they're talking about. She believes it wasn't what it appears to be."

"Do you think she's wrong?" I said.

"I'm open to another view if there's evidence to suggest it," Marvin said.

"This Cason Statler," Leonard said. "He seems to believe her."

"Yeah," Marvin said. "But that doesn't mean anything."

"He seems solid enough," Leonard said.

"You just liked the way he looked," I said.

"If he's that pretty, he's honest, and noble, loyal, and trustworthy," Leonard said.

"That's a lot of the Boy Scout oath," I said.

"He wears tight pants and has broad shoulders and is really nice-looking,” Leonard said, “so, I thought I’d give him some good attributes.”

“I can show you some things in this,” Marvin said, tapping his folder, “that are definitely true. So let’s pretend this is our first day at school, and we’ve got our supplies in front of us, and one of those is a nice folder like this one, and I’m gonna be the teacher, and I’m gonna say, Shut up, and open ’em up.”

We each opened our folder. There was a photo on top.

“Damn,” Leonard said.

The photo had been snapped near a run of water, and at first I couldn’t decide what water it was, and then I realized it was the creek that ran by the university at Camp Rapture, wound its way through a very nice park of pecan trees and oaks, and twisted on through the poorer part of town and went on to somewhere beyond my knowledge.

Brett and I had actually gone over to Camp Rapture once to look at a used car. We ended up buying it. I drove our old car, and she drove the one we bought to that park to have a picnic. Brett knew the place and told me about it. I remembered it well. I even remembered that we had tuna sandwiches with bananas cut up in them, along with crushed potato chips. Something Brett came up with. I thought it was a terrible idea until I ate one.

The park was along the edge of a hiking and jogging trail. The trail was wooded on both sides, and beautiful. There were wide spots with picnic tables, and there were big hickory and pecan trees there. We took a walk along the trail. There was a large Hoss apple tree near the edge of the creek. Its thick limbs twisted in unusual ways. We stopped next to it and kissed. The tree was in the photo.

Near the tree, there was woman lying facedown by the side of the trail, not far from the creek. Her hair was dark as sin and her body was pale as bone and she was amazingly thin. Her ribs stuck against her flesh like the framework of a canoe. Her clothes, what looked like shorts, underwear, a bra, and T-shirt, were heaped nearby. All of her clothes were black. Including the underwear.

“Shot in the back of the head,” Marvin said. “Name’s Mini Marchland. She was on her last outing with Ted Christopher, Mrs. Christopher’s son. Turn your page, class.”

I lifted up the photo and placed it aside. There was another. A man lying dead on the trail with his face turned to the side. The creek was not visible. He was wearing black jogging shoes, jogging pants, and a dark green T-shirt.

“When did this happen?” I asked.

“Two years ago,” Marvin said. “The couple had gone jogging, and when their car was found in the park driveway, and no one came to claim it, people went looking. The bodies lay there for half a day maybe.”

“On a jogging trail?” I said.

“That day, the only two people feeling like they needed to be physically fit were these two. They would have ended up better had they sat on the couch in front of the TV at home and ate cheese doodles and sniffed glue.”

I looked at some of the other photos. They were more of the same at closer and different angles. There was one close shot of their heads so you could see where the bullets had gone in. Close photos of the girl’s clothes heaped up. Close-ups of the ground and shoe marks, and a close-up of Ted’s shoe bottoms.

“How did Mrs. Christopher get all of this material?” Leonard asked.

“She knows a lot of people,” Marvin said. “And Cason knows a lot of people. Money and connections solve a lot of problems.”

“Was the girl raped?” I asked.

“No,” Marvin said. “Just stripped. Some of the cops thought maybe he was interrupted.”

“If he was,” Leonard said, “wouldn’t shooting her in the head have been a bigger interruption? Did anybody notice gunfire?”

“Nothing about that in the files,” Marvin said. “The guy’s wallet was taken.”

“He had it in his jogging pants?” I asked.

“That’s what they figure. The pants have a back pocket. He didn’t have a wallet on him, and there wasn’t one in his car. Also, his ring finger was cut off. His mother said he wore a high school graduation ring.”

“Did it ever turn up?” I asked. “A pawnshop, that sort of thing?”

“Nope,” Marvin said. “Not yet.”

“Anything stolen from her?” I asked.

“Her shoes were missing. And her socks.”

“Anyone see the couple earlier that day?” I asked.

“Nothing here to indicate that,” Marvin said.

“So how did anyone know they went jogging?” I asked.

“When they found the car and found the bodies and jogging clothes, they put two and two together. Jogging clothes. Jogging trail. No brains were overheated in figuring that part out.”

“Did you guys notice the bottom of the Christopher kid’s shoes?” Leonard said.

We picked up our photos and looked.

“Nice tread,” I said.

“Yep,” Leonard said, “and I have noticed something that we elite in the crime business like to call a clue.”

I turned the picture left and right. I said, “The shoes are clean.”

“Yep,” Leonard said. “If they were new, and he did a bit of jogging before he got interrupted and shot in the head, maybe they’d look kind of clean, but these look really clean. I think someone at the police department thought the same. Otherwise, why would they take a close-up of the bottom of his shoes?”

“Damn, Leonard,” Marvin said, “that may be the first time you’ve ever had a good idea. You’re like a regular Miss Marple.”

“And her shoes are missing,” Leonard said. “So maybe they got taken away before she was dumped. They got the clothes dropped all right, but forgot the socks and shoes.”

“So, you’re thinking they weren’t shot on the trail?” I said.

Leonard nodded, and now he had about him an air of superiority. That’s how he was, one good idea and for a day he thought he was Einstein. “And the car, it could have been left there when the killer dumped them. Or maybe the car was dropped off later. I don’t know. It’s just an idea.”

“It kind of makes sense,” I said. “I was bothered by the fact the bodies lay there that long and no one found them. Could have been that way, but I been to that place, and it’s pretty busy with people running, walking, picnicking, screwing in the bushes. But if they were killed somewhere else and dropped off early … Any information on time of death?”

“They were killed in the morning, was their determination,” Marvin said. “That’s all the report there is about that. As I said, half a day maybe, if they were lying there the whole time. It’s a guess. They’re country cops and country doctors. Not stupid, just not geared toward that sort of thing. The place doesn’t have a real coroner.”

“What about blood evidence?” I asked. “That would let you know something about where they were killed."

"There's no blood evidence information here," Marvin said, shuffling through some pages with writing on them. Leonard and I shuffled through the same pages. I said, "Isn't that a little odd? I mean, they got all this information, but nothing on that?"

"Again, the Camp Rapture police aren't noted for efficiency," Marvin said. "They do have a hell of a fund-raiser with an assortment of different kinds of barbecue, including raccoon and possum, and a country band once a year, but blood evidence tools … not so much. The chief over there is new, and the one before him was an educated idiot. Degrees out the ass and all the common sense of a duck. Anyway, the new lady they got is all right. Before her it was just good old straightforward corruption, so they've moved up a notch."

"You think this is something the cops of that time were in on?" I asked. "Some kind of cover-up?"

"I think they were just incompetent," he said.

We sipped coffee, looked at the photos and the information for a while. When I was through, I looked up, said, "There's a kind of neatness about it."

"That's what Mrs. Christopher thinks. That it's all too neat."

"What does she think really happened?" I asked.

"She thinks it was a hit," Marvin said. "She thinks he made someone mad, or knew something he shouldn't, so they killed him, made it look like another kind of crime. A lot of that is just motherly instinct, but Cason thinks maybe there's something to it."

"So you care about what he thinks?" I said.

"He is an investigative reporter. You grow some instincts, you do that enough."

"And maybe," I said, "Mrs. Christopher is just grieving and trying to make more sense of this than just a standard old murder. The idea that anyone can die for any kind of stupid thing is hard to take, especially if it's someone close to you."

"That's also possible," Marvin said. "The daughter, June, Ted's sister, thinks there's nothing to it."

"You talked to her?" I asked.

Marvin shook his head. "That will be your job. Mrs. Christopher said Ted and his sister didn't get along well, not even when they were kids. She also said June was bothered that Mrs.

Christopher planned to leave her money to Ted. Which on the surface sounds tough, but she said she planned to do that because June married into money and divorced real well. Ted, without family money, would have ended up with the lint in his shorts. I should note too, that the private detective she hired didn't believe it was a hit either."

"So we're sloppy seconds?" I said.

"Yep," Marvin said. "She told me that right up front. I knew the guy she hired, Jimmy Malone. Used to run into him from time to time doing police work. Not exactly on the up-and-up. When he didn't find anything, Mrs. Christopher let it lie for a while, then got it on her mind again that it was a setup, and hired us."

"So," Leonard said, "she thinks Malone took the money and did nothing?"

"My guess is," Marvin said, "that's what Cason thinks and is afraid we're gonna do the same. Me, I don't know. Jimmy was a shit, and a womanizer, and he liked money too much, but he usually did the job. He just didn't always do it the way it ought to be done. He didn't mind playing angles. But the thing is, he didn't find out any more than the police knew."

"We could talk to him," Leonard said.

"Only if you talk to the dead," Marvin said. "He retired, then promptly drowned in a boating accident out at the lake."

Leonard said. "What's this?" He was holding up one of the photos of the dead girl.

"Kind of obvious, don't you think?" Marvin said.

"Not the girl. The tree."

"Let me see," Marvin said. "I'm going to go for Hoss apple."

"The other tree," Leonard said.

"Hickory nut," I said.

"No. What's on the tree?"

We each found our copy of the photo and looked at the hickory tree. There was something on it all right. It was an angled view but it was some kind of drawing. What I could make out was a horned head and a partial face. It was painted there in red. Spray paint, most likely.

"Graffiti," I said.

"Yeah," Leonard said, "but is there anything about it in the notes?"

"No," Marvin said. "And that's because no one thought it meant anything. Kids paint on trees and underpasses and walls all the time. Why would someone kill them and then make a design on a tree?”

“All I’m saying,” Leonard said, “is Mrs. Christopher may be right. It might not be a random murder.”

“That whole mystery clue thing with paintings on trees and feathers and moles in the shape of the state of Rhode Island on a blonde’s ass, in real life, it doesn’t happen much,” Marvin said.

“He’s working his way through the Sherlock Holmes series,” I said. “He’s gotten a little obsessive about mysteries. He found a pair of socks he’s been missing for a couple of months, and he thinks he’s full of deductive reasoning now. Like maybe the socks had some kind of plan to hide out.”

“Listen, Ace,” Marvin said. “You and Hap just go out and ask questions and bumble around. I’ll do the real detective work from the office.”

“Ouch,” Leonard said.

13

So that’s how it went. Now we were sitting on the couch looking at those same photos and reading the information that came with them, thinking back on our meeting with Marvin.

It had started raining hard again, and the atmosphere had settled on the house like a woolen cap. The electricity blinked and crackled a few times but stayed on. It was so dark outside we had to turn on a light.

“So,” Leonard said. “Where do we start?”

“Same place the cops did, with the people who knew the victims.”

“There’s a long list here,” Leonard said, flipping through the folder.

“I think we should do what Marvin suggested. Talk to the sister.”

“To do that,” Leonard said, looking out the window at the rain, “we have to get off the couch. And drive around. We could wait until tomorrow.”

“We weren’t hired to stay home and play Scrabble.”

Leonard’s eyes lit up. “It’s a perfect day for Scrabble. Me and John used to play Scrabble when it rained.”

“I’ll get us a couple of rain slickers and we’ll go to work.”

“So,” Leonard said, “you’re not suggesting we sit on the couch in rain slickers and play Scrabble and call that work?”

“Nope,” I said.

“Dang it.”

We left Leonard’s wreck in the driveway to let the rain work the hardened bird shit off his windshield, took my car.

Before we left, Leonard got something out of his car and slipped in beside me. He laid what he had on the seat between us and pulled off his slicker and put it in the backseat with mine. He picked up what he had laid down and put it on his head.

"What in the hell is that?" I said.

"It's a deerstalker cap."

"A deerstalker cap?"

"You know, Holmes wore one in the movies."

"I know, but what are you doing with one?"

"I'm wearing it."

"Should I wear a bowler and carry an umbrella and let you call me Watson?"

"Would you?"

"Where did you get that?"

"I bought it last Halloween, for a party."

"You dressed up like Sherlock Holmes for Halloween?"

"I don't get to dress up often," Leonard said. "John went as Watson."

"So why are you wearing the hat now? Halloween is long past."

"We're on the hunt. The game's afoot."

"Leonard, you are not wearing that foolish cap."

"Why not?"

"Because you stand out like a hard dick in a nunnery."

Leonard quit looking at me. He turned and stared at the windshield.

"So you're gonna give me the cold shoulder?"

He didn't respond.

"You have this thing for hats, Leonard, but you are not a hat person … Look, you can wear it in the car. The car only. Got me?"

Leonard put on his seat belt, rested his hands in his lap, and stared straight ahead.

"Outside the car, you got that thing on I might have to kill you."

14

First on our list was Ted's sister's house. My idea of a really neat house is one that doesn't have to be held up with a stick, and there are no burnt cans in a pile in the driveway or an old Dodge on blocks with chickens roosting under it.

This house was way past that. It was so cool and connected to the center of the universe it stopped raining when we got there. It was behind a fence and a barred gate. As we cruised up, through the gate, we could see there was enough green yard to play the Super Bowl. Even the colorful leaves that fell from the trees and blew across the grass seemed embarrassed by the intrusion.

We parked in front of the gate. I rolled down the window and pushed a button on a metal box inside a brick indentation. There was a buzz and a long silence. I was about to push it again when a snappy female voice with an accent south of the border asked if she could help us.

I explained who we were and what we were doing and that June's mother had hired us to look into something for her. The voice went away. I turned and looked at Leonard. He was still wearing the deerstalker.

The voice came back, said we could come up, but the tone now was sharp and hard enough to clip paper dolls from cardboard. I guess she had hoped we would be rejected.

The gate slid back and we glided in. The driveway was a big loop of shiny wet concrete in front of a yellow adobe house with a Spanish tile roof. The house was big enough and tall enough to hold all of Noah's animals and a spare woodchuck. You could have driven four horses running abreast through any of the windows, and the doorway was tall enough and wide enough to accommodate at least one war elephant if it bent its head slightly and went through politely.

No one rode out to meet us in a golf cart, so after I made Leonard take off his hat, we got out and stepped up the walk. When I looked back at my car, it looked unnatural in the driveway. That driveway knew and adored limousines and sports cars, not functional metal, plastic, and glass. I leaned down by the side of the walk and felt the grass. Damn if it wasn't artificial.

Leonard wanted to ring the doorbell, so I let him. I wanted to ring it too, but sometimes you have to give in to the children. You could hear it chime throughout the house.

No one inside made a rush of things. Of course, a house that big, you might have to pack a sandwich before you went to answer the door.

When the door was finally opened it was the woman that went with the voice over the intercom. She was a petite Hispanic woman in her late twenties and she was actually wearing a maid outfit, just like in the movies. She had beautiful black hair and great skin and lips that looked like they would have been fun to suck on. Because of her stern voice, I had somehow expected her to look like the ass end of a mule and be built like a linebacker.

We were invited inside. I tried not to rubberneck. I had been in government buildings that size, but not a house, and the government buildings weren't so well furnished.

The maid hustled us along a long wide hall with blue and white tile floors. The walls had paintings on them that looked like they had been painted by madmen and recently. I liked them.

We were led off the hall through another war-elephant-size door and into a library that made the one downtown look like a used-book store. The books smelled of leather and old paper and more knowledge than could be acquired in three lifetimes, plus a whiff of cigar smoke covered in a light overcoat of air freshener. The place had a masculine feel about it, with leather couches and chairs and sliding ladders to climb onto to look at books on the upper shelves. There was a large window at the back and looking through it we could see a shiny pond out there, recently swollen by the rain. Beyond that was a wall like out front.

The maid told us to make ourselves comfortable and went away.

We sat on the couch and Leonard said, "Can you believe this is in the center of town? Hidden up here in the trees?"

“I can’t believe a place like this is anywhere,” I said. “I thought they made this stuff up for the movies.”

“The movie screen wouldn’t be wide enough to hold this place,” Leonard said. “It might take a few theaters just to get that hallway in frame.”

A moment later a woman came into the room. She was some woman. She looked like she was dressed to go out on the town, and not our town. Someplace in Manhattan, perhaps Paris, London, or Rome. Her long blonde hair was waved and she wore a pantsuit of shimmering white and she had a small glass in her hand and it was half-filled with a golden liquid that I knew wasn’t fruit juice.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen,” she said. It was a nice voice full of pep and insincerity. “I’m June. I hope you don’t mind if I don’t offer you a drink. I thought we could race through this rather quickly.”

“That’s fine,” I said.

She came and sat in a leather chair across from us and put her drink down on the wooden coffee table between us, no coaster. It was a heavily stained table and it was the only thing in the room besides the books that looked old.

“So, you’re private detectives,” June said, smiling. She had nice teeth and just the slightest bit of an overbite.

“We’re not exactly private detectives,” I said.

“Oh,” she said.

“We’ve still got the training wheels on,” Leonard said.

“So should you be on the job?” she asked.

“We’ve had a lot of experience,” I said. “We’re just not what you’d call official. We’re operatives. We work for a private detective.”

“So someday you may get a little badge, a whistle, and a canteen,” she said.

“Our boss,” Leonard said, “he started with Where’s Waldo books to sharpen us up, but now we’ve moved on to interviews. We mostly ask short questions.”

“I see,” she said. She grinned and leaned back and sipped her drink and studied Leonard, then me. Her eyes were very green and very penetrating.

“You boys look a little rough,” she said. “Like you’ve been around the block a few times.”

“Maybe more than a few,” I said.

“Oh, I didn’t mean anything by it. I like the way you look. Most of the men I know use skin cream and have straight noses and the most violent thing they do is grunt playing table tennis. Sometimes, in their sleep, they fart dramatically. Oh, I’m telling, aren’t I?”

She moved her head slowly, so we could have a look at her profile, and then she moved it back and sipped her drink.

“It’s just that I don’t know why my mother is bothering with all this, or why she would send you to talk to me. There’s nothing I can add. Ted and his girlfriend were murdered for sex and money. Though they didn’t get the sex, and my guess is they didn’t get much money.”

“Do you know what was actually stolen besides his ring?” I asked.

“Well, he may have had money in the wallet,” June said. “But I don’t know.”

“Credit cards?”

“Most likely. Several. Mostly filled to the brim and leaking over, would be my guess.”

“Did the police say anything about anyone trying to use them after his death?”

“No. I know you’re thinking that might mean the robbery was a sham. But I think whoever did it panicked and took what was in the wallet and was afraid to use the cards. Afraid they’d be tracked. Or maybe the cards got canceled before the killer could use them, and they just disposed of them.”

She leaned back in her chair and crossed her long panted legs and dropped her head slightly. I was sure she knew the effect this had; the way her hair fell across one eye, and the way she looked when she lifted her head and smiled that sexy beaver-toothed grin.

“Look,” she said, “my brother, he and I weren’t close. I’m sorry about what happened to him, but it was an unfortunate accident. Wrong place. Wrong time. I suppose it could have been someone who knew him, knew he was going to be there, thought he had money, and jumped him, but I think he was a victim of opportunity.”

“What about the girl?” I asked.

“She was a tramp. And in case you’re vague on that, let me translate. She was Miss Insert Slot B."

"That covers a lot of ground," I said.

"And a lot of ground was covered," June said.

"Only thing that surprised me about her was that she got killed in the daytime."

"Beg your pardon?" Leonard said.

"She didn't go out in the daytime."

"Fear of skin cancer?" I said. "She freckled?"

"Nope … Wait for it … She thought she was a vampire."

15

"Big teeth?" Leonard said. "Bite your neck, suck your blood? Wear a cape? Turn into a bat?"

"I doubt she turned into a bat," June said. "A bitch maybe, but not a bat."

"So, you're not denying the cape?" he said.

She smiled at Leonard.

"You knew Mini, then?" I said.

"Some. Liked to wear black and her hair was dyed so dark it looked like strands of shadow. She mainly went out at night. Claimed the sunlight made her weak, unless she needed to go out, and if she did, she seemed spry enough. She was out that day, wasn't she? The day she got popped. She was said to drink blood. Mostly it was her who said it. She was a goddamn nut. Being a nut was kind of her hobby. Some people collect stamps or keep a diary, she practiced doing nutty things."

"It probably has nothing to do with anything," I said, "outside of it's just weird as all daylights and I want to hear about it, but could you give us some more background on her?"

"I didn't know her well. I didn't want to know her well. But she told me a few things when she got out of jail."

"Jail?" I said.

"Yeah. She and my brother dated for a while, and I was trying to patch things up with him, because, as I said, we didn't get along. So, in the process, me and her hung a little and she talked a lot. I picked up other bits of her story here and there. Mini roosted with a really screwball crowd. Especially Evil Lynn."

"You're yankin' me?" Leonard said. "She had a friend named Evil Lynn?"

"I haven't had the pleasure of yanking you."

She smiled at Leonard seductively. I thought: Lady, you are wasting the possibility of a few wrinkles around your mouth on someone who is seriously batting for another team. Look this way.

She didn't.

"Was Evil Lynn her real name?" I asked.

"Of course not. Her last name was Gonzello. I called her Godzilla, not Evil Lynn. I can't remember Godzilla's first name. Cassie. Candy. Canola. Something like that. Only met her once, at my brother's place, and that was enough. There were several of them, actually. Vampires I mean … Let's walk outside. My husband used to smoke cigars in here, and I can still smell them, and him. Both stink."

We walked through the hallway, outside into the backyard. There were trees and a few leaves, and there was a man in work clothes walking around with a stick with a point on the end of it. He was stabbing the leaves and putting them in a big, black plastic bag he was dragging.

"I know a guy works doing special effects in movies," she said. "I'm thinking about having plastic trees put in. These are so messy."

Leonard looked at me out of the corner of his eye. I looked back and tried not to laugh. Plastic trees?

Underneath one of the pesky real trees was a stone table with a bench on either side. We sat down there.

June rattled the ice in her glass, looked at what was left of her drink as if it were the last of all sunshine, and said, "This is what I know, and all I know. And when I tell you what I know, I don't want to talk about it again. I'm all through. Just thinking about her and her nutball friends makes my ass tired."

She shifted her tired, but very nice, ass on the bench and looked at the pond. There was a big insect, a dragonfly, cruising over the water. She put her focus on that for a while. Maybe she was thinking about having it killed and crucified on the edge of the pond as an object lesson, then having the yard sprayed with insecticide. She could always get her special effects friend to make her a robotic dragonfly, maybe some birds. She drank and moved the liquid around inside her mouth in case her teeth were in need of a whirlpool bath. The man with the pointed stick and the bag full of leaves moved across the yard and around a corner of the house and out of sight.

June swallowed loudly, said, “Mini hooked up with Ted because they were both a little freaky. Ted, he was into anal, and she didn’t mind it. His girlfriend before, Lori, not so happy about it. She had two kids, and she told me all Ted wanted to do was crawl up her poop chute. It’s all he talked about. Had videos and magazines and a game plan in bed that always, if you’ll pardon the pun, ended the same way.”

I wasn’t sure where this was going, and maybe it was going a little too far south, but Leonard and I let it go. I kind of like nasty stories.

June said, “She started thinking, from the way the kid’s toys smelt and felt, that while she and the kids were out, Ted was greasing up and shoving toys up his ass.”

“Ouch,” Leonard said. “Hope one of those toys wasn’t a bicycle.”

“So, she confronts him, and he admits it, and she is major pissed off, and he says, ‘Hell, just wash them off.’ He wasn’t concerned. It was all about his ass, his fetish.”

“And that was, rim shot, so to speak, the end of the relationship,” I said.

“Not yet. She thought maybe he could change. We always think our men can change, and they can’t. Assholes at birth, assholes at death. A motto I live by. Anyway, one day she comes home, and she’s got the children with her, and what does she find but a drunk and drugged-out Ted passed out in the living room on the rug, naked, with the engine of a hard plastic toy train up his ass, the rest of it dangling out, all the way down to the caboose, like it couldn’t make the hill.”

“Oh, hell,” I said. “That had to hurt.”

“Yep. Bled on the carpet. Children were traumatized, and no one wanted to play with the train thereafter. And she’d already dealt with him and a rubber duck and a twirler’s baton, so she’d had enough. The train set was expensive. You can buy a duck or a baton anywhere and mostly cheap, but not those buddies. She was fed up with him, and she liked that carpet. Moroccan. Way more expensive than the train. So, it was choo-choo-choo-cha-boogie, you are gone, baby. So, that leads him to Mini, who is connected to Godzilla and a couple other girls who drink blood. Good thing for Ted is, Mini didn’t have a problem with the ass business.”

“Will there be more trains and tunnels in this story?” Leonard asked.

“No. We’re switching tracks,” June said. “I’m just trying to say nuts attract nuts. Now we’re going to the Children of the Night. That’s what they called themselves. Is that hokey or what?”

The maid, as if on cue, came out with another drink, set it on the table in front of June, and without a word went back to the house. I watched her swing away with more than a bit of pleasure. Being male is a full-time, and sometimes tiring, job.

“You like that maid outfit?” June said to me.

“I don’t think it would fit me,” I said, “but it’s very nice. I don’t have the legs for it either.”

“You ought to see me in one,” she said.

“And what days do you wear it?” I asked.

She snorted and sipped her fresh drink. She was starting to get pretty lit, though she was an experienced drunk and wasn’t losing her focus on the story, and the words came out clear, if slightly spaced, as if they had to stop and rest before going on.

“I don’t know why Mini felt she could talk to me, but she did. Maybe she needed to get away from all weird all the time. Also, she was drunk and at a party here at my house, and she was fresh out of jail and no one else wanted to talk to her. Word gets around. Had I not been drunk, I wouldn’t have wanted to talk to her myself. She told me she and these other girls, Godzilla, as ringleader, would go out to the cemetery and have ceremonies, reading spells out of witchcraft books, lighting candles, that kind of crap, calling on Satan to come on up and see them sometime. Then one night, Godzilla’s girlfriend … Let’s see … She was called Trip. I don’t know what her real name was, but she was called that … So, one night, they’re in the cemetery, and they’re doing some ceremony or another, and it leads to Trip letting Godzilla cut her neck a little with a pocketknife and suck blood from the wound. And then everyone has to have a taste, so there’s more cutting. Everyone giving up a little blood, except Godzilla. They all take turns sucking neck, which I figure is pretty damn unsanitary.

“Godzilla and Trip, who were lesbian lovers, end up making out. Then the nonlesbians say what the hell, and they’re all making out, followed by more blood sucking. Anyway, they’re sucking blood and suckin' whatever, and Godzilla, who was a pretty tough-lookin' broad, or seemed that way the time I saw her … I figured about three feet of chain and two stiff drinks and I could have whipped all of them."

"And without the chain?" I said.

"Might have been touch and go," June said.

"So you were saying?" I said.

"Well, they were doing vampire things, I guess. But Mini, she tells me that the night in the graveyard when everyone got naked and tried to find a place to bite, Godzilla started talking about killing people. Feasting on their blood, as she put it. Mini thought it was cool talk, but just talk. Like you know, when you say you're putting a band together in your garage and you're going to cut a record and go all the way to the top, and you know you're not, and the best that happens is you end up playing a bad version of 'Wipe Out' or 'Free Bird' at a bar for tips. Anyway, Mini claimed she was just playing along. Told me she thought she was a vampire on the weekends and late at night, and the rest of the time, she had to work at RadioShack. The other girls, they all had money and time to waste. Harder to be a vampire when you have to be nice to customers and earn a paycheck."

June took a long ice-rattling drink from her glass. When she started talking again her tongue had grown a little thick.

"What happened was, one night they're driving along in Godzilla's car, four of them, Godzilla, Trip, Mini, and this other goober I can't think of, and they come across this drunk frat-rat on a bicycle. Mini said they could see him pedaling along ahead of them. He was all over the road, like a sidewinder snake trying to drive a tricycle. So they pull over and get out, and this guy, he thinks he's hit the jackpot. Four hotties giving his drunk ass attention. Well, three hotties and Godzilla.

"They get him to abandon his bicycle, which he tells them he stole off a front porch, and he climbs into the car. Mini said Trip showed him some tit and a bottle of whiskey, and now this sap thinks he's died and gone to heaven."

Something clicked while June was talking. I remembered this. I had seen stuff about it on the local news, a while back. The vampire angle had been mentioned, but I had forgotten all about it.

"They drove over to Camp Rapture, teasing him and giving him whiskey, and then Mini said Godzilla said something about her and Trip taking the boy out behind the warehouse district and doing him a favor. By this point, this guy was so drunk and worked up he'd have humped a crippled sheep wearing stockings, a garter belt, and a purple beret. To him, even Godzilla was probably starting to look like a runway model. Man, where's my maid? I need another drink."

"Finish your story," I said, "and I'll look her up for you."

June held up her glass and shook the ice in it, hoping the maid might hear. She didn't. June shook the glass harder. After a moment she gave up and placed it on the table and burped pleasantly with her hand almost making it over her mouth.

"There's not much left to tell," June said. "They took him out back of a shed, down in the warehouse district. Mini said she could see what was happening from the inside of the car. They were a ways back, but it was all in full view. While the guy is shucking his drawers, thinking he's going to get to churn the log in the mill, out of her purse Godzilla pulls a big knife and sticks the guy in the neck."

June made a stabbing motion in the air, gritting her teeth as she did.

"Then Godzilla pounced on him, started sticking him, lots of times. He screamed and fell down on his face. Godzilla kept after him. She wasn't any slacker. She tried to hand Trip the knife, but she wouldn't take it. Godzilla went back to it. Trip went back to the car and got in and sat there and all she could say was that there was a hole in the guy's back big enough to shove a wiener dog through. Or so Mini said. They watched Godzilla bend over the body and start sucking at the blood.

"When it was over, Godzilla came back covered in gore. Mini said her eyes were wide and bright and she had that big wet knife in her hand and a loopy blood-smeared smile on her face like she'd just had a seven-course dinner and someone had been polite enough to burp her.

"Mini said right then she was through playing vampire. She got out of the car and made a run for it. And when she looked back, Trip was out of the car and chasing after her. But Trip, drunk, or just worn out by shock, fell down in a stretch of trees, and Mini just kept going. They were way out in the country, so she got lost. Wandered through some woods and over a little creek, finally saw lights. It was Camp Rapture. She could see the university tower all lit up.”

June paused and closed her eyes. The last words she had spoken had begun to have fuzz around them. I said, “So, she saw the tower lit up.”

“Real pretty, that tower at night,” June said.

“Yeah, it’s nice,” Leonard said. “What happened after Mini saw it?”

“She went into town and found the police and told them about it. They went out, and sure enough, they found the guy. He looked like bloody rags, he was so cut up. And when they found Godzilla and Trip and the other girl back at Godzilla’s pad, Godzilla was still covered in blood.

“They arrested all of ’em, includin’ Mini. But it was decided she didn’t do anything but hang out with the wrong crowd, so they let her out of jail and told her to hang up her gothic duds and turn state’s evidence. She did. Oh, God. I’m drunk. Do I sound drunk?”

“Amazingly,” I said, “not much.”

“Godzilla had somehow dropped her credit card, near the body, so when they found the body they found the card, and that established the likelihood of her being there. Later all the girls turned on her, even Trip. That put the nail in her coffin, which, for a vampire, seems appropriate. But there was one more thing. Godzilla threw up when she was arrested. All that blood. Samples were taken. Eventually, the results came back. It was the guy’s blood, of course. She actually had sucked down about a half quart of it, the greedy whore.”

“Do you remember the dead boy’s name?” I asked.

“Shit,” June said, “I’m two sips off startin’ to have a hard time rememberin’ my own name. All I know is the family was a good family out of Houston, and they were in court during Godzilla’s trial. I heard rumors Godzilla swore she’d get all the other girls, kill them, or have them killed. But I heard one of my cousins say he saw Bigfoot once, and I just got to take him at his word.”

“And how are the girls?” I asked.

“How the hell would I know?” she said, put her head on the table, closed her eyes, and in a moment she was snoring like a water buffalo.

“Well,” Leonard said. “Reckon that’s our cue.”

16

We went back into the hall and the maid met us there. She was friendlier now and her voice was less gruff. She said, “She drunk yet?”

“Yes, but she went down a pretty clear talker,” I said.

“Passed out?” the maid asked.

“Yep,” Leonard said.

“She’s like that. Talks almost like she hasn’t had a drink, then she’s snoozin’. You got to watch sometimes so she doesn’t bump her head, she’ll go down so fast.”

“We’ll take that under advisement,” Leonard said.

“You know, in spite of what she says, she loved her brother very much.”

“So, you been listening in?” I said.

“Absolutely. I knew she wanted another drink too, but I didn’t bring it. She didn’t need it.”

“We heard she was pretty upset about her mother leaving the money to the brother,” Leonard said.

“Not really,” the maid said. “She was worried that Mini would get her hands on it. She didn’t want that to happen, and that’s all there was to that. I’ve worked for her for five years, and she’s not as heartless as she can sound when she’s drunk. She and her brother didn’t get along, but she loved him. She just didn’t know how much until he was dead. I’ll walk you gentlemen out.”

Outside, Leonard said, “That’s some story.”

“Actually,” I said, “I remember hearing about the case on the news. I don’t remember the details, but I remember hearing about it.”

"Me too," Leonard said. "But it happened before Mini bit the big one, and before she was dating Ted, so I'm not sure it means anything, even if those girls could actually change into bats."

"No one said they could change into bats," I said.

"I know, but that would be way cool, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, yeah," I said, and we bumped fists. "Do you think Mini telling June about all that in such detail means anything other than they were both drunk?"

"Got me," Leonard said.

Back in the car Leonard put on the deerstalker.

"You're just jackin' with me, aren't you? You know you look like a moron, but you're wearing that thing to get my goat and all its children, aren't you?"

Leonard leaned over and adjusted the car mirror and looked at himself. "I think it fits my personality."

"What personality?"

"That's just mean, Hap."

I put the mirror back the way I liked it. "We'll take back streets," I said.

"I want a Sonic burger."

"You have money?"

"Not on me … You have money?"

"Yes."

"Will you buy me a burger?"

"Will you take off the hat?"

"You can eat in the car at Sonic."

"Yes, but the waitress who brings it out will see you and know I'm with you."

"No one will know you."

"It's not a chance I'm willin' to take."

"I hate you," Leonard said.

17

In Marvin's office, Marvin looked up some things on the Internet and made a few calls to cops, a warden, some prison guards, and other people, including a sandwich shop that delivered.

He didn't offer us a sandwich, nor did he offer to let us order our own.

Leonard, wearing the deerstalker, sat in a client chair reading one of Marvin's fishing magazines. I sat with my hands on my knees feeling like a bored kid.

After a long while, Marvin put the phone down, scribbled some notes, said, "Okay, I remember this vampire case. I checked some of the details, and it appears June is pretty accurate in her story. I just didn't put Mini together with it, didn't remember her name and Mrs. Christopher didn't mention it."

"It seemed too coincidental to ignore," I said.

"It damn sure looks like the vampire killings and Mini go together," Marvin said. "It also appears that—"

Marvin paused and looked at Leonard. "You know, Leonard, if I'm going to talk seriously, and you're going to listen seriously, you have to take off that goddamn shitty hat."

"Thank you," I said.

"Et tu?" Leonard said.

"Now he's trying to show some education," I said.

Marvin just looked at him.

Leonard slowly removed the hat and placed it on his knee. "All my life people have been jealous of me."

"Keep tellin' yourself that," Marvin said. "So, what June told you, it's pretty much right. We'll just have to take her word on her brother and the toy train."

"Oh, man," I said. "That was something I could have gone to my grave without knowing.”

Marvin nodded. “Yep. Me too. What June didn’t tell you, and probably doesn’t know, but what my phone calls just found out, is about two weeks ago, Evil Lynn, real name Ray Lynn Gonzello, Godzilla to June, had a prisoner start somethin’ with her over who knows what. Godzilla beat her down like she was tenderizin’ meat. Then she challenged a fellow ass-whipped prisoner to cut her. Let her get to the shiv she’d just taken away from her. Wanted to show her that it wouldn’t hurt. That any wound she got would heal. That she was in fact a vampire.”

“Uh-oh,” Leonard said. “This isn’t going to end well.”

“On the nosey,” Marvin said. “Fact was she didn’t heal up at all. Got stabbed under the armpit and bled out faster than you could say ‘Oh, shit. I’ve been stabbed under the arm and it hurts like a motherfucker.’ According to what I got here, Godzilla had some actual last words.”

“I’m guessin’,” said Leonard, “it’s not the stuff about ‘Oh shit, I’ve been stabbed under the arm.’ ”

“Kind of sad, really,” Marvin said. “She said, ‘I’m just a girl.’ ”

“Nothing like experience to put things into perspective,” I said.

“What I’m thinkin’,” Marvin says, “is every day she’s eating crappy food in the cafeteria, and she’s not suckin’ blood—I don’t think—and she’s behind bars like a zoo animal, no vampire powers at work, and she still didn’t get it. That’s the part amazes me.”

“The knife was the only kind of explanation she understood,” I said.

“Now here’s some more CliffsNotes. A year back, Trip, real name Tammy Trip, the vampire’s assistant, was found dead in her apartment, hanging from a doorway. Drove a big nail there, attached a short noose made of two woven nylon stockings, and hung herself. She was all dressed up in her best black duds. Course, according to my buddy over in Camp Rapture who works for the cops, cop who found her said she had shit herself and her tongue was hanging out so far and so thick, they thought she had a partially deflated balloon in her mouth.”

“Dressin’ up don’t help much,” Leonard said, “if you end up with shit down your legs.”

“Six months ago, one of the other girls, one who stayed in the car with Mini, name was Joan Carter, was found in her bedroom with a hypodermic needle no longer full of heroin in her arm. She had been dead a few days. Her dog ate most of one of her legs and a large chunk out of her naked ass, but was kind enough to do all his pissin' and shittin' in one corner of the room."

"Leonard can't even do that," I said.

"Then we go back to Mini and her boyfriend," Marvin said. "They were killed two years ago."

"Seems like belonging to or being associated with the vampire clan brings a person bad luck," I said.

"Yep," Leonard said. "But I do have a suspect. Van Helsing."

Marvin ignored that. He said, "Now, I hate to tell you this part, and I suppose when I do, Leonard, you can put the deerstalker back on. Cop over in Camp Rapture tells me that a bunch of them thought from the start the bodies of Mini and Christopher's boy had been killed somewhere else and dumped. And it wasn't the first time they'd seen the devil head symbol, but all of that was kept hush-hush."

Leonard put the hat on, lounged loosely in his chair. "Yeah, baby," he said.

"So the cops weren't as stupid as we thought," I said.

"No," Marvin said. "They thought they'd keep some things back, something they could use to nail their guy later on. Not let it be known they were onto the right idea. Of course, it didn't help. The cases still went cold."

"Are you about to tell us the Devil Red symbol was at the scenes of their deaths?"

"It was found in the apartment where the girl hung herself. It was marked above the doorway where the noose was fastened. Other girl, one with the needle … It was drawn on the headboard of the bed. Small, but in sight if you were looking. And, lastly, as you noted, Leonard, it was drawn on one of the trees where Mini and Ted's bodies were found. Since the murders took place in different towns, and some time apart, no one put it together right away. Maybe it should have been obvious, the girls being part of the vampire group. But, different towns, different departments. Mini was killed in Camp Rapture along with Ted. Godzilla in prison—and there wasn't any symbol there, which means she may not have been part of the pattern at all, just stupid. Trip was in LaBorde at the time, having just moved there, and Joan, the dog's lunch, died in Tyler. They figure the killer is spacing his victims out to keep from being connected, to avoid expectations, or is playing a kind of game. Wants to taunt the authorities, show how clever he is. Thinks he's smarter than everyone else."

"And so far," I said, "that's been true. But whoever is whacking them is leaving the devil head symbol, so they're not hiding that hard."

"Here's something else. Mini was about to inherit enough money to not only buy some plastic vampire teeth, but on top of that there would be eight million dollars left over."

"Holy shit," Leonard said, "she invent a perpetual motion machine?"

"Nope. Her mother won the lottery."

18

"That's some lottery," I said. "Eight million dollars."

"Poor girl," Marvin said. "She never got to spend her inheritance." Marvin picked up the notes he had made, glanced at them, and continued. "Her father died when she was young. Her mother remarried, and the old gal wasn't exactly tip-top in the high value department. A drunk. A bit of a whore. Picked up for shoplifting a couple of times. Even had Mini in on the job once, teaching her to stuff items down her pants. And the kid was five. Mother was fired from a lot of jobs, mostly for not showing up, or showing up drunk, and once for giving another employee head in the back room for fifty dollars. She also paid a fine for dumping a dog beside the road and wishing it good luck in the future."

"Everything but wearing polyester jumpsuits," Leonard said.

"The sources for all this reliable?" I said. "We didn't have this info before."

"I wouldn't use them if they weren't," Marvin said. "They don't know it all, but they know a lot. Mostly from cops and retired cops, a couple of lawyers who are only partly shark. But it's just background stuff, nothing that solves anything. It just means all that money might somehow have been a motive. Figuring out if it was or wasn't, that's our job."

"Shit," Leonard said. "I was hoping someone else had done the work and we'd be through after today."

"Actually, that vampire business opened the gate," Marvin said. "Gave me an idea of who to contact on the force over there. Once I knew stuff they didn't, they were more forthcoming with things I didn't know. They figured they might as well tell me. The case was cold to them. So, I hate to give you guys a compliment, but you did good. It's the way it works in the detective business: The more you know, the more others are willing to tell you."

Marvin returned the notes to the table and leaned back in his chair. His chair was much better than ours. It was comfy and had wheels on it. "Mini didn't have true friends because her personality was a little strange. That's why she latched onto the vampire business, got in with that crowd."

"She was pretty," I said. "I could tell that in the photo. A little still, a little pale, and way too dead, but no discernible ants or maggots or signs of rot, still pretty until the bloating. Usually, pretty girls are popular. When they're alive, anyway."

"She was popular with some in a certain way," Marvin said.

"Local hole punch?" I said.

"Yep," Marvin said. "According to Will Turner, a retired cop I talked to, guy who actually interviewed Mini first, after Godzilla did the chop and suck thing. He got the impression that Mini was trying to fit in. Boys liked her for the drawer shuckin' part, but not for too much else."

"If only she could have yodeled," Leonard said.

"You are a heartless sonofabitch," I said.

"I was thinkin' she and her buddies killin' that drunk frat rat was the heartless part," Leonard said. "And as a reward, her mother wins eight million dollars for buying a two-dollar ticket. What's up with that?"

"Bought the ticket at a filling station," Marvin said. "When she got some of the money, she went out to get drunk in celebration, leaving her husband home with a glass of milk and a bologna sandwich. She got so drunk she fell asleep in her car on the railroad track."

"I see this coming," Leonard said.

"She didn't," Marvin said. "A train knocked her ass about two miles down the track and into some woods and into a sink of water. Next morning they found the car. Someone finally saw the roof of the car sticking out of the water, shining in the sunlight. She turned out to have a car engine stuck up her ass. But the good news, my contact said, was the air bag opened."

"That technology," I said, "it's somethin'."

"I presume the husband inherits?" Leonard said.

Marvin shook his head. "Nope. Mini's mother, Twilla, bought herself a new car and a hairdo and about three thousand dollars' worth of duds on credit, then went to a lawyer and made a will.

She left it to her daughter should anything happen to her. This was two weeks before Mini was found dead. Little later, Twilla got hit by the train. Not long after, the daughter and the boyfriend bit it."

"Was anyone next in line for the money after Mini?" I asked.

"The animal shelter," Marvin said. "She liked cats. Not dogs, just cats."

"Prejudice is an ugly thing," Leonard said.

"Bert, her husband, wasn't completely left out. He got ten thousand. But that had to bite his butt. Him with ten thousand and the cats with almost eight million dollars. That buys a lot of catnip."

"So Bert could have a grudge," I said.

"I guess the cats are looking over their shoulders," Leonard said.

"Cops looked into him," Marvin said, "up one side and down another. They couldn't find anything that led them to think he was involved or did anything himself. But it's a motive. I don't know how it would connect to the other girls, but maybe he was trying to make it look like the murders were connected with what Godzilla and the girls had done. According to what I got here in my notes, Bert wasn't big enough or tough enough to do much but give Sharon's cats to the animal shelter. That was about the extent of his mean as far as the cops can see. Still, we won't take him off the suspect list."

"June might have a place on that list too," Leonard said. "I don't know how much I buy the 'she really loved her brother' bit. She didn't like the idea that he might get that inheritance instead of her. She had the money to make a hit, and if Mini was there when it was set up, so be it. Not that June needs the inheritance, but the ones who don't need it are often the ones who want more of it."

"All right," Marvin said. "June's on the list too."

"Do you think it's odd that Mini's mom made out a will right after getting the money?" I said.

"Not really," Marvin said. "She was old enough to think about it. Maybe she finally felt motherly and thought if anything happened to her, Mini would get it and she would check out making up for not being the best mom in the world. And if Mini died, well, there was the animal shelter. The husband did hire a lawyer on contingency to try and pry the money from the fuzzy little paws of all those desperate kitties. I don’t know how that worked out. But there’s nothing about Bert that has to mean murder. And the mother, well, I figure too much alcohol and a big case of the stupids did her in.”

I glanced over at Leonard and his deerstalker. I turned to Marvin. “Do you come across many murders where a fella didn’t like his best friend’s hat?”

“No,” Marvin said, looking at Leonard, “but I can understand the impulse.”

19

Marvin gave us some contact information for people we might want to talk to, and I folded that up and put it in my coat pocket. We left when his sandwich arrived. We knew when we weren't wanted.

At my place we fried up some egg sandwiches and sat on the couch and turned so we could look at each other. Leonard had finally taken off the deerstalker, so it was easier to do.

We decided we had to see Mini's stepdad, Bert. I called the cell number we had for him. The phone rang awhile, but finally he answered.

I told him we were investigating his stepdaughter's murder, that the mother of Mini's boyfriend had hired us, and could we meet up with him.

"Can't we just talk over the phone?" he said.

"I suppose, but we'd rather do it in person."

"Not anything I can tell you, and since I don't know you, I ain't wantin' you to come out to the house."

"Okay."

"I've had threats."

"Threats?" I asked.

"That's all I'll say about it."

"Look, I don't know about the threats, but we're on the up-and-up. What say we meet someplace public? We'll buy you lunch."

"Made a sandwich already."

"Well," I said, "how about just meeting you in town?"

He was silent for so long I thought the connection was broken. But just when I was about to give up, he said, "I'm going out to the auction barn, catch me there."

"Not sure what you look like."

"Call my goddamn cell, man. Use your head. When you get there, call me."

On the way out to the auction barn, I said, "He sounds paranoid."

"Doesn't mean someone's not after him," Leonard said.

"Take off the hat, Leonard. Where we're going is cowboy country. You going in there looking like that, you're asking for trouble. Only thing missing is a purse."

"This is anything but effeminate," he said. "In Merry Ole England they wore these to hunt deer. Real men. Real guns. Real deer. And this hat."

"Deer probably laughed themselves to death."

When we got out to the auction barn, the parking lot was full of pickups and trailers and everything smelled like animal shit; it was so thick you almost had to climb over the reek to get to the auction barn.

Inside, the place looked like an ad for chewing tobacco and blue jeans. Cowboy hats floated on the crowd, and there was a lot of crowd. Last time I'd seen that many people was in a rerun of *The Ten Commandments*. Who knew cows were that exciting. The animal crap smell was now so intense I felt I needed mountaineer equipment to scale it.

We started moving in among them, and as we went, Leonard pulled the deerstalker out of his back pocket, unfolded it, and popped it out like a wet towel and put it on.

"You sonofabitch," I said.

20

As we rambled through the crowd, a tall cowboy with a hatband full of toothpicks watched Leonard pass with open curiosity. I was right behind Leonard. I said to the cowboy, “He’s working a child’s party after this.”

The cowboy looked at me and nodded, like that explained everything.

We found a spot with a break in people, and went there. I took out my cell and called.

“Yeah,” Bert said.

“This is Hap Collins. I spoke to you earlier.”

“What about?”

I was more than a little certain now that Bert was not the sharpest knife in the drawer.

“Your stepdaughter. You told me to call.”

“Oh, yeah. I’m over by the door. Too many people in there, and hot.”

“Okay,” I said. “Meet you there. What’s your description?”

“What’s yours?”

“There’s two of us. I’m about six foot with brown hair, stocky. The guy with me is black—”

“Black?” He seemed surprised.

“Yeah. There’s a whole race of them. He’s just one of them.”

“Black, huh.”

“Now and always.”

There were actually a few black cowboys scattered about the barn, but they had on the proper duds. I said, “You’ll know us because he’s bigger than me and has gray at the temples. Oh yeah, he’s got on a funny hat.”

“Hey,” Leonard said.

21

It was hot in the auction barn, and it felt good to come out into the open air. There were a number of men and women in cowboy hats and gimme caps out there, and a few of them were smoking cigarettes. One was wiping cow shit off his boots, scraping them over the edge of a concrete step.

That guy, the shit scraper, turned and looked at us. He smiled when he saw Leonard. I had a suspicion he was Bert. He was tall and strong-looking in a working man sort of way; had long muscles and a face that had seen too much sun, and maybe too many fists.

“Damn, man, that is the ugliest goddamn hat I ever seen,” Bert said, coming over, pushing his cowboy hat back on his head. “You just wear that to crap in?”

I thought, Bert, my man, you are taking your life into your own hands. Leonard stood there with his hands in front of him, right folded over left, at his belt buckle. That was how he stood when he wanted to look casual but was ready to knock your head off.

Leonard said, “Naw, I crap in cowboy hats. This I keep clean.”

Bert and Leonard looked at each other. Bert looked like a tough hombre. Thing was, though, Leonard was a tough hombre.

I said, “Bert, we’re just trying to find out who killed your daughter.”

“Stepdaughter,” he said. “Could have been anybody.”

“So no idea?”

“I got an idea.”

“And?” Leonard said.

“Keeping it to myself.”

“You tell the cops what you thought?” Leonard asked.

“Nope.”

“Why not?” I said.

“Didn’t care for Mini much. A real weird one and a bitch. Don’t like her mother much now. Left her money to the daughter, then to a bunch of fuckin’ cats. How about that? Cats. What the fuck are cat’s gonna buy?”

“Cat toys,” Leonard said.

Bert gave Leonard a look.

“And there’s catnip,” Leonard said.

“Listen, I don’t really care I talk to you guys or not,” Bert said.

“What if there was money in it?” I said. I wasn’t sure where I was going with that, but I had a hunch Mrs. Christopher might be willing to put out a few dollars for information.

“That depends,” I said.

“On what?” Bert said.

“The quality of the information,” Leonard said, just like he knew what I was thinking. And he probably did.

“Well, money talks, and bullshit walks,” Bert said. “You two don’t exactly look like fucking Fort Knox.”

“We’re not talking about our money,” I said.

“How much of the other fella’s money, then?”

“Again, that depends,” I said.

Bert let that run through his head, which I considered was an easy task.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I got a feeling I say too much I might get in trouble.”

“With who?” I said.

“That’s my business.”

I could see he was actually nervous, but was waffling on the matter.

“How about I give you a card,” I said, “and you call us if you change your mind. This offer is short-term.”

“How short-term?” he asked.

“How about tomorrow morning,” Leonard said.

“I think you’d take it two weeks from now,” he said.

“And I think you don’t know us too well,” Leonard said.

I took out my wallet and opened it up and took out a card. I gave it to him.

He looked at it, then at me. “Hanson Investigations. Well, if you’re Hap Collins, then you must be Hanson.”

“Nope,” Leonard said. “We work for Hanson.”

"You change your mind, call us," I said.

Bert turned the card around and around in his hands. He was giving it serious thought. Finally he put the card in his shirt pocket. He said, "I'll consider on it."

And then he turned and walked away, across the parking lot. We watched until he got in a black truck so old I didn't know what decade it was from. He cranked it, and we kept watching while it coughed smoke and rattled away like something broken tumbling downhill.

"You have cards?" Leonard said. "I don't have any cards."

"Marvin gave them to me."

"He didn't give me any."

"He told me to tell you we would share."

"How are you sharing if you're carrying the cards and I don't have any?"

"I'll share for the both of us," I said.

Driving back to my place, I said, "What do you think?"

"I don't know," Leonard said. "He's an odd one. He's either paranoid, or has delusions of his own importance, or he knows something and he didn't tell us. And what he knows he's trying to turn into money. Maybe with someone else, and us, but the someone else may be someone he shouldn't have messed with. I think he may actually have been afraid. He was acting tough, but —"

"He was overacting," I said.

"Yep, we ought to know. We do it all the time."

22

Back home, upstairs in the bedroom, I called Brett on my cell. She answered on the first ring.

"So, just sitting around waiting for me to call?" I said.

"Actually," she said, "I'm sitting around in case my boyfriend calls."

"Is he handsome?"

"Not particularly, but he looks great by phone."

"Is he hung?"

"Nope, but I can dream."

"This boyfriend, would he be me?"

"He would."

"Thanks for lifting my spirits."

"You know I love you, even with all your deficiencies."

"How are things?"

"Well, pretty good for a small-blown crisis, but it's the same crisis," Brett said. "The one where my daughter is leading a screwed-up life, but pretends she wants to change and tells me all her woes, then goes right back to doing what she's always done, being who she always was and is. A whore who drinks too much and buys her clothes at expensive stores in Houston, and her underwear at Wal-Mart."

"And you're thinking it's your fault?"

"Some of it is my fault. Except for the Wal-Mart underwear … Oh, hell. Who am I talking to? You know I buy mine there too."

"Your ex had a little to do with Tillie's problems."

"True, but I didn't have to set his head on fire. I think it set a bad example."

"Maybe a little," I said.

“Are you doing okay in the private detective business?”

“Well, I’m in it. And there’s supposed to be a big check at the end of the rainbow, and me and Leonard got to hear some neat stuff about vampires, devil heads, a dog-eaten body, and a white trash winning the lottery and getting hit by a train. Oh, and a bunch of cats inherited the lottery money.”

“Say what?”

I told her all that I had learned.

When I finished, Brett said, “That’s some weird stuff.”

“You think? When are you coming home?”

“Tomorrow. I’ll be home by noon.”

“Really?”

“I just made up my mind. Tillie was the same before I got here, and she’ll be the same after I leave.”

“How is the prostitute business?”

“Booming. One of her johns asked me if I wanted to pull a mother and daughter.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah, I made three hundred dollars and there was a pony involved.”

“Is that all you made? The pony factor alone was worth three hundred.”

23

Leonard was about his business that night, which I thought might be trying to call John and talk him into coming back. I figured Leonard was close to the end of his rope on that. He was sticking with John better than anyone before, but I knew him well enough to know he had a destination in mind, and once he arrived there, if John came back to him bare-ass naked swinging his dick, Leonard wouldn't be interested anymore. Once he cut you loose, he cut you loose.

Me, I pined over everything, worried about everything. I was worrying now. I was worrying that Bert wouldn't call. I was thinking if he did, he wouldn't know anything and that he would just try to work us for money. I was thinking me promising money was stupid. I was thinking I could dip into my savings and come up with a few thousand, if I had to, but I didn't want to, and I didn't want to spend the client's money either.

I was also thinking Bert was just a dumb goober with a brain full of imaginary foes. A man shot down by disappointment, thinking about those cats with his dead wife's lottery money, as if they actually held it in their little furry paws.

I went upstairs and crawled into bed with nothing on but my underwear and read from a good book until midnight. Then I put the book down with only one chapter to go.

I put it down because I was thinking about things that had come at me sideways, out of the past. I don't know what sent them to the forefront, but this sort of thing had been happening for a while. All I could think about when things got quiet was the violence I had done in my life, or been around. Gunfire and fistfights, blood and gray matter splattered on the wall. The way it hit me right then, it was like I had looked in the wrong direction while crossing a road and had been hit by a truck.

I found that I was even breathing rapidly.

I twisted so I could sit on the bed and put my feet on the floor. I took some deep breaths. I tried to imagine encasing my thoughts in a dark balloon and letting it float away.

I had to float a lot of balloons.

After a little while, I felt better. I decided to take a hot shower and stand and soak the back of my neck for a while. I did that, and when I came out, toweling off, I checked the clock for the time. It was late.

I looked at my cell lying on the nightstand.

I had missed two calls.

I checked.

They were from Bert.

24

There was a message on the cell.

"Hey, this is Bert. Saw you and the colored guy with the silly hat at the auction barn, today, remember?" the message started, like maybe we wouldn't remember him. "Give me a call, you got some money. I got something for you."

I called his number.

Nothing.

I left a message.

I had missed his call by only a few minutes. Where the hell was he?

I finished drying off and crawled back into bed and picked up my book. I read only a page or two before I called him again.

Nothing.

I finally turned in and went to sleep, and in the middle of the night I woke up thinking about Bert's call. There was no reason to suspect anything odd, anything foul. He had called and left a message, and I had called back and left one, and that was it, but I couldn't get the paranoid feeling out of my head that something was wrong.

He hadn't said anything particularly suspicious in his call, but I had detected a worried tone in his voice. Or had I? Maybe I was projecting.

I rolled over and tried to go back to sleep, but that didn't work.

I turned on the light by the bed and tried to read some more, but my mind wouldn't focus on the words. I got up and dressed and drove over to Camp Rapture and the address I had for Bert. It was about a forty-five-minute drive.

His place was off the main road and over a cattle guard, down a drive that was little more than a crease in a pasture. As I turned into the long drive, a car nearly sideswiped me, and was gone.

I couldn't tell much about the car, but I thought it was some kind of SUV. All I had seen was lights, and the blur of a passing vehicle. It could have been any dark color.

I drove on cautiously, came to where he lived, which was a green-and-white trailer up on blocks in a little grown-up yard next to a creek on one side, an aluminum outbuilding with the door missing on the other side. I could see a lawn mower in there and what looked like an automobile engine up on sawhorses.

Bert's trailer didn't look as if it had been new when it was new. His pickup was in the yard. The closest house around, another mobile home up the road, wasn't close at all. Maybe half a mile. It was a lonely kind of place.

I sat in my car for a moment, then reached over and opened the glove box and got my .38 Super out of there, along with gloves and a little pocket flashlight. I mention it was a Super because if I don't Leonard always says something like "They don't actually make thirty-eights in automatic." And I always think if they don't, then why do they call it a .38 with a word behind it? Shouldn't he know I'm talking about a .38 Super? Gun fanatics make my ass tired.

This was the sort of thing I thought about when I didn't want to think about doing what I was about to do, because I knew it was stupid, more stupid than Leonard wanting me to say Super on the end of .38. But it settled the nerves. I figured whoever was in the SUV was long gone, and if they were someone I should worry about, that worry was doing seventy-five miles an hour down a dark road. I hoped.

I looked back that way. No lights. No shapes in the dark. Just lots of empty pasture. I didn't see any cows. Maybe Bert was planning to go into that business. Or maybe he had been in that business, but no more. Maybe he just liked cows, and that's why he hung out at the auction barn.

I stepped out of the car, put the gun and flashlight in my coat pocket, and pulled on the gloves. I walked up to the front door. A cement block served as a footstep. I stepped up on it, tried to look through the little diamond-shaped glass on the door, but it was designed for looks, not use. It was opaque. It was certainly nice that a fine wood-and-aluminum rectangle like a mobile home had so much class about its door window. Inside, maybe there was a chandelier over a coffee table.

I knocked, lightly at first, and then more briskly. I went around the trailer to the back. There was a rickety, weathered porch there. I went up on it and knocked again. My knock echoed through the trailer and then the noise died like a ball that had quit bouncing. I walked around the trailer and tried to look in the windows, but all the curtains were drawn, and I had to stand on my tiptoes to look at them.

I could hear the air conditioner that poked out of the bedroom window humming, which, considering we were on the edge of winter, seemed unnecessary.

I went to the front door again, thought about trying to jimmy it, but couldn't see any future in that, other than a visit to the Camp Rapture jail.

Then I thought, What the hell, and tried the doorknob.

It was unlocked.

I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. I looked at the edge of the door frame, near the lock. The wood was cracked there. It was the kind of thing a professional could do in a second, and almost soundlessly. The hair on the back of my neck stood up like brush bristles.

I opened the door and hoped what I smelled was a rat in the wall, but I had smelled that before and I knew what it was. It wasn't old death. It was the smell of fresh blood and excrement, the common result of violent death.

The thing to do was to call the police and not go inside. So I didn't call them and went inside. That was my style. I put my right hand in my coat pocket to keep the gun warm, and used my other to flash the light around, but otherwise, I stayed where I was, sniffing that stink, half-expecting someone to pop out at me.

There was a very large and nice television in the front room, and it took up most of it. There was a painting of dogs on the wall playing poker. Someone had to have one. I spent more time admiring it than it deserved. The place was so small, living there might require acrobatics. I kept looking at that painting of the dogs playing poker in the light of my flash. Anything to keep me from going back there where the stench was coming from. The air conditioner hummed and it was cold enough to be uncomfortable.

Finally, I pulled my feet loose and started walking. There was a bedroom in the rear of the trailer, and the door to it was open. I went inside. I bounced the light around. It looked as if it had been hit by a small tornado. Drawers were emptied on the floor, on the bed. Under some of the stuff on the bed was a heap that seemed to be the source of the smell.

Since no vampires seemed to be lurking in the shadows, I put the gun in my pocket and took out my flash and turned it on, shined it on the bed. I took hold of the edge of the covers topping the heap and moved them.

A body was underneath, not sleeping. I pulled my T-shirt up over my nose, but it didn't help much; that blood and excrement smell was stout. The body lay on its back and it was nude and dark and bloody. I moved the flash over it carefully.

It was, as I expected, Bert.

There was a hole in the forehead. The bedsheets behind the head were thick with dark, drying blood. In the beam of my light it looked as if the victim had leaked black wax. His hands were stretched out and held with rope. The rope had been pulled down on both sides of the bed and tied to the bed rail. His feet were tied off at the end of the bed in the same way.

I moved the beam down his bare chest, down to the groin. There was something there that looked like the remains of a penis, because it had been worked over with something sharp. You might call it a major circumcision.

A cockroach crawled out from under the body and scuttled over the sheet, proving Bert wasn't much of a housekeeper or the killers had brought their own roaches. Between his legs, about calf level, there was a design drawn on the sheets in dried blood.

A devil's head.

25

I threw up out by the car because the stench of the dead man was still in my nostrils. It wasn't the first time I had seen anyone dead or smelled death, but tonight it clung to me like shit on a stick.

Driving home, I could still smell it.

Several times I thought about pulling out my cell and dialing the cops, or calling Leonard, or Marvin, telling them what I found, but I didn't. I don't know why. I was overwhelmed with the feeling that had I arrived at the trailer just a little bit earlier, I could have ended up like Bert. It wasn't my first close call, but it seemed to me there had been a bunch of them now, and that my string was bound to be running out.

As I went along the road that led out to the main highway, I kept feeling as if I were disconnected. A part of me kept wondering if I was still asleep, dreaming about all this. But I knew better.

When I got to the highway, I saw a dark SUV pull out and move up quickly. Maybe it was the one I had seen before. Maybe not.

I put my foot on it and sped up. I might as well have been walking. The SUV passed me like I was standing still, but when it got in front of me, it kept going.

Moving along like a jet. Pretty soon, it was out of sight.

My cell rang. I almost crawled out of my skin when it did.

It was Bert's number.

I said, "Hello."

The phone went dead.

Shit. They had Bert's phone, and they had my number. If they had a way of tracing it, they could find me, and these days, with all the Internet stuff, that would be easy. I didn't like it. I didn't like what I did for a living. I didn't like me. I didn't like most anything I could think of at that moment.

I thought about Bert, and I thought about a person, or persons, who could do to him what they had. He'd been tortured. Maybe he did know something important, or maybe it was back to what I had thought before, they thought he did. Now maybe they thought I knew something.

Damn.

When I got home, I got out of the car and went carefully inside with my gun drawn. I looked around, went upstairs, looked it over.

I went back downstairs and looked out the living room windows, and then the kitchen windows, but didn't see anything that made me want to start shooting. I felt strangely weak, in a way I had never felt before.

I thought about Brett. I could call her. I could tell her what I found.

I didn't.

I sat in a chair in the living room and laid the automatic on the chair arm. I kept telling myself to get up and go to bed or make a call to someone. Leonard. Marvin. Brett. But I didn't move.

I didn't want to go upstairs.

I didn't want anyone sneaking up on me.

I wanted to be near the front and rear doors by being in the center of the living room in the chair. I tried to sleep in the chair, but I couldn't. I felt like I wanted to go to the bathroom, but I couldn't.

I sat there.

And sat there, and then I realized I had gone to the bathroom. I was in the chair and I hadn't got up, and I could smell myself. My mind seemed rational. Like it knew what was going on, but it wouldn't connect to the physical. My emotions were on holiday.

Time folded in on itself. I didn't move. I sat there and smelled myself and thought about getting up, but still I sat.

I had a feeling vampires were in the room. That they had turned to shadow and slid under the door and were behind me, but I couldn't turn to look. I couldn't move. I felt them come closer and closer and closer. They were crawling along the walls.

I could see them out of the corner of my eye. When cars drove by on the road out front their headlights moved the vampires away and washed them into the walls, and as the lights passed, the vampires returned and melted down the walls and into the floor. I sensed they were flowing along close to my feet.

But still, I sat.

The sun came up. It reddened the curtains.

The day passed in what seemed like instants. I watched shadows moving along the wall again. They weren't vampires this time. They were glimpses of time being stolen from my life. The room was as dark and heavy as if it were covered in thick black velvet.

I heard the door open, and Brett called out, "Hap?"

I tried to answer, but all my answers, like my emotions, were still on vacation. I kept thinking I would gather them up and weld them together and be myself, but I didn't move. I might as well have been a turnip waiting to be plucked.

The room grew suddenly bright.

Brett touched me and called my name, and then I saw her nose wrinkle up from the smell of me, and I wanted to say I was sorry, but it just wouldn't come out. Then I climbed into my spaceship and stretched out on my bunk and buckled in and looked through the windshield at the stars and colorful planets moving closer. I was cruising through the great black star-studded forever that was space. Twinkle, twinkle, little star, vampires suck blood, and humans make war. Ducks have feathers, goats have hair, pigs have pink feet, and Davy Crockett killed a bear.

A big black planet swung in from the right, and I could see the planet had eyes. The planet moved closer and I could see the planet had a resemblance to Leonard. The planet Leonard had arrived, and the knowledge of that made me feel better.

I heard Brett say, "I found him like this. I checked his vitals. They seem okay. Maybe I should have called nine-one-one."

"I got him," Leonard said.

I wanted to say something back. I could hear them and I could understand their words, but what they said were like trains passing in the night. I could see their words go by, but no way they were gonna stop and let me ride.

I was pulled right out of my spaceship. I felt myself floating upward (antigravity, baby), and I could see Leonard's face clearly, and he was looking right at me. Brett said, “I’ll call the doctor.”

“He don’t need no doctor,” Leonard said.

“But—”

“I got him. Open the bathroom door.”

Yeah. That would be nice. I need to go to the bathroom. Again.

And then I was sitting on the floor by the tub and Leonard was leaning over the tub running water. I finally turned my head. It was no more trouble than trying to screw a large bolt through the center of the earth.

“Throw this shit away,” Leonard said.

I saw Brett’s hands taking my old clothes.

I felt cold. And then I was lifted, and I felt wet. But it was a warm wet. I didn’t feel cold anymore. I was drifting comfortably through space, and the great black planet called Leonard was leaning over me in the tub.

“He going to be okay?” Brett said.

“Goddamn right he is.”

I closed my eyes, and as I drifted down into the wet warmth, I heard Brett say, “What … what is it? What’s wrong?”

“Life,” Leonard said.

26

When I opened my eyes I was still warm, but I wasn't wet. I was warm because I was in bed with the covers pulled up to my chest. Leonard was sitting by my bedside reading one of my paperbacks. I said, "What are you doing here?"

"Well," Leonard said. "I finish this book, I'm gonna steal everything you got while you're lying there like a dumb ass. And then I'm gonna turn heterosexual and me and Brett are gonna run off together, but not until we sell your organs to science and burn the house down and collect the insurance money. I was thinking we might buy a pig to take with us, start a hog farm."

"You need two pigs," I said. "One male, one female."

"Guess I hadn't thought that through." Leonard reached out and took my hand. "You back, brother?"

"Was I gone?"

"Oh yeah."

"Brett? I remember seeing her, hearing her, but I couldn't answer. Where is she?"

"Downstairs fixing me and her some breakfast. Want me to add you to the list?"

"That would be nice … But, what happened?"

"You had what some people call a nervous breakdown, and what I call a major fuckup by way of an easy chair and crapping your pants. You peed too. The world got hold of you and whipped your ass, Hap. But only for a round. You're back now and pretty soon you'll be off the stool and back in the fight. Though you may have to start with some tomato cans and work your way up to the contenders."

"I'm glad Brett called you."

"I'm not. I had to change your clothes and bathe you, wash the shit off, and then dry your ass with a towel, put you in your jammies, and carry you upstairs. I tell you now, boy, you got to lay off the pancakes if you want me carryin' your fat ass up a flight of stairs. Let me have Brett fix you some eggs or somethin'."

Leonard got up and walked toward the bedroom door.

I said, "Leonard."

He paused, looked at me. "Yeah?"

"A man couldn't ask for a better brother."

"Hell, I know that."

27

I was halfway through my scrambled eggs and bacon, sitting in bed with a tray, enjoying it, looking forward to my coffee, when suddenly I felt there was something I was trying to remember, something I wanted to say. It roamed around the alleys of my mind like a drunk trying to find where he'd dropped his car keys.

Brett was in bed with me, stretched out beside me, a pillow propped behind her head. She wore shorts and a sweatshirt. She smelled like perfume and fried foods. Leonard was in the chair next to the bed. He had been talking about things that didn't matter, and it was exactly what I wanted to hear. Those things that didn't matter were really good conversation right then. I knew Leonard thought I was bad off because he even asked me if I would tell a joke. He hates my jokes.

I didn't have a joke. I was too weak to have a joke. I could see he was actually relieved, and so was Brett.

"Did Leonard tell you I wanted to put you down, but he insisted you were going to be all right? I was about to call the vet and have it done, and he showed up."

"There was a moment there when I would have invited it."

She pushed my hair off my forehead and kissed my cheek.

Right then I loved her more than I had ever loved her.

I was sipping on my coffee when I had a flash as clear as daylight. I said, "Bert's dead."

"Bert?" Brett said.

"Mini's stepfather," Leonard said.

"He's dead," I said.

"You just have a psychic vision or something?" Leonard asked.

I put my cup of coffee on the tray. "No," I said. "I saw him dead. Last night."

I told them what I had seen.

Leonard said, “Maybe you never left the chair. Maybe you thought you saw what you saw. You told me vampires were after you.”

“I did?”

“You did.”

“It all seems like a dream. I think I remember thinking I’d call the police, then Marvin, then you, Leonard.”

“Was I on the list?” Brett asked.

“You were next.”

“But you didn’t call,” Leonard said.

“I guess not.”

“It was a kind of trigger, Hap, you seeing Bert’s body, or thinking you did, or dreaming you did. It was the straw that broke the camel’s back. And in case you’re not following my cliché, you’re the camel.”

“You really think you saw a dead man?” Brett said. “Or are you screwed in the head, honey?”

“Sympathy like that,” Leonard said, “is why you’re a nurse.”

“I’m just sayin’,” Brett said.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I really don’t. I’d have a hard time trying to remember my shoe size right now. But it seemed real. I had this feeling that things weren’t right, and I went out there. He called, see, and I went to sleep, and I woke up feeling like it wasn’t right.”

“But you don’t know for a fact you went to see him?” Brett said.

I shook my head.

“You been kind of goofy lately,” Leonard said. “I saw this coming, but I wasn’t expecting it to be like this.”

“What were you expectin’?” I asked.

“It didn’t involve you shittin’ yourself while sittin’ in a big armchair,” Leonard said. “That much I can tell you.”

“Which, by the way,” Brett said, “I have disposed of the chair. I took it to the dump. You owe me a chair, Hap.”

“I’ll get right on that,” I said.

Leonard got up and started for the door.

I said, “Where are you goin’?”

“To get Bert’s Camp Rapture address from the folder, then I’m going to go see if you’re nuts.”

28

Sometime later, Leonard came through the bedroom door. Brett and I were snuggled up together under the covers.

"Glad I didn't come back fifteen minutes later," Leonard said. "Or was it fifteen minutes earlier?"

"Whatever time you came in, it would have been the same situation," Brett said. "His little friend is as tired as he is."

I said, "Do we need to get me sized for a straitjacket?"

"It was just like you said, including the devil drawing on the sheets. The place was thrown about, maybe just to look like a robbery. He was tortured good. His tongue was cut out. Air conditioner was running, which might have muffled screams and it would keep the body from going to rot too fast. That happened, you could smell that stink for a mile. And maybe Bert just liked it cold. Bottom line, though, is he's dead."

"Jesus," Brett said.

"Good to know I'm not going to be spending Christmas in a rubber room. But, on the other hand, bad to know Bert really is dead."

"Yeah, with his passing, the world has really lost a big bit of charm. As for you, you're not off the nut hook yet. I think you need to stay where you are for a while. Get your marbles back together."

"Yeah, you're kind of fucked up," Brett said. "You boys want more coffee?"

"That would be nice," Leonard said.

"Well," Brett said, "I want some too, so I'm going to do what any good domesticated woman does, I'm going to have Leonard make it."

"Hell with that," Leonard said. "I'm going to the coffee shop."

"You know what?" Brett said. "I think I was just bitten by a ghost of women past. I'll go down and make the coffee. You two visit."

When Brett was downstairs, Leonard pulled his chair closer to me. "You feelin' better, brother?"

"I think so. I'm just not entirely certain what's real and what isn't, but more and more things are coming back to me."

"Do you remember that five hundred dollars you owe me?"

"Nope. That isn't coming back."

Leonard grinned and gave my hand a pat. He said, "Now, while you're weak, I can smother you with a pillow."

"Way I feel, you could smother me with a thought."

We sat silent for a few moments.

"Sometimes in war," Leonard said, "there are soldiers who killed too much and saw too much, and they have nervous collapses. Sometimes they have it right there, right after they killed someone, or lost a buddy, but mostly they come home and have it years later."

"And you never had any of that?"

"Once I woke up in a sweat remembering that I had lost a harmonica in the war."

"A harmonica?"

"My uncle gave it to me, and I had it over there. I never played it. He gave it to me when I was a kid. That and a cap gun and cowboy bandanna. I lost the cap gun, and once when I was in the woods, hunting, and had to shit, I wiped my ass on the bandanna and lost my sentimentality toward it. But I had that harmonica, and though I couldn't play a lick, I took it to war with me. It was kind of like a charm."

"So, you're telling me I lost my harmonica and had a nervous breakdown? I don't own a harmonica, Leonard."

"In a way, I am telling you that you lost your harmonica. There were guys went over there to war and came back and went along fine for years. I was once told by an army buddy that anyone killed someone had some kind of hole in them, even if they felt the person killed needed to be killed. Because on some level, human beings identify with other human beings to such an extent they start to see themselves as the dead human. You may be okay for a while, but in time, those things you do, things you've seen, they come home to roost, like pterodactyls."

“Do you have moments like that?” I asked.

“I don’t. Not if I thought what I did was the right thing to do. I’m pretty self-righteous. I mean, there are guys out there, sociopaths that end up in war, and for them it’s like a free hand job every day. They like it. They don’t feel. That’s different. I think it needs to be done, I don’t brood. You, you’re always digging into your feelings. You leave them raw, mess with them so much. You’ve seen plenty, but last night you saw one too many. And I think Vanilla Ride, meeting her, may have been a big trigger, not just poor old Bert. She was the gun. Bert was the bullet.”

Vanilla had been a while ago, but he was right, she was in the back of my mind all the time.

“Vanilla is a beautiful woman,” Leonard said, “charming, very feminine, and she can kill you with an ice pick or a gun, maybe her bare hands, and sleep like a baby. And I know you. In the back of your mind you’re thinking: Once she was a kid like me, and she grew up to kill, and she grew up do it for money and not care who she killed or why. You feel like you might be slipping over into her bit of darkness. I tell you, man, no way. You ain’t comin’ from, and ain’t never been comin’ from, the farm where she was raised.”

“Farm?”

“Figure of speech.”

“How bad was I?” I said.

“I’ve seen a lot worse. But, know what I think? I think you might have sat in that chair for days, maybe starved to death if Brett hadn’t come along, called me.” Leonard swallowed and his facial expression changed. “You know what Brett said to me when you were in the chair? She said he’s your brother, he loves you, maybe more than me. Fix him.”

“And you did,” I said.

“I put a Band-Aid on it. You got to be your own doctor. A little bed rest perks you up. A little experience helps you deal with it. But it’s like a super staph infection. It gets better, but it doesn’t go away.”

29

In Marvin's office, he said, "I thought you fuckers had retired."

"No," Leonard said. "We were on strike."

"For what?"

"Better working conditions

Well, you're shit out of luck."

"What we figured," Leonard said. "That's why the strike is over."

Marvin eyed me. "You're awful quiet. Usually I can't shut you up. No wisecracks?"

"Not today," I said.

"Hap found a body. Bert, Mini's stepdad. He's been killed."

"No shit," Marvin said.

"I just missed the murderer," I said, and I told him what we knew. About how Bert was scared, and claimed to have information, and then he was dead. I told him about the SUV, the phone call from Bert's phone.

"You tell the police?" Marvin asked.

"Not yet."

"That's not smart," Marvin said.

"I haven't been feeling smart," I said. "I have been, shall we say, under the weather."

"I can work this out a bit," Marvin said. "An anonymous tip. Let the cops know the body is there, but not who told them. Or I know a couple of them well enough they'll pretend they don't know who told them. You all right, Hap?"

"Pretty much," I said.

Marvin picked up a pencil from his desk and tapped his teeth with it. "How does Bert's murder tie in with the rest of it?"

"Therein lies the pickle," Leonard said. "We don't know."

The pickle of it all hung in the air like a zeppelin.

“So we don’t know shit?” Marvin asked.

“If we do,” Leonard said, “we haven’t figured out that we do. Not yet. But no doubt in our minds, it’s all connected.”

“You said Bert thought someone was after him?” Marvin said. “Couldn’t it have been someone else did it? Someone not connected to all this? I mean some reason besides our case?”

“Yeah,” I said. “But it’s all a little too sweet to be a coincidence. We talk to Bert. He wants to see us. He ends up dead. And I get a call on his phone, and a hang-up. I think that was a kind of threat. A warning at least.”

“All right, then,” Marvin said. “See if you can tie it all together.”

“We will go about detecting, then,” Leonard said, standing up.

“You mean you two will go about bumbling in the hopes that happens to lead to something.”

“Yeah,” Leonard said. “That’s pretty much it.”

30

Out in the parking lot, as we got in Leonard's car, he said, "To Marvin, we are nothing more than a couple of minions. Carrier pigeons to carry messages and bring messages back. Slaves to his judgment. Faces in the crowd."

"You've had way too much coffee," I said.

"I do feel a little itchy, like my nerves could jerk a decorative knot in my dick. But, minions though we may be, it beats honest work."

"Actually, we don't seem to do much, just find out about dead people," I said.

"And in your case, you even found one that's fresher than the rest."

"He wasn't all that fresh."

"Since the others, the vampires, are all in the ground," Leonard said. "He was the lily of the bunch."

"Ha! If they're vampires, they may not be in the ground."

"Oh, you are wise."

When we were well situated in the car, seat-belted in and hoping it would start, Leonard said, "I'm confused."

"About what?"

"Who do we annoy next? We have a list, but … who?"

"I vote Cason Statler," I said.

"Why?"

"Because we can."

"Now you're startin' to sound like yourself," Leonard said.

But I wasn't myself. I wasn't even close.

The drive over to Camp Rapture was nice because it was a pretty day. The rain had cleared up and the sun was out, and the car was a little warm inside. We wheeled to the *Camp Rapture Report*, the newspaper Cason worked for, and went inside.

Cason was sitting at his desk in the middle of the newspaper office. There were other reporters around, but fewer than I had imagined. There was also an advertising department. One of the women who worked there was overweight and frumpy with pissblonde hair that looked to have been made by electricity and a sense of humor. She was wearing a too-short top that showed a lot of belly and a silver belly ring. She had on shorts that showed way too much ass and on the ass was a tattoo that looked like something an arthritic chicken had scratched in the dirt while dying.

My take is you can dress any way you want, but my amendment to that is that you have to have mirrors at your house, and you have to use them, and you must not lie to yourself about what they show.

"Damn," I said. "I think my right eye just went dead."

"Wishful thinking," Leonard said.

"Oh, the humanity."

Cason looked up from his work, saw us, stopped typing, and watched as we approached his desk. There was one spare chair, and I took it. Leonard put his hip against the side of Cason's desk. All three of us looked at the woman in advertising with the too-little clothes and the too-much flesh.

"I try to forget she's over there," Cason said, "and then I get my mind off forgetting, and look up, and there she is, and I'm wounded all over again."

I said, "Does she actually sell any advertising?"

"She threatens to take the shorts off if they don't buy any," Cason said.

"Ouch," Leonard said.

"She's the curse of the newspaper," Cason said. "The editor is starting a dress code just to get some clothes on her. The flyer went out today from the boss saying we got to dress nicer, and a certain way. Normally I'm against dress codes. I think it violates our civil rights, but in Carrie's case, I'm going to make an exception. You got to think of the children. Small animals. Our way of life. The planet earth."

"If you're through insulting the poor woman," I said, "is there a place where we can talk private?" I said.

"The break room."

Our trip to the break room was short. By the time we had gotten bad coffee in Styrofoam cups and told what we knew to Cason, we were being shuffled away. Cason followed us out to the car. He said, "There's this guy works here, does research, Mercury is his last name, he can find something about anything. I'm gonna put him on this."

"Really?" Leonard said. "His name is Mercury?"

"Really," Cason said. "He lives for research, and anything to do with something odd, that's his meat. Dumb-asses who think they're vampires, that's odd and he'll like it, and he'll research them until he falls over dead. I'll talk to him and see if he can get on it."

"You seem quick to shuffle us off."

"Got a lunch date."

"With a lady?" I said.

"None of your business," he said, got in his car, and drove away.

31

As we were driving, Leonard said, “You think Cason’s too busy dropping the rope down the well to do us any good?”

“I think he’s the kind of guy that can screw and chew gum and do math problems all at the same time.”

“I doubt Cason’s date would appreciate his ability to do more than one thing at a time.”

“True,” I said, “but my guess is he’ll have lunch, knock him off a piece, get with this Mercury fella, and have something for us pretty damn quick. He’s pretty high-energy.”

“And if your description is right, he’s not particularly thoughtful,” Leonard said.

Leonard made a curve and looked at me out of the corner of his eye.

“How you feelin’, Hap?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “It comes in waves. Sometimes I feel fine, other times I want to go back to that big armchair and not get up.”

“The chair’s at the dump, and since we’re not going to the dump to let you sit in it, that means you just got to live with things.”

“How do you do it, Leonard?”

“Because I have to.”

“That’s no kind of answer.”

“It’s my answer. I look at it this way. If what I choose to do seems right to me, I do it.”

“And what if,” I said, “what I choose to do seems right, but isn’t. Ku Klux Klan people think they’re right, but they aren’t.”

“I get your point. But you just made a point. You said they aren’t right, those KKK fucks, and being a black man, I have to agree. But saying they’re wrong means you have what you think is a clear-cut position, and you back it up with experience and facts. Like it or not, you believe you can tell right from wrong, and I trust your judgment and mine on those matters more than I trust the judgment of paranoid and inferior-feeling assholes who are all about making people’s lives miserable because they can. I’m simple enough about the matter to consider that if I’m doing something to protect someone or make their life better, and I have the ability to do it, and I’m going to feel good about myself afterward, that’s what I do.”

“Seems more complicated than that to me,” I said.

“Didn’t say it wasn’t complicated for some. What I said was it’s easy for me. Do you think if we hadn’t killed those who were trying to kill us in the past, they would have let us go with a pat on the butt? Do you really think there’s a god that sorts them out and punishes them if someone here in reality land doesn’t?”

“No. But we’re part of the problem.”

“Let me ask you why we put ourselves in those positions.”

“We’re stupid.”

“Next answer.”

I sighed. “We were trying to help someone, or we were trying to help ourselves, and at least once, we were trying to make some money.”

Leonard turned a wicked eye toward me, and then put it back on the road.

“That was my fault,” I said.

“Just looking for an acknowledgment … Let me give you the bottom line, Hap. People we’ve chosen to help over the years, had we not helped them, it wouldn’t have turned out well. The people we killed, if we hadn’t, would have gone on doing what they were doing, which wasn’t good. You are who you are, and you are an avenging angel. You were born to it. For some years I’ve been trying to figure what my career ought to be. What can I make of myself? Then one night, while I was pulling my johnson, having to use both hands, of course, I had a epiphany. I’m following my calling as surely as those who grow up to be astronauts or firemen or doctors. So are you. Maybe it’s a kind of post-traumatic stress you’re suffering. But I don’t think the reason you had a nervous breakdown was about what you’ve done. It’s about you trying to find a way to stop being you, and you can’t.”

32

We went to my house and sat around because we weren't exactly sure what in the hell we were doing or how to go about it.

Brett was at work, wouldn't be home until midnight, so we broke out the checkers and played for a while.

Late afternoon my cell rang. It was Cason.

"Mercury is on it, and he'll have something for us day after tomorrow at the latest, maybe sooner."

"Us?"

"Am I helping, or what?"

"You are."

"Then it's us. So long, Hap."

…

We were too lazy to cook, so we drove into town and had dinner at a café. We digested awhile at a coffee shop, then went over to the gym to work out, kick the bag and punch the mitts, then we drove back. As we turned on my street, we saw a car stop three houses up from mine in the Apostle's Baptist Church parking lot and turn off the lights. The car was one of those low-slung jobs that in the light from the street looked like an angry rodent crouched to attack.

Leonard slowed, said, "Think maybe those are eager churchgoers who have come to wait until the church doors open on Sunday?"

"Seems unlikely."

"My thoughts exactly."

We drove by. I turned in the seat and looked out the back. The car was still sitting there. A little red dot from a cigarette was visible. No one had got out.

“What do you think?” I said.

“I think they’re bracing themselves to do something bad, and I got a feeling it isn’t the church they got a quarrel with.”

“Couldn’t be us, could it?” I said.

“It’s hard to believe anyone could be angry with us,” Leonard said, “but yes, I believe they have come to visit us. Call it instinct. Call it experience.”

“Someone somewhere is always mad at us.”

“Yeah, that’s probably more accurate.”

Leonard turned the corner and we went around the block and on the back street. We parked at the curb next to an empty lot with high grass. I opened Leonard’s glove box and got out his automatic.

“That’s my gun.”

“Not today,” I said.

Leonard pulled a short club out from under his car seat, lifted his deerstalker from the middle of the seat, and put it on. We got out and went across the field. At the end of the field we came to a backyard, and crossed that without any dogs barking. From there we could see mine and Brett’s house and the board fence around the backyard.

We didn’t say anything to each other. Sliding across the yard, through the night, we came to the fence and climbed over it, and fell into the backyard. We went across the dead grass and I got my key and opened the back door and we slipped in.

I went right, toward the kitchen, and Leonard turned to the left, toward the downstairs closet.

I was at the corner of the kitchen and the living room, thinking maybe we were overreacting, and that the car we’d seen had been nothing more than the preacher of the church stopping by to pick up a Bible, when the front door was kicked open with a bang and two men with guns plunged inside along with the light from the street lamp.

33

It was as I feared and suspected. Our beatings hadn't put the fear of the devil into them after all. They had found out who we were and where we were, but as luck would have it, they didn't know what car we were driving or that we had passed them by on the street.

The first one in the door was Thomas. He had a cast on his right hand. It was up in a sling. The other was Chunk, and he was limping, had a cast on his leg and some kind of heel on it to help him walk. They both had handguns.

Without meaning to, I said aloud:

"Really? You've got broken hands and legs, and … Shit, really?"

Thomas and Chunk paused there in the light, as if for a dance number. Thomas saw my shape and lifted the gun, held it sideways like a movie thug, said, "You fucks broke my right hand, motherfucker. But I'm left-handed."

There was a *ca-chunk* sound, and then I heard Leonard in the shadows by the open closet say, "Yeah, and I got me a shotgun in the gauge of twelve from the closet, cocksucker."

The world seemed stuck in amber.

Finally, Thomas said, "Well, okay."

That hung in the air like a popcorn fart for about thirty seconds.

Thomas's gun was still pointed in my direction. I had Leonard's automatic held down by my side. I said, "Put the gun down, or Leonard will blow you both out the door like so much dust."

"Actually," Leonard said, "what I've found, you shoot a guy with a shotgun, he don't blow backwards so much as he drops like a curtain and it makes a mess you wouldn't believe. There ain't enough janitors in town to clean it up right, but then again, that's just my personal experience."

As he said this, Leonard was moving forward, the shotgun at his shoulder.

"You know, I got a gun too," I said. "I could shoot somebody."

They ignored me. They were all about that shotgun.

Besides, I had yet to lift the automatic from my side. My face was covered in sweat and my gun hand was trembling. I had tunnel vision. You get that when you're scared. It's a thing happens when you're in a tight situation, especially one of potential violence. Me, I had gotten over it a long time ago. I could control it.

Or could. But tonight, not so much.

Leonard hit a light switch.

Thomas, without lowering the gun he was pointing at me, glanced at Leonard, did a kind of double take at the hat.

"You don't worry about it," Leonard said. "How's it gonna be? A maybe shot you get to take at me and Hap, or a certain boom from the shotgun, and the both of you blood and rags. My aim don't have to be as good as yours."

Thomas and Chunk let their handguns drift to their sides.

"Ain't nobody doin' nothing," Chunk said. "I told this fool we ought not mess with you two crazies."

Thomas turned his head slightly, looked at Chunk. Right then he knew his number one man had climbed out the window, so to speak.

"Now, with your guns at your side," I said, "dip your knees … Oh, sorry, Chunk. How about just drop them."

"You two," Thomas said, "I hate you both. I hate you cocksuckers big-time."

"That comes up a lot," Leonard said.

34

The cops came and took Thomas and Chunk. Drake, the chief of police, was with them. He was lean and black and his nose looked even flatter than when I had seen him last. He stayed after the other cops left. We had the lights on now. Very cheery.

Leonard moved the shotgun so he could sit on the couch. Drake said, “Don’t handle the gun anymore.”

I sat in a stuffed armchair and tried not to let anyone see that my hands were shaking. They had been that way for days, and tonight, after the events, they were shaking even more. I shoved them down by my sides in the chair.

“I’ll take that with me when I leave,” Drake said, nodding at the gun.

“Okay,” Leonard said.

They had already taken the automatic, which was registered to Leonard. I was a little uncertain how that would play out, but I didn’t point out it wasn’t mine or that I was the one that had held it. I also didn’t mention that we had a number of cold pieces hidden around the house, the best of them upstairs in the crawl space above the closet.

Drake declined me fixing him a cup of coffee, giving him a soda, anything. No bribes were considered. He sat on the couch and shook his head a few times. It made me feel sort of sorry for him, and sad about the two of us.

“They did break in,” I said.

“Yes,” Drake said. “That’s why they are gone and you are still here. But, you know, what they told me was you two broke into their house and broke them up a few days ago, and they were paying you back.”

“That’s some story,” I said.

"Yeah," Leonard said. "That's some shit, that is."

"You did break them up, didn't you?"

"I'm trying to remember," I said.

"Never mind," Drake said. "Not right now. I don't want to hear the lies. It just makes me tired."

There was a knock on the door. Leonard answered. It wasn't anyone else there to kill us. It was Marvin. Of course, considering the circumstances, maybe he wanted to kill us too.

Drake, still sitting on the couch, looked up at Marvin, said, "You got to get you some better friends."

"Tell me about it," Marvin said.

He took a chair across the way and sat. He and Drake looked at each other like two parents who knew how bad their kids were and had both had just about enough of it. Reform school seemed to be in mine and Leonard's offing.

"We didn't shoot anyone," I said.

"No," Drake said. "You didn't do that."

"I wanted to," Leonard said, "real bad. But I held back. I fought against that bad side and done good. That ought to amount to something."

I was thinking that if it hadn't been for Leonard I would have been dead. I had frozen. I had been unable to move. My brain went blank and my hands had felt like catcher's mitts, too big and clumsy to use. The thought of aiming a gun at someone again, pulling the trigger, I hadn't been able to do it. I wondered if I'd ever be able to do it. I was trying to decide if that was a good thing.

If Leonard hadn't been there, one thing was certain, at that moment in time, good it would not have been. Right now a crew with tweezers would be extracting my brain matter from the wall.

Drake said, "So, you boys didn't do anything to piss anyone off? I find that hard to believe. You always piss me off."

"Let me give you a scenario," Marvin said. "Say there was this little old lady, and she was walking home from the grocery, and this guy, we'll call him Thomas, assaulted her for the money in her change purse, and that money was less than a hundred dollars. And there were people in the neighborhood who saw this happen, and I know them, and they told me it happened, but they wouldn't go on record, wouldn't talk to the police, even though the little old lady, we'll call her Mrs. Johnson, because that's her name, talked to the police and told them, but there was no validation, no proof. At least not anything the cops could use."

"Let me finish this for you," Drake said. "But the little old lady told you and you got these two guys to go over and politely ask them for the money."

"Very politely," Marvin said.

"And things got testy, and they decided to hurt your two boys, and your two boys hurt them instead. So the other boys had a grudge against your boys, found out where Hap lived. So Hap and Leonard, innocent and as pure as baby chicks, are attacked in Hap's home."

"That's pretty much it," Marvin said.

"Yeah," Leonard said. "That sounds about right."

"Is that mostly true?" Drake asked Marvin.

"Yep," Marvin said. "Mostly."

"Did the little old lady get her money back?"

"Yep."

Drake nodded. "Well, I don't know. Maybe I can play it some kind of way where the two numbnuts—the other two numbnuts—go down for breaking and entering. They'll tell their story to a lawyer, but even if it's a true story they tell, there's still the part that involves guns and breaking into a home. But the story Marvin just told me, supported somewhat by our two friends trussed up in plaster casts, sort of supports you two breaking into their home."

"Oh," I said.

"Anyone see it happen?" Drake asked. "This event involving you two that didn't happen, but might have."

"If it happened," I said, "and I'm not saying it did. I don't think so."

"And in this case," Marvin said, "these two citizens called the police and asked for assistance. Those two goobers didn't call anyone, so their story is well after the fact and could just be a goddamn lie. This could have been nothing more than home invasion. Possible robbery. Right?"

"Yeah," Leonard said. "We could have killed them and buried them in the backyard and not mentioned it. Planted some flowers over them. But we called, because that's just the kind of guys we are. Fucking law-abiding citizens."

"Satisfied?" Marvin asked.

“No,” Drake said. “Not really. But I think I can live with it. I can’t promise they can’t stir enough shit that charges get brought against the stooges here, but maybe I can get the charges against them trimmed slightly, making them more jovial than they might be otherwise. And maybe part of the persuasion would be they leave you two alone legally.”

“How trimmed will their charges be?” Leonard asked.

“They’re going to go up for sure. Just can’t tell you how long. And you guys, well, if there are no witnesses to fit their story, it’s just a story. You two were smart and called the cops. They had guns, you were home, and you had a bigger gun, which is called home protection and self-defense, and nobody was killed.”

“That’s the story I like,” Leonard said. “It has a nice ring to it. One more thing, if they are mad at us for something they think we did, then they might think the old lady who got robbed ought to get some mojo. She ought to be checked on.”

“The two dumb-asses … The other two dumb-asses … told us you seemed to think you were avenging an old lady you claimed they hurt, and they gave us her name, and we called and checked on her, and she’s all right. Of course, if you didn’t do what they say you did, then you shouldn’t know Mrs. Johnson and what happened to her. Right?”

“Oh, no,” Leonard said. “We could know. Word gets around. We heard rumors.”

“Rumors?”

“Yep,” Leonard said. “Rumors.”

Drake kept looking at Leonard out of the corner of his eye. Finally he sat up straight on the couch, looked right at him, said, “Hey, Leonard. I’ve been trying to kind of let it go. But what in the living hell have you got on your head?”

35

Brett was sitting in the living room with me and Leonard and Marvin. Drake had gone away. It was after midnight and she was back from work. We told her what happened. My first thought was she'd finally decide it was time to ditch me. I was like a shit magnet. It always found me. No matter where I went, what I did, it came flying out of the air and landed on me.

Well, maybe there were things I did that attracted it.

Like breaking that guy's knee, messing up his ribs.

But it wouldn't matter. I could stay home in front of the TV and trouble would arrive in the form of a singing telegram. And if it didn't find me, it would find Leonard, and that was the same as finding me.

"So, you were just minding your own business," Brett said.

"Really," Leonard said. "We were."

"I believe you," she said. "I'm on your side."

"We're the three musketeers," I said. "Oh," I said, looking at Marvin, "sorry to leave you out of the musketeer thing. In the book, there were actually four."

"I don't want to be a musketeer," Marvin said.

"Now, come on," Leonard said. "He didn't mean to hurt your feelings. You can be a musketeer too."

"I'm fine," Marvin said.

"My sense of things," Leonard said, "is that you really do want to be one, and just won't admit it."

"Actually," Brett said, "I always wanted to be a Mouseketeer."

"Oh, Christ," I said, "is there any way some night I can get you to wear a set of mouse ears when we, you know—"

"Oh, hell yeah," Brett said.

Brett went into the kitchen, came back with some corn chips and sodas, said, “Enjoy, this may be as housewifey as I get.”

We had at the chips and drinks. It was like a feeding frenzy at the zoo.

“So, the deal is,” Brett said, “you’re trying to find the connection between the vampires and the man in the trailer, Mini’s stepdad? And you’re thinking Mini’s money is part of the deal?”

“It makes sense,” Marvin said. “And I can tell Hap has kept our confidential rule and not mentioned any of this to you.”

“Oh, he never shuts up,” Brett said.

“Figured as much,” Marvin said.

“Want to hear what I think?”

“Might as well.”

“Maybe I should wear Leonard’s deerstalker since I’m giving my valued investigative opinion based on nothing but a hunch.” Leonard handed it to her and she put it on.

“Whoa,” Marvin said. “That looks good on you.”

“Hell, yeah,” I said. “Forget the mouse ears.”

“It looks all right,” Leonard said.

“The money is all coincidence,” Brett said. “It’s clouding your judgment. The law got Godzilla for the murder of that frat boy, but Mini, she got off the hook, and so did the others. They got their wrists slapped. Somewhere, someone’s bound to be mad about that, and it doesn’t have to do with them being vampires, or there being money involved, or even Ted Christopher being killed. With me so far?”

“We’re listening,” Marvin said.

“Wouldn’t you be mad someone killed someone you loved, and the batch of them got off by tattling?” Brett said.

“They got off because they turned evidence on Godzilla, who did the actual killing,” Marvin said. “She was the one stabbed the kid, sucked his blood. I’m not saying they’re pure as the driven snow, but they didn’t do the stabbing.”

“I know,” Brett said, “but if someone killed Hap, I wouldn’t be satisfied if the one person most responsible went to jail and didn’t even get the death penalty. That deal would suck, especially since the others got to go free and weren’t even told their breath stinks. If I was the frat boy’s family, maybe I would have a serious grudge. Now that I think about it, I’ve never heard any of you even mention the dead boy’s name.”

We looked at one another.

"I guess we been thinking it had more to do with Godzilla or Mini or Ted," I said.

"You got your notes, Hap?" Marvin asked.

I got them.

Marvin opened them. "Kid's name was Jason Kincaid. His parents are divorced, and the mother is dead. Cancer. The father is a sixty-year-old accountant in Houston. Had one other child, a girl, Florence, died of a drug overdose. Has some wealthy clients, and therefore is pretty wealthy himself. His name is Howard Kincaid. He was looked at by the cops some years ago. They came up with zip. He hasn't been high on our list, because they caught the one who killed his kid. Godzilla."

"Maybe Kincaid could get another look," I said.

"It's worth a shot," Marvin said. "I could send you boys to meet him, or we could get someone good."

"That is some amusing shit you got going there," Leonard said. "That is funny, how you cut us down, and may really mean it."

Marvin grinned. "I suggest we talk to Cason Statler. He's friends with Mrs. Christopher, and he used to work in Houston. Probably has some contacts you could talk to. And, of course, you can talk to the kid's father. Personally, I don't think there's anything to it—no offense, Brett—as it's been looked into. I'd think the cops would have sensed something being there, even if they are the worst cops since Keystone. But they didn't note a thing. I think it has to do with Mini. I think she's the key, and I think it maybe has to do with Ted. The others are connected, of course, but I think the chain starts with her and has to do with something she or Ted knew or something they did. I think Godzilla may just be unlucky, and that Mom was a bad driver and a drunk. But Kincaid, I don't see it."

"I like my idea," Brett said, "because it's mine."

"May I have my hat back now?" Leonard said.

Brett gave him the hat.

"Jim Bob is from the Houston area," I said. "We know him. We've worked with him. Maybe he'd do better than Cason."

"We'd have to pay him out of our money," Marvin said.

No one said anything for a moment. Then Leonard said, "Yeah, you're right, let's get Cason, and we can work on his loyalty to Mrs. Christopher, and just have to buy him lunch or somethin'."

36

After Leonard and Marvin left, I set the door back in place, but it was beyond fixing. I didn't have any boards to nail over it, so I put a chair under the doorknob. A kitten with anger issues could probably have pushed it over, but it was something.

Me and Brett locked ourselves in the upstairs bedroom just in case our two cast-wearing vigilantes escaped the long arm of the law and came after us.

I said, "What you said about the father, Kincaid, that was solid thinking, baby. We've been so certain it was someone who just hated these people for their weirdness, or was one of them, that it didn't occur to us. We should have considered it, but we didn't, and that's why Leonard and I do odd jobs and are not professors of physics."

"That's the truth," Brett said.

"I give you a compliment, and you wound me? You are one mean woman."

"What about Marvin?"

"Well," I said, "I'm not saying you're definitively right and he's wrong, but he thinks of himself as a detective, and on some level, having been a cop, I think he wants to generally believe they know what they're talking about. And usually, truth is, they do. But sometimes, a person standing back from it all can point out the obvious."

She snuggled close. "What made me think of the father, Kincaid, really wasn't obvious thinking."

"No?"

"No. It was those two jackasses that broke into our house. Here are two guys that had their hand, a knee, and a rib broke. A couple of bully types, the sort they always tell you if you stand up to them they won't fight back. But they did."

"Most of those little schoolyard homilies prove to be false. Bullies are not always cowards, but they are always bullies," I said. "And they had guns. That helps make you braver, just in case you're lacking in the courage department."

"They went to the trouble of figuring out who you two were, and coming here. They wanted revenge. I thought Kincaid might feel the same way. And it turns out he has the money to make it happen."

"It was good thinking," I said. "I was thinking the law got Godzilla, so what's for Kincaid to do? It was taken care of. But it wasn't my son. Had it been, I might not be so easily satisfied."

"I'm going to change the subject."

"Okay."

She ran her hand down my side. "Want to make love?"

"Of course," I said. "I'm no idiot."

"No mouse ears and Leonard took his hat back."

"We'll just pretend."

"I can squeak like a mouse."

"Baby, you say the sweetest things."

We made love and fell into an uneasy sleep. Or at least my sleep was uneasy. Within seconds, Brett was sawing logs. Me, I lay there for a while and wondered what would have happened had Leonard not been there with me tonight.

The answer was obvious.

37

Next morning, early, I went to a hardware store and bought the stuff I needed and brought it home. Brett and I replaced the doorjamb and lock, with her doing the precision work. Stuff like that for me is like trying to write cursive on a notepad with my toes while taking verbal directions from a monkey. But with us working together, it was a fair job. It still needed painting, and I had forgotten the paint.

After Brett left for an afternoon shift, I called Leonard, invited him over for lunch. He passed, said he was having lunch with Cason.

I tucked a sandwich away, went to town, and bought some paint. When I got back, Leonard's car was parked in the drive. He had let himself in and was watching the downstairs television, some show about the life of Willie Nelson. Leonard was a bear for all things related to country music.

While I painted the doorjamb and he lounged, I asked him:

"What about Cason?"

"He's in. A couple of tacos and I had him on the job."

"When do we go?"

"He's waiting on a call."

Cason had us meet him at the newspaper office, and then took us downstairs to meet Mercury, the man who collected facts. He told us Mercury had been with the paper a long time, and all he did was fact-check and catalog the morgue. He was seldom seen, and his work was rarely questioned. In fact, Cason told us that unless you needed something from downstairs, in what he called the dungeon, you stayed out of there. Mercury liked it that way.

Downstairs was like a hole in the floor with steps and it was crowded with more crap than a junkyard: boxes and files and desks and tables with stacks of papers. It was poorly lit down there.

Mercury had a desk in one corner, and the desk, unlike the rest of the room, was well lit by a gooseneck lamp. He was sitting in front of the desk in a wheeled, wooden chair with his legs crossed. He looked in his thirties, blond hair, blue eyes. A nice-looking guy with a real set of shoulders on him and a face that needed some sun.

He didn't get up as we got closer. We went to him and shook hands.

Cason took a position on the edge of the desk, said, "So, Jack, you find anything?"

"The actual case you're working on, not much. Thing interested me was the devil head at the scene of the murders. I ran it through the computer, and came up with some similar things, but most of it was not similar enough. Except for these."

He turned in his roller chair and picked up the file and spun back around and gave it to me. I opened it. It was a thin file. But there were some crime photos in it. Some may have been suicides, some murders. There were separate photos of little red devil head drawings.

"You got these off the computer?"

"I got some information off the computers, but these photos I got through contacts and through Mrs. Christopher spreading some money around. You can thank her, my government friends, and FedEx for these. The devil head was at the scene of these crimes. Each crime took place miles apart. Let me see the file."

I gave it back to him.

"There was … Oh, here's one in Louisiana. Took place not long after the hurricane. The one there was a mobster. The devil head was made really obvious, was drawn on a mirror with the man's blood. The others, they're less obvious. There's Oregon … Here's one in New York."

"You're saying these killings have a connection?" Leonard said.

"I'm saying that there's a devil head drawn in blood at these death sites. You want me to do your work for you?"

"That would be nice," I said.

"Here's what I can tell you. Those drawings are either connected, or someone knows about them and copied them for the murders you're investigating. The drawings and the murders, or what look to be suicides—all of them suspicious—took place over five years. There could be more devil heads and more murders that are just not known. Or maybe the killer didn't always do the devil head thing. No one like me has sat down and tracked this stuff, or had the connections to see how many of these devil heads are out there. Me, I like doing this sort of work. You start to see patterns in stuff like this. I'm big on patterns."

"So, is there one person doing all this?" Leonard asked.

"Hell, it could be two, three, a copycat, or a weird coincidence. But it would be one hell of a weird coincidence, and since someone like me would have to put together the fact that there's something to copy, I think a copycat is unlikely as well. Another thing. I checked out any so-called vampire connections to the devil head. Nothing. All of the murders seem unconnected, except for the ones that took place in the East Texas area."

"So what we got is a serial killer?" I said.

Mercury paused. "You know, I'm not so sure. There doesn't seem to be any sexual obsession. There is the devil head, a kind of signature, but maybe our killer just likes to sign his work. It's missing the qualities one usually thinks of when using the term 'serial killer' to mean someone who kills due to some sort of sexual obsession."

"Bert had his tongue cut out," Leonard said. "His penis cut up."

"Torture can be sexual, but I think this was punishment. I think the killers just consider it business. They wanted him to tell them something, and whatever they wanted, he told them. I can promise you that, truth or not."

"Didn't the Son of Sam just shoot people?" I said. "He was a serial killer that didn't mess with the bodies. It was about power. That's what serial killers are really after."

"Yeah," Mercury said. "It could be just like that. I'm not saying I know. I'm saying my experience looking at this kind of stuff for years tells me it may be something else. But, hey, when it comes right down to it, your guess is as good as mine."

38

We went to the hospital and I told Brett we were leaving for Houston. She gave me a kiss and we tried not to make too much of it, me going off only a short time after she had come home, but the feelings were there.

I left her and we drove to my place, and then Leonard's, packed a few overnight things. I saw that Leonard packed the deerstalker. He was swift about it, but I saw it done. At least it was packed and not on his head.

We tooled back to Camp Rapture to get Cason. He had needed time to settle some work details and go home and do his packing.

On the way over, Leonard said, "This is like being in a mystery novel with no detectives."

"Nailed it," I said, and we bumped fists.

We picked up Cason at the address he gave us. It was an apartment complex on the far side of town. Nice place. He told us he had just moved there. We didn't give a shit, but he told us anyway.

Driving along, Cason entertained us with some amusing stories that mostly involved the misfortune of others, which, of course, is what most humor is about, and then explained we would be staying with a friend of his over Houston way, out near the airport. A former police officer.

What he didn't tell us was the former police officer was a hot late-twenties blonde named Constance and she lived in a one-bedroom apartment with a cat named Yo-Yo. She put Leonard and me in the living room, him on the couch, me on a blow-up mattress. We lay there listening to Cason and Constance all night long. For all I knew, maybe Yo-Yo was involved. There was a banging of heads on the bedstead, a whimpering of delight, a cry of servitude, a yelp of triumph, and a smacking of genitals that sounded like someone snapping a leather strap across bucket seats. After a few hours it ceased, then near morning it started up again, loud enough to wake us. Once I thought a siren had gone off, but it was just Constance.

Early morning someone let Yo-Yo out of the bedroom. Listening to that all night, even Yo-Yo's pert little ass made me horny. But Yo-Yo the cat didn't swing that way. To compound matters, it didn't help any that Constance came out of the bedroom adorned in a thin white T-shirt that showed she had very pert nipples and more ass than shirt.

She said excuse me and went to the bathroom and came out wearing dark sweat pants with the T-shirt. The ass was protected, but the nipples still looked like .45 slugs.

Constance offered us some breakfast, and while she was in the kitchen, Cason came out in sweatpants and a wifebeater, scratching his nuts.

I said so Constance couldn't hear, "I had the impression you had a girlfriend at home."

"We aren't connecting like we used to," he said.

"You seem to have been connecting with Constance last night."

"That's none of your business."

"Well, since it sounded like you were screwing next to my air mattress, you made it more of my business than I expected. There were a couple moments when I thought I ought to be wearing some kind of contraceptive. Leonard had morning sickness."

Leonard, who was sitting on the couch in his shorts, nodded. "I'm going out later to buy a bassinet and a baby stroller. Do you have a color preference?"

Cason smiled a smile so thin no teeth were visible, said, "You can both go fuck yourself."

"I've tried," Leonard said. "Doesn't work."

We ate breakfast, and then Cason made some calls on his cell while Constance got ready for work. Turned out she was now working for a private investigation agency. A cooler more successful one than Marvin's. Fifteen agents worked there, and unlike us, they were most likely real detectives, and one of the real detectives was a hot blonde who could screw all night and work all day and had a cat named Yo-Yo.

Constance exited the bathroom, looking professional in a black suit with a frilly white shirt. Her hair was brushed and glossy as a show horse's mane. She sat on the couch and put on her shoes. I noticed her toenails were painted pink and had little silver stars in the middle of them.

I asked her, "Do you know a private investigator from Houston named Jim Bob Luke? Know it's a long shot, but I was just wondering."

"That conceited asshole," she said, giving me a hard look. "Yeah, I know him. He a friend of yours?"

"No," I said. "Leonard knows him."

39

Cason, with his boyish phone charm, got us a meeting with Howard Kincaid.

Driving over there, me at the wheel, I said to Cason, “No problem with him talking with us?”

“I told him we were investigating his son’s death, looking for new connections. I didn’t have to say much else.”

Howard Kincaid had his office in one of the supertall buildings downtown. It seemed to be made completely of glass and metal and the only stone about it was the wide steps in front, and that stone was polished. In the sunlight the building was as shiny as the snot under a kid’s nose. There were people moving about on the street and cars crowding mine as I drove. I was glad I was visiting Houston, not living there. Three days in a place like this I might have a screaming fit. Of course, that couldn’t be any worse than sitting in a chair and crapping on myself.

We found a parking place in an underground garage and took an elevator up to the floor we wanted. When the elevator opened, the floor was so freshly buffed it gave off a shimmer like a heat wave in the desert, not quite as bright as the building outside, but bright enough. There was a large opening at one end of the hall, and in it were a lot of plants. It also had brightly colored birds in cages, and the birds were trilling. I hate seeing birds in cages. I had an urge to open the cages and let them out.

We cruised through the jungle of plants without being attacked by tigers, and into an even wider foyer. There was a desk there. There was a young black woman behind it. She appeared fresh and professional and very nice-looking. Her dark brown eyes were as smooth and cool as refrigerated chocolates. She smiled at us as we walked up. She gave Cason an extra smile, and I thought she showed him more teeth than she showed us. They were nice teeth, by the way.

Cason told her why we were there. There were a series of chairs along one side of the foyer, and we went over there to sit while she pushed a button on her phone. She talked quietly for a moment over the intercom.

“You can go in right away,” she said.

As we passed her desk, Cason gave her a wink, and she smiled. Just before we went inside, I said to Cason, “Are there any women who don’t like you?”

“Yes,” Cason said. “But it’s a short list.”

40

Kincaid's office was about the size of an airport and there was some nice furniture there, including a large couch, and there were paintings on the walls. The paintings were mostly of birds, though there were some that looked to be nothing more than splashes of color. Maybe the splashes were birds too.

Kincaid was sitting behind a large desk, and he looked older than sixty by no more than a hundred years. He was white-headed and his face seemed to have collapsed at some point and been blown back into shape with a water hose. He hardly had a chin and there was a clear tube running up from behind the desk that ended in a little fitting that went into his nose. He was on oxygen. The gray suit he was wearing was like a tent that folded up around him. I saw that he was in a motorized chair.

At a smaller desk nearby was a middle-aged woman in a blue dress. She was stout of build but nice-looking. Her hair was tinted blonde and well sprayed. She looked healthy enough to wrestle a steer.

She got up from behind her desk with a catlike grace and came out to greet us, shook our hands, told us her name was Miss Sara Clinton. She directed us to chairs in front of Kincaid's desk the way a waitress shows you your table.

"Which one of you is Mr. Statler?" Kincaid asked. When he spoke, the words fell out of his mouth as slow and gentle as a sweet afternoon rain. Hearing him talk made me sleepy.

Cason said, "That's me."

"I spoke with you over the phone."

"Yes."

"These are your associates, of course."

"Yes," Cason said, gesturing to each of us. "Leonard Pine and

Hap Collins."

"Hap," he said, "that's an unusual name. Is it short for anything?"

"Hap," I said.

He smiled a little. The act of talking seemed to tire him out. "You mentioned my son. I wanted to know what you had to say, but what can be said? He's gone, and the people who did it are, according to the police, all dead."

Cason nodded. "That's true, sir. We have been asked by the mother of a boy who was killed with one of the women, Mini—"

"I know who she is," he said, not wanting to hear the rest of the name. "I followed the case, obviously." His voice was less gentle now, like the rain had suddenly been disturbed by thunder. "You aren't lawyers are you?"

"No," Cason said.

"Good."

"Why would we be lawyers?" Leonard asked.

"I don't know for sure," he said, "but I had this sudden feeling you might be, that maybe you were trying to tie me to the whole mess, a civil suit. Well, I thought maybe all of you were lawyers but you."

He nodded at me.

I wasn't sure if that was a compliment or an insult.

Leonard leaned over to me, said, "I look like a lawyer."

I thought: Let's get your deerstalker and have you put it on, and then we'll see how much you look like a lawyer.

"Why would you think that, sir?" Cason said. He was using all of his buttery personality, and it was working. I suppose it was the reporter in him, experience with others. He hadn't been buttery when we first met him.

"Because that Mini you mentioned. Her stepfather tried to tie me to her death. I would gladly have killed her, and all of the others, myself, but I doubt carrying an oxygen tank and having to ride around in this chair would have made me much of an assassin."

"How did he try to tie you to them?"

"I'm not really sure what he was thinking, but he decided somehow we were responsible, like we had paid to have it done. Ridiculous."

"Well, we have nothing to do with him," I said.

“We represent a Mrs. Christopher,” Cason said. “We’re trying to find information concerning the death of her son, trying to figure what connection there could be to him having been killed.”

“You’re detectives?”

“Mostly,” Cason said.

“Wrong place, wrong time,” Kincaid said.

“What?” Cason said.

“The boy,” Kincaid said. “He must have been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Should have kept better company.”

“Perhaps,” Cason said.

“Those are the hard facts. My only son was killed by these animals. Anyone who would associate with them is no better than the animals they were. Vampires! Seriously, now.”

“Animals actually have a much more polite and less devious agenda,” I said.

“I agree,” Kincaid said.

“It’s just that we’ve been hired to investigate,” I said, “so we’re asking some questions. It’s not meant to be personal. We’re just trying to fit some shoes, so to speak.”

“I’m not Cinderella. Whatever you’re asking, whatever shoes you’re laying out, my feet don’t fit.”

“Well,” I said, “long as we’re on a fairy-tale theme, you might call us Goldilocks. We have to try out different things to find out which ones are just right. It’s our job, nothing more.”

He grinned at me. His teeth, though clean and shiny, looked loose in his mouth. “You’re thinking that I didn’t kill them, but that I have money, and I had them killed. The ones who got off, I mean. You’re thinking like the stepfather. I didn’t do anything to them. I should have. I wanted to. But I didn’t know how to go about it. Besides, the law took care of the actual killer, and fate took care of the accomplices and the young man who was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“The stepfather, Bert,” I said. “He’s dead too.”

“How unfortunate. He came to me trying to tie me to the death of this … Mini. He was certain I had something to do with it. He wanted money. I told him where he could go, and he must have gone there. I haven’t heard from him, or of him, again, until just now.”

“The others, way the law took care of them,” Leonard said. “That satisfy you?”

“No. But the fat queer got what she deserved in prison. The others got theirs as well. As I said. Fate. I’m not satisfied with the law, but fate has satisfied me as much as a man can be satisfied in a situation like this.”

“Do you have any idea how the others might have died?” I said, trying to make the question sound as casual as if asking him if he wanted a back massage.

“No. Why would I? I was told they were all dead. My assumption is they died due to their connections, others who were as crazy as they were. If I knew who those people were, provided I didn’t think they too were somehow connected to my son’s death, I might throw them a parade. Well, gentlemen. I’m a busy man. I have a nap to take. It’s when I do my best thinking.”

Miss Clinton, who had gone behind her desk to sit, got up and came over and directed us toward the door. She even took my arm and led me. Why the hell was I getting the bum’s rush? Why not Leonard or Cason? Was it because I didn’t look like a lawyer?

We were hurried out into the foyer, where the receptionist waited behind her desk. As we passed she looked at Cason the way a dog looks at a pork chop. He looked back at her and smiled and then she smiled again. There was enough sexual tension in the air between them you could have sparked a candlewick to flame.

We stopped in the jungle section with Miss Clinton. There were still no tigers. The birds were screeching loudly, making me a nervous wreck.

Miss Clinton said, “He doesn’t mean to be rude, but questions about his son, they disturb him.”

“He seemed awfully hostile for someone happy with how things turned out, the killers getting theirs,” I said.

“That was his only son. His only child. He’s dead and he isn’t coming back, and it was all because of some kind of prank, or belief, whatever you like to call it, son.”

“Hap. Or Mr. Collins,” I said. “I don’t go by son.”

“Don’t be cute with me. You’re not that cute.”

I thought: And you’re not old enough to be my mother, so don’t call me son. But I didn’t say it aloud. I was kind of glad she thought I looked that young. You got to take compliments where you find them, even if the remark wasn't actually meant as one.

"Thing is," she said, "any discussion of his son always upsets him."

"Then why did he let us come discuss it with him?" Cason asked. "We're not here to harass him. Just to find out information that might help our client."

"He wanted to hear anything that might be about his son, and he wanted to hear nothing. Do you understand?"

"We regret if we upset him, or you," I said. "You seem very loyal."

"Loyal? That's not the word. He's my ex-husband."

"Your ex-husband," Leonard said. "So, the boy was your son?"

"No. Mr. Kincaid divorced me, married … another woman. She died of throat cancer … smoked like a chimney. I was his personal assistant when we were married, and I stayed that way."

"I can respect that," I said.

"Can you? You can? Well, I don't need your respect."

"Well, you don't get mine," Leonard said. "I think you're a goddamn doormat."

"You don't have to be rude," she said.

"Duh," Leonard said. "Of course I don't have to be. Neither do you. We are grown-ass adults and we both decided to be rude."

She left then, went past the squawking birds and back through the doors that led into Mr. Kincaid's office. She was a real fast walker.

Leonard looked at me. "You respect that shit? I think she's goddamn pathetic."

"I think it's kind of sweet," I said.

"You two hash that out," Cason said. "These damn birds are making me crazy."

We stood there while Cason went back to the desk and talked to the receptionist. When he came back he had her name written on the back of Kincaid's business card.

41

Since Cason had a date with the Kincaid secretary, Lateesha, we thought staying at Constance's place might be bad form, so we rented a room in the Holiday Inn Express near the airport. It had two beds and a rollaway; we left that death trap for Cason.

Cason didn't come back that night, so we sat around and watched television and went to bed late, like parents worried about their boy who had passed his curfew. In the morning, we went downstairs and looked at the free breakfast and understood why it was free, so we walked to a restaurant next door.

As we walked, Leonard said, "If Cason doesn't show soon, he's going to have to find a ride home. I'm not taking that motherfucker in to raise."

"I thought you said he was loyal, and—"

"Oh, shut up."

We were going inside the restaurant when Cason came up. Out in the lot, we saw Lateesha driving away in a red sports car.

"Good to see you," I said. "But we didn't come here to serve as a dating service."

"Oh, I got that date all on my own."

Cason held up a disc.

"What's that?" Leonard said.

"A list of all of Kincaid's clients," he said. "Lateesha got it for me off her computer. It occurred to me that—and I know this will be hard to believe—Kincaid might be lying."

"What has the world come to?" I said.

"I'm going to send it to Mercury, have him cross-check it and see if there's anyone on it that might be someone who would do Kincaid a favor. So to speak."

"The old organized crime figure on the accountant sheet trick," I said.

“That’s it,” Cason said.

The greeter came over and guided us to a booth in the back, which is what we asked for. Soon as we were seated a thin waitress who looked as if it would be all right with her if everyone who ever wanted to eat in a restaurant was dead, arrived and took our coffee orders and went away.

“Mercury can do that?” I said. “He has that kind of list available to him?”

“He has a list of lists,” Cason said. “If there are people on this disc that cross-check as criminals, or are associated with criminals … We can check. It might lead to something, and it might lead to nothing. But it seems like this baby”—he held up the disc—“has made the trip worthwhile. It’s more than Kincaid would ever tell us just by asking.”

“Lateesha get anything out of this?” I asked.

“About six inches of dick and a marvelous breakfast,” Cason said.

“Six inches and about ten feet of bullshit is what I figure,” Leonard said.

“I’m not the world’s best person to be around women,” Cason said. “And the worse thing is, if I really get interested in them and they lose interest in me, which seems to happen as I tend to get preoccupied with things—”

“Like more women,” I said.

“That would be one of the preoccupations, yes,” Cason said. “But if they lose interest in me, I become a half-ass stalker if I don’t watch it. It’s hard for me to let go.”

“So you have an inferiority complex,” Leonard said.

“Could be,” Cason said.

“What about Constance?” Leonard said.

“I’m seeing her next weekend,” Cason said.

“What about Lateesha?” I said.

“Constance Saturday, Lateesha Sunday.”

“Do you take vitamins?” I asked.

“Push-ups and clean living,” Cason said.

Driving home, Cason and Leonard talked about this and that. I tuned out and thought about Kincaid. If he had done anything to get rid of those associated with Godzilla, and her crime, I had a hard time figuring out what made him bad and us good. I had his money and resources I might have done the same thing. Hell, without his money I had done that kind of thing in the past, and Leonard was with me and he was proud of it.

So why did his shit stink and ours smelled like perfume?

And Bert had an idea, maybe a guess similar to ours, that Kincaid might have done the daughter in, and since he had lost all that money to the kitties, maybe he thought he could get some out of Kincaid. Only thing was, Kincaid hadn't bit, and he may not have bit because he may not have been guilty. Or the only card Bert was holding was a guess, and Kincaid knew it. He struck me as a shrewd and intuitive man. And Miss Clinton, she didn't seem like a slacker either. But the bottom line was, Bert was dead. Why would Kincaid bother to have him killed? Or had he. And if not, who did?

No answers presented themselves.

42

By the time we got back to LaBorde, Leonard and Cason had become buddies. They both had been in the military, in different wars, but they had some similar experiences. When Cason got out of the car at his place, Leonard got out and they hugged.

When Leonard got back in and we were tooling along, I said, “That was some hug.”

“Don’t worry,” Leonard said. “You’re still number one.”

We drove to Marvin’s office. The girl at the bicycle shop was standing in the open doorway. She was dressed warm today. The weather had turned cold and there was a hint of rain on the air. She had on a woolen cap and her hair cascaded out from under that. She wore a leather bomber jacket with a sheep’s wool collar, blue jeans, and some big boots with fur trim. The only thing missing was the sled dogs.

In the office, Marvin had a small heater plugged into the wall and he was sitting by it in his rolling chair.

“Can’t find the money for some real heat?” I said.

“Central air is out,” Marvin said. “And I can’t afford to fix it. We get through with this case, I can. I may even get a new coffeepot and a better water cooler.”

We pulled the client chairs over by the heater. Leonard said, “Are you hinting that we should hurry up?”

“No,” he said, “but a conclusion at some point in time would be nice.”

“We’re starting to believe Kincaid was looking for vengeance for his son,” Leonard said, “and he knew someone whose accounting business he took care of was also someone who, for a fee, could take care of business for him.”

“You think that because Brett thinks that?”

“No,” Leonard said. “Because it’s logical.”

“Another thing,” I said, “Bert tried to blackmail Kincaid. Kincaid admitted that. I think Bert was guessing Kincaid had Mini and Mrs. Christopher’s boy killed. He may not have seemed smart, but when it got right down to it, he could have had things figured out. Kincaid may have had him whacked. He knows the right people, and he makes millions for them on their taxes and accounts. He might be able to have them to do him a favor. Or pay them for one.

“Actually, it’s all guesswork for right now, but it’s all we got. Frankly, I haven’t ruled out June either. She had money too, and she didn’t like Mini, and how much she liked her brother is up for debate. She struck me as a hard ass in a soft-ass body.”

“But you have no proof that anyone did anything?” Marvin said.

“We do have something that might give us some proof by way of our new BFF, Cason.”

We filled Marvin in on all that had gone on. Told him about how Cason got the disc with the names on it.

When we finished, he said, “Cason got two pieces of ass in as many days?”

“Gets two this coming weekend as well,” I said.

“I knew I hated that guy,” Marvin said.

“You’re married, and I might as well be,” I said, “so it’s of no interest to us.”

“Okay, we’re married, but damn, I’m jealous.”

“All right,” I said. “Me too. And Leonard here, I think he was hoping him and Cason might play a little grab-ass.”

“It was merely an affectionate hug between comrades,” Leonard said.

“About the case?” Marvin said.

“Cason is having the disc checked,” I said, “and we’ll get back to you.”

Marvin said, “You know, guys, I don’t want to be paranoid here, but I’m starting to look over my shoulder.”

“You think we’re in danger?” I said.

“I don’t know,” Marvin said. “But if Kincaid is responsible for Bert’s death, it doesn’t take much to piss him off. Why would he bother? It’s just one more death that might tie itself to him. He could have let it go and probably been better off.”

“That may not be his way,” I said. “He strikes me as a man that likes to win at whatever game he’s playing, and from the looks of his office digs, he has the money to make the kind of arrangements he wants for most anything next to a body transplant.”

Marvin got up and poured himself a cup of coffee, came and sat back down.

“So, how do we play it?” he said.

“I’m not one for quitting,” Leonard said.

“Here’s my thought,” I said. “Best thing for us to do is to keep poking our noses in other people’s business and find out if someone will come out and play.”

43

I was lying in bed with Brett, and I had told her about our day and the day before. Leonard was downstairs sleeping on the couch. From where I lay I could see the window and the night sky. It was a velvet-soft night. No rain.

"How are things between Leonard and John?" she asked.

"John's being taught that his sense of future direction ought to include deep desire for a woman's vagina."

"Who's teaching him?"

"His brother."

Brett shook her head. "Families can be a mess."

I reached over and took her hand. "I'm gonna change the subject a little."

"That sounded ominous."

"I know you have a child, a grown child," I said, "but have you ever thought about starting a family with someone else?"

"Someone else?"

"Yes."

"Who would that someone else be?"

"Oh, I don't know. Someone off the street. Someone about my height and weight and general disposition."

"You're serious?"

"I guess I am."

Brett lay without speaking for a long time. "I have thought about it, Hap. I've told you how much I love you, and how I stand by you. But … if we had a kid, there's no way you could do what you do."

"I could quit. Though I'm not sure what I'm quitting, since I don't know what my job is."

"You know exactly what I mean, Hap. Don't act coy."

"I think I could actually finish college."

"You tried last year and quit."

"I wasn't motivated enough."

"Now you are?"

"I could try. Unlike just about everyone else, I really had a good family. I know how to be a father. I would be good at it."

"Your lifestyle isn't exactly conducive to tricycles and soccer games and PTA meetings. You'd do all right for a while, and then you'd be … you know, back out there with Leonard. I don't know if I could manage it. I have a grown child that drives me crazy. I don't even know if I could have another one. I'm probably too old."

"We could find out," I said.

She reached out and patted my cheek gently. "I don't think so, baby. I love you. I do. But, Hap … I don't think so."

44

Morning came, and downstairs I found Brett making coffee. I said, “Where’s Leonard?”

“I sent him to his place.”

“Sent him?”

“To get his stuff. His rent plays out in the next couple of days. He doesn’t need to be staying in some rat hole, and besides, I like having him around.”

“I like having him around too … but not that much.”

“It’s temporary. Me and him talked.”

“He has enough money right now to rent or put down dough on a good place, he just hasn’t done it. He’s cheap.”

“He’s not ready for that. Not with the way things are with John.”

“And things may never get better,” I said. “But they might. And if they don’t, he’ll move on. Leonard’s a survivor.”

“He is at that.”

“What we talked about last night,” she said. “I been thinking.”

“That’s all right,” I said. “I was having a sentimental moment.”

She put her arms around me. My hands cupped her buttocks.

“How long before he gets back?” I asked.

“Let me start the coffee, then let’s go upstairs and see if you can make a hole in one before he shows.”

I let go of her. She turned off the coffee. She took my hand. We went upstairs.

Fore!

45

The case didn't exactly die on us after that, but it went a little south for a while while we waited on Mercury to cross check things. Me and Leonard spent time at the little gym where we had a membership, and it was a cold place to be, as the heating wasn't enough to warm up a mouse.

We were often the only people there. The owner was a big fat man whose only exercise was sitting in a chair near the door and taking money or, as in our case, checking memberships. The gym wasn't pretty, but it served our needs. It had a heavy bag, which I hate, and a speed bag, which I love, and it had a good mat we could spar on and throw each other down on. I noticed that when I was thrown it hurt more than it had just a couple years back. Time seemed to have made the ground harder, even if it had a mat over it.

The cold made us train briskly, skipping rope, pounding the heavy bag, punching the speed. After that we sparred a little.

It was good and fun to work out with the weather going wonky, dropping uncharacteristically down to seventeen at night, and in the high twenties during the day. Weather like that, you had to keep moving. Even as we sparred our breath puffed little white clouds. It was odd weather for East Texas, the sort that came once in a blue moon.

We finished up by going over self-defense drills, doing them pretty rough, to make sure we weren't slacking, then we did our groundwork, so we would be ready if we had to end up there, then we went into the cold shower room with our feet freezing on the tile, took hot showers not only to clean up, but to warm up, got dressed, and drove home.

When we got there, Cason's car was parked out front with the engine running, the exhaust pumping into the cold air. After we parked, he climbed out, dressed in a bomber jacket and slacks and a shirt and tie. He held up a folder. “Mercury,” he said.

I invited him inside, sat him at the kitchen table with Leonard, and made some hot tea.

“How British,” Cason said, as he took his cup of tea.

“I see that dress code has kicked in,” I said.

“Yeah,” Cason said, “it has.”

“About the file,” Leonard said.

The file lay in the center of the table. Cason tapped it with a finger.

“Mercury cross-checked names, and there are people on the list that are kind of scary, including a nasty guy named Cletus Jimson.”

“Oh yeah,” Leonard said. “He’s a sweetheart.”

“You know him?” Cason said.

“We’ve crossed paths,” I said. “He doesn’t like us.”

“We’re often misunderstood,” Leonard said.

“Do you think Kincaid could have hired him to do it?” Cason asked. “Kill those folks?”

“Cletus doesn’t do that sort of work, he has it done,” I said. “I suppose Kincaid could have contacted him about a little help, though.”

“Jesus Christ,” Leonard said. “I hope it isn’t Vanilla Ride.”

“Who?” Cason said.

“You don’t want to know,” I said. “Those other devil head murders. Ones up in Oregon and so on. When were they?”

Cason told us.

I said, “Those are too long ago for Vanilla. She’d have been in the womb. She’s not that old. And even if I add five or six years to what I think her age is, she’s still too young. I hope.”

“That’s a relief,” Leonard said. “I keep thinking we’ll see her again, and may not like it when we do.”

“I don’t think she and Jimson are on that good of terms,” I said. “Not the way I remember it. So, taking that fact and adding her youth to it, I think we can safely say, no Vanilla Ride.”

“Money and need make strange bedfellows,” Leonard said. “And I don’t think Cletus has forgotten us. He had these others killed for Kincaid … hell, maybe even June, and it all leads to us sticking our noses into his business, he might decide to put us on the list, and considering our past history, perhaps he'd do it with a certain amount of enthusiasm. But that's private. You don't need to know any more than that. He doesn't like us."

I nodded.

Cason had been watching us in a tennis-match fashion. Head first to one, then the other. "So, I'm sort of out of this part of the conversation," he said.

"Yep," I said. "We don't want to explain that part of our past. But it's possible Jimson did Kincaid a favor, if he got something big in return."

"Should we talk to him?" Cason said.

"That could be tricky," I said. "It's like stirring up a snake. He's sleeping all quiet like, hibernating maybe, and we go in there with a stick and twist him around with it, piss him off, and we are in for some shit when he may not have anything to do with this. So, we could get bit for nothing."

"I got the impression you boys get bit a lot," Cason said.

"That's why we don't want to get bit again," I said.

Leonard looked at me, then looked away. He said to Cason: "I don't mind talkin' to him. We need to, we will. But is he the only one on your list? I think before we stir him up, we got to decide if these murders connect somehow with the murders in Oregon and the like. I think Jimson would kill his mother if he thought he could get a nickel for her bloody Tampax, but I don't think he'd go out of the South. He's sort of regional."

"Yeah," I said, "his territory is East Texas and western Louisiana mostly. I reckon he could do some business outside of this area, but I don't know the business he'd do would be that sort of thing. He's got his niche here. He's got contacts and has the right people paid off, but up north, not so much would be my guess. What I think Jimson likes is being a big frog in a small pond. It's his comfort zone."

"Anyone else on that list suspect?" Leonard asked.

Cason nodded. "Couple others, but the thing is they aren't that big-time. They're little operations, and I got a feeling our killer, our Devil Red, is well trained and works for big money. That's why I thought of Jimson. He's much bigger time than the other two jokers."

"Where are they from?" I asked.

"Midwest," Cason said.

“Kincaid isn’t afraid to do business with bad people,” Leonard said. “Keep their taxes clean and fresh. So that makes it even more likely he would have been willing to make some kind of deal to get even for his son.”

“Maybe he just does their taxes and tells them how to save on weather stripping their homes,” I said.

“Yeah, right,” Leonard said.

“If Kincaid did arrange it, I’m not sure I blame him for wanting to get even,” I said. “Losing first a daughter to drugs, then a son to murder is bound to weigh on and mess up the mind—”

“Wait a minute,” Leonard said. “I just had a flash. Detectives like to call it inspiration.”

“Yeah,” I said. “What do you call it?”

“The drug-dead daughter,” Leonard said. “What do we know about her?”

“I think the whole she’s dead part about covers it,” Cason said.

“Let’s look into it,” Leonard said.

“May I ask why?” I said.

“Yes,” Leonard said. “You can ask, but I got nothing to say about it yet. I may be full of shit.”

“All right,” Cason said. “We can check on her. I’ll get Mercury on it.”

46

After Cason left, we called Marvin and asked if he could set up a meeting with Jimson. The whole thing about telling Cason we didn't want to see Jimson really meant we didn't want Cason in on it. We had a history with Jimson. All bad. We didn't want to put Cason on Jimson's doo-doo list.

We sat around for about an hour, then Marvin called us back.

"What'd he say?" I said, pressing my cell phone to my ear while standing at the kitchen window, looking out at the yard, the house beyond. It had turned off clear and the sun was out, but there was ice in little spots where the water ran out of the grass and collected along the concrete walk at that side of the house. If I was married to Brett and had a child, the most I'd have to think about today was maybe going to work and coming in to read the papers and play with the kid. It was a pipe dream, but I liked it.

"He said he didn't want to see you," Marvin said.

"That's not nice."

"No, it isn't."

"I don't know about you," I said, "but my iddy-biddy feelers are crushed to the bone."

"Mine too, but that's what he said. He also said eat shit and die."

"You're exaggerating."

"Yeah. Actually, I didn't talk to him. But the message from his associate, one of his bodyguards, was pretty much in that ballpark."

I turned to Leonard. "Jimson doesn't want to see us."

"Then we should respect his wishes," Leonard said.

47

Within fifteen minutes we were on our way to the little burg of No Enterprise. It wasn't much of a place, a four-way stop with a string of buildings here and there, but for some odd reason, Jimson lived over in that area and did a lot of his business in a little service station that also had sodas and liquor and snack goods, had some tables in the back with some chairs, and sold hamburgers. Good burgers, bad fries. The pie was good too.

Jimson spent a lot of time there in the afternoons with his goons. If he wasn't there, well, we'd have chocolate pie with meringue. If he was there, we'd probably have it anyway. Maybe a hamburger. Me and Leonard, we believed in living large. It's just how we roll.

It took us a little over half an hour to get there because there were some low spots in the highway and water ran across those, and in this weather they had frozen, making an occasional shiny ribbon of ice across the road. Mostly it took us a while because Leonard had a new country music CD and he wanted to hear all of it before we stopped. He said, "They get rowdy, and I get killed, I like to know I heard all of it."

"You're dead, what does it matter?"

"It's the idea of it," he said. "I just want to know I consumed it all, at least once."

"You've heard it before."

"But it's a different collection of the same songs. I like that they're in a different order."

"Jerry Lee Lewis singing country sounds pretty much like Jerry Lee Lewis singing country in any order."

"Oh yes, and oh so good."

I had to agree. He told me to shut up and played the CD.

We were both armed. I had my permit pistol, and Leonard had a sawed-off shotgun without a permit fitted inside his long coat. He flared the coat back, he could pull it out of there faster than you could blink.

When we arrived the café part was absent of Jimson and thugs. In fact, it was absent of any patrons. There was a guy at the counter, and when we sat down back there, he said, "You got to come up here to get menus."

I got up and got us a couple of menus. I noticed there was a large jar of pickled eggs on the counter and a small jar with a kid's photo on it and a request for money due to burns received in a car wreck. I put a buck in the can and took the menus back to where Leonard had picked seats. There was a door back there that was an emergency door. It didn't open from the outside. Anyone came in, they had to come in the front door and come along the path between the counter and the tables to reach us. There was a wide row of glass to our left, but we were sitting at a table where I had my back against the wall, and had a bit of wall to protect me. Leonard was point man. Anyone came up, he could see them through the glass, and if need be he could cut down on them with that shotgun, start pumping out loads.

We ordered two hamburgers from the guy when he came over. He was a little nasty-looking for a man who worked as a cook. His fingers were nicotine stained and his teeth were the same. In fact, where the stains were missing, black decay had filled in between his teeth like dirt washed down from a hill.

Leonard said, "Two hamburgers, no fries, hold the hepatitis."

"What?" the man said.

"I mean wash your hands. I like to think that's nicotine, but for all I know it could be from you sticking your finger up your ass."

"You guys leave," he said.

"We work for the health department, mister," I said. "I wouldn't push it."

He looked at me, said, "Show me your credentials."

"We don't carry any. We're here to surprise people, not let them know we're coming."

"Credentials just show who you are," he said. "I'm already surprised."

“True,” Leonard said, “but you’ve got on my bad side. Go wash your hands.”

The man studied Leonard for a moment, figured quite correctly we weren’t with the health department, but he wasn’t really sure about throwing us out. Especially Leonard, who had a kind of lazy look that said “I’d love to kill you very much.”

“All right,” he said. “Two hamburgers.”

“After you wash your hands,” Leonard said. “And I even think or consider you might spit in my food or mess with it, I will personally see you get some big demerits. And on top of that, I will hold your face against the stove until it cooks your nose off.”

“No need to get nasty,” the man said.

“Your fingers are nasty enough,” Leonard said.

The man went away.

I said, “Leonard, why do you always try to make friends wherever we go?”

“Our man Jimson comes here all the time, so he’s got to tip Shit Fingers something or another now and then to use the space, and I figure whatever he tips him is big enough to buy some loyalty. I figure Shit Fingers is in the back there now, punching him up on the cell phone. I figure it’s a way to pull Jimson out of the Jacuzzi and get him on the road.”

“You know, you’re not as dumb as you look.”

48

Our hamburgers arrived, and about the same time we saw Jimson and two of his goon balls push through the door, start toward us. Leonard turned so that he was facing that direction. He had his hand inside his coat. Things went south, he'd have the shotgun up and ready. I put my hand in my coat and felt for the automatic, but to tell you the truth, I wasn't sure I could use it, way I'd been lately. I hoped I could at least talk tough.

Jimson was a fortyish guy who looked as if he was trying to smooth his image with expensive clothes. He was wearing a tan fedora, a very nice brown leather coat over a maroon sweater, and tan slacks so tight you wanted to yell "snake."

With him were two men that couldn't look sophisticated if they were wearing tuxes and monocles. One of them was so muscular he looked as if he had been pumped up with air. The other was leaner, and he carried his right hand close to him with his palm folded back, his coat slightly pushed. He'd be the shooter, the big man with the muscles would be the hitter.

As Jimson walked toward us, he turned to Shit Fingers, said, "You're right, they're not the health department. More like sewer."

Jimson sat at the table near us and looked at us like we were wild animal exhibits. Leonard had turned completely around in his chair. He wouldn't even need to take the shotgun out of his coat. All he had to do was lift and shoot through fabric. A shot from that sawed-off and Jimson would be mixed in with the pickled eggs.

"Fancy meeting you here," Leonard said.

"Yeah," Jimson said, "imagine that. Last time I seen you guys I didn't like it, and now I see you again, I don't like it some more."

"Is that line out of the movies?" Leonard said.

"That's an original," Jimson said. "I got a feeling you boys didn't just come over for a hamburger."

"Well," I said, "there's the pie."

Jimson smiled. "Yeah. There is the pie. So, I get a call from Marvin Hanson, a guy I don't like much, but knows me all right, and he says can his boys come see me. And you know what I say?"

"No," Leonard said.

"That's right. I say no. And then you know what?"

"Pray tell," Leonard said.

"You show up anyway."

"Not at your house," Leonard said.

"At my spot."

"Here?" Leonard said. "Really? This is your spot?"

"You been hasslin' my man over there." He nodded at Shit Fingers. "He kind of keeps me an open office here. I let you hassle my man, what kind of reputation I got with the locals?"

"What do you get out of him letting you have your office here?" I said.

"Pie."

"All right," I said. "I can see that."

Leonard nodded.

"Look, I don't know what you two assholes want, but I got nothin' to do with nothin' you're dealin' with."

"Now, how would you know that, when we haven't told you what we're dealing with? We could be selling Girl Scout cookies for all you know."

"Them's some good cookies," said the man with muscles.

Jimson turned and glanced at him. Muscles looked embarrassed, then tried to look as serious as a heart attack.

"I come here 'cause my man there called," Jimson said, "and I come here to show you guys I'm not afraid of you, that you ain't got no mojo on me. You dig on that?"

"I think 'dig' went out with the beatniks," Leonard said.

Jimson sighed. "You don't even try to work with a man when he's trying to work with you. I wanted, I could rub you guys out. I still owe you a shitstorm that didn't never come down."

"Actually," I said, "you threw a lot of shit our way, but we sort of threw it back."

“I’m talkin’ about what I could have done.”

“Woulda, coulda, shoulda,” Leonard said. “That was then, and this is now.”

“You fellas don’t want this,” Jimson said. “You don’t want me mad.”

“Do we look nervous?” Leonard said. Leonard didn’t. Me, I wasn’t so sure about. “We made you mad before, and we’re still standing,” Leonard said.

“I thought you made a deal to stay out of my business if I stayed out of yours,” Jimson said.

I nodded. “It’s a deal we like, stayin’ out of each other’s business, but we’re thinkin’, considerin’ what we know lately, maybe your business is in our business again. And if it is, well, we got to come say howdy.”

“And what in the hell business could that be?” Jimson said.

Leonard said, “You know, I’m gonna pause and eat this hamburger. It’s better when it’s warm. Hey, Shit Fingers. Come over here.”

Shit Fingers was behind the counter. He looked at Jimson. Jimson nodded.

Shit Fingers came out from behind the counter, over to Leonard.

“Let me see those hands,” Leonard said.

Shit Fingers showed them to him. They had been washed.

“All right, go on about your business,” Leonard said.

I looked at Jimson. He was starting to fume. That’s the way Leonard wanted him. He liked people he was dealing with mad, especially when he was trying to find something out. Me too. They were more likely to mess up, reveal something they shouldn’t. They were easier to read when they were angry. It’s the way we worked. Either that or kicking their ass. Subtlety was not our long suit.

Muscles said, “You want me to fuck ’em up, boss?”

Jimson shook his head. “I don’t know you can.”

Muscles looked hurt, the way a kid might if you told him his drawing of the sky and a moon looked like a boat on the ocean.

“Here’s the thing,” Leonard said. “We got this client, and our client has a problem. Someone she knows, family, was murdered, and there were other murders, and they’re all connected by a little symbol. A devil’s head. Red. Left at the scene of the murders. You know anything about that?"

"No."

Leonard said, "Oh, Shit Fingers. I'll have a slice of pie. Hap?"

"Oh yeah," I said. "Big slice."

"I don't see how this has anything to do with me," Jimson said.

"Got that whole Kincaid-does-your-taxes thing going," Leonard said.

"Yeah, and I got a grocer, this filling station where I buy my gas and do my business, and I got a mechanic and a plumber, and a girl on Fridays comes over and pulls my dick so I don't have to."

"So you got nothin' for us?" I said.

"If I had, why would I give it to you? You come in here, you insult Shit Fingers … I mean Toad—"

"Toad?" I said.

"We called him that in high school. I've known him a long time. Same for these two. We grew up together."

"I used to beat him up on the playground," Muscles said.

Jimson turned and looked at him. "You could have saved that."

"Sorry, Cletus. I just thought it was funny … as a memory. Not that I would do it now—"

"That's all right," Jimson said. "Just be quiet."

Muscles went quiet.

"Here's what I got to say," Jimson said. "I've got nothing to do with the devil head murders. Nothing. What I can say is this: I've heard of a hit person who uses that mark. The only person more deadly than this person, so they say, is this Vanilla Ride, and you've had experience with her. They're both a lot more deadly than you are. Say I wanted somethin' done, I used to go to Vanilla. She got the job done, but now me and her got this disagreement on account of you two."

"I call bullshit on that," I said. "You decided to kill her. That's the disagreement."

"Whatever. I wanted someone killed in a bad way, I might go to this devil head killer. I might go through Kincaid. I might know he can arrange it. But me, I don't want anyone killed, so I'm not doin' that. I didn't do it in the past. I got to tell you now, you boys are startin' to annoy me. You're not keepin' your side of the bargain about stayin' out of my business."

"As long as it's out of our business," I said. "That was the bargain.”

“And I’m tellin’ you, if my accountant is hirin’ someone to knock fuckers off, it ain’t through me. That’s what I’m tellin’ you, and that’s my word.”

Shit Fingers, aka Toad, brought the pie.

“Get me one too,” Jimson said.

“Yeah,” Muscles said. “Pie all around. And some milk. What we got here, five milks?”

Toad looked at Jimson. Jimson sighed. “Why not? More pie. Bring milk. We might as well see if anyone wants coffee.”

“I’ll top it off with coffee,” Muscles said.

Jimson shook his head a little.

Leonard took a big bite of pie, worked it around in his mouth, and swallowed. “Any chance you might hook us up with this Devil Red killer, like maybe we act like we got a job we want that bad boy to do?”

“No.”

“Come on, man,” Leonard said. “Here we are sharin’ pie, and you won’t hook a brother up.”

“I belonged to the Aryan Nations in prison, so I don’t hook brothers up.”

“Unless it’s to fasten ’em to a chain to get dragged by a car,” Muscles said.

This time the tall thin man who hadn’t said a word yet grinned. It was like seeing the Grim Reaper get a chuckle.

“Oh, that’s funny,” Leonard said.

“Look here. I ain’t into all that nigger hatin’ anymore,” Jimson said.

“That’s big of you,” Leonard said.

“Only way you might see this Devil Red dude, as you call him, is if he comes to shoot your black ass, and your white pal too.”

“That’s so sweet,” I said. “Both of us, and in the ass.”

“Look here,” Jimson said. “We’ve had a talk. I’ve bought some pie.”

“We’re not asking you to buy our pie,” Leonard said. “The milk maybe, as your man ordered that.”

Jimson snapped both hands in the air, making a crosscutting motion.

“Forget it. I’ve got the whole goddamn bill. I just want you two to go away and stay away, and let’s go back to where we were before. I'm out of your business, and you're out of mine. You jackasses are like having seed ticks imbedded in the balls."

"All right," Leonard said. "But before we go, and before I say thanks for lunch, let me confirm some things. There is a killer who works for money who uses a red devil head as a symbol to sign his work?"

"That's what I'm told," Jimson said.

"And you're sayin', and I know you might lie to a brother, you're sayin' you've got nothin' to do with these hits?"

"If I did," Jimson said, "them crossin' your path would just be a coincidence."

"So you're sayin' you did have somethin' to do with it?" Leonard said.

"No," Jimson said. "For Christsakes, no. That was one of those hypotheticals."

"You learn that word in prison?" I asked.

"I just added an *s* to it, that's all. I have nothing to do with Devil Red. I have never had anything to do with Devil Red. I might consider havin' something to do with Devil Red in the future. Maybe the very goddamn near future."

"That a threat?" I asked.

"Hell yeah," Jimson said.

"Don't forget," Leonard said. "Vanilla Ride is a personal friend of ours."

"No need to bring that bitch into this."

"You are such a misogynist," I said. "If you can't be sweet, don't have anything to say at all."

"Yeah," Leonard said, tossin' his napkin on the table. "You're gonna talk like that, then we'll just have to leave."

He got up. I got up. I went to the fire door and pushed it. The alarm went off. I backed slowly out of it, and Leonard backed out after me. We went around by the side glass on our way to the car. Jimson, Muscles, and the Grim Reaper were watching us from the table. Well, Muscles was actually eating pie and drinking milk. Jimson and the Reaper were watching.

Toad wasn't in sight.

Nobody pulled a gun.

49

On the way home, Leonard said, “Did Jimson seem a bit grumpy to you?”

“He did.”

“The guy with the big arms, he didn’t worry me none. Neither did Jimson, but the quiet one.”

“I call him the Grim Reaper,” I said.

“Yeah, him. He’s someone could be trouble.”

“We’ll file him away for any future associations.”

“That part of the file, people that don’t like us, might kill us, and just ought to be watched, is getting sizable.”

“It is,” I said.

“Hap?”

“Yeah.”

“You feelin’ better?”

“Sure.”

Actually, I had no idea how I felt.

50

When I got home, Leonard took his car and went away somewhere to do Leonard things, which probably meant he was giving Brett and me time together.

Inside, Brett was sitting on the couch with her suitcase parked by her.

I closed the door and said, “Problem?”

“It’s Tillie.”

“You just got back from there. You said yourself you can’t change her.”

“I can’t. She got beat up. Her pimp did it.”

“Shit. How bad?”

“Bad. She’ll be all right, but she’s bad.”

“Damn, Brett, I’m sorry.”

“I got to go. I was just waiting on you.”

“Why didn’t you call?”

“Your phone was off.”

“Oh.”

“And I wouldn’t have called anyway. I wanted to see you before I left.”

“How’d the hospital take it?”

“They took it,” she said, and stood up. “I get there, I’ll give you a call.”

When she stood up and came close, I could see there were tears on her cheeks.

“Long as you need, of course,” I said.

We kissed and I picked up her suitcase and carried it out to her car. She kissed me again and got behind the wheel and started the engine and rolled down the window.

“You didn’t offer to settle the pimp’s hash for me,” she said.

“No. I didn’t.”

“It’s all right. It won’t change him and it won’t change her.” She smiled at me and drove away.

I went upstairs and took off my clothes and closed the blinds and put on my pajamas and got in bed. It was early afternoon and still bright out. But not with the blinds drawn. I lay back on my pillow and pulled her pillow to me. It smelled like she smelled and I liked it.

51

When my cell phone rang, I woke up and didn't know where I was for a moment. I rolled out of bed and pulled it out of my coat pocket and flipped it open.

It was Cason.

"You and Leonard ought to get together with me and Mercury," he said.

"Got somethin'?"

"Yeah. Leonard with you?"

"No. But I can hustle him up."

"When can we get together?" Cason said.

"I don't know. I'll call him, we'll call you, and we'll get together."

"Tell Leonard not to wear the hat."

We showed up at Cason's apartment, way he said. Mercury was there with him. Leonard didn't wear the hat.

As we went inside I gave the place a once-over. It was sort of thrown together with home-made bookshelves and an old couch and a coffee table that looked as if it had been salvaged from the dump. It had so many glass and cup stains on it, it almost looked designed.

I could see the kitchen from the middle of the room, and the sink was full of dishes. Through an open doorway I could see an unmade bed and clothes on the floor. It reminded me of every place either I or Leonard had lived until Brett and I got the house. As much as was possible, she had civilized me.

Mercury had a laptop with him and he placed it on the coffee table, and we all found a place to sit. Cason asked if we wanted beer. Leonard took one; so did Mercury and Cason himself. I passed.

Mercury turned on the laptop, said, “You don’t need to see this ’less you want to. I can read off my notes and tell you what I got.” We agreed this was fine.

“Kincaid’s daughter died of an overdose,” Mercury said. “That much you know. But she died in Oregon. Did you know that?”

“No,” I said.

“Guys that got killed and had the devil head painted at the site were all drug dealers. You startin’ to see a pattern here?”

“Kincaid’s daughter died of a drug overdose, and the drug dealers she dealt with are the ones found dead with the devil heads,” I said.

Mercury nodded. “And his son is killed by crazies, and the crazies die. I think the one in jail, Gonzello a.k.a. Godzilla, was the subject of a hit, but she was tougher than the hit. But when she gave the knife back, thinking she was immortal, well, she messed up. And the train accident. Who knows? Maybe that was some kind of rig too. The Christopher boy … Wrong place, wrong time. Probably caught and killed him and Mini somewhere else, tried to make it look like rape and robbery. However, they just couldn’t resist leaving their mark. Right there in the open, thinking no one would see the connection. But they would know, and it would please them. That’s what conspiracy theorists like myself call a pattern. A pattern of deaths, a pattern of markings—a signature, if you will.”

“So it all does go back to Kincaid?” I said. “He wanted revenge, so he hired Devil Red to do the deed, but Devil Red couldn’t resist leaving his mark. I guess someone killed my son and daughter, I’d feel pretty vengeful.”

“Thing is,” Cason said, “Devil Red seems to put a lot of people to sleep, all over the country. They can’t all be people who’ve done something to the Kincaids. What Mrs. Christopher wants is whoever killed her son. She wants Devil Red, and I’m sure, if possible, she wants whoever arranged it, so the Kincaids aren’t off the hook, no matter what.”

52

When we arrived at my place, we were hungry. I decided on chili.

I got a wide and deep cast-iron frying pan out from under the cabinet and put hamburger meat in it. As it fried, I black peppered it.

Leonard cut up half an onion and a jalapeño, scraped that off the cutting board into the meat. I stirred it while he got the chili powder out of the cabinet and shook some of that in.

I let it cook for a while, and we got soft drinks and sat at the table and smelled the chili cooking.

“So, what do you think?” Leonard said.

“I think Mercury is probably right,” I said. “It’s all connected, and the thing now is, how do we get enough evidence to nail Devil Red, and find a way not to nail Kincaid and Ms. Clinton.”

“I’m not sure I care as much about them as you do,” Leonard said. “There’s something about this whole thing still bothers me. It’s like an animal called Not Quite Right crawled up my ass and is wiggling around.”

“I thought you enjoyed that kind of thing.”

“Wrong kind of animal.”

“All right. How about we try to find evidence to nail Devil Red, not make an effort to stick our vengeful couple, but if things shake out that way, and we can’t keep it from happening, we let it. Him in that chair, and she his former wife, they might get off with something light.”

“She might not have anything to do with it,” Leonard said.

“Oh, she did somethin’, all right. She’s still in love with him. That much was easy to tell. And if anyone knows his business, it’s her.”

“He dumped her, and she’s still moonin’ over him like a preteen," Leonard said. "I don't get it."

"I think love is hard to explain, brother."

"Yeah. Well, I think it's made up."

"You do? What about John?"

"I think I was attracted to him, and him to me, and we had certain things in common, both being queer was right up there, and—"

"He made you laugh, right? That's what everyone always says."

"You and Brett make each other laugh. Me and John, not so much. But I think our basic attraction created love. I think love is real, but I think it's created, kind of like a smoothie."

"You are such a romantic."

"No. No I'm not," Leonard said.

The chili cooked for a long time, and we were starved when it was ready. We ate quickly, devouring huge bowls of it with crackers, and then we did seconds. Between it all, we made some general plans about going back to Houston to shake Kincaid's and Clinton's tree some, see we could get them to make a mistake, wiggle something out of the woodwork. It wasn't a plan up there with Patton, but it was a plan. We had plenty of clues now, plenty of circumstantial evidence. Thing to do was to see if our knowing what we knew made them nervous.

And then the worm turned.

53

Leonard had a lot of his stuff at my place, so we decided he could easily pack and go from there. Some of his clothes were dirty, though, so we put them in the washer, and while it churned, we sat and talked.

Sometime later, Leonard moved his clothes to the dryer and put on a fresh shirt and pants. He came back from changing, said, "I'm cravin' more of that chili."

"Help yourself," I said. I was sitting on the couch with my feet on the coffee table, glancing at one of Brett's magazines. It didn't really have anything to do with anything I was interested in, but it killed a bit of time.

"No more crackers," he said.

"Eat it without crackers."

"I like crackers."

"I like steak and baked potato, but what you have is chili, no crackers."

"I'm gonna go get some."

"You want crackers that bad?"

"It's the way you eat chili."

"You have a rule book?" I asked.

"I know things."

Leonard got his coat. "And you're out of vanilla cookies."

"Wow, wonder where those went."

Leonard put the coat on and took his deerstalker out of the pocket and put it on. I didn't say anything, but I'm sure I sighed. Going out the door, he said, "I'll be back in twenty or thirty."

"Don't screw around," I said. "We need to pack and get gone. We have people to irritate."

"I wouldn't miss that," he said.

Leonard was gone about five minutes when I realized Leonard had left his wallet on the table with his cell phone, and even his pistol. The sawed-off was there too. He had taken them out of his pants when he had changed clothes. He was driven to have those crackers and cookies and he didn't think he needed a gun to get them. A wallet with money, though. He needed that. And frankly, the idea of him being out there, and Devil Red maybe being out there, and Leonard without a gun, it unnerved me a little. I was starting to get as paranoid as Bert was.

I got his wallet and phone and my own gun, and drove over to Wal-Mart. I knew that's where he'd go. It's where he always went.

As I drove over, it started to sleet and I could see that ice was cresting the grass in yards I passed.

When I got to the lot, I cruised around, looking for his car, and I saw it and I saw him. Leonard was in the lot walking. He had his hands in his coat pockets and his head down against the sleet.

I saw a black SUV turn down the row of cars where Leonard was walking, and when I did, my heart sank.

I drove faster, but the SUV was on him, and the back side window came down, and I saw a pistol poke out of it. I honked my horn at the same time Leonard was turning, reaching under his coat—

—for nothing.

His guns were at home, on the table.

There was a blast of fire from the open window. *Snap. Snap. Snap*.

Leonard went down.

I pulled over quick and got out and fired at the dark-windowed SUV and the glass popped and made a spider design but didn't break. The SUV gunned in. They came by my position. I could see a shape inside, through the open window, but my main concentration was on the gun poking out at me. I fired once and leaped over the hood of my car. A bullet scraped something and I lay down tight behind my tire, peeked out and under.

The SUV was roaring away. I stood up and draped my gun over the roof of my car. Someone screamed. I saw a shopper pushing a cart go right behind the SUV. No shot there. No license plate either. Not that it would have mattered. They knew what they were doing. Those plates would be false.

I screamed because I couldn't do anything else.

I put the gun away and ran toward Leonard.
It seemed to take me forever to get there.
He didn’t get up. He didn’t move.
The lights from Wal-Mart seemed to strobe.

54

There are some things that happen to you that thicken the air around you until it is as heavy and as hard to penetrate as stone.

I don't know a better way to explain it. It's as if air and gravity are coconspirators, pulling you down. I tried to move fast, and I suppose I was moving fast, but I felt like Brer Rabbit caught up in the tar baby. The more I struggled, the worser I got.

My feet didn't know how to work, and my head wasn't thinking clearly; my brain was echoing with the sound of gunfire.

When I got to him, he was breathing. But he was bloody, and he was bad. His stupid hat was lying nearby. There was a stream of blood flowing away from Leonard's body and it was about to touch the hat. I took the hat and put it in my coat pocket.

I said, "Leonard," but he didn't so much as blink.

I touched the pulse in his throat. He was going fast.

I stood up to see a half-dozen people standing around me. And the crowd was growing.

A lady said, "I called nine-one-one."

"I hope you hit the sonofbitch," someone in the crowd said.

After that, it seemed as if I was down on my knees forever, holding Leonard's head across my knees. Then there were sirens, and lights, an ambulance and cops.

They took my gun and put me in a cop car and I sat there not able to speak, watching through the window as the ambulance with my best friend—my brother—drove away.

They let me make a call. I called Marvin. They asked me some questions. I did my best to answer them. There wasn't a lot to say. The cops knew me. They knew Leonard. That wasn't necessarily a good thing. And they knew Marvin.

I went downtown, and my memory of that trip is all a haze. Finally they let me go away with Marvin. I had heard only one thing, a cop saying it to another cop, out in the hallway. It was about Leonard. He wasn't expected to live.

He should have had chili without crackers, I thought. Goddamn it, Leonard. If you don't die before I get to the hospital, I'm gonna kill you. Crackers and vanilla wafers. That got you shot? Maybe killed? You sonofabitch.

Don't die, goddamn it, don't die.

Shot outside Wal-Mart. How ignoble was that? A man who had fought in a war, and had fought dozens of tough customers over the years, gunned down in a parking lot.

"Who do you think?" Marvin said.

"Jimson. He was mad at us from the time before. And we just saw him again."

"And you were not endearing."

"No. It was the usual."

"Who else is on the list?" Marvin asked.

"Vanilla Ride, maybe. Devil Red. I don't know. We pulled someone's chain a little too hard this time, and someone didn't like it, or hired someone to not like it for them. They must have been scoping us out at the house. Saw Leonard alone, thought they'd take him. Come back for me. Normally, that wouldn't be an easy thing. But this time, it was."

"There's no rhyme or reason to that sort of thing," Marvin said.

"They caught us apart. We're not easy apart, but together, we're really difficult. Except this time."

"Even monkeys fall out of trees," Marvin said. "It's not always about how good you are."

"Take me by the house before the hospital. I want to get something."

…

Marvin parked down the street and let me out, and then he drove by, to see what he could see. I walked across two backyards and went to my back door. No one was waiting on me. I used the key and went inside.

Upstairs, I got Brett's little revolver and put it in my coat pocket. Simple gun. Light enough. No jams.

Downstairs, I looked out the back window. I could see our neighbor’s fence, and nothing else.

I went to the living room, peeled the curtain on first one window, then another. The yard was empty, except for dead grass nipped over with ice.

I put my hand in my pocket and went outside and looked around. I didn’t see a sniper’s nest or black helicopters or Bigfoot.

Marvin coasted up front. I got in and we went away.

It had turned very icy by now, and we almost went off in a ditch once. But we made it.

As I walked into the hospital, shaken to my core, the last thing I told myself was it no longer mattered what had been going on inside of me as of late, because I was past that now.

It didn’t matter.

It was behind me.

Whoever did this to Leonard was going to die.

55

They wouldn’t let us see Leonard. He was in surgery. Me and Marvin sat in uncomfortable chairs in an overlit waiting room with a TV on without the sound and a lady wrapped up in a blanket sleeping in a chair across the way. From time to time, Marvin got up and made some calls to the cops and who knows who all.

When he came and sat back down, I said, “Thomas and his crony aren’t out of jail, are they?”

“First thing I thought of,” Marvin said. “Answer is no.”

“No idea of anyone else?”

Marvin shook his head. “Folks saw the SUV.

Heard shots. But didn’t really see anyone, same as you. A woman got the license, but—”

“It’s not to an SUV.”

“That’s right. It’s not. It was stolen from a car that’s already been traced. They must have taken it off the car tonight. Quick and fast. They’ve already traded the license plate on their car back by now, tossed the other one.”

“Shit. I should have been with him. We’re together, shit like that doesn’t happen.”

“Of course it does. You two have just been lucky. All of us, we just been lucky. We’ve all been shot, nearly killed. Just not as bad as Leonard got tonight.”

“I’m thinkin’ maybe Jimson,” I said. “We rode him pretty hard.”

“Possibility.”

“And then there’s Devil Red.”

“Really?” Marvin said.

“Could be. Jimson implied he knew how to contact Devil Red.

Like maybe he could hire him, he wanted to. Or maybe we got Kincaid stirred when we were in Houston and he put Devil Red on us. I don't know. Anyone say anything about finding a drawing, something with a devil head on it?"

"No. But that might be information even my buddies wouldn't tell me," Marvin said. "But, if it was Devil Red, he might not leave a warning if there's no time. Also, since the shots came from the back window, he's got help."

"That could point to Jimson," I said. "It might just be him and some of his boys."

Marvin was hesitant. "Well, when it comes to you two, there is a long list. Only thing I can say, it wasn't random, and it wasn't for robbery. They had one purpose. Shoot Leonard. And if they did that, I pretty much think you're next."

It was a long time before Leonard came out of surgery. We weren't allowed to see him then, just a glimpse as they pushed his gurney onto an elevator and took him away. He looked ashen, and when a black man looks that ashen, it's not good, not good at all.

The surgeon met with us in the break room a few minutes later. The surgeon's name was Rogers and he was out of his surgery duds and wearing some loose clothes with slip-on shoes.

We sat at a break table in plastic chairs. The room seemed too bright.

"He's pretty bad," Rogers said. "He's tough, though. I'll tell you that. I couldn't believe he'd taken those slugs, bled that much, and was still alive. He could even talk a little."

"He say who did it?" Marvin asked.

"He asked me if we found the cookies."

"The cookies?" I said. "Why that silly sonofabitch. The last thing he asked about were cookies? He never even made it inside the store."

"He was kind of out of it. He asked about a hat too. Neither meant anything to me."

I smiled. Thought: That's probably why he was shot, that hat. "Wish I could tell you he was going to be better," Rogers said. I held my breath.

"I can't," he said. "He could recover. Like I said, he's tough. But he lost a lot of blood, lots of trauma."

"What kind of chance does he have?" I asked.

"No way of really knowing," Rogers said. "But I'd say he's on the low end of possibilities."

"What's that mean?" Marvin said.

"This is all guesswork, gentlemen. Ten, twenty percent maybe."

"Oh, hell," I said.

"Ten, twenty percent, that's something, though," Rogers said. "It's a wait-and-see situation, not a wait-for-certain-death kind of deal. And like I said, he seems to have a lot of willpower. That's what makes someone tough. Not just muscle and flesh, but willpower."

"He'll make it," I said.

Rogers stood. "We're doing all we can."

"Do all you can and more," I said. "That's my brother in there."

56

After we talked to the surgeon, I told Marvin to go home, be with his family. I walked outside with him to his car. He opened his trunk and got out a golf club bag with clubs poking out of it. He said, “Borrow these.” I just looked at him.

“Inside,” he said, “is a sawed-off pump shotgun, twelve-gauge. You might want to put it together.”

“I might at that,” I said.

I opened my trunk and he put the bag inside. “We’re on hospital camera, you know,” Marvin said.

“I know.”

I closed the trunk.

I called Brett. I waited in the parking lot till she arrived. I put the golf bag in the trunk of her car. She didn’t say anything. We went up to the waiting room. We were the only ones there.

Brett was red-faced and her eyes were red too. Her hair was tied back and her shoulders were slumped. She sat down beside me and took my hand.

“How is he?”

“No word,” I said. “I think the same.”

She patted my hand.

“I know you need to find out who did it,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“I know what you’ll do when you find them.”

“Yeah.”

“Those weren’t just golf clubs, were they?”

“No,” I said.

“So, how are you gonna get who did it sitting here?”

“I want to know how he is. I want to know he’s okay.”

“We have phones. You sitting here doesn’t change anything. You get that sonofabitch. Whatever it takes, you get him. And if you need me to help you get him, I will.”

“I know,” I said.

She pulled my head around and looked me directly in the eyes. “I’ll stay here. You … you have any ideas. Any way to get ideas, anyone to get ideas from, you do it. Take my car. And when you find who did this, and I know you’ll find them, show no mercy.”

57

I drove over to No Enterprise. I drove carefully. There was a little park by the side of the road just outside of the city limits. I pulled over there and opened the trunk and took out the golf bag and dug in there until I found the shotgun. It was in two pieces. There was a little bag with tools in it. I put the shotgun together swiftly. There were shells in a plastic bag. I loaded the gun.

I looked up as a black Volkswagen drove by, heading back the way I had come. I hoped they weren't pulling into the park.

They drove on.

I put the bag back in the trunk and took the shotgun and laid it on the front passenger's seat and drove on into No Enterprise. There was no reason to expect Jimson to be where I hoped he was, but Shit Fingers or someone there would know. I'd get him to come there if I had to beat the information out of an innocent bystander. I might even make them drink the coffee.

When I got to No Enterprise, I saw the service station/convenience store. It occurred to me as I arrived that it might not be open. But it was. It was all night. It was the swinging spot in No Enterprise.

The lights were on, but right then it wasn't swinging.

I cruised into the lot and parked. There was a dark SUV parked in front of the store, near the door. I tried to determine if it was the one in the Wal-Mart lot, came to the conclusion it was not.

I got the shotgun off the seat and opened the door. My legs felt like lead, but I made them move anyway. I held the gun down by my side, and used my other hand to tap the revolver beneath my coat.

I walked straight to the door and went in.

No one was there. That was alive.

I saw Jimson on the floor, his head turned funny and his mouth open. So were his eyes. His blood was all over the floor. He had one hand inside his coat. Probably reaching for a gun.

Sitting in a chair at the table was Muscles. He had his head thrown back, and his mouth was open, like something you were supposed to toss a ball into.

The thin man lay on the floor. He was on his back. He had his hand on his gun, but it wasn't drawn. He had a hole in the center of his forehead, nice and neat, like it was painted there with a paint pen. The back of his head was oozing blood. The place smelled of blood, gunfire, and feces from evacuated bowels.

I took a breath and looked around. No one. I walked over to the counter and looked behind it. Like I expected. Shit Fingers. He was dead too, crumpled on his side with his knees drawn up. His mouth was leaking blood. Blood was splattered on the cigarettes in a rack behind him.

For some reason the only thing I could think was a dedicated smoker could buy those cheap.

Blood. All of it fresh. This had just happened.

I felt the hair on the back of my neck crawl around. I took another deep breath and backed out of there.

58

I went home to get a bigger gun.

I went home to get more than one.

I went home to break into the stash upstairs. A twelve-gauge pump better than the sawed-off, and a .45 automatic pistol. I kept them inside the closet there, behind the opening in the ceiling, up in what served as an attic. Both were cold pieces. There was plenty of plastic-wrapped ammunition up there too.

Sometimes when I thought of those things up there, I felt as if a sleeping dragon were just waiting for me to call it out and use it wrong.

But this time, I was happy. Whoever had wiped out Jimson and his men, and Shit Fingers, they had been the one who shot Leonard. Had to be. Too big of a conincidence otherwise. And I had no reason to doubt that I was next on the list.

This time I couldn't wait to get my hands on those guns, to let the dragon loose.

I was thinking about all that as I drove into my drive, got out carefully, and looked around, Brett's revolver hanging loose in my hand. I thought I heard the icy grass crunch once, but I went still and waited and didn't hear it again. It could have been anything. Ice shifting. A cat or a dog running across the backyard. Anything.

Or nothing.

When I was on the porch I kept Brett's revolver in my right hand and held my keys in the left.

As I was pushing the key in, a voice said, "I wouldn't do that." I dropped and wheeled.

Standing in the yard, wearing a long heavy duster-style coat, was a young woman with long blonde hair. In the glow of the single streetlight at the end of the drive her hair appeared to fall over her shoulders and down the front of her coat like a waterfall of butter. She had a gun in her right hand, and the hand was leveled at me, and I knew before I could even get a shot off, I'd be dead.

It was Vanilla Ride.

59

Once upon a time, Vanilla Ride had been hired to kill me and Leonard. But her employer, one Cletus Jimson, got greedy on the money he owed her for other hits, and decided to hit her together with us instead. It was a cost-cutting plan.

As it worked out, Leonard and I helped her fight them off. There was a lot of gunfire, a lot of blood, and the hit on the hitter failed.

That gave us a connection with Vanilla.

It gave me and her another kind of connection that I can't explain. Not romantic. Brett wouldn't like that, and in the long run, neither would I. But it bonded us. Still, I never really expected to see her again.

Or hoped I wouldn't.

"Hi, Hap," she said, as cheery as if we were meeting for coffee. "So, it was you who shot Leonard."

"Don't be silly. He'd be dead. I'm not here to shoot you. I'm here with a warning."

"What do you mean a warning?"

"I'm not going to shoot you. Not unless I have to. I don't even have a silencer on my gun. I'm not here for business."

I knew she was right. She walked like a ninja and had the aim of Annie Oakley. Had she wanted, she could have killed me and I would never have known she was there. I lowered the revolver by my side, but I didn't put it away.

I said, "I'm not in the mood, Vanilla. You could kill me, maybe. But I might not die so easy."

"Yeah, you would. This is a twenty-two. Not a big caliber. But I can put a bullet where I want to standing this close. I can write my name in bullet fire on your forehead before you hit the ground."

"Yeah," I said. "But I bet you'd have to leave out one of the *l*'s." She smiled.

"What's the warning?" I said.

"Let's start with don't open your door, because if you do, you'll get blown out into the street."

I looked at the door.

"How do you know?"

"I know. I've already checked. But I didn't disarm it. Wanted you to see me do it. I wanted you to know I'm not here to kill you."

"I was here not long ago," I said.

"And they must have been here a few minutes ago," she said. "While you were in No Enterprise looking up Jimson. Don't look so surprised. I passed you as you were going in, stopped by the road getting something out of the trunk. A gun would be my guess."

"Sawed-off. I left it on the seat. Now I wish I hadn't."

Vanilla put her gun away, came up on the porch, turned the key, and unlocked the door. I stepped back off the porch. Way back.

I saw her push the door open ever so slightly. She reached in her coat and took out a little leather parcel. She pulled a small flashlight from it and turned it on and put it in her teeth. She knelt down on one knee and removed something else from the parcel. She used it on something near the bottom of the door. A trip wire I figured. I heard a slight snip, and then another snip.

"Disarmed," she said, and pushed the door open.

Inside, just for safety measures, we turned on the lights and looked through the house. There was a bomb at the back door too.

Vanilla cut some wires like before. She said, "This would have blown you in half. Either one of them. You pushed the door open, it would have pulled the wires, and that would have pulled a trigger. You go boom, baby."

She picked the bomb up and carried it inside and placed it on the kitchen table, which is where she had put the other one. She walked into the living room, looked around. Her coat fell open and one long, black, panted leg poked out. Just for the record, she was wearing what Brett calls sensible shoes, low slung and soft and easy to move in. Even under the circumstances, I couldn't help but note she was breathtakingly beautiful—an evil wet dream with vanilla crème skin, sea blue eyes, and bloodred lipstick.

"Cozy," she said.

We stood across from each other. I still had the revolver in my hand. She said, "You really ought to put your rod away."

I put the revolver in my coat pocket.

"We never seem to meet just to say hi," she said.

"This is only the second time we've met," I said.

"But it was such an exciting meeting."

"Truth is, I don't feel like a lot of chitchat right now."

"Because of Leonard," she said.

I hesitated before I answered. "That's right. How would you know about that? How would you know to check my house for a bomb?"

"I've been watching you. I wasn't watching Leonard. I wasn't sure I was going to warn you. I was here to do it, but I wasn't sure I'd go through with it. I was down the street, parked in a car at the curb when Leonard left. I saw it was him, I stayed. I'm here to protect you, not him. Later, I followed you to the hospital. I figured things out. I know how to ask the right questions at a hospital desk without seeming nosy. I told them I was your sister. They told me whatever I asked."

"How clever of you."

"You and me, we need to sit down on the couch and talk."

"I don't feel all that chatty. Thanks for not letting me get blown up, but I got things to do."

She looked back at the kitchen. "You have anything to drink?"

"Vanilla …"

"No. Really. We need to talk."

60

"So," I said, when we were seated on the couch, "you were just in the neighborhood."

"You don't have any vodka?"

"No. You already asked."

"A beer?"

"Nope."

I had given her a diet soda, and she was sipping it. I was so nervous I was about to vibrate out of the room. She seemed very casual. We had turned off the main lights. She thought it a good idea, in case anyone was watching the house, waiting for it to blow.

The only light on now was the little plastic fish-shaped light plugged into the kitchen outlet over the counter. The light from it stretched into the living room, but it was faint and soft.

"You didn't get blown up, so they'll come back," Vanilla said.

"Are you Devil Red as well as Vanilla Ride?"

"Devil Red," she said. "That's a funny name."

"So is Vanilla Ride."

"That's the name I was given," she said. "Devil Red, that's made up."

"But you know who I'm talking about?"

"I do. And we can use that term if you like."

"Considering you tried to kill me before, you're awfully pleasant."

"I'm always pleasant."

"I've seen you less pleasant."

"Oh, come on, Hap. Let bygones be bygones. We made up, remember."

"We never quarreled. And still, you tried to kill me."

“Killing people for money. It’s what I do.”

“Look, Vanilla, my brother may be dying. Someone shot him. Someone is gonna die if I have my way. If that’s you, or whoever —”

“It’s not me. But it is …” She hesitated as she worked the words around in her mouth. “Devil Red.”

“All right, now I know. I just have to find him.”

She looked at me and smiled faintly. “You’re not up to it, Hap. You’re not up to me.”

“So, why are you here? Tell me where I can find Devil Red, and let me get about my business, up to it or not.”

“Don’t you wonder how I knew you were in trouble?”

“It’s not high on my priority list right now.”

“Let’s put it there. Jimson called me.”

By then, of course, I knew that if she had seen me beside the road, that it was her who had given Jimson a visit. But I didn’t let on. I wanted to hear it from her.

“I thought he was afraid of you,” I said.

“He wanted me and him to be friends. He wanted me to know the whole thing about deciding to have me killed was just business.”

“How’d you take that?” I said.

“I understood his position. I understand business. I would probably have just taken the job he was offering me if it hadn’t been you.”

“Why are you so concerned about my welfare?”

She studied me for a moment. “I seem to be infatuated with you.”

“Me?”

“Go figure.”

“I’m just a middle-aged guy going to seed. What’s the attraction?”

“The same your girlfriend Brett has, I suppose. She’s some looker, Hap.”

“You know about her too?”

“I know all kinds of things about you. I’ve made it a point to know. Once I was supposed to kill you, remember? I did my research.”

“Nothing like research,” I said.

“Jimson, he wanted me to kill you and Leonard. I told him I didn't want to. But not before I went to see him. I was in Shreveport when I got the message through contacts. I was finishing up a little job there. Nicely done, I might add. I told him I'd come see him pretty soon."

"You got close to Jimson pretty easy. I'd have thought he was nervous about that, considering your past."

"He had never seen me before. He just contacted me. He knew how to do that through certain parties. I've known about his habits for over a year. I keep tabs on my old connections, just in case they decide to be trouble. Anyway, I went there, this little station where he spends time. He didn't know me. He saw me. He wanted to know me. That happens to me a lot."

"I bet."

"Why thank you. He had his two bodyguards with him. I sat down. He bought me a cup of coffee, started his hustle. Thought he might get some tail. And then I told him who I was."

"How'd he take it?"

"Surprised. I think he expected me to be huskier. He knew Vanilla Ride was a woman, but he had me pegged different."

"Yeah, you don't look the part. You look more like a James Bond villain."

"That's so sweet. He immediately started saying how trying to have me killed was all business, and could I take care of you and Leonard, since it didn't work out last time. He offered me double. Do you realize how many pounds of dope and how many whores he'd have to run to pay me as much as he offered me?"

"I don't know how much he offered."

Vanilla smiled. When she did, she almost looked like a cherub. "Let's just say it was a lot."

"All right, let's say that," I said. "So how's this story end?"

"Quit pulling my leg, Hap. I said I passed you. You were there. You know how it ends. I told them no, and then I shot them all."

"All of them?"

"You know that too. But, just in case you like to hear it. All of them."

"You shot the thin man first, didn't you?" I said.

"I did. He's the one that actually looked like trouble. But no. He wasn't any trouble at all. He was quick, but I was quicker. Then I shot Jimson, and then I shot the big man with all the muscles. For the hell of it, I shot the guy behind the counter. The coffee he brought me sucked."

"Yeah, coffee there isn't too good," I said. "Didn't that cause a stir, all that shooting?"

"No one else was in the place. Lucky for them. A twenty-two is pretty quiet compared to a larger gun. I didn't have a silencer. I've used them for some guns, but not this one. Doesn't work well on it. Four shots. Four dead, and I was out of there." She sat up straight when she told me that, like a proud girl in class who had just answered a hard question.

"You did that for me?"

"I did it for me. I didn't like him. And I didn't want to shoot you and Leonard. Leonard, maybe. But you, no."

"So you were supposed to come after us for Jimson. And Devil Red is after us because we've been snooping."

"That's pretty much it," she said. "But you got this figured. I can tell the way your eyes light up."

"I know some of it," I said, "but a lot of it is guesswork."

She nodded. "Jimson put Devil Red on you two as well. He wanted me for backup. The whole thing is he wanted me and Devil Red on you guys because you were so hard to kill last time."

"For that I refuse to apologize."

"This time Leonard was easy for Devil Red."

"He dropped his guard," I said. "He had shopping for cookies on his mind."

"He's tough, and so are you, but this isn't his profession, and it's not yours. Me, it's what I do."

"I bet your mother is proud."

"I wouldn't know. Way I think Jimson had it planned is he also hired Devil Red to take me out. I don't think he forgave as easy as he said, business or not. He was scared of me."

"And for good reason."

"He told me to take out Devil Red. So I think he thought he'd get rid of one connection one way or another. If it left Devil Red, not so bad. He didn't have an ugly history there. If it left me, well, he paid me off and he probably thought that would soothe things over between us and he wouldn't be worried about looking over his shoulder for me. He probably thought if Devil Red was out of the picture, that would just be one less connection to him. In time, maybe he thought he'd get me."

“So, I’m not worth as much as you led me to believe. It was a combination job.”

“Pretty much. But still, you and Leonard, you were worth a lot. You can take some pride in that.”

“Oh, goodie. But now Devil Red is after you.”

“The guy that would pay them, he’s not around anymore.”

“Then why bother with me and Leonard?”

“That’s personal. You may have already been on their list, and with you talkin’ to Jimson, and him talkin’ to them, that sealed it. You know, he was quite a talker. I think I made him nervous. He told me all about you and wantin’ to know about Devil Red. The whole nine yards … You know why I didn’t take the job to kill Devil Red?”

“Because you shot the guy who was going to pay you,” I said. She wrinkled her brows. “Well, yeah. There’s that. But also there was this: I didn’t want to kill Devil Red, because I know them.”

“Them?”

“You’ve met them. Mr. Kincaid and his former wife, Ms. Clinton.”

61

I couldn’t have been more surprised if I had just discovered Jesus had sent me a Christmas present of the Holy Ghost with a personal note signed “Love and kisses.”

“The old man and his ex-wife?” I said. “They’re Devil Red?”

“Isn’t that a kick?”

“Can’t be.”

“Can and is. Where do you think I learned my craft?”

“Them?”

“Oh, Hap, you are so cute when your jaw is on the floor. Yes. Them. Let me tell you something. Mr. Kincaid, he looks like hell, but actually, he’s quite spry and doesn’t need the chair or oxygen. Sometimes, garbed up like that, he uses it to get close to people. Who expects an old-looking man in a wheelchair breathing through a tube to be a killer?”

“You’re foolin’ with me, aren’t you?”

“I’d like to fool with you, but no.”

“And my client’s son? His girlfriend’s mother and stepfather. You know anything about that?”

She held up her hand and spread her thumb and forefinger. “Teeny bit,” she said. “Mr. Kincaid and Ms. Clinton have a kind of get them all and poison the well attitude. My guess is Mini’s stepfather—”

“Bert.”

“Whatever. He made a wild guess they were involved, stirred them up, like you did, and they took him out. The mother, she was probably an accident. They tried to kill Leonard. You’re next. I wouldn’t be surprised if they went after your employer.”

“Marvin?”

She nodded. “Maybe your redhead. Anyone associated with you.”

“Did Jimson know Kincaid and Clinton were Devil Red?”

“He didn’t really know who I was. Just my reputation. But he knew how to contact the ones you’re calling Devil Red. And he did. And he contacted me. But did he know Mr. Kincaid and Ms. Clinton were in fact Devil Red? … No.”

“You said Kincaid and Clinton trained you? There’s people who do that? That’s not exactly a college course.”

Vanilla shifted her long legs seductively and leaned forward a little.

“Some people find the job naturally. Others have it thrust upon them. I had it thrust upon me and took to it naturally. I developed my own style, my own way. But they were my mentors. I am who I am, and I have come to embrace it. I’m almost the best there is.”

“Almost?”

“There are my instructors.”

I knew how good Vanilla was, and that made me realize even more what I was up against. I said, “Why would anyone want to raise you to kill?”

“Family business. Though I doubt you could call us a real family. There was never what you would call love, whatever that is. But there was affection of a sort, like you might have for a goldfish, I suppose. I don’t know. Never had a pet. There was also another reason. They were a kind of factory. I wasn’t the only well-trained and well-oiled cog in their machine. There were others.”

“Jesus,” I said.

“He didn’t train there,” Vanilla said. “Once we knew the trade, they hired us out. Male and female. Prostitutes of Death they called us. We got a cut of the kill, and they got the bulk. I didn’t know it was unfair for a few years, us making so little. I was fifteen when I made my first hit. I wasn’t even scared.”

“It didn’t bother you?”

“I didn’t know the man I killed, so no. I’m not sure it would have bothered me if I had known him. Hell, Hap. He could have been my father. He was the right age. I don’t even know why they wanted him killed. It didn’t matter to me.”

I let that soak in. I said, “Kincaid had a second wife, right? What did she think about all this?”

"She was unaware of the business. An airhead. She bore him two children. Ms. Clinton couldn't have children. There was an arrangement. He cared for his wife, but Mr. Kincaid really cared for Ms. Clinton. Maybe it was love. I don't know. I'm a little confused on that issue, Hap. They never really stopped being together. There was a house in town for the wife, and an estate in the country where he and Ms. Clinton spent their time. Where I was trained."

"You call them Mr. and Ms.?"

"That's how I was taught. I can't think of them any other way. But this isn't about me. This is about you, Hap. You and Leonard. Though they may have already punched his ticket. They'll wait and see. Why take an extra chance? It's my bet he never even saw his shooter. They're too good for that. But if he doesn't die, they'll be back to finish the job. And there's you."

"They leave a devil's head at the scene of their murders, staged events. Why? Why leave any indication?"

"Did Picasso sign his work?"

"They see it as an art?" I asked.

"You could say that. So do I. But I don't sign my work. They don't if time and situation doesn't permit. But they are proud of their craft. After years of doing something well, on some level, they want to be recognized, not caught. It was also a way they could challenge anyone trying to discover them. Here's our calling card. Respond if you can."

"So you deserted them at some point."

"Most do. It's the way of the job. They always have a few who live on the grounds. People who protect the place and them. They saw us as their retirement. But they haven't quit. They won't retire."

"No one should be raised to be a killer," I said.

"You could say I was exploited. But it has given me a livelihood. And I am an artist."

"You're a killer, Vanilla. That's all."

"For me it beats being a teacher or a nurse. No offense to your redhead."

"Plenty taken."

I thought I saw her blink when I said that, but it could have been the light.

"And you?" she said.

“What exactly are you?”

“I suppose I’m the same as you.”

She looked at me for a long moment. Her face seemed so soft, her lips so kissable. She was mesmerizing. I sat farther back from her.

“You’re not like me at all, Hap. You’re not even close. For me, there’s no passion in the act. It is what it is, and I do it artistically. That’s what makes me second to them. They are still passionate about their work. And you, you’re no artist and you don’t do it for money. You have reasons, views. I don’t get that.”

“And you’re telling me all this because …?”

“I don’t know really. I feel we have a connection. Do you feel it?”

“I do.”

“What is it exactly?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. I’m old enough to be your father.”

“Maybe that’s it,” she said.

“I hope not. All I know is, I have to get them. They shot my friend.”

“He means that much to you?” she said, turning her head slightly, as if trying to position herself to believe that idea.

“He does.”

“They’ll kill you.”

“Maybe.”

“They’re better than you,” she said. “I’m better than you.”

“The chips aren’t down yet,” I said.

Vanilla shook her head slowly. “No. It won’t work out for you.”

“Just tell me where to find them and when.”

“I don’t know when, and I won’t tell you where.”

“You think I can’t find out where they live? If I can’t do it myself, I have friends who can. I’ll find them. I’m asking you to speed up matters.”

“I’m not one to betray.”

“They betrayed you,” I said. “They took a child and made a killer. You may not think that matters now, but maybe some part of you knows that isn’t the life you had to have. It can’t be that good a life.”

I watched her face. It revealed nothing.

“It was you who got snookered, baby,” I said. “The fact you came to me means you feel something other than professionalism. And if you think you're helping me by not telling me where they are, all you're doing is giving me a reprieve. They'll get to me eventually. At some point, it'll be me and them."

"Run."

"I'm not into running."

"Man's got to do what a man's go to do, huh?" Vanilla said.

"Something like that. If you're not going to help me, then leave and let me get about my business. And thanks for the warning."

Vanilla set the diet soda can on the coffee table, careful to make it fit into one of Brett's coasters. "Do you have weapons?" she asked.

"Yes."

"They certainly do. And they probably have at least two bodyguards on the grounds. Maybe more. And dogs."

"Dogs."

She nodded. "Yep. And a security camera."

"Oh, good. And do the Mummy and the Wolf Man work for them too?"

"There you're safe."

"That's a relief."

"And consider this. They may or may not be home. If they were here earlier, it would take them almost two hours to go back to the estate. It's on this side of Houston. In the woods. A hundred acres or so. They would be there by now if they went home. But you don't know. It's a gamble."

"What isn't," I said. "You gonna help me, or not?"

"Get a pen and paper," she said, "and I'll draw you a map. But when I do, it's like me signing your death warrant."

62

Not long after that cheery little comment from Vanilla, I had warm clothes on, including a wool cap, the heater turned up, and my foot heavy on the gas pedal. I had a thermos of coffee and a tuna fish sandwich in a plastic bag on the seat beside me. Brett's revolver was holstered on my hip. In the glove box was my .38 Super. In the trunk, the twelve-gauge pump and ammunition for all three weapons. Also there was a toolbox with a pair of snips in it and some other things I needed. I had my clasp knife in my pocket and a roll of breath mints so as not to offend anyone I might want to stab or shoot. Marvin's sawed-off I had left at the house, replaced by my own twelve-gauge. Call me sentimental. I preferred my own gun.

Outside the air was damp with a cold mist, and the highway in the beam of the headlights looked like a ribbon of blue steel. It was late and the road was oddly empty, as if while Vanilla and I talked there had been some kind of apocalypse.

I was still trying to wrap my mind around what Vanilla had told me, and there were parts of my brain that doubted what I heard. For all I knew she was setting me up. But that didn't make a lot of sense. If she wanted me dead, she would have done it. I'd have had a bullet up my ass while I was still trying to find my house key. Not to mention that since she suspected a bomb, she could have just let it go off and they would have found my pecker in a tree the next day. And when I came downstairs from fetching my guns, she was gone, and she had taken the bombs with her.

A tidy cleanup for someone who would want me dead. And if she was using me to take out the competition, so far I wasn't proving to be that good. Neither was Leonard. A bag of crackers and cookies had got him shot, maybe killed, and Vanilla had snuck up on me while I was on my porch about to unlock a door that would have blown me apart.

I decided to believe she was on my side. I also thought maybe she had arrived at the house by means of teleportation. Where was her car? And after she had drawn the map, and I had gathered up my weapons and ammunition, how did she get out and gone so quickly, without making a sound?

That girl was creepy.

No more slacking. No more being distracted. No more feeling sorry for myself. Tonight, I had to be back on my game, like the old days.

I called Brett and asked how Leonard was doing.

"Same ole, same ole," she said. "You on the road, baby?"

"Yes."

"For reasons discussed?" she asked.

"Yes."

"That was quick."

"I had some help."

"Help?"

Brett knew about Vanilla Ride, and what she knew about her she didn't like, so I decided not to mention her.

"I'll tell you about it later," I said. "At some point I'm going to cut off my phone. Not for a while, but in the next couple of hours."

"Be careful," she said.

"Always careful," I said. "Take care of Leonard."

"You'll be back to do it."

I hesitated. "You'll take care of him, right?"

"You know it," she said.

When I finished with Brett, I called Marvin.

"I need you at the hospital. To watch Brett. To make sure she and Leonard are okay. I know I told you to sleep, but—"

"Say no more. I'm on my way."

"Marvin … I know what happened. I know who did it."

"Wait until you're not so steamed up, Hap. You know who it is tonight, you'll know who it is tomorrow, and you can put a plan together. Right now you're acting on anger."

"I am at that."

“Cool some.”

“Now’s the time,” I said.

“Tomorrow we can get Jim Bob. Me. My leg is better. I’m sort of up to it now.”

“No you’re not.”

“You’re gonna hurt my feelin’s, Hap.”

“Right now I don’t have room for that, my friend. I’m tellin’ it like it is. You’re not up to it, and I’m not waiting. And I don’t want to pull you or Jim Bob or anyone else into this. At least not directly. This is goddamn personal. And they don’t expect me to come to them. That’s the only edge I got. That and knowing you’re there with Brett and Leonard.”

“Who are they?” Marvin asked. “Who are them?”

“I told a certain someone that if I didn’t come back, they were to let you know what happened.”

“Who’s that certain someone?”

“You’ll know if I don’t come back.”

It was a promise Vanilla had made me before I went upstairs to get the guns. If I didn’t come back, she’d let Marvin and Brett know, warn them that Devil Red would be after them. I hoped they were smarter than me. I hoped they’d take Vanilla’s advice and run. I hoped she would keep her word. I was pretty certain she would.

Marvin said, “You sound a little dramatic.”

“I feel a little dramatic,” I said.

I heard Marvin sigh. “You doing something like whatever the hell you’re doing, and Leonard not being there … Man, that don’t seem right. I can’t think of one of you without the other. It’s like Siamese twins have been halved.”

“Tell me about it,” I said.

63

It had started to snow. Real snow. Highly unusual for East Texas. The flakes were huge, like cotton balls. Normally snow in this area was little more than flakes that barely stuck and lasted about as long as it took to melt one on your tongue. If I hadn't been on a mission to blow people's brains out, I might have enjoyed its uniqueness and beauty. Right now, it was nothing more than a hindrance.

I wasn't far from where I wanted to go. There was a rest stop nearby and I pulled in there and tried to eat the sandwich because I thought I was crazy hungry, but it just turned out I was crazy scared. I drank a cup of coffee, slowly, because my hands were trembling. I turned on my overhead light and looked at the map Vanilla had drawn on a piece of paper. I studied it. I was close. I was very close. I turned off the light and sat and thought, and it seemed as if the trees in the roadside park were drawing nearer to me, as if the darkness between them were gathering together into something solid and demonic, trimmed in snow and ice.

I squeezed my eyes shut, and then opened them. I didn't look at the trees.

I poured another cup of coffee and tried to work my courage up as I sipped it.

My cell phone rang.

I almost jumped out of my skin.

It was Brett.

"He's slipping," she said.

"Oh, shit," I said. I felt the bit of sandwich I had eaten churn in my stomach and nearly rise up.

"Hap, I'm so sorry. They don't think he'll make it through the night.”

“Goddamn it! Goddamn it to hell!”

“They let me in to see him. They said I could come in because I’m all that’s here. I shouldn’t have told you to go. Oh, shit, Hap. I never thought he’d die.”

“He isn’t dead yet.”

“I held his hand. I told him you were taking care of things. I told him we loved him. Marvin is here. He’s out in the waiting room.”

“I told him to watch over you,” I said.

“He has a gun under his coat. And he gave me one. But really, a shootout in the hospital?”

“I’m just being cautious … So the doctor said … no hope?”

“Just said he was slipping away.”

“Tell Leonard I have his hat.”

“What?”

“Whisper in his ear. Tell the big bastard I have his deerstalker, and if he wants it back, he’ll have to take it from me. Tell him, he dies, I’ll shit in it. You tell him that.”

Brett laughed a little. It was strained, but it was a laugh.

“I’ll tell him. If he can hear me, he’ll come back just to kick your ass.”

“Right now I’d let him. You go back in there, and you take Leonard’s hand, and tell him his brother loves him. You hear me? You tell him that again. And you tell him what I said about his hat.”

“I will,” she said.

“I’m gone,” I said. “And so is the phone.”

I turned off the phone. I rolled down the window and tossed the coffee from the cup and threw the cup on the floorboard and sat for a moment. My stomach was really churning now. I got out of the car quickly and walked around back of it and upchucked the sandwich and the coffee. It burned my throat.

“Leonard. Don’t you die,” I said out loud.

I got back in the car and got a Kleenex out of the glove box and wiped my lips. I tossed out the sandwich. I put a few of the breath mints in my mouth to kill the vomit taste. I pulled away from the rest stop onto the highway.

Devil Red, I’m coming.

64

There was a little logging road, and according to Vanilla it went down behind Kincaid and Clinton's property. I took it, bumped along, almost got stuck a couple of times, made my way to where the road stopped amid what looked like the results of a nuclear strike but was in fact the end product of logging. In the moonlight, I could imagine the snow as nuclear ash, all the world dead and turned to powder.

Off to the south, that myth dissolved. The woods were thick there. Out there without lights, the moon behind cloud cover, all I could see were vague tree shapes, nature's own palisades rising thick and wild against the dark sky.

I got out with the .38 Super and my flashlight and went crunching over the frozen leaves and pine needles to the trunk of the car and opened it up, removed the shotgun, and laid it on the roof. I opened the toolbox, got the snips, and removed a little strap-on headlight like the kind you use to read in bed so as not to wake up your partner. I turned it on and slipped it over the wool cap on my head. It wasn't a big light, but it was a good enough light. I turned off the flashlight and put it in my coat pocket. I got a machete from the toolbox and the ammunition out of the trunk and stuffed my pockets with it. I made sure I had the Super's spare ammo clips where I could get to them quickly. The shotgun had a strap, so I slung it over my shoulder.

I took a pee.

I picked up a wad of snow and made a snowball in my gloved hand and threw it at a stump of a tree. I missed.

I hoped that wasn't an omen.

I was ready as I was going to be.

Way Vanilla had explained it, I had to go through the woods there, had to find my own trail, of which there were a few, and if I kept going south, I'd come to the high wall that led to the grounds of the estate. How to get over the wall was another matter, but Vanilla felt that since there were high woods on my side of the wall, on property other than their own, the logging company's property, I could maybe find access that way.

I didn't think that far ahead. If I did I'd turn around whimpering and head back to the car.

I tried several times to find a path but couldn't. The woods were thick and dead winter vines were twisted up between the trees like ancient fencing. Worse, I was no longer exactly sure which way was south. It was too damn dark, and among the trees I couldn't see anything but the whiteness of the snow and the occasional glare of moonlight on dangles of ice.

I made an attempt to follow my instincts, knowing full well that could get me in deep doo-doo, but I went ahead with it.

Hacking my way through the undergrowth, following the little beam of my head-strap light, I fought my way forward. At some point, I came upon a path through the trees and I followed that. It finally veered off to the right. I reluctantly abandoned it and started hacking again. I kept moving forward, inch by inch. I figured by the time I got through this mess and arrived, it would be two weeks from Tuesday.

Even in the cold weather, wearing all those clothes and hacking away, I was steamed and had to pause to cool it. I opened my coat and leaned against a tree. I was glad Leonard and I had been doing more workouts as of late. I had dropped a few pounds and my wind was better. Still, I was tired.

I reached up and turned off the head-strap lamp, leaned against the tree in darkness. I thought about Leonard. I thought about how long I had known him. I thought about all we had gone through. Here I was in the deep woods hacking through twisted dead winter vines and brush, and he was lying up in the hospital without me. That didn't seem right.

For a moment I considered going back, driving to the hospital to be with him. But then I thought about what Devil Red had done. I thought about how I had been sympathetic toward their killing of those who hurt their loved ones. And then I thought about what they had done to Vanilla and so many others, made them Prostitutes of Death. I was better than they were. I was much better.

I reached up and turned the light on again, and started forward.

In a very short time I saw a glow ahead of me. It was faint and blurry in the misty night. As I neared, I realized it was not a small light, but a large light that spread to my left and right, and that it was shining between the trunks of the trees. I kept going, and finally came to a thinning of the pines and saw a wall ahead of me. It was at least twenty feet high. The light was seeping over it.

Okay.

Now we separate the men from the mice.

Squeak. Squeak.

65

I walked along the edge of the barricade, feeling like a Mongol considering how to make it over the Great Wall and into China. I finally found what Vanilla suggested. A tree that grew with limbs close to the wall.

But not that close.

Kincaid and Collins kept the limbs pretty well trimmed off their side. I'd have to climb the tree and jump to the wall, and then drop down on the other side. The trick then, according to Vanilla, was to move along a certain line of trees, and then onto a long open veranda. All of this was in a blind spot for the camera. Then I had to snip a certain wire in a certain hidden place just inside the foyer, and then I had to get in, all of this without the dogs or the guards or the camera seeing me. Then I had to kill two of what she said were the greatest assassins alive, and once that was done, all that was left was to sneak out and go over the wall without being shot by the guards or having being torn apart by the dogs. Piece of cake.

I turned off my headlight, slipped the machete in a scabbard on my belt, started up the tree, which was a kind of sickly pine coated in a light casing of ice that crackled as I went. Snow drifted down on me, both from the sky and from where it had gathered on limbs. With me in my heavy coat and with the shotgun strapped on my back, I kept getting hung up, and I kept slipping on the ice, but finally I made it without falling, nestled on a limb, and gathered myself.

I was high enough up I could see over the wall. There were lights there, most of them closer to the house. There was a huge brick estate with a long veranda and a sloping roof nestled in the center of some open land. There was a line of thick-limbed trees that ran from the wall toward the house, but ended some thirty or forty feet before they got there. Everything was covered in snow.

I began to think Vanilla was way right. I was in over my head. I was having a hard enough time getting over the wall, let alone going into the house and killing Devil Red—the both of them.

Finally, I felt rested enough to scoot out to the edge of the limb, and just as I was trying to get up on it to jump, it broke, and I fell.

I lay on the ground for a long time. I had landed with the shotgun strapped to my back, so that didn't help matters either. I felt as if it had been driven into my back. The fall knocked the breath out of me and I lay there trying to get it back. I felt like the Oz Scarecrow with the stuffing pulled out. Only colder.

I was off to an excellent start, if I was a comedian.

Eventually, I felt strong enough to stand. I looked up at the tree. The limb had been my best access, and now it was gone. I went down the fence row again, this time in the direction closer to the shrubs, looking for a new way over, and finally came upon a sweet gum tree with a limb that projected just over the wall and hadn't been recently trimmed.

The problem was there were few limbs until you got up about ten feet, so I had to climb using the pressure of my palms and the soles of my shoes. The tree was damp and it was no easy business. By the time I got to the first limb I could reach, I felt on the verge of a rupture. I got hold of the limb, swung up, and sat on it for a moment. I was much closer to the line of shrubs here. I could see them through the cluttered boughs of the leaf-stripped, snow-coated tree.

I had too much stuff on me, and that was making it hard to move along, so with reluctance, I removed the machete and dropped it on the ground. I crawled out on the limb. It dipped slightly, like a horse nodding for me to get off. The wall was festooned with barbed wire and sharp pieces of metal and broken glass that had been imbedded in the cement when it was drying. Vanilla said there was a camera, but the trees had grown large and bushy and would hide someone from sight if they came over the wall in line with them.

I was in line with them.

I eased out farther on the limb, near to its thinning tip, and that made me nervous. It was long enough that with my weight on it, it dipped over the wall. I grabbed hold of the limb and swung out, catching my pants on the glass in the wall, but only slightly. I dropped to the ground inside the compound and went down on one knee, giving things a look. The wet ice and snow came through my pants and made my knees numb.

I went at a crouch along the line of trees, and if Vanilla was right, out of camera shot. My back ached from the fall. I felt a little light-headed. Either not enough food. Too much activity. Being scared. Or a combination of all three. Fortunately, I didn't have to go number two, so I had that going for me.

66

I had only gone a few feet when I found a dead Doberman. It lay just inside the shadow of the trees, right before they broke and there was that space between them and the house.

I bent down and touched it. It was warm, and it was bloody. Bending over, I clicked on my headlight and took a look. A bullet most likely. Right through the front right chest. From the way the ground looked, the snow creased and bloody, I knew the dog had dragged itself here and died.

I clicked off the light, sat there thinking.

A thought crossed my mind. One I couldn't hold on to with any conviction, but it was there. I decided to let it go, and to move on. I hadn't come this far to turn around and go back over the wall.

I moved to the end of the trees, stopped, and bent down and studied the gap between where I was and the veranda. As Vanilla had said, it was well lit, except right at the corner closest to me. Presumably, if what Vanilla knew about the place was the same, there wasn't an angle there that accommodated a camera. All I had to do was make a straight run into the shadows, and then, if she was right, pull myself into an indention in the wall and gather my wits, which might take a lot more time than I had available. After that, I had to move quickly, and then it was assholes, elbows, and hot ammunition.

I was about to lunge forward, and then I saw him.

He was just to the front of the veranda. A big man. A very big man. Lying on the snow-covered lawn. A rifle of some sort lay on the snow beside him. I had an idea he hadn't stopped to put his ear to the ground to hear the sweet vibrations of the earth. He was one of the bodyguards, and I was more than certain he was as dead as Abraham Lincoln; and if not, he was close enough to being dead to see Lincoln's ghost. Like with the Doberman, the snow around him was coated red.

I went across the stretch and made the edge of the veranda, and slid up against the wall. The dark indention was there, as Vanilla said. I slipped into it and caught my breath. I didn't know for a fact that the trees and that space between them to the veranda was in a camera blind, or even that I was in one now, but I had to play it that way.

I took the wire snips out of my coat pocket, and turned to where I was supposed to be able to reach through a gap and cut a wire that hooked to the camera, and another that hooked to the alarms. Snapping on my headlight, I saw there was indeed a gap, and that it was some sort of flaw in design. The concrete should have come together in that spot, but it didn't. I could get my hand in there, inside a large storage room, and flip open the little metal door that held the alarm system without any trouble, but when I flicked it open with the tip of the wire snips, the wires were already cut. I snapped off the headlight. I pulled out Brett's little revolver and moved along the veranda wall as far away from the lights as possible.

I came to the door lock Vanilla said I'd have to pick, and as I figured, the door was already cracked open.

I slipped in, held the revolver at the ready with two hands. I didn't always shoot with two hands. I had learned to shoot the Wild West way when I was a kid, and I never dropped it completely. It's not as accurate, but I can hit pretty much what I shoot at, provided it's in range and not moving too damn fast.

It was dark inside the house and I couldn't tell where I was going at first, so I just squatted down and let my eyes adjust to the shadows. I didn't turn on the little head-beam light, knowing if I did, all I was doing was giving them a little spot target on my forehead. I squatted there with my back against a wall trying not to breathe too loud. After a few minutes I could see better in the dark, make out shapes. It was all furniture as far as I could tell. Rising up, I moved across the floor with the revolver at the ready.

I stopped when a voice said, "Don't move."

67

"Jesus Christ, Vanilla," I said. "You damn near made me mess myself."

"Better than a bullet in the head," she said. "Be quiet."

She took me by the sleeve and pulled me over to a space behind a stack of boxes.

"Why?" I said.

"Now's not the time," she said. "I decided to go in with you, and right now, that's all you need to know. My take is if they have one dog outside, now dead, there might be one inside. They used to always have two. My other take is the guy in the yard isn't the only one. He was making the perimeter as I arrived. He didn't see me, but I decided it was best he go. It's best they all go."

"How many is all?" I said.

"We'll determine that as we continue. This storage room leads into a large room. The training room. That'll be our first stop. And good luck. You'll need it."

"Thanks for boosting my spirits."

"Put the pistol in your pocket, and use the shotgun. Go for heavy firepower if that's what you got."

We went out from behind the boxes and across the room, Vanilla leading the way. She moved smooth and silent as a ghost, and when we came to the double-wide doors that led into the big room beyond, we could see light through the cracks and at the bottom of it.

Vanilla spoke so that I could hardly hear her: "Ready."

"Yes," I said.

She grabbed the door handle and turned it briskly and threw the door wide. There was a guy in there, a big guy, blond-headed, handsome like a movie star. But unlike a movie star he had a real gun and it was in a shoulder holster. He was sitting at a table with a deck of cards in his hands. When the door popped back, his head snapped around, and when he saw us standing there, he turned in his chair and went for his gun, and while I was still trying to lift mine, Vanilla shot him. Her gun coughed through the silencer, like a patient in a doctor's office with a finger up his ass. The man in the chair fell back and his feet went up and a spray of blood went up with him. In that moment, a man, the dead man's card-playing partner, came out of a small room off to the side, zipping up his pants. He saw us. Vanilla shot him through the chest while he still had hold of his zipper.

She stopped by the man who had been in the chair and looked at him. He wasn't going to wake up and brush himself off. She went over to the other, and I followed after, like a puppy learning from a smarter dog. The man on the floor moaned once, opened one eye, and looked at her. She shot him through the head.

The rest of it was like a bad dream. We cruised quickly across the floor and to the double doors across the way, and Vanilla opened them without hesitation, not loudly, but not like she was still being sneaky. As she opened it, the sounds of popping hit our ears briskly. A moment later, I knew the source of the sounds.

We had stepped into it up to our necks.

It was a large long room, and there were targets at the far end, and there were four shooters taking practice on them. Three men and a woman, all young. When we stepped into the room, they turned.

And so did their guns.

I moved left and Vanilla moved right. I cut down with the shotgun and blasted the girl in her middle. She went back and down and her gun went sliding across the floor. There were two coughs to my right and two men dropped, and I let loose with the twelve-gauge again, and the last man lost his face.

"We've made enough noise," Vanilla said, "so from here on out, it has to happen fast."

There was a hallway, and it oddly split left and right. She went right without saying a word to me, walking very fast in her sensible shoes. I went left, walking less fast in one of the two pairs of shoes I owned.

I walked with the gun before me. The hallway was narrow and the walls were drab olive, or appeared that way in the near dark. There was some light from little runners near the floor. The hall went on for a long time and then it curved ever so slightly. Eventually, the hall opened up into a circular room. The room was dimly lit and there were martial arts mats on the floor. There were more mats stacked to one side, about five feet high, and across the way was an open door.

A young woman, perhaps twenty, came through the door at a rapid walk. Her long hair was tied back and looked orange in the light. She had on a bulky sweatshirt and sweatpants. She had a gun by her side. She was obviously on a mission, and that mission was me. That shotgun of mine had made so much noise I might as well have been a one-man band.

She lifted her gun with calm deliberation and fired. I was already moving, but the hair on the left side of my head fanned a little. The bullet couldn’t have missed me by more than a micro fragment. It made a sound softer than Vanilla’s gun; it too was silenced. I fired twice, quickly, as I dodged, the reverberation of the shotgun loud in the room.

But she was moving too. She moved like Vanilla moved. Both my shots missed, and as she fired again, I rolled, hit the matted floor, and came up behind the high stack of mats, crouching. The stuffing inside them poofed out as the silencer sneezed again.

I scurried on hands and knees farther behind the mats and put my back against the wall, about middle ways, so I could see both ends of the stack and above. The way the light overhead was set, I could see her shadow fanning around on the floor. She was climbing at a crouch over the top of the mats and was going to be above me, shooting down.

I ducked to the left of the mats, so low I was almost duckwalking, moved as quietly and quickly as possible. I glanced back at her shadow as she rose out of her crouch and was near the edge of the mats, where she expected me to be.

I stepped out from the mats in a nice noiseless move that would have impressed a mouse, lifted the shotgun just as she realized she’d been snookered and was turning to find me. I shot up and hit her in the chest. She made a noise like I had punched her and went off the mat and hit the floor with a loud thump. I couldn’t see her, but I knew I had hit her good. I went around the edge of the mats and saw her lying on the floor on her back, her head propped against the wall. She still had the gun. Her face looked odd in the light. She way trying to figure who in the hell I was. Her brow was covered in sweat. Her lips were tightly clenched together. She was leaking blood all over the place. I could see where her sweatshirt had been ripped and riddled by the blast. She had her gun pointed at me. Her legs were spread out in front of her in a loose manner that made them seem as if they belonged to someone else, just borrowed for the occasion. She had a clear shot. I was about to cut down on her again, and then she lowered the gun. It lay across her lap. Her eyes were looking at me. It took me a moment before I realized she wasn't seeing anything. I didn't move for a brief moment, just stood there with my gun pointed at her. She had been an attractive kid.

"Okay," I said. "That's how it tumbles. That's how it goes."

I was startled to discover I was speaking out loud.

68

I went through the open doorway the woman had passed through and slinked along a wide corridor that was drop-dead dark at the end. I felt like I was walking into a gun barrel and someone was about to pull the trigger.

For a moment I thought about turning on my light, but figured I was outlined enough on my end without giving them a bull's-eye. I went along nervous and listening. I wasn't listening well enough, because there was movement to my right, and in that moment I realized there was an open doorway and someone was coming out of it. I turned and a shot flared the darkness, and in the flash of the gun, I saw a face.

It was Kincaid; in the brief flash of the gun he looked like a living mummy.

I swung the shotgun barrel around and caught him up alongside the head, heard his gun hit the floor and slide. But the next instant, he was twisting the barrel of the shotgun up, and it was coming out of my hands.

Moving in quick, I kicked him in the groin, and then we struggled over the shotgun. It came loose of both our hands and flew behind me and hit the wall and clattered to the floor.

Something winked in the dark and then I felt a smooth motion like the page of a book brushing across my hand, and then I felt the sting. I had been there before. A knife. I skipped backward, tried to get the pistol out of my pocket, but he was on me too fast. I made a kind of horseshoe bend as the knife passed in front of me. I felt it tug at my shirt and hit the edge of my coat as it flared wide. There was a noise as something hit the floor.

I was able to see better now, as my eyes had adjusted. I kicked the inside of his leg, and he went down on one knee. I gave him an uppercut to the chin, but he dodged it. The sonofabitch could see like an owl.

I reached in my coat pocket; it was wide open at the bottom. The knife had cut it at some point, and the damn revolver had fallen out, and that's what I had heard hitting the floor. I was scuttling backward as he came, and finally I got the clasp knife out of my pocket and snapped it open.

Seeing well enough now, I slapped a stab aside by hitting his wrist, and cut down across his forearm. Or tried to. He slapped it down and brought his knife up, and I just moved in time to keep from catching it in the throat.

He sliced again, inward, and I parried it and cut down again, this time hitting him across the arm. He let out with a hissing sound, and kicked my feet out from under me. He leaped on top of me, and I caught his knife arm and locked my legs around him. I tried to stab him, but he had hold of my wrist.

I twisted so that my blade cut him. He let go and sprang off me and tried to cut my leg, but I avoided it and he kicked up at me. I felt the knife hit my shoe.

Now we were both on our feet again. He came slashing right and left, but keeping it tight. Filipino knife work was his game, and he was good at it. Better than me. I tried to take him with a straight stab, and he disarmed me, cutting the back of my hand in the process. Weaponless, I stepped back, and my foot came down on something, and I nearly slipped.

I knew what it was. The revolver. He lunged at me. I dropped down and his thrust went where I had been. I snatched up the revolver and tossed myself on my back and fired. The shot lit up the room, but it didn't stop him. He came at me slashing. I scuttled backward. I fired again, and still he kept coming.

He leaped on me. I couldn't get a shot off. His knife made a hard thunking noise, and then he quit moving. I crawled out from under him. His knife was stuck in the floor and he was lying facedown. I turned on my head beam and kicked him over on his back.

He had taken my shots, and I saw too that I had cut him more than I thought. He may have looked like a scarecrow, but he was tough. I kicked him in the ribs a couple of times to make sure he was dead.

He didn't move. I turned to pick up the guns and the knife, and that's when he jumped on my back.

His arm went around my throat and he started choking. It was a good choke. He was shutting off the arteries. I was about to go out. I pressed in on his elbow, pressing his arm tight to my neck, just the opposite of what you might think you should do. It opened enough space on the other side, though, that the blood started to flow and I started to regain my wits. I bent down and then sprang up, and he went over my hip. When he landed, I came down on top of him, straddling his chest, and I crashed my forearm into his throat.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

I could feel something give in his throat. He stopped struggling.

I still had my head beam on, and was still straddling him. He appeared to be a hundred years old, and at a glance skinny and weak. I knew better than that, though. He had been wiry and strong and skilled. I had been better. Or luckier.

I got up quickly and carefully. This time I wanted to be sure it was done. I found the revolver and put it in my belt, the knife in my pocket, picked up the shotgun without turning my back on Kincaid.

I went over and looked at him again.

In the light, I could see he was still breathing. He was alive still. He was a regular Rasputin.

I felt sorry for him for a moment, then I thought he was maybe the one who shot Leonard. Either him or his partner, the ex-wife.

I lifted up the shotgun and pointed it at his head, and let it go. You couldn't have told much about how he had looked after that. The hallway stank of gunfire and blood.

I moved on through the dark toward the end of the hall, the headlight on, not worrying about it anymore. Whatever came, came.

69

There were lights now, and large rooms, and I turned off the pointless headlight and went through several of the rooms until I came to a half-open door with a man on his knees, his forehead pressed to the wall.

He had fallen there. He was a large man. There was blood all down his shirt and all over the floor in a fresh wet pool. He had never known what had hit him.

There was another hallway. I went down quickly, and when I came to the end of it, there was a door slightly cracked, and there was light coming out of it. I eased over and touched the door gently, moved it aside.

Looking in, I saw Vanilla Ride squatted on her haunches, the silenced automatic in her gloved hand. Across from her, lying on the floor, her head against a couch, a hand held to her blood-gurgling throat, was Clinton. Her eyes darted toward me. She coughed and blood squirted from between her fingers. There was a little automatic lying on the floor not far from her free hand. Her fingers curled toward it, like a dying spider, but nothing more. A Doberman lay on the floor nearby. Dead, of course.

Vanilla turned her head and looked at me. She said, “You can finish her if you want. If you think it’ll make you feel better.”

I shook my head.

I felt empty standing there watching that woman die. Right then, it didn’t matter to me what she had done. Had I come upon her first, I would have shot her myself, no doubt, but now, looking at the life ease out of her, I just felt confused.

Clinton glanced at Vanilla. She tried to say something. It sounded like “why.”

“Why not?” Vanilla said. Her gun hand flicked up and the silenced weapon made a tubercular noise. Clinton’s body jerked a little. A red spot appeared on her forehead, and whatever muscles were holding her head against the couch released and she rolled over on her face. The blood pooled beneath her. A pool of urine soaked out of her and its smell was rich with ammonia.

Vanilla stood. She looked at me. I can’t describe what I was seeing there, but in that moment she looked much older and stranger and dangerous, a visitor from someplace far beyond Mars.

She said, “Done, and done.”

70

We searched through the house, looked in all the rooms, all the nooks and crannies. There was no one left. We went out the way we had come in and stopped on the veranda in sight of the dead man in the yard. It had grown bitter cold and the snow was turning hard.

“You lied to me,” I said. “You said you wouldn’t get involved.”

Vanilla put her gun inside her coat and looked at me. “I didn’t know I was getting involved until I started drawing that map for you. Jimson, like I said, that was personal.”

“I presume the map you gave me isn’t really the easiest way for me to get here, is it?”

“I gave you quite a trial, didn’t I?”

“You think I’d give up and go home?”

“I thought if I gave you the long and hard way here, I’d get here first, in plenty of time. Still, I didn’t want you not to be a part of it. I wanted you to know it was done.”

A part of me wished I had been late. From what I could see, she hadn’t needed me at all.

“What made you do it?” I said.

She looked at me like that was a question that didn’t immediately compute. Finally, she said, “I don’t know. I learned a lot in that big room back there so long ago, the one with the mats. I learned how to fight and use a knife, ice pick, most anything I could lay my hands on. There’s also a gun range farther in. Everything nice and padded and silent. There’s also a bedroom that wasn’t my room and it wasn’t their room. You didn’t see it. It’s a large room, and it’s silent too. I learned a lot there from Mr. Kincaid.”

“I’m sorry, Vanilla.”

“All part of the drill, I suppose. The males got the same.”

“I’m still sorry.”

“I suppose I had to close things out. I believe that’s why I came, more than for you.”

“How do you feel?” I said.

“Just the same.”

“What now?”

“I’ll show you to my car, drive you around to yours, and we go our separate ways.”

“I mean what now for you?”

She shrugged and started walking across the yard. I slung the shotgun strap over my shoulder, followed, our feet crunching on the snow-covered grass. We went out through the open front gate and I swung the shotgun off my shoulder, and we got in her black Volkswagen Beetle. The one I had passed when I drove over to No Enterprise and found Jimson and his goons.

Vanilla had merely driven straight up the drive and gone inside. I don’t know how she had gotten through the gate. Maybe it was open. Maybe she knew a code. After that, it had been easy. Drop the guard and the dog, and then I showed up. I’m sure she had answers to those questions, but at that point in time, I didn’t really care.

As she started up the Volkswagen, I said, “I thought you were like James Bond till I saw this car. Does it have machine guns in the headlights?”

“It’s maneuverable and dependable,” she said. “Just like me. Did I ever tell you how maneuverable I am?”

“It’s best I don’t hear,” I said, and she wheeled us out of there.

71

When we stopped at my car, Vanilla turned slightly in the seat, said, “You could go with me.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“You can.”

“All right. I can. But I won’t.”

“The redhead?”

“That’s some of it, yes.”

“And Leonard.”

“Yep.”

Vanilla nodded. She smiled. “I don’t know, Hap. I don’t understand it. Why they mean so much to you.”

“I don’t think I can explain it.”

“There’s another thing I don’t understand.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Why am I attracted to you?”

“It’s the way I dress.”

“Hardly,” she said.

As I put a foot outside the door, Vanilla said, “You ever been to Europe?”

“No.”

“Italy is a wonderful country,” she said. “Beautiful people. The best food you can imagine. Scenery that has to be seen to be believed.”

“You go there often?”

“I’ve never been to Italy. But I’ve read about it.”

“You believe everything you read?”

“Only when I want to. The money I got, I don’t need to do anything anymore but lie on a beach in a bikini somewhere and soak up the sun. I might just retire there. Maybe you could come see me?”

“All I can say is I owe you one,” I said.

“Oh, that was a freebie. That wasn’t for anybody but myself. I didn’t feel good or bad about it before, but now, sitting here, I’m starting to get the warm fuzzies. I liked the way Ms. Clinton looked when I shot her. Lean over here.”

I did. She kissed me gently and quickly on the lips.

“Our secret,” she said.

I didn’t know what to say to that.

I got out of the car with my shotgun and she backed around and was gone.

72

Vanilla should have been everything I detested in a human being, a stone killer with the conscience of a fly, but there was no denying I felt something for her. I didn't know exactly what it was. But I felt it. And she felt it back. But then again, who was I to hate someone for being a killer?

I drove back to LaBorde through a bad storm mixed with rain and snow and a vision of that young girl's face, the one I had killed in the mat room. She was just a kid. I told myself if I hadn't killed her she would have killed me. I told myself she was being trained to kill others for money. For all I knew she might have been the one who shot Leonard. There wasn't any certainty Devil Red, the two of them, or either of them had done the shooting. And if it wasn't that young woman, someday it would be, for someone.

I arrived drained and exhausted at the hospital. It was way past visiting hours, but when I got upstairs I found Brett and Marvin in the waiting room. Brett had found a blanket and was curled up in a chair asleep. Marvin sat beside her, wide awake. He nodded at me as I came in, put a finger to his lips. We went outside the waiting room to a few chairs along the wall. We sat down.

"How's Leonard?" I said.

"Better."

I sighed with relief.

"Not out of danger yet," Marvin said. "But better."

"Good," I said.

"Did you find them?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Did you take care of them?"

"Vanilla Ride took care of them mostly. I took care of some of it.”

“Vanilla Ride? Our Vanilla Ride?”

“How many of them could there be?” I said.

“I’ll be damned,” Marvin said.

I told him all about it, everything Vanilla had told me, how it had all gone down.

He sat for a while when I finished. “So it was like Brett thought, Devil Red killed all those people for revenge. Twilla too?”

“Maybe. And then Leonard and I fell into their line of fire.”

Marvin considered for a moment. “They most likely arranged the hit on Godzilla in prison, don’t you think?”

“It’s possible,” I said. “They decided to kill us all, symbolically salt the earth. They couldn’t get rid of their grief any other way. And I doubt that did it.”

“What amazes me is to think they actually cared that much for their children, considering what they were, what they did to Vanilla,” Marvin said.

“I think for them it wasn’t child molestation or abuse in the way we think of it. I mean it comes down to the same thing, but I think for them it was just business. They were sharpening the tools of their business by making them willing and moldable. When Kincaid was away from there he was an accountant, a husband to his airhead wife, and a father to his children, who he loved. One life had nothing to do with the other.”

“That’s what you call compartmentalization,” Marvin said.

“Yeah, I suppose it is.”

“How do you feel?” he asked.

“My hand won’t quit shaking. I got a few minor wounds, but that’s what surprises me the most. In all the gunfire and knifing, I didn’t get a serious wound. Worst thing I got was back pain from falling out of a tree. Thing I’m wondering is how we tell Mrs. Christopher that the job is done without telling her how it was done, and without getting our dicks in a crack.”

“That’s my job,” Marvin said. “I’ll find a way to satisfy her without telling her everything. There’s some things she doesn’t need to know. Do you think you’ll see Vanilla again?”

“I don’t want to. She makes me nervous.”

At that moment, Brett came out of the waiting room and came over to me and grabbed me before I could stand and hugged me. I kissed her near her ear. She was crying. She fell into my lap.

“My God, I thought that was you I heard talking,” she said.

She kissed me several times. I wiped away her tears. I hugged her tight. I looked at Marvin, said, “You should go home, friend.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I should. Call me if there’s any news.”

He stood and clapped his hand on my shoulder. I reached up and touched it. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

We went back in the waiting room, and I told her all I had told Marvin.

“I don’t know how I feel about Vanilla Ride,” Brett said. “You’re my man.”

“You know it,” I said.

“Really now,” Brett said. “How pretty is she?”

“She’s all right.”

“Hap.”

“Okay. She’s real pretty.”

“Hap.”

“All right, goddamn it,” I said. “She’s stunningly beautiful.”

“Okay,” she said, “that’s enough.”

73

The next morning we got word that Leonard was out of the woods, and though not ready to see visitors, much better. We decided to go home and have breakfast and get some sleep.

About noon we woke up and made love, and when we were finished, we were ravenous. We ate a quick lunch and went to the hospital. We found Rogers, Leonard's surgeon. He took us into the waiting room, where we were the only ones present. He said, "I can't figure Mr. Pine. He not only should have died in that parking lot, he shouldn't be awake and feeling as well as he is. He's not going to jump up and run a marathon or anything, but he's doing miraculously well."

"Can we see him?" Brett asked.

"Shortly," Rogers said.

About an hour later we were allowed into ICU to see him. I had hoped to have his deerstalker to wear, just to pick at him, but I didn't. I guess the cops had it.

We sat in chairs on opposite sides of the bed. We each held one of his hands. He looked rough, but he had his color back, and that wicked look in his eyes.

"So, you're gonna shit in my hat," he said, looking at me.

"You actually heard that?" Brett said.

"Yeah," Leonard said. "I wanted to answer, but couldn't. I was a little under the weather."

"I'll say," I said.

"You know," Leonard said, "bullets hurt."

"Yeah. Well, you know our motto."

"If the dick's intact, we're all right."

"That's the one"

"You're sitting funny, Hap."

"I fell out of a tree."

"Ha," Leonard said, and then licked his dry lips. "Did anyone call John?"

I felt a little ashamed. "No," I said.

"Good. I don't want him to see me like this. I don't want any goddamn sympathy from him. He comes back, I want him to come back because of the right reasons. Not because I got myself shot."

"Your surgeon said it was small caliber, and your muscle tone had a lot to do with your survival," I said. "You know what really surprises me, though?"

"What?"

"That you have any muscle tone."

"Ha, ha," he said. Then: "Brett, could you see if they would let me have a bit of soda pop? I'm craving a little something wet and sweet."

"I can ask," she said.

"Tell them I'll try not to let it squirt out the holes in my chest." Brett got up and went away.

Leonard squeezed my hand really tight. He said, "Do you know who shot me?"

I told him who as quickly as I could. I told him what had happened to them.

"Man," Leonard said, "Vanilla is so cold and mean—"

"—her mean has to wear a hat and tie," we said together.

Leonard laughed, and then winced. "Oh," he said. "I think I shit myself a little."

"What nurses are for," I said. "Ask Brett to tell you how much she loves that part."

He grinned at me, then gradually turned serious. "How do you feel, man?"

"It got done, and Vanilla got whatever it was she needed out of it. I figure eventually we'll read about it in the papers. Someone will find them in time. They won't show to work, and then they'll go out there and find all those bodies. I don't know what the law will think."

"As long as they don't think about you, it'll be okay," Leonard said.

“I think Vanilla and I did it pretty clean. I’m even going to get rid of the shoes and clothes I had on last night. I’m leaving nothing to chance, no footprints, no clothes fibers. And since I didn’t write my name in blood or draw a drawing of a devil head, I think I’ll be all right.”

“Of course you will,” Leonard said.

“I’m going to get rid of the guns tomorrow. Except my automatic. I didn’t use it. It’s still clean.”

“Hate to see them go,” he said.

“Best bet, though. I know a good place to ditch them.” Leonard nodded.

“Vanilla, what she did,” he said, “she didn’t do it for me. It was for you.”

“And herself.”

“What I can’t figure is how you got someone like Brett, and then someone looks like Vanilla, to be attracted to you. As a queer, I got to say, I don’t find you attractive at all.”

“Feeling’s mutual,” I said. “Minus the queer part.”

“But, you know what?”

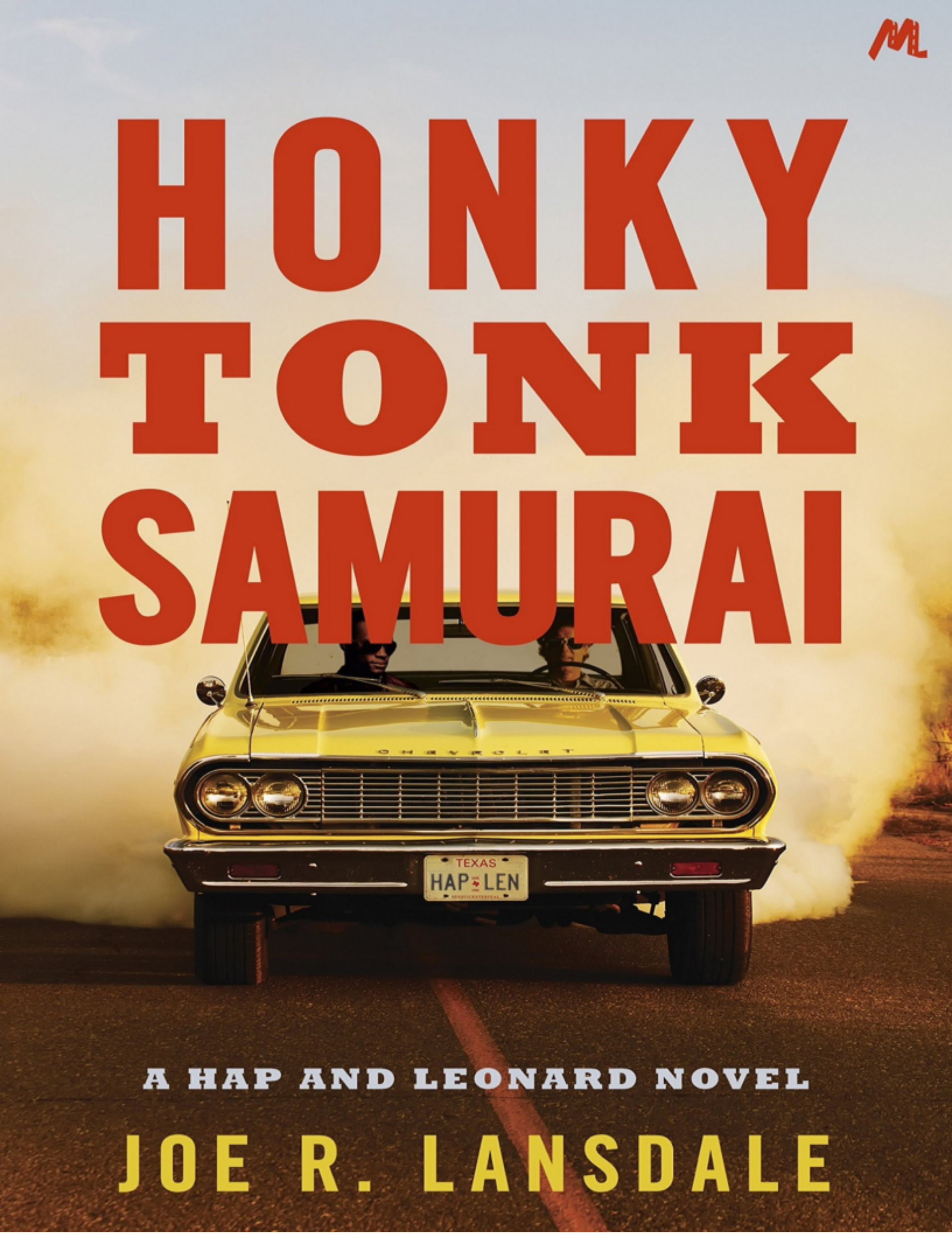
“What,” I said.

“I love you, brother,” he said, without looking right at me. “And you’re the reason I came back from the dead. That, and the fact it’s cold over there. And dark.”

“Still,” I said, squeezing his hand, “I’m not giving you that damn hat back.”

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joe R. Lansdale has written more than a dozen novels in the suspense, horror, and Western genres. He has also edited several anthologies. He has received the British Fantasy Award, the American Mystery Award, seven Bram Stoker Awards, and the 2001 Edgar Award for best novel from the Mystery Writers of America. In 2007 he won the Grand Master Award at the World Horror Convention. He lives in Nacogdoches, Texas, with his family.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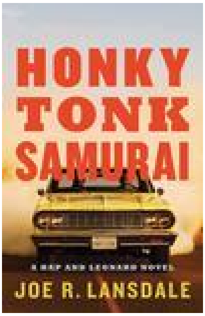

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For the Kelley Boys—Danny and Dennis,
our extended family

Just when you think you got things learned good, and life’s flowing right, a damn Mack truck comes along and runs your highly attractive ass over.

—Jim Bob Luke

1

I don’t think we ask for trouble, me and Leonard. It just finds us. It often starts casually, and then something comes loose and starts to rattle, like an unscrewed bolt on a carnival ride. No big thing at first, just a loose, rattling bolt, then the bolt slips completely free and flies out of place, the carnival ride groans and screeches, and it sags and tumbles into a messy mass of jagged parts and twisted metal and wads of bleeding human flesh.

I’m starting this at the point in the carnival ride when the bolt has started to come loose.

* * *

The truck windows were rolled down and the heat wasn’t quite unbearable yet, but the air had the smell toast gets as it begins to brown and you know the butter will spread clean. In less than a half an hour, about noon, my butt crack would be completely filled with sweat and breathing the air would be like swallowing fishhooks. I was already looking forward to loose clothes, a big glass of ice tea, and lots of air-conditioning.

We were sitting in Leonard’s new-to-him pickup truck. He traded a lot. So did I. I’m not sure why, but we were always getting a different car or truck, usually used. This one was a Dodge and it was silver, and it was only a few years old. We were two blocks down from the house we were watching.

The guy who lived in that house, the fellow we were waiting on, had a wife who thought he was cheating and had hired the Marvin Hanson Agency to find out if he was and who with. She was brokenhearted and wanted everything to be all right, and if it wasn’t she wanted to divorce him in a serious and financially lucrative way that would cause him to have to sell his balls for a place to sleep.

We weren’t full-time employees, but we worked for Marvin quite a bit, a lot more lately. Divorce work, or potential divorce work, however, was not my idea of a good time, but the lady had hired the agency for two weeks of surveillance. We were on the last day of the job, and what we had pretty well determined was her sixty-year-old husband wasn't cheating on her at all, but he was going at odd hours to the gym, and we had a pretty good guess he didn't want to tell her.

Leonard thought it was because the idea embarrassed him, having to work out, or wanting to. That seemed peculiar to me, but Leonard understands that kind of thinking more than I do. For a gay guy he's much more tuned in to machismo than I am, so I guess he could be right. I figured the fellow was just going to surprise her with his new body, hoping one day she'd look up and say how good he looked. Maybe he kept going so much because she hadn't said anything.

Irony was, we had noticed that even in the last two weeks he'd dropped some pounds and muscled up a bit, and she had noticed over the last few months the same thing, but hadn't mentioned it to him because she thought he was dieting and buying new clothes because he had a chippie piece on the side. That's how she said it. "I think he's got a little chippie piece on the side."

I hadn't heard the word *chippie* used in many a moon, but the sad thing was I was old enough to remember when it was more common. I was starting to feel as if I were getting along in years and the recent ones were angry at me. By the time you're fifty you start to realize just how much of your time on earth you've wasted.

Anyway, we were sitting there watching him come out of the house, ready to follow, knowing full well by this time he didn't have a chippie piece on the side and that this was our last day so we would coast it on out for the dollar and give her our report. She had paid in advance and wanted two weeks, so I didn't feel we were sucking money she didn't want to spend.

I had been on a diet myself. I always exercised, and hard, and was usually in better shape than I looked, but lately I wanted to look it again, because Brett, my red-headed woman looked so good. I wanted to make my body more like the way I felt. But truth was, I had had to change my workout methods. I had dropped lifting heavy weights and gone to doing more reps with light weights. Jogging a little, but doing more walking than before. It seemed to be working. I was never going to be pretty, but I preferred not being able to rest a glass on my stomach when I was sitting down, as if it were an end table.

Even Leonard, who normally looked firm and ready for action all the time, had changed his eating and workout habits a little, because for the first time in a long time fat had crept in around his middle. He claimed it was protecting his gooey chocolate center. But since he was black as rich chocolate all over, I told him that seemed kind of redundant. And on top of that I didn't want to know about his gooey chocolate center.

There we sat, me reflecting on these things and holding in a wheat-bread fart out of courtesy, when Leonard said, "What the hell?"

He was looking at a yard across the street from our car. A man had a dog on a leash and the dog was cowered on its belly and the man was kicking it, and I could hear him screaming at it. The dog yelped a couple of times after the kicks.

Leonard was already out of the car by this time and crossing the street.

I got out and went around and followed, heard Leonard yell, "Hey, motherfucker, how about you try kicking me?"

The man stopped his dog abuse and looked up.

I let the fart ease out. I did it quietly, not wanting to frighten the dog. I left the fart where I had laid it like a rotten egg and moved away from the smell.

"Who the hell are you?" the man said to Leonard.

"I'm the man fixing to put that leash on your neck and kick you all over this goddamn yard like a soccer ball."

"You're trespassing," the man said.

"That's just where I start," Leonard said. "How about I put one of your goddamn eyes out?"

Appeared like a start to a fairly ordinary day for us.

I stayed at the curb while Leonard stood in the yard talking. I was waiting patiently, ready to stop Leonard from the death blow, which I was fairly certain might be coming.

"Take two of you to do it?" said the man, checking us both out. He was a pretty big guy, about Leonard's height, wider than both of us, bigger belly than us put together. He had the air of someone who had once run with a football and thought that gave him an edge for life. Maybe he should get with his neighbor who went to the gym, get some diet and exercise tips. Still, he was big enough to cause problems, even if it was just falling on you.

"No," Leonard said. "Just one of us."

I said, "And you can choose which one. Just for the record, I can hit harder. But I was thinking I'd rather not get all worked up. The heat, you know."

"He can't hit harder," Leonard said. "Faster, but I actually hit a little harder.”

“He’s a braggart,” I said. “We both know I can hit harder, and I’m faster, too.”

“You don’t neither one of you look so tough to me,” he said.

“Why don’t you show us how tough you are?” Leonard said. “You do pretty good with a defenseless dog wants to please you, but we don’t want to please you. Right, Hap?“

“Right,” I said.

“Tell him again.”

“Right. Not in the pleasing mood.”

“Tell you what, ass wipe,” Leonard said. “Give me the dog, let me take it with me, and we’ll call it a day, and you get to keep your face like it is. With a nose on it and everything. Without me punching a fucking hole in it.”

The guy laughed. “You are nuts. Both of you.”

“That’s what I’m trying to warn you about,” Leonard said. “But I don’t think you’re listening.”

By this point I could tell the man was starting to worry a little. That was a good idea. Leonard might truly be nuts. Some people didn’t even think it was open to discussion.

“You want him, or should I go on and beat the shit out of him?” Leonard said to me.

“I’ll just be here to stop you should you go too far.”

“Hey, now,” the man said. “You’re in my yard. I’ll call the cops.”

“I don’t think you’ll make it to the door,” Leonard said. “Got a cell phone in your pocket, you won’t have time to punch in the numbers. I promise you that. And if you call afterward, it ain’t going to help you none. The deed will be done. And they might have a hard time understanding you, as you might be missing some teeth, trying to talk with your nose gone. They might have to read your fucking lips you still got any. Now apologize to the dog and give the poor thing to me.”

“Apologize to the dog?”

“Yeah, apologize.”

“I’m not apologizing to any goddamn dog.”

“I would if I were you,” I said. “He means it.”

“Fuck you. She’s my dog.”

“Not anymore,” I said.

Leonard crossed the yard then. He moved swiftly. It was like those old Dracula movies when the vampire glides over the earth with the ease of a windblown mist. The man let go of the dog’s leash. The dog, a young German shepherd mix, maybe a year old at the most, remained cowed. I hated to see that. I loved dogs. I loved animals. People I'm a little more mixed on, so I didn't hate what was about to happen to the asshole in the yard, though I had to consider the cops might take a different view if the guy lived long enough and was strong enough to call them. Or maybe some neighbor looking out the window had already given them a call. Probably filming the whole thing on a cell phone.

The man put his hands up, clenched his fists in what he thought was a boxing position.

Shit, I could tell from the way he stood this wasn't even going to be a good fight.

Leonard didn't even put his hands up, just walked right up to the guy. The man threw a haymaker so slow and cumbersome we could have damn near driven home, had a cup of coffee, and come back before it landed.

It didn't.

Leonard looped his arm over the strike as he stepped in, most of the guy's force going around Leonard's back, the arm itself trapped to Leonard's side. Leonard lunged forward and shot out a palm that caught the guy in the nose and knocked him to the ground, or as close to that as he could get with Leonard still clutching his arm, partially lifting the guy's side off the ground.

The dog started to slink off on its belly like a soldier crawling in high grass. I went over and took the dog's leash. When I did the dog winced.

"It's okay, doggie," I said. "Uncle Leonard is kicking the bad man's ass."

By this time Leonard had let go of the man's arm and was kicking him sharply in the ribs, way that bastard had done the dog.

"How you like it?" Leonard said. "Enjoying that, asshole? Bark for me, cocksucker."

The guy didn't seem to be enjoying it. He started yelling, not barking. Hell, the dog had only yelped a little, this guy, you'd have thought was taking a real beating. And for him, I guess he was. Leonard actually seemed a little altruistic, I thought, considering it was all about animal mistreatment. Maybe he was getting old. Though actually he hadn't had much breakfast, so it might have just been his blood sugar was down.

After a bit, I guess Leonard got tired, because he quit kicking the guy, bent down, and retied his shoe, the string having come loose. When that was done I thought he'd go back to it, but he didn't.

The man, not learning his lesson, his face covered in blood from his nose to his chin, said, “That’s assault, nigger.”

“Couldn’t leave well enough alone, could you?” I said.

Leonard had already grabbed him by the ears and was picking him up just enough to knee him in the face. Blood went everywhere, and the guy lay on the grass without moving. I hoped he had fallen in dog turds. I thought I saw one of his teeth gleaming wetly in the grass, like a cheap Cracker Jack prize.

Leonard came over to pet the dog. The dog let him. The dog seemed to know we were on her side. Leonard said to the dog, “When he wakes up I’ll get him to apologize and maybe lick your ass.”

“You didn’t kill him, did you?” I asked.

“No, but I wanted to.”

“Well, yeah,” I said. “Me, too. But maybe it’s best not to.”

“Reckon so,” Leonard said. “Still, not nearly as satisfying. Goddamn, what’s that smell?”

“I’m having a little intestinal disturbance going on. My body does not deal well with wheat.”

“Quit eating it. God, man. That’s just foul and wrong. Let’s move to some other spot.”

2

I continued petting the dog, soothing it, and as dogs do, it stood up, wobbled, and licked my face. I think it would even have licked its crummy master's face. It's why I prefer dogs to cats. Cats aren't independent, they're just entitled assholes who want to be fed and do nothing. They're your owners. A dog just loves you. It's not about ownership or anything like that. They are sincere as death and taxes. They're the best creatures on the earth. Still, had it been a cat being mistreated, the bastard would still have gotten his ass kicked. But I would have taken a moment to tell the cat how I felt about his species. Not that it would have been listening or interested in thanking me. It would already be making its plans for the day. Lie around and shit in a box, puke hairballs on the floor, scratch up the furniture, and expect a treat for the effort. All dogs go to heaven. All cats go to hell.

The cops pulled up. One car. We were a little surprised to see Marvin Hanson, our boss, get out of the passenger side and stroll across the yard, look down on the guy, and say, "He doesn't look so bad."

The officer got out of the car. I didn't know his name, but I'd seen him around. Young guy. Leonard and I were no strangers to the police station. I tried not to worry too much about the cops' names, since they came and went faster than a john on holiday in Amsterdam. The young cop came over. He said, "Lady across the street called, said a guy was kicking his dog and we ought to come get him for animal cruelty."

"That's a good thing," I said. "But we thought it might take a little while, so we made a citizen's arrest."

"And trespassed and committed assault," Marvin said. His worn black face creased in a half smile. At least I think it was a smile. He might have been baring his teeth. I couldn't quite tell the difference. Marvin is not what you would call a pretty man.

"If you want to be that technical," Leonard said. "Sheesh."

"What are you doing with the cops?" I said to Marvin.

"He doesn't care what company he keeps," said the officer. He was a little guy, fat-faced, with stubby arms and legs, dark-skinned. He looked like a gingerbread man made with the last of the dough.

“Yeah, if my wife asks who I was with,” Marvin said, turning to look at the cop, “for God’s sake tell her I was buying drugs and was with a male prostitute. Don’t mention the boys in blue.”

“Done,” the cop said.

“But between me and you,” I said, “I still got to ask. What are you doing with the pigs, as we old rebels used to call them?”

“That’s just mean,” said the cop.

I liked this guy. I looked at his name tag. He might be worth remembering. Carroll was his last name.

“I been meaning to tell you,” Marvin said. “ I got my old job back. Police chief.”

You could have knocked me over with a green pea. Before I could ask about the particulars, Marvin, who had recently abandoned his cane, though he had a slight limp if you knew to watch for it, strolled over and looked down at the guy, who was awake now and trying to sit up.

Marvin said, “Can you stand up?”

“I think so,” said the man.

“Why don’t you do that if you can?” Marvin said. “I’m with the cops.”

“He called me a nigger,” Leonard said.

“That’s a tiebreaker in this modern world unless you use it in a rap song,” Marvin said.

“I was just angry,” said the man.

The guy gradually got himself collected enough to get to his feet. Marvin put his left hand on the guy’s right shoulder, said, “Were you kicking this dog?”

“She kept pulling the leash,” the man said. “I was trying to teach her.”

“What were you teaching her?”

“To behave. To quit yanking me.”

“So you kicked her?” Marvin said. “That was your instruction?”

“Had it coming. Hell, it’s a dog. My dog.”

Marvin’s right hand moved then. It was quick, a slap to the guy’s bloody face, a back hand, another slap, a swift knee in the nuts, and the guy was on the ground again. Marvin looked at the officer. “Damn if I wasn’t just angry.”

“You were just trying to teach him,” Leonard said.

“I can’t believe that,” said the officer. “That son of a bitch tried to resist arrest. And to the brand-new police chief.”

“Yeah, ain’t that something?” Marvin said. “No respect for the goddamn law.”

“Sign of the times,” said the officer.

“Next the sun will go cold,” said Leonard.

“I hear you,” said the officer. “Just this morning, my coffee wasn’t quite right.”

“There you are,” Leonard said. “It’s already started. The end of the world as we know it. The goddamn fucking apocalypse.”

3

She's got a busted rib—cracked, really. Nothing major. Used to wrap them up tight. Not the way it's done anymore." The vet, a stocky young lady who had thick shoulder-length blond hair slicked back with mousse, was telling us this as if we were potential interns.

"So she'll be all right?" I asked.

"Long as she takes it easy," she said.

"She will," I said.

"I'd like to have the bastard did this right here on my table," she said. "I'd cut his balls off with a dull scalpel."

"And we'd hold him down," Leonard said.

"When he came around, because he had a kind of accident and was out for a while, he apologized to the dog," I said.

"Apologized?" she said.

"Leonard there actually put the words in his mouth and made him chew on them and like it," I said. "But he had him say: I am sorry, little doggie, I am a shit-eating asshole and am not worthy to wear your dog collar. I have fleas."

The vet smiled a little, nodded at Leonard.

Leonard was sitting in a chair by the wall. He nodded back. Marvin was leaning against the open door frame. Officer Carroll had taken the dog abuser in. The dog was on a table, lying on her side. She was very patient and even cooperative. I liked that dog.

Marvin had let us take the dog to the vet. I guess he would have some paperwork to lie about, about how that bastard had jumped Leonard, who was merely trying to stop animal abuse, and then had turned on Marvin when he came to investigate. It wasn't legal, but it was justice. I could still visualize those slaps from Marvin. Marvin had fast hands.

The vet shaved some of the dog's hair and wrapped her up, but not tight. Just a little something to keep the rib firmly in place. She said it probably didn't need to stay but two or three days, and told us again about how it used to be done and how it wasn't done like that anymore.

I guess she was practicing a lecture she was going to give. I paid the bill out of some of the money we had gotten for watching the guy go to the gym, and we drove Marvin to his car at the cop shop. He said he wanted to talk to us, said he'd follow us back to my place, that he'd come in a little while, had a bit of cop work to do. We went ahead.

Leonard had recently found his own living arrangements, a shabby place downtown in an old building that had once been a candy factory but was later cut up into apartments. Before the apartment, Leonard owned a house, but he had left that to John, then John left it, and Leonard sold it. Leonard actually made a small profit. This was rare for either one of us. A profit. Though for the first time in both our lives we had a bit of money tucked away and were what you might call almost comfortable. Redneck jobs are frequently short on career potential. You do one till you tire or get fired, and then you move on. We had moved on a lot.

Leonard's apartment was a kind of loft with a partition for the bedroom and the bathroom. The landlord was letting him build some new walls for some of the rent. Work he had to have done by a certain time. Leonard decided to hire someone to do it. It was not cheaper than the rent reduction, but it gave him a nicer place to live, and in time it would even out. There was talk of the landlord applying the rent toward a sale. The owner was old and tired of property and renters, and Leonard wanted to buy.

Leonard had been living there for only a short time, staying at our place a lot until some of the work on the place was done. Before that, he lived at our house full-time. We even had a room built onto it. I loved him—dearly—and so did Brett, but I must be honest: I was glad he wasn't there all the time anymore. Brett and I were happy empty nesters. We could have more time to ourselves, and we didn't have to be quiet when we were playing doctor, and my vanilla-cookie-and-Dr-Pepper budget would go down dramatically. This would also help Leonard's waistline. He loved those vanilla cookies and Dr Peppers severely, but he loved them even more when he didn't have to buy them. I think he saw eating my cookies and soft drinks as an accomplishment of great importance and took it as a matter of pride.

It had turned hot by the time we got out of the vet's, and it was only ten thirty or so. The sun lay down on us like a coat of heated chain mail.

When we got to mine and Brett's house and came in with the dog, Brett was home from her nursing job. She had quit nursing several times but was so good at what she did that she always got hired back. She looked tired but pretty, her red hair tied back in a ponytail. She said, nodding at the dog, “So we’re having company for dinner? And I don’t mean Leonard.”

“Hey. I make good company,” Leonard said. “What are we having?”

“Whatever you’re buying,” Brett said.

“Oh,” Leonard said. “That limits things.”

I looked down at the dog. “This is our true guest. This is … well, I don’t know who this is.”

“Follow you home?” she asked.

“Not exactly.”

“Your new dog, Leonard?” she asked.

Leonard roved an eye my way. “Could be,” he said. “Could be yours.”

“Can I have her?” I said. I tried to sound winsome and wistful at the same time. Actually, I’m not sure which part of how I sounded was wistful and which part was winsome. Maybe you can’t do both at the same time. Maybe one sounds a lot like the other.

“Will you throw a hissy if the answer is no?” Brett said.

“Probably.”

“Oh, he can throw a grown-up big-ass cracker-style hissy,” Leonard said. “I’ve seen him do it, and I got to tell you, I was embarrassed. It wasn’t very manly.”

“I can try throwing the hissy in a deep voice,” I said.

“Nope,” Leonard said. “That’s not how a hissy works.”

“First how about telling me how we’ve come by a dog?” Brett asked.

We all ended up around the table, the dog lying at my feet, and I told her while we all had glasses of ice tea.

“I can’t believe people like that,” Brett said. “This dog looks like a lover, not a biter.”

“I don’t think she’s old enough to know what she is,” I said.

“Well, I like dogs,” Brett said.

The doorbell rang. I answered it. It was Marvin Hanson.

“So,” I said as he came in. “Hello to the police chief who didn’t tell us he was the police chief.”

He sat at the table, and I sat down again. He leaned over to give the dog a pat on the head. “Nice dog.”

“Police chief?” Brett said.

“Yep,” Marvin said. “You know, that man might want this dog back, and I’m not sure how that will work out in court. He’s going to get a fine for animal abuse and resisting arrest, but he could still throw some stink around.”

"Give Hap some wheat bread," Leonard said. "He'll match him out, I bet you."

"I'm serious," Marvin said. "Could be some court stuff coming up."

"I don't know about court," Leonard said, "but I know how it worked out on his lawn. Not too well."

"We were bullies," I said.

"No," Marvin said. "We were the Fresh Fists of Vengeance."

"To be precise," Leonard said, "you were the Slap and Backhand of Vengeance."

"Don't forget the knee," I said.

"Yeah, and the knee," Leonard said. "But that lacks a certain ring."

"What's the legal damage?" I asked Marvin.

"For me or for you guys?" Marvin asked.

"Give us the whole package," Leonard said.

"Well, the police officer saw him attack me," Marvin said.

"Yeah, well, all right," I said. "Should we say we saw him attack you, too?"

"That would be handy," Marvin said. "But the lady next door saw it all happen, and she filmed it on her cell-phone camera. Got word of that on the way over. She called it in."

"Of course she did," I said, having expected just that sort of thing.

"But she said she didn't film the part where Leonard knocked cheese dick around, and she didn't film me slapping the poo out of him. She's just got the part where he kicked the dog. Said she thought he looked as if he was going to attack you two, and then me, so she put the blame on him."

"She's such a sweet liar," I said.

"Yeah," Marvin said. "And she's an old lady and looks very trustworthy, I hear. A little crusty, but all right, I think. I just got my description from Officer Curt Carroll, who had to drive back over there. He said the man who owned the dog was out on the lawn on his hands and knees looking for his missing teeth, thought maybe if he put them in ice they could be put back in. He's one of those guys thinks he knows all manner of shit but couldn't tell the difference between shit and wild honey."

"Very convenient the old lady looks trustworthy," Leonard said. "As for ass wipe, I hope he doesn't find his teeth."

"How many was he missing?" I said. "I only saw one."

"Two, I think," Marvin said. "Anyway, Gummy, as I like to think of him, isn't pressing charges. He at first had a different point of view, but

I pointed out you guys were just good Samaritans who saw an animal mistreated and went to help. I think he bought that. There's some truth in it, but then there's that whole lying part about how we were attacked."

"He did swing at me," Leonard said.

"We'll let that count for something," Marvin said. "Thing is, he's done, you're safe, so am I, and besides, I'm the police chief."

"You were just trying to frighten us with that stuff about how he might want his dog back, weren't you?"

"Just a little," Marvin said. "I have to get my licks in on you guys somehow. You've certainly given me enough grief."

"There's a little something we're all curious about," I said. "How did that whole police chief thing happen? We work for you, you know—seems that would have come up."

"Does, doesn't it?" he said. "But it didn't. And I'll tell you why. I thought maybe I was being foolish, trying to get back on the cops. But now my leg's healed up and I'm able to work and I had a good record there, and better yet, the city council came to me. Seems they can't keep police chiefs or officers. They change all the time. They got a lot of quitters, one in jail for this or that. By the way, you know they painted the jail pink and make the convicts wear pink jumpsuits now?"

I held up my hand. "Been there, wore a jumpsuit."

"Pink," Hanson said.

"Yep, and a little loose-fitting, I thought, though more attractive than you might think. Comfortable because it was loose, I guess. The pink is supposed to be a deterrent to crime, embarrassing and all that."

"Do you think it works?" Hanson said.

"Not so much."

"Me, either. First thing I do next week is have all the jail cells repainted. They can keep the pink jumpsuits until they wear out. No. You know what? I'm ordering the standard orange ones right away. They can afford that. Can you believe that shit? People raping and murdering, and their conclusion is to paint the jail pink and have the shits wear pink jumpsuits. The goddamn death penalty doesn't stop them, but they think butt-hole pink will."

"It's a mystery," I said. "But I'm still more mystified that you're police chief."

"Yep, me too," Leonard said.

"I like pink," Brett said.

"The conversation has moved on, Brett," I said. "So why you,

Hanson?”

“Oh, there’s been some good chiefs, but so far the good ones have left because they can’t stand how things get done in this town or because they got better jobs doing the same thing in places they like better. There’s some good cops here, though. Kid that was with me you met. Some of the detectives like Drake and Kelso, few others. They’ve lasted awhile. But they want someone they think can hold things together better. They heard how I had an agency, was doing good physically now. How I had all that experience in Houston and here, so they came to me, hoping they could lure me away. They could.”

“Don’t they have elections for that sort of thing?” Leonard asked.

“That’s sheriff,” Marvin said. “Here police chief isn’t an elected office, it’s a pick-and-choose on the part of the city council. I got picked. I officially started today, but mostly I just rode from the office out to where you guys were. When I came in first thing, first day at work, first crack out of the box, I hear that a guy who’s been kicking a dog was getting an ass-whipping in a yard near where I sent you guys to scout. I knew who it was, of course.”

“We’re so predictable,” Leonard said.

“In some ways, yes,” Marvin said. “Thing is, well, I can’t keep the agency.”

“There goes about a third of our employment,” Leonard said.

“More like three-quarters,” I said. “We’ve been prosperous these last few months, and now we won’t be prosperous. It’s back to day labor and field work.”

“There’s always bouncing, janitorial work, and sexing chickens,” Leonard said.

“Yeah. I forgot we had so many options.”

“It’s a conflict of interest to have that kind of business and be in the law business, too,” Marvin said. “Besides, I got to go more by the law now. I’ve turned back to being respectable.”

“Clean underwear and all that,” Leonard said.

“That’s right,” Marvin said. “I even change socks daily.”

“You sure gave your first day a swell start,” Brett said.

“Yeah, I know. I could have been back at the agency after one day, but it worked out.”

“This what you want?” I said. “Police chief?”

“I loved my work there as a lieutenant, and I was practically police chief then, so I’m taking the job. I’m back in law enforcement. But thing is, I got to close the agency or sell it. I was thinking you two might want to take it over."

"What's the price?" Leonard said.

"What I was thinking," he said, "is you buy all the office equipment, take up the payments on the place, cause I'm buying the building, and you can start right away. Owner financed."

"Us?" I said. "You're really talking to us about owning a business? I don't know our names and 'business owners' ought to be said in the same breath."

"I know," Marvin said. "It's a scary thought."

"I don't know I want to run a business," I said. "I like the work all right, but that's just getting paid, not running the business—paying property taxes, insurance, and the like. Keeping up with this and that. What if a pipe breaks?"

"Fix it or get it fixed," Marvin said.

"One I don't like to do, the other one costs money," I said.

"Yeah," Leonard said. "That's not for me, either. Fixing pipes or running a business. I tried a lemonade stand once and had to fight two little white boys who called me a black cocksucker. I whipped the shit out of them. Hell, it was ten years after that before I sucked my first cock."

"It's good to be precise on cock sucking," I said.

"Have it your way," Marvin said. "But I'm selling out, and I'm offering you the best deal I'll offer anyone." He looked at Leonard. "Call it my cocksucker discount."

"That's nice of you," Leonard said.

"I don't know," I said.

"I'll do it," Brett said.

We all looked at her.

"I'm nursed out," she said. "I'm tired of the hours, and I'm tired of wiping asses and changing bandages. I'll buy out the equipment and take over the business, pay the bills. Hap and Leonard can work for me."

"You'll be our boss?" I said.

"We can make it work," she said.

"I don't know," I said.

"You know," Marvin said, "that's a good idea. Gets me out from under it, and you can make it work, Brett. You don't even need these two dopes. I can get you a private investigator license easy peasy. I know folks that know folks."

"I was thinking that," she said. "That I didn't need these two guys."

"Wait a minute," Leonard said. "Did I say I was out? I don't think so. I don’t even like Hap.”

“I’ll provide a certain amount of vanilla cookies as part of your payment,” she said.

“Dr Peppers?” Leonard asked.

“That, too,” she said.

“Hell, then, I’m surely in,” Leonard said.

“Hap?” Marvin said.

“Yeah,” I said. “I guess so. We go on like we are? No license for us two, just slave labor?”

“Of course,” Brett said.

“Yeah,” Marvin said. “You work under Brett’s license like you did mine.”

“When does this start?” Leonard asked.

“Right now the business is going to close. I turned in the report to the lady with the gym-conscious husband, and that was the last of it. She owes one more payment. But the business can restart when Brett wants it to start, long as it’s before the next building payment, and of course there’s paperwork to do. Thing is, it’s not going to cost that much to get started. It doesn’t pay like nursing, though, Brett.”

“Trust me,” she said. “Nursing isn’t exactly big money. Good, steady money, but not big money. Besides, like I said, I’m worn out with it. I’ll give my two-week notice when I go in tomorrow. And I think they’ll let me leave right away. They owe me vacation time.”

And that’s how I went to work for my girlfriend at what became the Brett Sawyer Agency.

4

At least Marvin had liked the paint. It wasn't pretty paint, and to be honest, I wasn't sure what color you would call it. Faded rust, perhaps. But it was the paint that had come with the inside walls, and there was nothing about it that bothered me, but Brett, she had other ideas. Leonard and I ended up painting the office a light mint green. It did look better, but I thought of it as a waste of time. It wasn't like we were trying to run a boutique. Next thing you knew there'd be flowers in vases, a bird in a cage, and a painting that looked like a bag of crayons had exploded.

Then again, we did work for Brett, and the boss was the boss. Course, what sucked was that she wasn't paying us for the paint job. Not that I expected her to or wanted her to. I'm just grumpy.

We got it painted, and Brett bought a new desk without coffee-cup circles on it, put out some coasters, and purchased comfortable office chairs and a new, streamlined computer. At least there were no flower arrangements or any of that other stuff I feared. She let me buy a movie-poster reproduction of the Robert Mitchum version of *Farewell My Lovely,* and I had that nicely framed and put on the wall. It was the only time in my life I actually did something more than buy a picture at a place like Walmart and frame it myself. I had someone who knew what he was doing frame it. It made me feel a little more like a real private eye, having that poster there. Of course, you got right down to it, I'm about as much like a real private eye as a weasel is like a kangaroo, but I like to dream a little.

The bathroom was kept simple. Clean place to do number one and two with plenty of toilet paper. There was a painting on the wall of water lilies. I thought that was silly. Really, did we need a painting in the shitter? And of water lilies?

Brett also got a better coffeepot for our kitchenette, as she called it, bought some gourmet coffee, and put a bag of vanilla wafers in the desk drawer. The vanilla cookies were the same cheap-ass brand we always bought, primarily for Leonard. He had three kinds of vanilla cookies he liked. The plain wafers, the ones with the cream in the middle, and any other kind that were vanilla. The drawer had a key. Two. I had one, Brett had the other. Leonard couldn't help himself. Came to those cookies, he was like a crack addict. We were there to protect him from himself. And the other thing I liked about it was it was kind of funny. He enjoyed tormenting me by wearing goofy hats and such, so I liked to return the favor now and again. It's what brothers do.

There was a little fridge with soft drinks and water in it, including Dr Peppers for Leonard, and there was a couch that could be pulled out into a bed. Brett and I tried it out one night when we were working late. Leonard had gone home to his new digs, and it was just us. We decided to break it in, so to speak. It was only a little more uncomfortable than the rack at the Inquisition. Next morning our backs were out of whack. Brett bought a thin foam mattress that she rolled up and put in the closet. You pulled the couch out, all you had to do was put that mattress on it and it turned the rack into something a little more serviceable and almost comfortable. We thought we might as well be ready. You never knew when you might need sex to bolster your serotonin, or whatever that stuff is that makes you feel happy. I always just thought it was fucking that makes you happy, so there you have it.

Our new dog stayed at the office with us during this time, wrapped in her not-too-tight but tight-enough bandage. While we were making love that time in the office, she watched us with curiosity from her doggie bed. I felt she was a little young for all that information. But I guess since I was taking her back to the vet for an operation that would end that whole having-puppies thing, it was all moot.

Night we were up there trying out the foldout couch, Leonard and John were having a get-back-together dinner. Leonard was making spaghetti with his famous sauce that he bought at the store ready to go. I hoped it worked out for him. He had been trying to put things back together for a while. He had just about thrown in the towel, and then John, who decided he was supposed to like women because he got religion, found out that women didn't really do it for him after all and maybe God would give him a pass on the whole male-on-male thing. Least that's where his head was at. I was beginning to think John, nice guy that he was, was just too confused and messed up to know what he wanted. Frankly, these days I avoided him. There was part of me that wanted to punch him in the mouth.

So the day after the night on the foldout, right after Brett bought the mattress and put it in the closet, it was just me and her, doing this and that to spruce up the new office. Mostly little things that I didn't think needed to be bothered with but that she thought were desperately important. We paused in our work and were both looking at the dog lying on her doggie bed in the corner of the office. Brett said, "You know, we got to quit calling her Her."

"You think?" I said. "It could be like that H. Rider Haggard novel *She.* That woman knew who she was. She was all the name she needed. Our dog could be Her."

"I don't think our She, or Her, is that confident," Brett said. "And besides, She actually had a name. Ayesha, I think."

"You got a point there."

"But she is starting to feel better, and she's getting fat, like you," Brett said.

"I lost five pounds."

"You need to lose twenty-five, dear boy."

"Yeah, at least."

"What have you been feeding her?"

"Nothing."

"Liar," Brett said.

"All right, now and then we go through the drive-through at Dairy Queen and I buy her an ice cream cone, plain, no chocolate. Chocolate is bad for dogs."

"I used to share chocolate candy bars with my dogs when I was a kid," Brett said. "None of them died."

"So they're all still alive?"

"Of course not," she said.

"See? Chocolate got them. It just took a lifetime."

"Ha," she said. "I think we should call her Spot."

"She doesn't have any spots," I said.

"That's the joke."

"We will not joke about our dog. I say we name her Ace."

"That's a boy dog's name."

"I always wanted to name a dog that because Batman's dog was named Ace."

"No. Not Ace. How about Buffy?"

"Like the vampire-slayer girl?" I asked.

"Yep. I like that name. More for dogs than for girls."

"That fits," I said.

"Let's call her Buffy the Biscuit Slayer. She does like dog biscuits."

I studied on that a moment, said, "Buffy the Biscuit Slayer is for formal occasions, when she has to wear an evening gown or be at a queen's coronation, but for at home and rides to the Dairy Queen, it's Buffy."

Our new dog was christened.

As this christening was going on, I was looking at Brett's legs. She was leaning up against the desk. She was wearing shorts and her legs were shiny and I was wondering if maybe we might try the couch bed again with the new mattress. That thought was destroyed when I heard someone on the stairs. It was a heavy sound, like a elephant loaded down with a raja and his escorts, and there was a clicking with it, like maybe the elephant had a large cricket for a friend or perhaps was wearing a tap shoe on one foot.

That's when the door opened and a lady came in who was older than dirt but cleaner. She had a cane, which explained the cricket, but the elephant walk was a little more confusing, as she wasn't much bigger than a minute. She had more dyed red hair than she had the head for. That hair seemed to be an entity unto itself, mounded and teased and red as blood. You could have shaved her like a sheep and knitted a sweater with all that hair, maybe have enough left over for at least one sock or, if not that, a change purse.

Her face was dry-looking. She had a lot of makeup on it, as if she were trying to fill a ditch, or several. Her clothes were a little too young for her age, which was somewhere near to that of a mastodon that had survived major climate change but was wounded by it. She had on bright red tight jeans and a sleeveless blue shirt that showed hanging flesh like water wings under her arms. Her breasts were too big, or maybe they were too exposed; the tops of them stuck out of her push-up bra. They looked like aging melons with rot spots, which I supposed were moles or early cancer.

She eyed Brett and me, said, "You two weren't about to do the dog, were you?"

"I don't think so," said Brett. "Our dog is a lady."

The lady eyed the recently christened Buffy on her bed in the corner. Buffy had lifted her head to check things out, but she quickly lowered her head again and lay still. I think all that hair bothered her. She probably thought it was a vicious animal ready to pounce.

"I mean screwing," said the woman.

Like Brett, I knew what she had been referring to, but still, she wasn't what I expected, though I suppose when I got that old, if I did, I'd still talk the same way I do now. Actually, the more I looked at the old lady, the more I thought the language suited her. She looked like a retired hooker.

"Why, yes, I was just fixing to drop my shorts and bend over the desk and ask Hap here to drive me home."

"You aren't shocking me, honey," the old woman said.

"Or you us," Brett said.

I was actually thinking I might be a little shocked.

"That was your game, wasn't it?" Brett said. "To shock us."

"Naw," said the old woman, finding a client chair and settling into it as if she were a bag with a bowling ball in it. "I'm just a vulgar old shit." She laid a heavy eye on me, said, "You're Hap Collins, aren't you?"

"I am," I said. "Do we know each other?"

"No, but when I was forty I'd like to have. You and me could have burned a hole in a mattress then. Course, you may not have been born. But you might want to lose a few pounds, honey. You're starting to chub up."

"He's taken," Brett said. "Pounds and all."

The old woman studied Brett. "Aren't you the Southern belle? I bet you could earn a pretty penny on a Louisiana shrimp boat and never have to toss a net."

"Listen, you old bag," Brett said. "Either say what you want or I'm going to stick that cane up your ass and throw you down the stairs so hard the dye will come out of your hair."

The old lady let out with a howl. "You are a pistol, aren't you?"

"And all six chambers are loaded," Brett said.

"Don't get your panties twisted up your ass," said the old lady. "I'm just fucking with you. I want to hire Hap here."

"I charge a little more for the position of male escort," I said. "And just so you know, I don't do anal."

"I might could arrange that—the male escort part," she said. "And I do do anal and use toys. Or used to. These days I'm so dry I have to grease up to pee." She said that and laughed. It was a good laugh and sounded young, right up to the end, where she got choked and suddenly sounded like a boiler about to blow.

When she got her pipes cleaned out, I said, "I don't know you, so how come you know me?"

"I saw you and your colored friend out in the yard the other day. And there's that sweet dog that got kicked. She looks much happier now."

I thought: colored friend? Really? Then again, she was old. Hell, she might have been near ninety. A spry ninety, but at least that age. I guessed she was entitled to the old proper style of identification for black people. Then again, the term *black* was fairly past its shelf life, too. The new word was *African American,* a variant of *Afro-American,* a term used in the sixties and seventies. Leonard always said it was obvious he was American and that the closest he'd been to Africa was a geography map. He thought of himself as black. Then again, me and him are about the same age. We like a lot of the same terminology. I just about always say *pussy* instead of *vagina*.

The old lady stirred a hand around in her purse and came up with what I still call an electronic device and everyone else calls a tablet. To me a tablet is writing paper between cardboard covers. I especially liked the old-style Big Chief tablets. I don't even know if they still make them.

She ran a bent finger around on the tablet, then turned it toward me. It was a very nice video of Leonard beating the shit out of the dog abuser. The sound was down. That was okay. I remembered everything that was said, and the machine probably hadn't picked that up anyway.

And then I understood. Of course I did. She wasn't just an old lady who had seen what had happened. She was the one who recorded the dog abuse, said she didn't have Leonard and Marvin recorded—but she did. She had filmed everything from the minute we showed up to the moment everyone left. It was pretty cool to watch, both Leonard and Marvin. I almost asked for a replay.

What kept me from asking for that, however, was I had a sinking feeling that I knew why she had come in.

5

Here's what I expected. She had blackmail material, and though I wasn't involved in the actual ass-whipping, I was there and was part of the deal by proxy, and the way it would come down was all of us on that video, and that included Officer Carroll, were about to get rubbed raw as hamburger meat.

"You think I'm here to blackmail you, don't you?" she said.

"Never crossed my mind. Why would a nice lady like you blackmail anyone?"

"Shit, boy, you're a bad liar. If you were a woman you couldn't fake an orgasm."

"All right," I said. "It crossed my mind. And just for the record, I think I could fake an orgasm."

"Totally," Brett said.

"I want you to take my case," said the lady, "if that's what it's called. Think that's what they say on the TV shows, or maybe it's movies. Are there private eye TV shows anymore?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Those were always kind of fun," she said. She seemed to be thinking about a favorite episode of something before she shifted to: "Here's the way I see it." She patted the tablet. "I want you to find my granddaughter. The cops gave up. For them it's a cold case, and from what I can tell it's not getting any warmer. I'll be honest. I don't have any illusions. I'm too old to have any. She's most likely bones by now, but I want her body found, and I want to know what happened to her."

"You don't need threats," Brett said. "We just need payment. Actually, I own this agency now, so it's me you deal with."

"Well, that's the rest of the problem," she said. "I got some money, but not what it takes to do the deed, cause I presume it'll take awhile, and usually this stuff is by the hour, right? That's why I brought the tablet. What's on it is my down payment. And if you're thinking of pushing me down the stairs, I got a copy of this elsewhere, somewhere

where you can't get it. I'm pretty tech-savvy for an old geezer."

"I think you're a lying bitch," Brett said. "How much money you got?"

"How much you need?" the old lady said.

They went back and forth with that for a while until it was determined the old lady had about half of what Brett charged for a couple of weeks, having raised her prices from those Marvin used. I guess she was thinking about paying for the paint and the new furniture and a lot of vanilla cookies and the toilet paper for the snazzy bathroom.

When the money talk was done, and an inferior sum was agreed to, the old lady pulled a manila envelope out of her purse. Inside were some papers and photos of her granddaughter. She was a good-looking girl in a short white dress and those Greek lace-up sandals. She had thick red hair like Brett's and like maybe the old lady's original hair used to be. The girl was striking a model pose, which was appropriate, because her grandmother said, "She wanted to be a model when she was a kid, then she wanted to be a journalist. Her name is Sandy Buckner."

"What's your name?" Brett asked.

"Lilly Buckner."

"We have a painting of lilies on the bathroom wall," I said.

"What?" Lilly said.

"Never mind," I said.

Brett asked her a few questions, and I listened. Five years ago Sandy had gone missing. She had graduated college with a journalism degree and found that the newspapers and magazines that did hard news had gone the way of the dodo bird and drive-in theaters, so she tried being a weather girl, but she was no good at it. She looked wonderful on camera, but she had zip charisma, as her grandmother put it. It's odd how that works. There are people who in life are beautiful, but on film, beautiful or not, they have all the personality of a ham sandwich without the pickles, and then there are those who look all right, nothing special, a little too thin, but the camera loves them, spruces them up, makes them glow. Sandy didn't glow. She was just pretty. She ended up taking a job at a used-car lot that only sold high-end used cars—Mercedes, Lincolns, Cadillacs, muscle cars, that kind of thing—mostly old cars that had become rare and classic.

Sandy worked there six months and was making some money, then one day the boss called Lilly Buckner looking for Sandy. Hers was one of the numbers Sandy had left as a contact. She hadn't come to work, and she never showed up again. She hadn't been seen for five years. Her car, which wasn't up to the level of those she sold but was pretty nice, had been found in the parking lot of the apartment complex where she rented. It was a nice complex, and it and the pretty nice car led Lilly to think Sandy was making money that was a little too good.

The whole missing-person business had gone through cop channels without any solution. Lilly hired a private agency that had taken her money and told her what she already knew, then went out of business. The owner of the agency decided being a private eye lacked some of the excitement he had hoped for and had gone into real estate. Ms. Buckner said it made her happy the bottom fell out of the market right after he made that decision.

Then she saw us and the dog. She talked to the cops and got Marvin's name, and then she researched him, and that led to all of us. She did it, she said, because all she had to do was shit and eat. She discovered Marvin had an agency, and now Brett had it.

She researched us to brag on us saving the dog. She did in fact do that while she was with us, said good things about us, but thought Brett might could use a little less eyeliner, told her she had to watch tight shorts when they got sweaty. "You get a camel toe you're not careful," she said. It sounded like a sincere suggestion. Brett gave me a look that said: What the hell?

Ms. Buckner rambled on. She thought Leonard was good-looking for a colored man. Said she always voted against any politician if he smiled too much. She told us a lot about herself, pretty much everything there was to know except her personal laundry tips.

"This granddaughter," I said. "I take it you two had special feelings about one another."

That reeled her in a little.

"I understood her," she said. "I had been the black sheep of the family years before, and now she was. Modeling and journalism, any plan but marriage and being Suzy Homemaker, wasn't something my daughter Kate understood. Maybe that was my fault. I didn't set a good example for her. I had this stupid idea when I was younger that art trumped all things, including family. I thought I had great talent and great pride, but what I had was hubris. I still have a substantial dose of it."

"Oh, you don't say?" Brett said.

"You are a shit, aren't you?" Ms. Buckner said.

"Takes one to know one," Brett said.

"I was a bad mother, no doubt. I was always worried more about me than her. My daughter wouldn't have anything to do with me. She treated me like gas from a calf's ass after she left home. Not that I blamed her. She wanted things more conventional. Damn if I didn't outlive her. Cancer got her. Self-righteous and proper and all that, praying all the time, and she ended up wired up like a spaceman and easing away in inches and shitting in a bag. I saw her right near the time she died. I thought we might at least close our ledger. Kate didn't even know who I was. Poor thing, she looked then like I look now, and she was middle-aged. That cancer sucked the juice right out of her.

"My granddaughter had done the right things, gone to school, got a degree. Stuff her mother ought to have been proud of. Better than what I'd done by a long shot. But Kate thought Sandy should be going to college not for a BA but instead a MRS. Didn't matter. The degree didn't work out, but Sandy took a job. She was like this one." She nodded at Brett. "A pistol."

"How was her eyeliner?" Brett asked.

"A little heavy, you want to know the truth. I say go big, but don't go giant. Look like you'd like some action, but not like you're ready to pull the train on the local football team."

"So she was a pistol," I said. It was an attempt to get things back on track. I knew Brett. Once she decided she didn't like someone, it was hard to steer her out of a path of hit and run. Or, rather, hit and back over the bleeding corpse.

"Yep. She was indeed a pistol. Had all the chambers loaded, too, just like this one said. I liked her for that. I tried to help her here and there. I think she appreciated it. It was hard to tell. I think somewhere in there she had her own plans and thoughts, and I think she had a hard time expressing love and appreciation. I'm like that. You start showing me affection, I start waiting for the other shoe to drop, the trap to close. I don't know how to deal with it. Enough maudlin shit. I've told you everything but my shoe size."

"Would be about a man's ten, wouldn't it?" Brett said.

"That's just mean, girl," Lilly said to Brett. "Weight and shoe size on women is hitting below the belt."

"I know," Brett said. "I thought you had it coming."

"I may have. It was something I would have said for sure. Look. Enough shit. I want you to find out what happened to her, and bring either her or her bones back if you can. I need to know."

Experience gave me a thought. I said, "Let me ask you something personal. Did you ever loan her any money, give her any money?" I asked.

“Not exactly,” she said.

“Let me put it another way. Did she ever take any of your money without asking?”

“I suppose you could say that. She took some things from my safe. Some of it was money, some of it was securities, things like that.”

“How much money?”

“About fifty thousand dollars.”

“Damn,” Brett said.

“Yeah,” Ms. Buckner said. “Damn.”

“And the securities?” I asked. “She cash them in?”

“Forged my signature, worked her charms, I guess.”

“You didn’t look at that a little askew?” I asked. “That seems to me to not be doing everything right. A common name for someone like that is goddamn thief.”

“She needed the money. Like I said, she had pride. She didn’t know how to ask for it, so she took it. I think she would have paid it back. I think she meant to, anyway. Hoped she could. But then something happened. I’m guessing she got in some kind of trouble and had to have it and was afraid if I didn’t give it to her things could be really bad. Whatever those things were, she didn’t want to tell me.”

“Sounds like to me it’s what Hap was saying,” Brett said. “She’s a thief who stole your money.”

“Maybe,” Ms. Buckner said. “Maybe she did. I don’t care. I loved her, and I don’t love much, other than animals. I’ve had cats and dogs, and I loved them. Now I don’t have any. Outlived everything I ever loved, it appears, and who the hell wants to get up early to take a dog out to shit? At my age I’m not adding anyone or anything new to the mix. The rest of the world can go to hell. Except for Sandy. Maybe she didn’t always show good sense, even if I think she had it. I still want to find her.”

Then she gave Brett a financial retainer and went down the stairs, doing that elephant walk with the one-tap-shoe sound. She had to struggle down the stairs in the way she struggled up. I think Brett would like to have helped her down by kicking her in the ass. I sort of wanted to give her a piggyback ride myself.

She was salty as a bar nut, but I got to tell you, I appreciated that. I like people with a little spice, even if it gives me a bit of heartburn. I looked out the window and saw her work herself into a vanilla Mercedes and glide it out of the lot, not bothering with the exit. She drove right over the curb with a thump, and then she was on the road. The middle of it. She struggled the car along without running over anyone, though she narrowly missed a parked car and a wandering squirrel.

She got to the end of our street, turned in front of brake-grinding and horn-screeching traffic, and maneuvered away slowly, like a blind turtle, until she was out of sight.

6

"For someone who talks tough, I think she was all flatulence and no guts," Brett said. "Letting her granddaughter off the hook like that."

"Flatulence?"

"I was trying to class up our conversations."

"All right," I said. "But you should have said 'all flatulence and no intestines.'"

"It's so rare you're right," Brett said. "But when you are, you are."

We were lying in bed at home and had just finished what Ms. Buckner had called the dirty dog.

"I think she's tough, all right," I said. "I just think her granddaughter, Sandy, is her soft spot."

"Like Leonard is yours?"

"You and Leonard," I said. "Though maybe I'm Leonard's soft spot. If he was any tougher he'd be made out of leather and stuffed with nails. He should have been dead several times over, but he's too tough to die. He's waiting to get old so he can whip death's ass."

"You've survived your share of bad moments," Brett said.

"With Leonard it was toughness, with me it was luck."

"He's not always so tough."

"You mean lately?" I said.

"Yeah, the stuff with John," Brett said. "How does a gay guy stay a conservative, by the way? John's brother is a big-ass Republican, and he's always thumping the Bible and telling John he's going to go to hell for being gay."

"Well, Leonard has been hit in the head a few times," I said. "That could account for something. Frankly, he's been changing his political affiliation as of late. Thinks Republicans have become assholes, so he moved to the Log Cabin Republicans."

"That the gay Republicans?"

"Yep. But then he thought that was too much of 'an elite' club, so he's become a Libertarian."

"Aren't they just mean-spirited I-got-mine-and-fuck-everyone-else Republicans?"

"A lot of them are. But they're more like the old Republicans—least that's the way Leonard aligns himself. Eisenhower without a heart. He fits there."

"Except when he doesn't," she said. "He can have a pretty big heart."

"Yeah," I said. "He can. You vote Republican, don't you?"

"You've never asked before."

"No. But I've wondered."

"I don't really have a party I like," she said.

"Who does?"

"I vote mostly Democrat, though I voted for Reagan, to my regret."

"I don't fit neatly with either side," I said. "We're all like goats if we're honest. We find our pastures but we love to put our heads through the fence and nibble a bit of the grass on the other side. No one fits anywhere perfectly."

"I don't know," Brett said. "I can think of one place you always fit perfectly."

"Oh, you flatterer," I said.

"Yeah, well, I figured I needed to throw in a compliment so you wouldn't worry too much about me faking an orgasm now and again."

"Nice," I said. "The old lady got that on your mind?"

"I guess. Talk about soft spots: now you have a new one. Buffy."

I turned my head, looked at Buffy resting on one of the doggie beds we had bought her. We had one downstairs, one at the office, and one here, upstairs in our bedroom. She had to be coaxed to come upstairs, and then when she did she stayed there until we invited her outside to go to the bathroom. She seemed frightened to ask for the outdoors, the way a dog will do, poking you with its nose, wagging its tail, and barking. We had to take her out at regular planned intervals so she wouldn't hold it in. I felt like she'd do that until she burst.

"Stop overfeeding her," Brett said. "You're acting like a southern mother."

"She seemed a little skinny to me," I said.

"Well, you got her back on track now," Brett said.

I pulled Brett close to me. "Off topic, but have you been wishing you hadn't bought Marvin's business? Nursing was at least regular."

"I did wake up this morning wishing I could pour shit out of a bedpan, but other than that, and the long hours and the yelling doctors and men trying to put their hands on my ass and up my skirt, I'm not missing it as much as you might think. Besides, I got a nest egg for us. I can afford time off."

"I don't want your nest egg," I said.

"I know that. But it's there anyway. It's our nest egg. What's mine is yours."

"I found that out just a short while ago."

"You did, didn't you?"

"You know what I miss?" I said.

"What?"

"Leonard, damn it."

"Yeah. Me, too. He's so cute when he wants his cookies."

"Family couldn't afford a lot of extras. He'd go to his uncle's house, and Uncle Chester always had vanilla cookies and Dr Pepper on hand. I think it's a comfort food."

"That explains things."

"Yeah. You know the hats he likes to wear?"

"Childhood something or other?" she asked.

"No. He's just an asshole. I thought I should remind you of that before we became too nostalgic for him not being here."

"He is at that, but you can sure see the kid in him when he wants those cookies."

"He has eyes like Buffy's," I said.

"You're right. He really does. He was messy, ate all the cookies, drank up all the Dr Peppers, interrupted us during sex by knocking on the door, knowing full well what we were doing in here, and he stayed up and played the TV loud downstairs, left his dirty drawers on the floor between his room and the living room. Left them so I could get them washed."

"You made me do the wash," I said.

"I know, but I had to point the drawers out to you," she said. "Shit, aren't gays supposed to be neat and listen to show tunes?"

"Just the ones who do," I said.

"Still, I miss him."

"Me, too," I said. "Should I see if he wants to come back?"

"Not on your life," she said.

7

The car lot was called Frank's Unique Used Cars. It was off the major highway that ran through the center of town, Highway 59. In the town itself the highway had a street name until it came out on the far side in a wide band of concrete heading north. The car lot was tucked in near a bank and a money-managing firm, a stone's throw from a Burger King. It was a big lot, and the cars were in fact unique.

I had driven by there many times and seen those fine old cars, but it just then registered with me how rare and fine they actually were and how often I had looked at them. It seemed odd for our town to have that kind of business. Most guys I knew drove pickup trucks with dogs riding in the back, tobacco spit sprayed along the side of the truck, splattered like some kind of poorly executed racing stripe. Those trucks were frequently festooned with stickers about how proud the owners were to be rednecks and how they were going to cling to their guns until they were pried from their cold dead fingers. They often had stickers with beer and whiskey labels on the trucks as well. I guess they kept a dog in back in case they needed a designated driver.

The fancy cars were all parked out front on the lot, but you could bet they went into the huge building behind the office at night. It was a three-story building, and it looked like anything but a car lot. It had once been a fancy hotel. The bottom-floor wall had been knocked out and fixed with big aluminum doors, but the top floors were still the same, with broad windows and white shades over them. Not enough people came, so it closed down. Few years back it got a sweep-out and paint job, and its parking space became the car lot. A modern single-story office building had been built out front of the hotel, behind the display of cars, the glass reflecting the lot and anyone on it.

Leonard and I cruised by a couple times in a beige BMW we had rented from a place in Tyler so as to look prosperous. We were checking things out. Finally Leonard pulled us into the lot. Before we went inside, Leonard said, "I've driven by this place often in the last few years. The cars are still the same cars."

"Guess it's possible they are different cars that look like the same old cars," I said, "but I was thinking exactly the same thing."

We went inside, out of the intense summer heat. The office was large, a kind of showroom, mostly glass, but with no cars on display inside. It had the kind of glass that was hard to see through from the outside, appeared dark, but inside the glass had a different effect—you could see the outside clearly. A large part of the ceiling was made of glass. You could see clouds rolling by. It was bright inside and very air-conditioned, cool as a penguin's ass on an ice block. The sweat began to cool-dry against my skin.

"You'd think they were selling igloos instead of cars," Leonard said.

In the center of the room was a big clear plastic desk. At the desk sat a golden-haired beauty of a woman with two large, round tits from the tit store, firm as rocks. She had a nose by someone other than genetics and a lot of experience looking at her own reflection in the mirror, knew how to tilt her head just right, when to let go of her smile, like she was holding back a bomb until it was right on target. She let that bomb drop when she saw me looking at her. She was a lady who knew her chickens. Leonard, of course, was not going to be impressed. He was already scouting his eyes around for a male salesman that would be the lovely lady's equivalent, but none was visible. In fact, no one else was around but us and the blonde.

Just for the record, when it comes to tits and noses, I'm not one of those who worry about if they're real or not. If it doesn't appear to have been glued on, nothing falls off during sudden moves, and the smile doesn't look like a Great White gliding down on a tuna, it's okay by me. I'm true to my baby, Brett, but I have never lied about the fact that I got this whole biology thing going on, and I like to look, and this lady was well worth looking at. I imagined Brett looked at men, too. She could appreciate a nice shape, which is what makes me wonder why she stays with me. I like to think it's my massive pecker.

When the blonde stood up she looked even better. The surgery work had been mostly subtle. She wore a blue western-style shirt and a dark brown cowgirl skirt that was cut short, a little longer in back than in the front. I couldn't see her rear, but I had a feeling that dress was pressed against a butt firm as a fresh-picked apple. She had long, spray-tan legs that were lightly oiled and inviting. She wore red-and-blue cowboy boots with shiny white moons on the toes. The heels were high, even for boots, and when she walked, she knew how to do it. Had that runway-model approach. As she got closer I saw she was older than she looked from a distance. Not all her face had been sculpted. She had some corner-of-the-mouth creases, a few lines around her eyes, and a crimp on her forehead like she was about to make a decision. The lips were nice, and the cheekbones were high. I like to believe those were natural.

Me and Leonard were dressed in our most expensive casual duds, which were so seldom worn both of us had to send a posse into our closets to find them. Our outfits smelled a little dry, like old wallpaper in a damp room. The boots she was wearing were worth more than what both of us had on, right down to socks and shoes and all that was in our wallets, including the change in my piggy bank back home. I actually have one. A pink pig. I think it's precious.

It was a goodly walk to where we were. As she strolled, Leonard said, "She looks like your type, and I'm going to tell Brett if you smile too much."

Within a few seconds she was in front of us, standing in a way she knew was killer, one leg slightly in front of the other to accentuate her legs and hips. Of course, why anyone would stand like that normally is impossible to figure, but like I said, it had the desired effect.

"Can I help you gentlemen?" she said. She had the sort of southern voice that's a little bourbon-soaked and so smooth you'd think butter wouldn't melt in her mouth but a lie could happily live there. She let loose that bomb of a smile again.

I turned on what charm I had left, showed her my smile. At least I had all my own teeth. Except for the wisdom teeth. They were long gone, top and bottom. I have suggested many times that what was wrong with my life might be just that. No wisdom teeth.

"We'd love to talk to you for a moment," I said. I was so friendly and cheerful I wanted to pull up a chair and listen to me.

"Would you like to go out on the lot?" She posed that like it was a question up there with a possible discussion of string theory, and that the two of us might really have something profound to add.

"Actually, we're not here to buy one of those cars," I said.

"Oh," she said. "We do sell cars, you know."

"Yes, but I'm assuming you have others, ones not on the lot," I said.

"Of course. Come sit at the desk and we'll chat."

We followed her over. I watched her buttocks wrestle in the tight skirt. Both sides of her ass seemed to be holding their own. She indeed had a firm-apple butt, and the skirt fit tight, as if it and the ass were one and the same.

She took her chair, and Leonard and I took the two chairs in front of the desk. Those chairs were like settling down on a cloud. I felt sleepy the minute I got situated. I could feel the sweat freeze-drying at the small of my back.

“I’m Frank,” she said.

“Hap,” I said. And Leonard gave his real first name, too. We didn’t offer last names. If it came to that we had already worked up some lies—Wilson and Smatter. He was Wilson, I was Smatter.

“Hap. That’s an odd name,” she said.

“It’s rare,” I said. “You don’t look like a Frank.”

“Actually it’s Frankie,” she said and shifted her legs so that I could be certain she was all woman, let her foot hang so she could dangle one of those fine boots. “But everyone calls me Frank. I thought it sounded better for the business.”

I doubted that. She didn’t seem old-fashioned to me, like she was trying to convince anyone a man ran the business. Maybe she was just trying to appeal to who she thought we were, a couple of male chauvinist pigs she could sell a car to.

I noticed her turning her head to the lot, checking what we drove up in.

“Would your car be a trade, if we were able to put you in a new ride? I must be honest. We don’t give substantial trade credit. It’s not our way.”

“He drove his car,” I said, indicating Leonard, “but I’m the one who’s come to buy a car. I wanted him to check them out with me.”

“He values my opinion,” Leonard said. “Him being my sidekick and all.”

She nodded. “That is so nice, to have a friend that dear.”

“Isn’t it?” Leonard said. “I get loose bowels thinking about it.”

Frank gave him a look that showed she was trying to appreciate his humor.

Easy, Leonard. Pull it back. There were some days when you just didn’t know which Leonard you would get. The sarcastically playful one, the deadly avenger with a heart of ice, or the snot-nosed little brother who wants his cookies and Dr Pepper and was easily bored. All the personalities that make up his overall personality were quirky at best.

“The cars on the lot, interestingly, are not for sale. They are showpieces, but we have others like them, and some even rarer. I mean, people can look at the ones on the lot if they want, but only to buy a car like it, not those cars.”

"It's like when you get shown the dessert tray at a restaurant," Leonard said. "They look good, but they're shellacked over and not for sale."

"Sort of like that, yes," she said. "But you said you were looking for something different from what was on the lot."

"I did indeed," I said.

"Well, we have them."

"Good deals?" I said.

"I suppose that depends on how one looks at it," Frank said.

"How would one look at it?" I asked.

"Well," she said, "that depends on your bank account, to be honest."

"Or to be frank," I said.

"Yes, that's a good one, Hap," she said. "A good one." She made it sound like I was the smartest man who ever squatted to shit over a pair of shoes. She was already starting to irritate me.

"Our cars are reconditioned with all original parts, which we have to go well out of our way to find, and that's expensive. We don't use substitute parts or any modern part that might fit, and that is a rarer situation every year. Therefore, each year there is a rise in expense. Hard to find those parts. But for what we have to offer with the cars, and how unique our services are, it's worth it. You can look at one of our catalogs if you like. Not only pictures, but lots of explanation there."

She gave me and Leonard the catalogs. I studied them. Lots of nice classic cars with some very nice classic women leaning against them while wearing only enough to keep from being arrested. In fact, the girls were more prominent than the cars. Redheads and blondes and brunettes, white-skinned, dark-skinned, short, and tall, but each of them so good-looking they nearly brought tears to my eyes.

"There are a lot of side benefits to buying a car from us," Frank said. "If you want them. Were you recommended by anyone? Someone who might have told you about us, recommended our special services?"

I think it was the way she looked, the way she sat, the way she laid out the questions, that made me think what she was asking wasn't exactly what she was saying. I began to get some idea of what we had actually walked into.

I avoided her questions, and asked her one.

"Say we want to buy something to go along with a car."

She didn't even blink. "You don't mind expense?"

"I'm in a good financial position," I said. "Inheritance. Some patents. I'm well-off, to put it bluntly."

Leonard coughed a little.

"Are you all right?" Frank asked Leonard.

"Yeah," he said. "I think I swallowed a moth or something coming in."

"Really?" she said.

"I'm all right," Leonard said. "It was a little moth."

"Goodness," she said.

Her concern for Leonard dying of moth inhalation was brief.

She leaned forward, showing me her cleavage, which I should note was deep enough you might need mining equipment, a good light on your helmet, and some serious camping supplies to go down there and look around.

"What if I wanted something from your catalog?" I said.

"What kind of model are you looking for?" she said, leaned back and arched her back slightly. It was enough to give me a new and exciting view of the Grand Tetons.

"Something in your caliber," I said, and I was surprised to find there was a catch in my voice. I, too, must have swallowed a moth. "The sort of car you would drive, I mean."

"Of course," she said. "A nice, clean, serviceable model." She smiled to show me there was a joke in there somewhere.

Leonard cut his eyes at me. Buffy did that the same way. They really did have the same eyes. I put my attention on Frank. "Exactly," I said. "A nice, clean, serviceable model."

Now Frank laid it on thicker. She lowered her eyes slightly, gave me a sleepy kind of look, the sort she thought I might like to wake up to. Her voice dropped slightly, and you could almost hear panties drop and bedsheets being pulled back in that voice.

"Something sleek and fine-tuned. Something that could make you feel fine-tuned yourself."

"That sounds good," I said. "I mean, who doesn't want to be fine-tuned?"

She looked at Leonard, lowered her eyelashes, and gave him that sleepy kind of look.

"How about you?" she said. "You think you might decide you want a fine-tuned car, too?"

"Absolutely. Something that would just tune the shit out of me would be nice," he said.

She acted mildly shocked at such language, but in a pleasant way, as if she were a preacher's wife who now and then liked to have a beer and have her ass pinched.

“So we’re talking a car for both of you?” she said.

“Oh, yeah,” Leonard said. “I just came as his backup, but now that you mention it, hell, I might as well get one. Whatever he gets, I want one better. Fact is, make it bigger and longer than his.”

“We’ve known each other a long time,” I said. “We’re a tad competitive.”

“I suppose it’s friendly competition,” she said.

“Friendly as shit,” Leonard said.

She smiled that killer smile again, settled back in her chair, and let her gaze hang somewhere in between us.

“Tell me how you heard of us,” she said.

I had dodged that question earlier.

“I drive by here all the time,” I said.

She gave me a stony look. That wasn’t the right answer, but I was still trying to see how much of what I thought was going on was real and how much was my imagination.

I laughed. “Of course, as I pointed out, the merchandise I want isn’t on the lot. I think I’m making myself clear, am I not?”

“I’ve explained about the catalog,” she said. She was beginning to lose some of her giddy sweetness. She was definitely wanting an answer to her question. And the right answer.

“I’ve been told there are some things that come with the cars that aren’t in the catalog,” I said. “Or at least it can be that way.”

She didn’t bite. Just smiled. Not a very good one this time, just enough to show her teeth and wet her lipstick.

“I had a friend tell me about the place,” I said. “He knew a lady named Sandy, and Sandy put him into a good ride at a fair but certainly upscale price.”

The woman narrowed her eyes. “Oh,” she said. “When was this?”

“Maybe five years ago,” I said.

“Who was this man?” she asked.

“Fellow I met in passing,” I said. “At a party. A party Ms. Lilly Buckner arranged. I met him there. Sandy was her granddaughter, and this fellow, the one at the party, he knew her a little. Actually he said ‘a little but well,’ if you catch my drift. Said she worked here. He told me a bit about what you offer.”

“A little but well?” she said. “Kind of a contradictory statement, isn’t it?”

“Not the way he meant it,” I said.

"Of course," she said, but she had grown as cold as the air-conditioning unit since I mentioned Sandy. "We did have a Sandy, but she quit. Stopped coming in, actually. And this wasn't her work station. She was assigned to another office, another division of the business."

"Another division?" Leonard said.

"Another city, but she was here for a while, then she was gone. The other division, in Fort Worth, she just quit showing up there. Can't say I remember her that well. Well, right now inventory is small, Hap, but I'll keep you in mind."

"What about the catalog?" I asked.

"I think I misspoke," she said. "I realize I might not have what you want at all. The other services. Road check. Free tire rotation. That may not be available right now."

"It wasn't my tires I was hoping to get rotated," I said.

"I have no idea what you mean, but I made a mistake. We won't have any cars for a while."

"Not a good way to sell product," I said. "Not having it available after you say you do."

"We don't need to sell many of what we sell to make good money. We're expensive."

"I can afford the expense," I said.

"He can," Leonard said. "He's got patents on sex toys. Nice stuff—he ought to show you the line sometime. What's in *his* catalog is for sale. There's this one—a big purple rubber dick with metal studs on it—that will make you scream like there's a man with a chain saw after you. And me, I got some serious-ass money. A white couple left me their estate. I was their gardener for about ten years. They didn't know that secretly I hated them for their whiteness and called them ugly names behind their backs. Cracker, honky, and such. That old, wrinkly lady, and her having me stud her. Jesus. That was some tough work, I got to tell you. I'd rather have had a job wiping asses in hell. Dropped her drawers, lay down on the bed, that thing of hers looked like a taco rolled in hair rotting on a blanket. Paid all right, though. Still, you had to get past the smell and imagine it was a goddamn donkey to get a hard-on."

I thought: Gardener? White couple? Stud to a wrinkly old lady? Get past the smell? What the fuck?

"Is that so?" Frank said to Leonard. Under her green-eyed gaze I felt like we had gone from two wealthy buyers to a couple of yokels in mud-splashed overalls with cow shit on our shoes and the intellectual level of a bag of busted bricks.

"He's a joker," I said. "He's just not too funny."

"Oh, I'm not kidding. The old man knew how to keep an erection. Viagra. That's the drug for the aged; that's what I'm trying to tell you. I think for everyone over sixty they ought to pass it out for free. Put it in their fucking oatmeal and mashed peas. By the way, do you have a hat to go with that outfit? I think it needs one."

Frank stared at Leonard. I think she wasn't certain what she had just heard. When she was certain, she said, "I do have a hat. It matches the skirt." Then to me: "You have a card? Maybe I can let you know when we have new inventory. I can make my mistake up to you if something comes in."

"That sounds good," I said. "But I'm out of cards. I'll just write down a phone number you can call."

"Very well," she said.

I wrote my number down on a pad with a pen she handed me. I didn't put my last name, just Hap. Leonard didn't bother writing his number or name, just told her to call and make it two, but to make his more expensive and better. The competition thing. But by then Frank was like someone waiting for a train to pass.

I finished the writing, did it carefully, remembering where she had touched the pen. I didn't touch that spot. I looked at the pen when I finished. It was one of a handful in a small, decorative jar on her desk.

"Are these to spare?" I said, holding up my signing pen.

"Handouts," she said.

"Good," I said. "You'll call right away if something comes up?"

"Of course," she said.

Maybe saying there was a party at Ms. Buckner's was my mistake. Maybe she knew the old bat, realized she wasn't exactly a party animal. Then or five years ago. And, of course, Leonard had fucked up any chance I had of rescuing the deal.

We stood up.

Frank said to Leonard, "You must have been some gardener to inherit their money."

"Well, I was plowing a couple of fields in the house, not to mention the garden. I was good, though. I could make an old man scream and an old woman shit herself. I could grow a rose that would kiss your ass every morning and sing you to sleep at night. And petunias—oh, hell, they were so goddamn fine we had a paying tour come by once a year every winter."

"Petunias grow in the winter?" Frank said. She wanted us gone, but she just couldn't help herself. Maybe she was wondering if there was really something to it. A gardener gigolo.

"Mine grew in the winter, and that's why there was a tour," Leonard said. "Nuns. Boy Scouts. Mostly civic people. They were happy as hell to be there and see those petunias. Hybrids. Very special."

"I'm sure they were," Frank said.

We left. I made sure my grip stayed exactly the same on the pen. When we were back in the car, Leonard said, "Talk about going from hot to cold."

"Oh, really? I have patents on sex toys? A white couple left you money for being a gardener? And you secretly hated them and were plowing their fields, making them scream and shit themselves, and to fuck the old woman you had to imagine a donkey? Roses that could kiss your ass and petunia tours in the winter for nuns and Boy Scouts? What the hell, Leonard?"

"We were already burned," Leonard said, starting up the car, easing it off the lot. "I thought I might as well mess with her. I didn't like her."

"I guess you have a point, brother. It was over before we came in the door. I mean, she nibbled at the bait a little but didn't like the taste."

"Yep. She's not going to call," Leonard said. "Our pony stumbled into the ditch when you mentioned Sandy. And I think mentioning Ms. Buckner broke its leg."

"And you shot the pony in the head with that gigolo-gardener crap," I said.

"Someone had to put our bullshit pony out of its misery," he said. "It was kind of funny, though, wasn't it?"

"No."

"Hap?"

"It wasn't."

"Hap, come on, man."

"It was amusing to some degree. The old woman shitting herself was a nice touch."

"Told you. And I don't believe she had a hat to go with that outfit. I would have a hat with something like that. I like a good hat. She had a hat, she'd have had it on."

"You see her keep looking out at our car?" I said.

"I think she was memorizing the license number."

"If she's got the contacts, and I bet she does, she'll find someone who can trace it to a car rental."

"Yep. We're fucked on the secret-agent front," he said. "We were better at sexing chickens back at the chicken plant."

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "I couldn't tell a chicken wee-wee from a dee-dee. I could make a good aluminum chair, though."

"And I was a good bouncer."

"Until you got fired for kicking that guy's ass and peeing on his head."

"Yeah," Leonard said. "They thought that was excessive. Bunch of weenies. You know what we did do well? Rose-field work."

"We did. But it was hot in the summer and cold in the winter."

"Seasons work like that, Hap. It's not uncommon. Sometimes it rains, too."

"We're not actually too good at anything, are we?"

"Sadly, I was just thinking that," he said.

Leonard drove us to the office. I never let go of that pen. We pulled up in the lot. The sign for our office had changed, of course. It said BRETT SAWYER INVESTIGATIONS. That was done right away, and Marvin did it. He had to make sure no one thought he was working both sides of the street.

Just for luck, I checked for the bicycle lady and the shorts she likes to wear. She has a very successful store downstairs. You wouldn't think you could sell and repair that many bicycles, but then again, you got to see her in those shorts so much of the time. They make men and some women want to buy a bicycle or a hippopotamus, and catching sight of her in those sweet little things is as fine and satisfying as a tour of petunias in the dead of winter.

Neither she nor her shorts were on display. There were no petunias, either. Not that I'd recognize one if I saw it.

8

When we came into the office the air-conditioning hit us in a pleasing way. It wasn't as savage as the air in the car-lot office, but it was showing summer some anger. The couch was pulled out, and Brett and Buffy were asleep on it. Brett woke up when we closed the door but only moved a bit and didn't open her eyes.

Buffy raised her head in a tentative manner, like she was expecting a beating. When she looked like that I wanted to drive over to that fellow's house and pull him out of it and kick him around the way Leonard and Marvin had. I wanted to see him on a daily basis and do just what he had done to a helpless, loving dog. I wanted to see him flinch every time he saw me. I guess that made me the same as him. Naw. He's a grown-ass man. A dog expects to be loved. And deserves to. Any man that would kick a dog like that ought to have a knot jerked in his dick, the kind that could only be untied with a butcher knife.

"Been a tough day, huh?" Leonard said to Brett.

Brett cocked one eye open and left it open. The other eye finally followed.

"I didn't have a pillow, and the mattress is a tad lumpy," she said, "but I'm tough. I can handle it." Brett rolled over and put her feet on the floor, smacked her lips, and yawned. She had on jeans and a loose T-shirt. Her red hair had been pinned back, but part of it had come loose and hung across one shoulder. "Girl has to keep up her strength. Besides, I wanted Buffy to learn how to snuggle."

"How'd that work out?" I asked.

"It's a little like hugging a mahogany end table. Her legs stick straight out and go stiff. But she was sort of getting into it when you two interrupted us. How'd your morning go?"

"Not sure," I said.

"It does seem as if there's more than the car business going on there, though," Leonard said. "Fact is, I don't think the car business is going on in as big a way as monkey business."

"I'm not a fan of monkeys," Brett said. "Apes I like. Monkeys not so much. I think it's the screeching."

"Both monkeys and apes throw shit," I said. "I think we had some thrown at us today."

"Why are you holding that pen like that?" she asked.

I went to the desk drawer, where I knew there was a box of plastic bags we had bought for a variety of reasons, evidence being one. I unlocked the drawer with my key, which Leonard did not have a copy of, and put the pen in a plastic bag and left it in the drawer. I said, "I'm going to take advantage of our friendship with Marvin and see if I can get him to run the prints of a certain well-turned-out lady ape who I think may be selling more than cars and is the one who flung a lot of shit on us."

"Oh," Brett said. "How well turned out?"

"Nothing you have to worry about," Leonard said.

"No offense," Brett said, "but you aren't exactly the best judge of female flesh."

"You got a point there," he said.

"She was all right, but not my type," I said.

"I'll accept that," she said.

"On the other hand, maybe she thought me and Leonard were boyfriends," I said.

"If she did," Leonard said, "and I find out, I will personally set fire to that place, then shoot you."

I got comfortable in one of our nifty new chairs, said to Brett, "I think it's a place that gets a lot of people walking through the lot, but very few people ask about buying. I think they sell some cars but reckon they are mostly taking recommended clients, and it has to do with something besides automobiles. I got the vibe they were selling prostitution, but for all I know they got a big cookie-baking deal on the side, and that's what they're selling. I tried to make Frank—that was her name—believe I was a potential prostitute user or cookie buyer. Being with Leonard messed that up. He's like bringing a wolf to a butcher shop. He just can't help himself. He was all up in the pork chops."

"Oh, now you're blaming me," he said.

"I tried to sell us both, but I wasn't having any luck. Leonard was a bump on a log. He had nothing worthwhile to offer except claiming to have gotten an inheritance from rich white folks for his gardening expertise and bedroom prowess. Said he gave tours of his petunias. In the winter. He said I had patents for sex toys."

“I wish you did,” Brett said.

“He’s just pissed his charm didn’t do it,” Leonard said. “That he didn’t have any.”

“A little of that, yeah,” I said.

Brett said, “No one should really let you guys out without a leash. And really, Leonard? Petunias?”

“I thought it made me sound sweet,” he said.

“That’ll be the day,” I said. “And his story was a lot worse than that, but I’ll spare you the details.”

I got up and plucked us bottled waters from the little fridge. We all sat down and sipped water while me and Leonard told Brett more about what we may have found out. It all seemed less likely by that point. Frank hadn’t really said anything incriminating, not actually. I began to think I had imagined a connection between cars and prostitution and Sandy’s disappearance. I might as well have thrown in a Bigfoot sighting.

“It sounds way too precious,” Brett said. “A car lot that sells poontang to rich people. Why bother? Why not just set up a simple escort service?”

“The cars are the lure, and the word gets around through satisfied customers. Expensive cars and expensive women. It could be a gold mine for them.”

Brett shook her head. “I don’t know. It may be monkey business, but it may be a totally different monkey than the one you’re suggesting.”

“Could be,” I said. “But high-end clientele do things in different ways. No dimly lit massage parlors with stained towels or street-corner hookers with more germs than the Centers for Disease Control. That’s too raw for them. This is elevated business for people who are willing to spend serious money. It may be hard to believe, but not only can they attract people from other places for the service, there are lots of people right here in town with money. Some of it is even legal. Lilly Buckner said Sandy came into some good money working for the car company, and then all of a sudden she wasn’t in good money at all, or didn’t seem to be, since she lifted her grandmother’s goods. The good money could have been for the services that came with the car—sex, drugs, a party. I don’t know. Maybe something happened, and she found out something else about the business she didn’t like. Could be she was actually researching what was going on there to do an exposé—going undercover, trying to use that journalism degree.”

“But she got caught?” Brett said.

"And she needed money to run," Leonard said.

"What I'm thinking," I said.

"I'm still skeptical," Brett said. "I mean, a car you can use every day, but this call-girl thing, paying that much money for a car and a one-time hump. No ass is worth that much."

"Except for yours, of course," I said.

"Oh, you are in for so much loving, Hap Collins," she said.

"What I'm saying is it could be like an exclusive membership. Now that you're in the club, the ass is there when you want it. You still pay, but not as much as the first time, because you were buying a car with it."

"Yeah, all right," Brett said. "I hear you. Still skeptical."

"I just want a cookie," Leonard said. "I know they're in that drawer and you have the key."

"What do you think about all this, Leonard?" Brett asked.

"I want the key to that drawer," he said.

"About the car lot and the prostitution business," she said.

"Oh. I think it's what Hap says, and I'd still like a cookie."

"Maybe tomorrow." I said.

"Don't be mean, Hap," Brett said.

"He needs to learn delayed gratification," I said.

Brett opened the drawer with her key and gave Leonard a cookie. He ate it slowly and happily. But he watched carefully as she relocked the drawer and put the key away.

"Dang it," I said. "You broke down, baby."

"Okay, laying the Sandy Buckner problem aside," Brett said, "there has been some good news. The lady who had you snooping on her husband came by and paid her last check and said she was happy with the results, though curiously she's divorcing her husband anyway."

"What?" I said.

"Said she didn't like him keeping secrets from her. But you know what I think? I think the marriage just played out, and she was looking for a way to end it."

"You figured all that because she gave you a check?" Leonard asked.

"No, actually she told me that," Brett said. "Said she was happy for twenty years, or thought she was, and then one morning she got up thinking he was cheating, and he wasn't, but she hoped he was. Said he's devastated and she feels a little bad about it, but she's moving on anyway."

"People are strange," I said.

"I called Marvin to offer him his part of the payment," Brett said, "but he doesn't want it. He says all of it is ours to have. He's keeping himself clear of the old business so there won't be any misunderstandings."

"Does this mean dinner out for me and you and John and Leonard?" I asked.

"Buffy would be alone," she said. "I don't think she's ready for that."

"Good point," I said.

"We could order something and have it here or at the house," Brett said.

Leonard shook his head. "John and I are going to pass. We're working on things. I think I need to sort of hang close. He's like your new dog right now. Vulnerable and confused. And me, I'm not too good at dealing with vulnerable. I kind of see it as a weakness. John comes and he goes. He's on about things. He's off about things. All that shit just makes my ass tired. I'm sick of talking about it, but I want a decision."

"He's vulnerable, like Buffy," I said, "but he acts like a cat."

"Tell me about it," Leonard said. "Just get over it or get on with something else and let me know where you stand. I hate all this back-and-forth bullshit about our feelings and such. My feelings are I care about him and I want to go to bed with him and I want to watch television with him, and now and again I want him to just leave me the fuck alone."

"That's part of the problem," Brett said. "You wanting him to just leave you the fuck alone now and again. Maybe you ought to at least pretend to be understanding."

"I suppose," Leonard said, shifting his butt onto the edge of the desk, crossing his well-muscled arms. "But you know what? Just pull your pants up and get on with it. I get so tired of all the whining. Do what it takes or shut up."

"Oh, that has got to be good pillow talk," I said.

"Pretty understanding and romantic," Brett said.

"Yeah, John don't care for it much," Leonard said.

"Sometimes a little white lie never hurts anybody," Brett said. "Tell him you feel his pain and understand his feelings, and that it's something the two of you will get through together. It might even come true."

"But it isn't like that," Leonard said. "I can't listen to that 'I'm a homo sinner' shit and not want to start tearing up the place."

"I bet that homo thing really goes down tight with the gay community," I said.

"I wouldn't know," he said. "I don't much like any community. I don't want to be part of anyone's goddamn club other than my own. I don't have problems with who I am. I don't want to tell a little white lie about how I understand where he's coming from, because I don't."

"Sometimes you have to lie a little," I said.

"So you lie to Brett?" Leonard said.

Brett was looking right at me.

"I didn't say that," I said.

"You just told me it was a good idea," Leonard said.

"Actually, she did."

"You just said the same thing," Leonard said.

"I was just saying who said what."

"And I'm just saying you were one of those who said what," Leonard said.

Brett was watching this like a Ping-Pong match.

Another five minutes and I had extricated myself from the mess with a few white lies, and Leonard and I left to return the BMW.

Leonard chuckled as we rode along. "Got you, didn't I, brother?"

"That stuff about lying was because of the cookies, wasn't it?"

"Most definitely was. John's not the only one on the fade right now. I am feeling quite vulnerable myself. For cookies."

"At least you're simple," I said.

9

That night I invited Marvin and his wife over after Leonard and I returned the car to the Tyler rental and I got mine back. Marvin said he would come, but not Rachel. I expected that. She hates me and Leonard. We saved her daughter once, and she's appreciative of that, but spending an evening with me would for her be like having her asshole worked over with a plumbing snake.

We ordered from a barbecue joint by phone. I drove over and picked it up about twenty minutes before Marvin showed up. I got Buffy a sandwich as well. Later, I'd take her to the drive-through at Dairy Queen and get her a vanilla cone, a double.

It was a good meal. The sandwiches. Ice tea. We also had some potato chips and a bit of pecan pie that had been frozen since last Thanksgiving. It tasted all right, though. Nobody died. All in all I was off my diet for one night, and I loved it. I felt good enough to give Leonard his cookies had he been there. Back at the office it had been a joke, but now I was thinking about his face and how he had looked. You had to know him well to know the difference, but there was despair there, as much as he knew how to show. Of course, John was the real problem, but a cookie wouldn't have hurt him. Or I could take him to the drive-through and get him a vanilla ice cream cone, too. He'd like that. Maybe tomorrow. I could even roll the window down and let him hang his head out the way Buffy likes to do. Of course, if he knew I was thinking like that, comparing him to a dog, he'd have my ass on a stick.

When we were done eating I went out of the room and came back with the bag with the pen in it. I told Marvin how I had come by it, told him what I suspected, told him about our visit with Frank. What we had said, what she had said.

"Seems pretty elaborate for a call-girl setup," Marvin said.

"What I thought," Brett said. "Ridiculous, really."

"Leonard agrees with me," I said.

"There you have it," Marvin said. "If Leonard thinks so, then we should consider no more. Where is that jackass?”

“Home with John.”

“They’re back together?”

“I think it’s on the fence. One of those with twists of barbed wire along the top. John is feeling gay again and some of his religion and his brother’s influence have faded and in the meantime his pecker has gotten hard, but Leonard doesn’t like it.”

“The pecker?”

“The situation,” I said. “Doesn’t like having to coax John along. Thinks he should just get over it.”

“That time me and my wife had the troubles, I paid for that for years. Sometimes I still pay for it. Not that I didn’t deserve it. Rachel took care of me through my accident, but we were split in a way, even then, because of me messing around. We were together, but we weren’t. I was there. She was there, but we weren’t there together.”

“As a woman,” Brett said, “I can see her position.”

“As a man I can see it,” I said.

“It was stupid on my part,” Marvin said. “One of many stupid things I did. I’m glad we’re back together, but there’s times when Rachel’s giving me the hairy eyeball, and I sort of get the wish we weren’t together, that I’d moved on. And then I think of being without Rachel and I get sick. I’m sure Leonard is going through all that kind of thinking. And I got to admit, he may be on to something. You got to think there’s a point where you either say high five or drown the son of a bitch.”

“So how are things at home?” I asked.

Marvin laughed.

“Don’t ask that,” Brett said, slapping me on the shoulder.

“It’s all right,” Marvin said. “I’m not sleeping on the living room couch anymore. Being back in bed with Rachel feels funny. Like I’m sleeping in a bear’s den and she’s the bear and she’s going to wake up and claw me to death and eat me and shit me out behind the house.”

“Must make for some restless nights,” Brett said.

“It does,” Marvin said. He picked up the bag with the pen in it, turned it around in the light as if he might actually see her prints with his naked eye. “So you want me to run the prints? You believe there’s something to it?”

“I do,” I said. “See if there’s anything on Frank, or Frankie.” I placed her card on the table. “Note there’s no last name on the card, either. Just Frank. The name of the business and a phone number. I left my name and cell number, but like Frank I didn’t leave a last name. I don’t think it matters, I said. I think she made me pretty quick, knew I wasn't legitimately rich. And then Leonard clinched it all with the sex-toy patents and the petunias."

"It's hard to know how to act rich when you've never been," Marvin said.

"Yep," I said. "Anyway, she made me and Leonard and that was it: we were given our traveling papers, and we were out the door."

"All right," Marvin said. "I'll look into it. Might be enough to reopen the cold case on Sandy."

"Do you know anything about that case?" I asked.

Marvin shook his head. "Been gone too long. But I'll look into it this week. My guess is she's growing grass somewhere."

"That's what her grandmother thinks, but she still wants her back," I said. "Even if it's just her bones or a hank of hair."

"I understand."

We had another cup of coffee, and then after an hour or so, Marvin said he had to go. Brett popped some popcorn while I drove Buffy to the drive-through for that ice cream cone. When we got back the dog consented to lying on the couch between us, but she was nervous every time we reached out to pet her. That, of course, made me mad at her previous owner all over again.

Other than that, it was a nice night. The popcorn was a little greasy, and it gave me a feeling of having a knotted rope in my stomach. But hey—compared to stuff that was going to happen, it wasn't so bad.

10

It seemed like forever before I fell asleep, and it seemed a shorter time before I awoke to Brett saying, “We got to go to the office.”

“Didn’t we just lay down?” I said.

“Nope.”

“I feel like I just laid down.”

“Was it night when you laid down?”

“Yes.”

“It’s day now, so you didn’t just lay down.”

“It’s early,” I said. “You own the place. I’m just part-time hired help. I been thinking about calling in a sick day.”

“You’re full-time. And when I go, you go. And you don’t get sick days. Come on, lazybones.”

“But why would I go to the office? I’m not a receptionist.”

“Because I want you there. Either that or you and Leonard can get on the job and find out something about Sandy.”

“We’ll do that,” I said and tried to cover back up.

“And you’ll still get up,” she said.

“What if I offered savage sex?”

“Would it have to be with you?”

“Yes,” I said. “I think it would.”

“Then get up.”

While Brett made coffee, I put the leash on Buffy and took her out, and damn near jumped a foot. Leonard was sitting on our porch swing. He was pushing gently with his foot, back and forth. His skin, normally black as night, looked ashen. He had lines around his eyes and mouth and appeared to have shrunk into himself.

“What the hell, man?” I said.

“John went home last night. I didn’t want to stay in the apartment.”

“So you sat out here and sniffed under our door?”

“Yeah. Did you have barbecue?”

“We did,” I said. “What happened, man? Did John leave angry?”

"I think so. I told him to go fuck himself, because I wasn't going to."

"I'm going to vote he was angry."

"Sounds right. He kicked one of my shoes on the way out and slammed the door."

"More evidence," I said. "What happened to get you in the 'go fuck yourself' department?"

"One whine too many. And then just before we got down to the business, he got on his knees by the bed and prayed to God to forgive him. That set a tone I didn't like. If he had been praying for strength, I could have got behind that, so to speak. But forgiveness? Hell, we hadn't even done anything yet. That wilted my pecker something furious, let me tell you."

"How long have you been here?"

"Since sometime last night. I dozed a little. I woke up, and a raccoon was in the yard. He looked at me like this was his swing."

"It is. He comes here at night. Likes to make it move by swaying from side to side. You're here tomorrow night, he might not be as accommodating. And he has friends. Come in. Have some coffee."

We went inside, me leading Buffy and Leonard. Brett glanced at Leonard.

"Look what turned up," I said. "And I still need to walk the dog."

Me and Buffy went back outside. The heat moved across the morning like an invisible truck, heavy and crushing, and with a hotter engine than the day before. It was the kind of heat that made me feel short and fat and close to the ground. It made me thirsty and made my stomach heavy as lead. I wished for rain, but knew if it came, even if it cooled things, when it passed it would be hot again and, worse yet, humid. Nothing helped but the arrival of winter.

Buffy sniffed where the raccoon had been, then did her business near the edge of the road under one of our trees on a patch of grass. I walked her down the sidewalk for about twenty minutes, then put her in the house, got the shovel from the garage, and cleaned up the dog crap, bagged it and trashed it. Time I got through doing that I felt even shorter and heavier and was sweated up and almost sick from the heat.

Inside we all had coffee, and I had a lot of cool water to boot, hydrating myself and thinking maybe I might move to Maine. I said that once to Leonard, and he said, "If it isn't the heat, it's the Yankees, and I prefer the heat."

You'd have thought he fought for the Confederacy.

Leonard and Buffy rode with us to the office. I suggested we get Buffy an ice cream, but Brett was against it. “She’s been indulged enough. And besides, it’s not good for her, and she shouldn’t have something like that so early.”

“Its not like drinking,” I said. “It’s okay to have a cone before ten. And she’s not driving.”

“It’s important to set a good example,” Brett said.

At the office we gave Leonard some cookies, primarily because he had a shitty night. I gave Buffy one when Brett was in the bathroom. I said to Leonard, “Don’t tell.”

“Only if the key to the drawer is mine when I want it,” he said.

“You are an evil bastard,” I said.

That’s when the phone rang.

It was Marvin. He had some news on the fingerprints.

He drove over and we made more coffee, decaf this time, and got comfortable. Buffy climbed on the couch. She was starting to be bolder. I liked that.

“How’s the new job?” I said.

“Fits me like a G-string,” he said. “Nice and snug.”

“You had to go there,” I said. “Now I’ve got that in my head all day.”

“If you can’t stop thinking about it, call me later,” Marvin said.

Brett came out of the bathroom then. When she saw Marvin, she said, “I was only in there to powder my nose.”

“Of course,” he said.

“I thought I heard the toilet flush,” Leonard said.

“Hey,” she said. “Who gave you cookies?”

“I may have heard the flush below, in the bicycle shop,” he said.

“That fingerprint you gave me,” Marvin said. “You’ll like this. It belongs to a man.”

“Interesting, to put it mildly,” I said. “Frank didn’t look like a man, in spite of the name. Maybe you ought to run them again.”

“Frank, or Frankie, is really one Frank Chesterville from the old days, but she had the tree cut and the stump split.”

“A surprise, but not a crime,” I said.

“It depends on how big the dick was,” Leonard said. “Some things, from my viewpoint, are a criminal waste.”

“You’re going there again,” Brett said. “Lady present, goddamn it.”

“The measurements were not in the report,” Marvin said. “She does have a record, though. I guess that’s right. She? Hormones and operations now put her in the female department. That’s right, isn’t it?”

“Why you looking at me?” Leonard said. “I’m queer, not an expert on every kind of sexual orientation in the world. I look at it simple. You got your good folks and your bad folks. They can be nudists, gays, trans doodads and no doodads, albinos, midgets and giants, black, white, brown, all the colors in between. I keep it simple. I think Frank might be a bad folk."

"I think you meant little people," I said.

"What?"

"You said 'midgets.' I think they like to be called little people."

"Fuck you," Leonard said. "And fuck the little people, too, right down to the ground. And piss on their little hats."

"Little hats?" Brett said.

"Oh, he is fussy today," I said.

"I just thought you might know what was what," Marvin said, shrugging his shoulders, looking at Leonard.

"So what's the past crime Frank committed?" Brett said. "You didn't wind up with her fingerprints in the system for nothing."

"You'll love this," Marvin said. "When she was a he, she was a pimp in Fort Worth. High-class, but a pimp nonetheless. Ran a tip-top joint, had people who took care of bad company, throwing them out, giving them an attitude adjustment now and then. No leg breaking, stuff like that, just kind of rearranging them for a moment. Keeping it all clean and calm and profitable. But Frank got nailed for pimping, did a little time and paid a fine, got out, had the sex change, and maybe changed her life. She may have gone on to better things and is a fine example of humankind and only works at the car place to finance her research into the elimination of cancer. Or maybe not."

Marvin paused.

"You want someone to ask, 'What do you mean "maybe not"?' don't you?" Leonard said.

"Thank you," Marvin said. "Frank did have a minor problem later with a man who said she was trying to blackmail him. That got swept under the rug, though. I think the guy got over being mad and started worrying about what his wife would think about some film that may or may not have been taken of him doing the sweaty-sheet wallow. He decided not to press the issue."

I thought on that a moment. "I don't know for sure she's still pimping, but it sounded like it to me. She was talking in a way where I could keep asking until I got the answer I needed. But I spooked her. I wasn't a guy with money, and she smelled a rat."

"Well, this isn't my problem just yet," Marvin said. "No crime is known. I'm just giving you a little information on the sly. If it comes to something, let me know. Frankly, I don't really give a shit if she's selling ass, as long as no one is underage or forced and they're keeping clean and not spreading disease. But you know, the law is the law, so if I should know it for a fact, I got to act. Blackmail is involved, that's a different matter. That one bothers me, and I damn sure need to know about it should you find out."

"Our business is finding Sandy," I said. "That's it. Wherever it leads."

"From what you've told me," Marvin said, "if Sandy went to work for them peddling tail, it's possible she moved on. Maybe she just didn't want anything to do with Grandma, and Grandma thinks she's dead, but she's moved on to be a hairdresser in Fort Lauderdale."

"That's possible," Brett said. "But I bet Grandma, who is, at least by her own admission, tech-savvy, has searched for her. It's harder to hide these days than it used to be."

"But not impossible," Marvin said. "People do it every day."

"We'll find her," Brett said.

"I love my girl because she's an optimist," I said.

"One week on the job and she's Sam Spade," Marvin said.

"Sammy Spade now," she said. Then looked at me, said, "You and me, baby, we need to talk."

"Honey, even if you were a horse in a past life, I'm satisfied," I said.

"I'm not sure what to think about that," Brett said. Then she whinnied.

11

We have this friend named Cason Statler. He works for a dying newspaper in Camp Rapture, which isn't far from LaBorde. He's one of those dark-haired guys that looks like an underwear model but is tough as sandpaper. Been in the military. Been to war. I don't know all the details, but he's done some things that have given him hard bark, even if it doesn't show right away. I like him.

Brett, on the other hand, thinks Cason's a little too free with the ladies, plays the field too much, but my take is if he's not making any promises to anyone, then so be it. Make it clear, and everyone knows the lay of the land, then it's all good if everyone is in agreement. Doesn't matter in whose garage he's parking the car.

We drove over to Camp Rapture and caught him at the newspaper. He didn't even ask for time off, just came with us. We wheeled over to a coffee shop downtown, where a very nice-looking, bouncy blond waitress wearing a short dress with barber-pole-striped stockings up to her knees put the hustle on Cason. Me and Leonard might as well have been extra chairs. Cason was polite with his smile, gave it to her freely, then ordered all of us coffee, and when she went for it, he said, "So you want me to be an operative of sorts?"

We had explained a bit of it to him as we drove him from the paper to the coffee shop.

"That's about the size of it," Leonard said. "Thing is, man, we don't know what's going on. It might be a legitimate car lot that sells expensive cars and we just looked like old biscuits, not new bread, so she was willing to let us pass. Then again, maybe Frankie was hiding something."

"Here's the thing," I said. "Frankie used to be Frank, but now she looks like a retired movie star planning a comeback. I don't know which way she swings. Men, women, zebras, or moose. But we think if you put on some nice duds, you got the look that says money, and you got the look she'd like if she likes men. I can't tell you which end of the farm she works. I don't know if she's hoeing potatoes or corn."

"What am I getting out of this?" he asked.

"The satisfaction of finding out if the place is actually a front for a call-girl service or something else nefarious. It's got a stink all over it. You could write a damn good article or two or three on that. We think that's what Sandy was trying to do—write an article."

Cason thought that over. He sipped his coffee, thought it over some more. "I could use a good article. I could make a series out of it if it's any good. Last piece I wrote was about the blueberry festival. Bad year. Lots of rot."

"There's always the cabbage festival next year," Leonard said.

Cason nodded. "Might be something there, except we don't have a cabbage festival."

"You could write like there's one," Leonard said. "Like it was a huge event, and everyone reading will think, shit, I missed the goddamn cabbage festival."

"No," Cason said. "I don't think so."

The waitress came with the coffee. She made some small talk, and we tried to make some with her, Leonard and I being witty and all, but she didn't think so. On the other hand, there wasn't anything Cason said that wasn't interesting to her. He asked for some Sweet'N Low. She went away and got it and was back faster than I could pour cream in my coffee.

Cason managed to end their conversation politely. When she left we noticed one of the artificial-sweetener packs had her name and phone number on it. This did not seem to take Cason by surprise. He stuck the packet in his shirt pocket without so much as blinking.

Okay. Maybe Brett was right, and he was a little bit too much of a player. Or maybe I was jealous he was so attractive to women. Leonard, of course, just thought it was funny. Hell, I think he had a mild crush on the guy.

"What we'll do is set you up with a rental," Leonard said. "Nice car, a bit of spending money. But please don't spend it."

"I may have to," he said.

"Only if you have to." I said. "Brett's money."

I took a moment to tell him that we weren't working for Marvin, how things had changed.

"How much money?" he said.

"A thousand," I said. "Plus the rental. You may have to get that in Tyler. That's what we did. But she might check the license plate."

He nodded. “I won’t need a rental. I know a brunette lady who has a very nice old Jag. She’ll loan it to me.”

“All you have to do is wash it when you finish,” I said.

“Maybe a little more than that,” he said. “Still something that will get me wet, but nothing that hurts my feelings.”

12

Cason told us he would start the next day, as he had a loose rein at the newspaper, could pretty much come and go as he pleased. He was the only one who worked there who at one point had been short-listed for the Pulitzer, so he was kind of their pet.

Since there was nothing for us to do but wait, we drove over to see Ms. Buckner. I had a few questions for her. It was a simple house with the grass grown up and a mailbox at the curb on a post that leaned a little. The garage was closed up tight where the Mercedes would be resting, ready to threaten cars and dogs and people on bicycles.

Once upon a time there had been a flower bed next to the house. Now it was weeds, and even they looked as if they were hoping for death. There was a stone Negro lawn jockey between the flower bed and the door. I thought he looked very hot and a lot insulted.

“Nice,” Leonard said, studying the jockey.

I laughed at him and rang the bell.

It was hot outside, and it took her about the time it took for a roast to cook in a slow oven before she answered the door. She was wearing a loose white shirt with food stains on it and some yellow stretch pants that fit her a little too well, causing the bones in her hips to stand out. She had on fluffy brown house shoes. She studied us for a long moment.

“Found her?” she asked.

“No,” I said.

“Then what the hell are you here for?”

“She is so endearing,” Leonard said.

“Go fuck yourself,” Ms. Buckner said, glaring at Leonard with two watery eyeballs.

“And her verbal skills are delightful,” he said.

“Kiss my ass,” she said.

“We just need to ask a few questions,” I said.

“I hired you to find my granddaughter, not ask me a bunch of questions,” she said to me. “What’s he doing here, anyway?”

“She liked you better when you kicked the dog abuser,” I said.

“I still like that part,” she said. “But why is he here?”

“Just to be clear, Leonard works with me and the lady you met at the office.”

“She’s kind of a bitch,” the old lady said.

“Wow, that is something,” Leonard said. “If you weren’t old and a woman, I’d punch you in the mouth. Brett’s like my sister.”

“Don’t let the age stop you,” she said. “I can still bounce a little.”

Leonard actually laughed.

“Tell you something,” she said. “I can use a cell phone, take photos with it, work a computer, and I can research on it. I don’t need to call someone to change my TV channels, neither.”

“No one asked you about your technical ability,” Leonard said.

“Just thought I’d throw it out there,” she said. “I wouldn’t want you to think I’m past it.”

“You know, I actually have trouble with the TV-channel part,” I said.

“Of course you do,” she said. “The trick is to actually read and study the goddamn instructions.”

“That’s true. I should do that. The questions I want to ask have to do with your granddaughter. I might get some tips on the remote later, but for now, it’s her I want to talk about.”

“I told you what I know.”

“Okay,” I said. “But would it be okay to ask just a few questions? There’s some things you said that have got me to thinking.”

“Don’t hurt yourself, child.”

“It does strain me a bit now and then, but if I lie down I get all perky again.”

“All right, bring your happy asses inside.”

We escorted our happy asses inside. The place smelled like old people. Or, in this case, an old person. I guess it comes with the territory. The room was way too warm for this time of year, at least for anyone with any skin on them. It was dark except for a crack of light from a split in the curtains, and in that light dust motes were spinning.

She poked a skeletal finger at the couch, and we sat down there. It was a couch so seldom used it was hard. Maybe we were the first ones to ever sit on it. I wouldn’t think Ms. Buckner was the sort that attracted a lot of social visits. Any kind of visits, for that matter. So if Frank did know her, it was no surprise she knew she wasn’t the party kind and that’s why my cover was blown. And then Leonard had that whole servicing-the-old-folks bit going. Sometimes I really did want to throttle him. A lot of people wanted to do that. Only thing was, you had to bring reinforcements if you wanted to make that happen.

"You boys want something to drink?" she said.

"No, thanks," I said. "We're fine."

"Look, I'm trying to be a hostess. I'm going to have something."

"Sure," Leonard said. "Anything."

"You people like orange pop, don't you?" She said this to Leonard.

"We people sho' do likes us an orange, and you got some peanuts to po' in them, that makes it right special."

"Oh, go to hell. I drink them. Good enough for me, good enough for you. What about you, dipshit?"

"Dipshit will have an orange," I said.

She shuffled out of the room, the friction from her house shoes building up enough static electricity on the carpet she might be able to light her stove with nothing more than a touch of her finger.

"Goddamn," Leonard said. "She is just one big ole double-sweet sugar tit."

"Ain't she?"

We waited there in the smelly room with the slit of light and the spinning dust motes for a long time. This would be the crack of light at the window where she looked out and saw what was going on across the street, where she used her cell phone and transferred the video to her tablet with her high level of technical skill. She was probably drinking an orange soda while she did it, like Leonard's "people."

Finally she came back. She had three orange sodas in bottles on a tray she was holding with wobbly hands. When she came over, Leonard and I rescued our drinks, and she took hold of hers with one hand and just let the tray drop to the floor with a clang and a clatter.

"They make those damn bottles too heavy," she said.

She collapsed in a chair. She was breathing hard, and gradually she started breathing slower. Damn if I didn't think she was going to quit on us right there. But she finally came to herself, took a swig of the orange, said, "What's the questions?"

"You said Sandy had done good, gone to school, all that, but then you said something that kind of stuck with me. About her maybe living too high on the hog and having too much money. Did you let something out you didn't mean to?"

"I don't know I meant to or not," she said. "I say most anything comes to my mind these days. I thought I was pretty clear I suspected shenanigans. Damn. This orange is tangy, isn't it?"

“Quite tangy,” Leonard said.

“So was there something?” I asked again.

“I know she was doing a bit of leg spreading for someone, making some money from it. You know, had a sugar daddy.” She paused. “Maybe more than one. I’m not judging her. When I was younger I could do more tricks with a good long dick than a cowboy could with a waxed lasso.”

I was feeling a little ill.

She saw it on my face. “Oh, hell, don’t be such a prude. Look here.” She got up and took her sweet time picking up a thick photo album on one of the end tables by a stuffed chair. She brought it over as if she were carrying the Ten Commandments down from the mountain, put it in my lap, went back to her seat, and did the whole breathing thing again. While she regrouped, I opened it.

After I had been looking a few minutes, Leonard leaned over to look, too. She said, “That’s me. Nearly all those photos. I did some modeling. All we were showing back then in public was some leg and shoulders. In private men got to see a little more if I was in the mood. I was in the mood a lot. I liked pecker the way a chicken likes corn. When you get my age, look back, you got to wonder what that was all about. When the juices dry up the brain works better, at least in some ways. You know, I was actually in Hollywood. Believe that shit? In the old days. It was too vulgar for me, and I gave it up.”

“That must have been some seriously nasty shit out there, then,” Leonard said.

“What I’m trying to tell you.”

I flipped through the photos. My God, even with the fashions then, the hairdos, she was one hot number. Considering the level of the photography at that time, she probably looked even better. She actually did look like a movie star, though a little short for a model. Still, she was the kind back then who would stop a man in his tracks the way a brick schoolhouse will stop a semi.

“I was in some movies,” she said, as if she were reading my mind. “Some of those photos I’m a teenager. Some of the other shots, my twenties, then my thirties. I tried to settle down later, when the bit parts in the pictures played out for me. I was mostly the girl second to the left in a film with a couch audition on Sunday afternoons. I couldn’t act my way out of a paper bag, but I was hell on that couch. That kept me working, if not in any big way.”

“And settling down didn’t work?” I asked.

“Couldn’t keep my legs crossed. I was with every Tom, Dick, and Harry that had pants, and I would have been fine with a man in a kilt. Couldn’t help myself. I liked the men. Now not so much. Nobody too much. Except Sandy.”

“So you’re saying Sandy couldn’t keep her legs crossed, either?” Leonard asked.

“I couldn’t because I greatly loved sex, and I think Sandy did, too. But unlike her, I didn’t do it for money. Oh, I got a coat and some diamonds now and then, a dinner, a play or a movie. A job. But hell. I was going to screw them anyway, so no big deal. By the time I did settle down and get married and had a child, I was almost too tired to fuck.”

“I think that’s a very modern way to look at things,” I said, because I didn’t know what else to say.

“Dontcha know it,” she said, pushing her false teeth forward with her tongue. When she relaxed they jumped back into her mouth like a free throw. “Sandy, though, she might have been doing a little of the other, fucking for the buck. I got that impression. Then suddenly she didn’t have money, and then my money went missing. I know she got it.”

“You think this had to do with the car lot?” I asked.

“Expensive cars like those don’t bring the cheapies around. So I figure that’s how she started selling the old hairy triangle for the big bucks, and then somewhere along the way she either got greedy or got broke, because she played it stupid, took money from me. I like to think she didn’t mean to take it forever, that she would have paid me back.”

I could see the old woman thinking about that. I believe she decided it was too sentimental. She added, “I don’t really give a damn. I can’t spend money in hell.”

“Did you ever meet someone named Frank?” I asked. “A woman?”

“Named Frank?”

“She goes by Frank or Frankie.”

“No,” she said. “I never met her, but I think Sandy mentioned her once or twice. The name Frank rings a bell. But then at my age everything seems slightly familiar and at the same time unfamiliar.”

I looked back at the book of photos, closed it up, looked up to say something but didn’t. Leonard looked at me. I looked at him. I placed the book on the couch beside me.

I drank the orange pop. I was hot, and it was good. Leonard swigged his. We wouldn’t want to walk out and leave the bottles full—didn’t want her to think we didn’t appreciate it, the old witch. The clock on the wall beat out the minutes. We got up to leave and went out quietly, because she had gone to sleep in her chair.

13

"Do you think while she was asleep we should have just gone on and smothered her and set her house on fire?" Leonard said.

"You are not a nice man, Leonard."

"How about I steal the jockey while she's sleeping?"

"It would look very nice in your new apartment," I said.

"Better at the dump."

I drove Leonard to our house so he could get his car. He surprised me by just going home. I guess that business with John had worn him down a bit. Not to mention the unpleasant old lady. He said he was going to see if he could stand to watch *Road House* again, as that usually cheered him up.

Of course he could. It was his favorite movie. I think he had a crush on Patrick Swayze.

I drove to the office. The lady who owned the bicycle shop was outside working on a bicycle chain. She had on those great blue-jean shorts, bless her little heart. Her legs were long and brown, and her hair was long and blond. I studied her as I walked to the stairway. She gave me a smile. It was one of those that said, "You're such a nice old guy."

It was chilly inside. Brett liked to keep it almost as cold as the office at the car lot. First few days she had it turned down to save money, but East Texas summer heat can make you less thrifty. Sometimes someone from up north will come down to East Texas and say, "It's so hot, but living here all your life, I guess you get used to it."

No. You don't. You live in an air-conditioned house, dart from it to an air-conditioned car, then drive to an air-conditioned place. You spend time outside only when necessary. Some summers it's so hot dog crap fries on the ground. I used to work a lot of field work, but not anymore, and I hope never again. It was hard to believe that I had grown up with only a window fan.

Brett was at the desk chair, and Buffy was on the couch. Buffy raised her head to make sure I wasn't that other guy, the asshole who had kicked her.

Brett said, “Hey, we got a couple other jobs. Seem easy to me. Checking on a few things people want to hire us to do they could do themselves but are too lazy to do.”

“That’s good. I guess.”

“Honey, it’s good. We can always use the money.”

“Sure. I was just thinking this current job might be a bit more demanding than expected.”

“You thought it would be easy?”

“I thought the old lady would want to give up when we didn’t find her granddaughter right away. I don’t think so now.”

“You talk to Cason?”

“I did. We’re set.”

“And your talk with Lilly Buckner—I bet that was a soul-enriching experience.”

“Not exactly,” I said. “But I like her. I can’t help myself. I like her because she’s got spirit and spunk and hasn’t lived a life she feels a need to apologize for. I think she lived a tough life and was tough enough to live it and not care what anyone thought about it. Besides, she drinks orange soda. I like orange soda.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Me, either. I forgot. I had one today at her house.”

“How did she and Leonard do together?”

“Like mother and son.”

“That’s a lie.”

“Yes, it is.”

I opened the refrigerator, took out a bottled water. We emptied a bottle, we filled it up in the sink, and cooled it in the fridge. It was the cool we liked. The water is the same, far as I’m concerned. Water that comes bottled—hell, fish shit in it. Ducks shit in it. Birds flying over shit in it. This way I can buy one bottle of water and use the bottle for a while without the payment.

I had marked the bottles with a marker. One mark for my bottle, two for Brett’s, three for Leonard’s, and sometimes I drew a smiley face on his. The dog drank straight tap water we ran into her bowl.

“There’s something else,” Brett said as I sat down in a client chair to nurse my water.

“Oh?”

Brett’s face had a look on it like maybe she had been sitting on a tack and had just decided to pull it out.

“A girl came by,” she said.

“Okay,” I said.

“She wanted to see you.”

“One of the cases?”

“No. But she knows a lot about you and us and that you were working for Marvin before I took over. She said I was pretty.”

“You are.”

“I told her you would be back, but I wasn’t sure when, and it was best to either call or come by. Call would be best. I gave her the office number.”

“Not the home or cell?”

“No. I didn’t like that idea.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know.”

“You think this has to do with the car-lot business?”

Brett shook her head.

“Do I know her?”

“I doubt it.”

“You’re being very mysterious.”

“Am I?” Brett said.

“You are.”

“I guess I just don’t know what to think about it. She wouldn’t tell me anything other than she had to see you.”

“What did she look like?”

Brett hesitated on that one. “She was young. I’m not sure how young. Twenty-five at the oldest, maybe a year or two on either side of that. She’s well taken care of, but a little too thin, I thought. Like maybe she’s missing some meals.”

“On purpose?”

“I don’t think so. She was maybe five nine, though she had on these wedge shoes with big heels, so I’m not sure. She was dressed nice, but nothing fancy. Older clothes well taken care of. Has jet-black hair and is dark-skinned, kind of Hispanic or Indian-looking, American Indian. I think maybe she dyed her hair, though my guess is it’s pretty dark to begin with. She had that brunette look about her.”

“If you say so. Whatever that is.”

“She also had very nice teeth.”

“That’s good,” I said. “If we need her to bite off a bottle cap, she’s ready.”

Brett said, “She had pretty gray eyes.”

"Okay. I still don't know who she is. Did she leave a name?"

"She said she was called Chance, but she'd rather talk to you. So I didn't get a last name. She left, and I watched out the window. She talked to the lady at the bicycle shop a moment, then went out to a bicycle and rode away."

"She bought a bicycle while she was here?"

"I didn't say that," Brett said. "I said she rode away on one. I assume she rode up on it as well. Do you know anyone called Chance?"

I shook my head. "Can't say that I do. Mysterious, no doubt."

"I thought so, too," Brett said. "Buffy liked her. Actually got off the couch, came over, and licked her hand."

"Did she seem to know the dog?"

"I didn't get that impression. I don't think it was anyone working for the dog kicker, if that's what you mean. A daughter. A wife."

"I thought it might have been," I said.

"Didn't seem that way at all. I think she just liked dogs, and the dog liked her. Some people are like that."

I nodded.

"Besides," Brett said, "had she tried to take our Buffy, I'd have kicked her scrawny little ass."

Brett tried to smile after that, but the smile dissolved, like ice melting. I could see she was bothered by something. I went over and put my arm around her. "Here, now. You act like she's death come to visit."

"I know. I can't explain it. But somehow I think in some way she might be in trouble. That she might need us."

"She should have said something."

"I think for whatever reason she's waiting for you."

I didn't know what to do with that remark, and I let it lie.

We hung around for a while, me sort of hoping the dark-haired, gray-eyed girl on the bicycle would come around and solve the puzzle.

She didn't.

Leonard came over a couple hours later. He said *Road House* was as wonderfully bad as he remembered it. That was his way of saying he actually liked it a whole lot. I also knew that sometimes watching that movie was how he got his center back. It may be a hokey movie about a bouncer who has raised bouncing to a high art and reads Jim Harrison, but to tell the truth, in a way, Leonard was just that kind of guy. Only more dangerous. He made the characters in the movie look like the masters of the slap fight.

I had my jogging clothes and shoes at the office, and Leonard had his in the truck, so we changed and took a run along the street, on out to the edge of town and across to the park. It was a pretty place. Filled with pecan trees and a creek. We ran along the path that was by the creek. The late afternoon was still hot, but the shadows from the trees gave us shade. Our shadows piston-pumped along beside us.

There were women in shorts with dogs and Frisbees. Three college jocks were running along ahead of us. We passed them, and one of them said something about how he'd hate to see us die of exhaustion, old guys like we were, or some such thing. Leonard made a kind of circle while he was running, went straight to the guy, and only quit running long enough to punch him in the face, almost right between the eyes. It was a quick punch, a kind of half jab, and coming from Leonard that was still a lick, but it was a lick with a governor on it. Nothing full-bore. But it's all it took for the jock to hit the ground like a lawn dart.

The other jocks stopped running. They checked their man on the ground. He was way down in the deep siesta.

Leonard said, "All right, mice. You can squeak to the police or act like men. He can take it and live with it, and you can let him take it and live with it, or I punch you in the head, too. Which is it?"

No squeaking occurred. Leonard had appealed to their basic manhood. Don't be a squealer. Always a good weapon to attack the male ego; that's where great weakness lies. They were helping their dazed friend up as we jogged away. I think the guy they were picking up was trying to remember if his mom was picking him up from school, or if he had gym class and had remembered to bring his jockstrap.

"Kind of rowdy, aren't you?" I said as we continued to run.

"I just watched *Road House.*"

"It's got you pumped?"

"I didn't tear his throat out like Patrick did to the bad guy in the movie."

"Yeah, after that guy Gazzara just looked like some goof stumbling around. See him rip the throat out of a truly bad guy, and then he fights an old man, a geriatric, and that's supposed to be tense?"

"Wasn't he about our age?"

"Maybe."

"That's what those boys back there thought we were. A couple of geriatrics."

"We're not that old, buddy," I said.

"To them we are. To them, anyone over thirty is ready for the boneyard. Irritates me. How about you?"

"Not today."

"But some days?"

"Some days. But I wouldn't have punched him in the face for that."

"No—I get to do the fun stuff. You have that thing about turning the other cheek."

"What did punching that asshole prove?"

"That I could knock him down," Leonard said.

I took a deep breath and blew it out my nose, picked up my pace. "Could John actually have something to do with your ill temper?"

"He could. He has made me an unpleasant man."

"More unpleasant than usual, you mean."

"True," Leonard said.

We ran for about an hour, then lightly jogged and walked back to the office. When we got there we were sweaty and we stank, but we were breathing fine. Our extra and revised workouts were starting to do us good. It was our plan to do some boxing later, some kickboxing, some shen chuan, then light weights. It's what we called the Master Fucking Plan.

Brett was wearing black workout shorts and a oversize orange T-shirt. She was on a roll-out rubber mat on the floor. She was doing some kind of stretchy thing. Yoga. Zumba. A version of the Elongated Man. I don't know. I kind of liked watching her do it, though. That girl was flexible. I knew that already, but it was nice to be reminded.

That went on for a while, and I enjoyed the view while Leonard fucked up his workout with some vanilla wafers and a Dr Pepper, which, according to our previous discussion, I had to let him have. I didn't even wait for him to ask for the key. I just unlocked the drawer.

Brett saw us. She narrowed her eyes, but I gave them to him anyway. I knew when it got right down to it, Brett was more of a softie than I was when it came to Leonard. She would never actually deny him a cookie. She was the one that always caved first.

I gave Buffy one of the cookies, too.

"Damn it," Brett said.

"She likes cookies," I said.

I reached down and gave Brett one of the cookies in the same way, as she was still on the floor stretching. She laughed and took it in her mouth like the dog. I decided to have one, and she fed it to me.

Leonard, wanting more, held up his hands like paws, but I put the bag of cookies in the drawer and locked it.

"Aw, come on," Leonard said.

“Nope,” I said. “If you sit up only when you get a cookie, that’s not good. You have to do it because it’s the right thing to do now and then.”

I insisted we call Jalapeno Tree for food. I made a phone order. We took turns in the bathroom changing back into our day-to-day clothes, washing our faces and hands. Leonard drove to Kroger to get some large diet sodas for us and some Dr Peppers for himself while we drove to the restaurant and picked up the food.

After that we drove to the Dairy Queen drive-through and bought a vanilla ice cream for Buffy, two scoops. By the time we arrived home, I had forgotten all about the girl Brett told me about. The one who said her name was Chance.

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Leonard wasn't much for talk that night. After dinner he hung around for a short while, but I could tell he wanted to go home. He couldn't be comfortable away from home, because he wanted to be there if John showed up, but if he did show up, he wasn't comfortable with him there. That's love for you. When it's good, it's magic. When it isn't, it just pees all in your soup.

Leonard had pretty much decided John wasn't worth it, and then John came back and gave Leonard hope again, and then he was gone again. Leonard felt miserable. I didn't like John for that, but then again, you hurt Leonard and I'm not always reasonable.

Leonard went home, and while Brett showered for bed, I opened up the envelope Ms. Buckner had given us that day in the office. I had sort of forgotten we had it, which says something for my budding detective skills. I thought about the photos she had shown me at her house, and then I looked at the photos of Sandy in the envelope. I could see how much she favored her grandmother. They were both small and pretty, or at least Ms. Buckner had been pretty many moons ago. I moved the photos around and looked at the police reports that Ms. Buckner had gotten hold of. I wasn't sure how she came by them, but it might have been money that had helped that happen. Some of the last of her real money, back in the days when she had it and thought she'd have it forever.

There were some newspaper clippings about Sandy's disappearance there as well, but none of it meant a thing to me. I moved the photos around again, hoping something would jump out at me. There was a graduation photo. A couple shots that might have been taken in the mall with Sandy in front of one of the stores, one that was surely taken out front of Ms. Buckner's house before it went sad and dark, dusty and old, a tired, paint-chipped Negro jockey looking grim and lonesome by the flower bed. There was even one photo of Sandy with Ms. Buckner. Lilly Buckner still looked older than death in that picture, but she had a smile on her face.

My cell phone hummed. It was Cason.

"You up for some information?"

"Yep. Been waiting. Is it worth anything?"

"I think so."

"Let's have it," I said.

"Okay if I give it in person?"

"Should I put coffee on?"

"Probably won't take that long, but if you have decaf, that would be nice. I don't want to be up all night wrestling with caffeine."

"Milk and sugar?"

"I prefer Sweet'N Low."

"Would you like cookies and for me to wax your ass? Maybe a little hand job?"

"That would be nice, but you have to wear a blond wig and use baby oil."

"Well, you're shit out of luck on that."

"The hand job or the wig?" he said.

I rang off, warned Brett he was coming. She was in her pajamas by then. They were blue and loose and fell down on the tops of her feet. She went up to bed, and Buffy padded upstairs behind her. The dog was looking bigger, bolder, happier.

Like I said, there was something about Cason that Brett doesn't like. I knew I should pay attention to that, but right then, I needed him and his information.

I called Leonard and asked if he'd come over.

"Didn't I just leave?"

"You've had time to watch *Road House* again."

"Not quite," he said.

"John show up?"

"Fuck him."

"Sure. Fuck him. Cason's got some news for us."

"I'm coming over," he said.

It took Cason about twenty minutes. I had the coffeemaker churning in the kitchen. I was outside on the porch in the sweet dark, sitting on the swing listening to the crickets make their racket in the recently mowed grass of the front yard. I used to mow it. Now I hire it done. I guess for someone like me you could call that prosperous. Money got shy, I'd be pushing the mower again.

As I waited for Cason to cross the yard from the curb where he was parked, I could smell that unique smell that pines have when they've been heated all day by Texas summer, then slightly cooled by night, a kind of biting turpentine taste in the air and then in the nostrils and on the tongue. That smell was being carried a long way. I had an oak in the front yard and some sweet gums out to the side. No pines.

"Brett's gone to bed," I said as he came out from under the streetlights and up on the porch. "I'll bring our coffee out here so our talking won't disturb her."

This was a bit of a lie. She wouldn't hear us downstairs as long as we talked in an even voice, but I liked it out there. I liked that pine smell. It reminded me of when I was a kid growing up in the East Texas woods. Smells like that, along with honeysuckle, took me back to when I was young, sitting under a tree reading a book. The world seemed shiny and bright then. I wasn't thinking about trying to keep my life together, about living with failure. I was too young to consider anything but success. The world was my oyster. Since then I felt the shell had closed around me for the most part.

"Suits me," Cason said. "It's a pretty nice night."

Inside I got us two cups prepared, fixed his how he asked, went back out on the porch. He was sitting on the top step, and he turned in my direction. I gave him his coffee and sat on the swing, put my cup on the little metal table in front of me. Brett had bought it at a yard sale.

"This news I have, it's interesting," Cason said. "I don't know what to make of it, exactly, but there's some things in it that float, some others that might float to the surface if we stir them a bit."

"Then we'll stir," I said.

About that time Leonard pulled up in his truck. Unlike Cason, he pulled in the driveway next to our cars. He got out and strolled onto the porch and sat down on the swing with me. The pine smell was going away, and so was the wind that carried it.

"I like coffee," he said.

"Do you?" I said.

"I do. I'm smarter with coffee."

"Not that I've noticed."

"Well, I feel smarter."

I was too tired to jack with him as usual, so I cut it short, went inside, and fixed him a cup the way I knew he liked it, though I decided not to tell him it was decaf. I doubted he'd know the difference, nor would he be any smarter with caffeine. I brought out a bag of vanilla cookies with the coffee. I put the cookies on my side of the swing. There was enough glow from the streetlights for Leonard to see what I had.

"Manna from heaven, encased in a bag," Leonard said. "To me you are like a god."

"Thanks."

"Oh, no," Leonard said, smiling toward the cookies. "Thank *you*."

I turned to Cason. "You think you fooled Frank?"

Cason hesitated a moment. "At first. We got into a little more business than you did. I think she thought I really was a guy looking for a good car and a good escort and a trip overseas."

"Overseas?" Leonard said.

"Yep," Cason said. "That's connected to it. You can stay in the US, but they like this whole overseas thing. I think it makes what they have in mind easier to pull off."

"All right," I said. "How about you tell us what they have in mind?"

"Still a bit of guesswork," he said.

"That's all right," Leonard said. "So far we haven't got much but guesswork."

"I warn you, though, I didn't find out anything about Sandy," Cason said.

"Like you said. Let's stir it and see what floats."

"Cookies first," Leonard said.

I picked up the cookie bag, pulled it open, and shook it at him. Leonard took a handful. I poked the bag at Cason. He held up his hand like a traffic cop. "Don't care for vanilla cookies."

Leonard turned and looked at him but said nothing. I knew Cason had gone down a notch in Leonard's estimation. I was hoping the conversation wouldn't turn to Dr Peppers. If Cason didn't like those, no telling where things might lead, especially since Leonard had watched *Road House* earlier and had already punched a smart-mouth college jock in the face.

"I went in for a little visit," Cason said, "like I wanted a car. Some of this is going to be familiar, but I'll try to hit the spots you know lightly and move on. I don't think you played it quite right when you were there, you and Leonard. They smelled shit in the air, and with me they were sniffing pretty hard. I started out with I had been recommended, saying I heard they sold very nice cars and there were a number of services that went with it. I even gave them a name. Before I went, I looked through the newspaper files stored in the computer until I found some reference to a car bought there, a black Rolls-Royce. Guy bought the Rolls was named Terrence Milden, had oil money out of Beaumont.

He bought a car there, and in this article—some fluff piece about the guy's car collection—his newest purchase was referred to in passing and where he got it. This guy was not so old, but he was retired. He came from Beaumont to here to live. I looked up more about him, asked around, did the reporter snoop, found out he was proud of that money and wanted people to know he had it.

"There were rumors about sketchy deals and such. Liked the ladies, drugs, and so on. Again, rumors, but he struck me as someone might have made a special deal at the car lot. So I talked to Frank like I knew this guy, like he recommended me. You see, he died of some disease or another—cancer, I think. Heart attack, maybe; not sure. I just know he's dead, so it's not like he can be questioned. It was a shot in the dark, but I hit the target. Frank got out the book of cars, all of them way overpriced, and sitting in each or leaning against each of those cars was a woman. Each of them looks so hot it's like the car will burst into flames. She starts talking around it, you know. So I say, 'Too bad the girls don't come with the cars,' and I looked at her and winked.

"She said they might. They could. Making it kind of a joke at first. We eased forward from there, and pretty soon I'm told how there are some nice women who work for their company that love to show buyers how the cars work. I asked what if the buyer was a woman. And Frank, she says there are some nice men who work for the company, too. Said they, too, like to show how things work, make sure everyone understands the product, inside and out. Like maybe I need help finding the clutch. It's like you guys thought. They sell a car, they sell you a girl. If you want to go that far. If they think that's your urge. Otherwise you can just pay too much for a fancy used automobile. They think you got serious money, and you take the car and the girl, you can get that foreign trip as well. I think it's a setup for filming."

"I was in the ballpark," I said.

Cason nodded, sipped his coffee.

"I don't think they're happy with selling just motors and snatcheroo. They want you to keep paying for it for a long time. They're not looking for repeat customers. They're looking for customers they can repeatedly blackmail."

"But what if someone doesn't care?" Leonard said.

"They still get money for the car and the girl, the trip overseas. They can let the blackmail go, they have to. Or they can wreck someone's life for the hell of it."

"What if someone turns them in?"

"Still has to be proved," Cason said. "Or maybe they know exactly how to set someone up they think is trouble, even if that person isn't really doing anything wrong. I don't know all the working parts yet."

"You're overseas, in some foreign country," Leonard said. "Makes you more vulnerable, more at their mercy."

"I got hints from Frank you could go places in the States, too. I think it's wide open. But the main thing is the blackmail. They asked me about my job. How I liked it. I played it up, about how important it was to me."

"To set yourself up for blackmail," I said.

"Exactly. Showed them I had something I liked and didn't want to lose it."

"That fits Frank's past MO," I said. "At least according to Marvin. Once a scammer, pretty much always a scammer."

Cason nodded. "But this scam is delicious, if that's the deal. I mean, I'm filling a lot in here based on a sideways conversation—all the things Frank said as well as the things she didn't say. Once they nail you good the first time, get you on camera, all they need is the blackmail. Though now that I think about it, they figure you're someone doesn't care if you get filmed, then they can keep selling you the girl if you want her. They think you repeat enough, there may be adequate money in that. Those gals in those photos, they don't get backstreet money. We're talking about high-dollar escorts."

"You got a lot from a mild conversation," Leonard said.

"As I was saying, I got some things, and the rest is reporter intuition."

"So you could be wrong," Leonard said.

"About some of it, but I think I read between the lines pretty well. The blackmail idea, that's all speculation, of course. I mean, shit, she's not going to tell me they're going to sell me a ride and some ass, and then add, 'Oh, by the way, we're going to blackmail you so hard you'll be constipated.'"

"But you're in?" I said.

"I thought so. She pulled me up on a laptop right there, saw the job I had. I had to give her my name, you see. Got cornered. Could have given her a false name, but I wouldn't have had the cover. I tried to make out the Pulitzer nomination had led to a big publishing contract on a book I was writing on my time in Afghanistan. But she started pedaling backwards then. That was all stuff in the bush, not in the hand. She knew better. I think she believed I really had been given a recommendation for the place and that I had a job I loved, blackmail material, but she also figured if I worked at the Camp Rapture paper I wasn't making much. Not enough to be driving the car I was in and own it. Not enough to buy their kind of car and whatever else they were selling. She wasn't going to wait for me to finish a book. Frank's smart. She gets you right up to the door, cracks it a little, shows you some light, lets you hear a little music on the other side, but she doesn't let you in if you don't fit all the categories. I could tell she was clicking in that license number on the car I parked outside. I hadn't parked so she could see it, but some guy came out of nowhere, out there on the lot, looked at the car, and walked away. You can bet the license number came up on her computer."

"So you were fucked like us?"

"No. Lady owns it shifted it into my name, and we messed with the dates of purchase. You're not the only one who knows people. It'll only be that way for a few hours, then it goes back to the way it really is, so we don't get caught, but I was hoping that was enough."

"Does this lady of yours work at Motor Vehicles?" I asked.

"Yep," he said. "But she's got some inherited money. We take vacations now and again, on her dime."

Figures, I thought.

"But it doesn't matter," Cason said. "Frank has contacts, too, I figure. Some blackmail victims, perhaps, or someone on their payroll. Might be dropping a few dollars at places where she can get things done, including the DMV. She figured it out pretty quick. She didn't say anything, but I could see it in her eyes. I had been squealed out, or something or other had gone wrong, because she knew from whatever she saw on the computer—whatever that guy in the lot saw and posted when he went back inside. She's getting information in real time while you sit there. Next thing I knew the catalog was closed, I had her card and a promise to call, and I was out the door. It was done so smooth I hardly realized it until I was standing on the lot."

"How it worked for us, too," I said.

"Actually," Leonard said, "our exit was less smooth."

"Thanks to you and the goddamn petunias," I said.

"I fucked it up," Cason said. "I should have spent a few days building a backstory, setting some things up with friends, contacts. I could have made it work better, but I was thinking it might all just be bullshit. It wasn't. Now I've got my radar up, and I want to find out more about the place. It's quite the scam, and it wouldn't surprise me if there's a lot more to it than what we think. I've got the nose for this kind of stuff, and I smell a big story here." He tapped his nose to assure us he did indeed have the equipment with which to smell a story. "I don't know what's making it smell, but I want to find out. None of that helps you with Sandy, but maybe she's in the mix somewhere."

"She was a journalist," I said. "Graduate in that profession without a job. What if she got wind of what was going on there and, being a looker herself, she thought she'd slip in, get a job as a car accessory, and find out the true story? She got past all the hurdles for what she wanted to do, slipped in and planned to write about it, and got caught."

"Maybe she just liked the idea of money from high-class hooking," Leonard said.

"Also a possibility," I said. "And some journalists go the whole hog, invest right down to the skin."

"That would be me," Cason said. "At least it has been me."

"All that is interesting," Leonard said, "but what we got to think about is Sandy, even if her grandmother ought to be run over by a truck."

"And after she gave you an orange soda," I said.

"I'm ungrateful sometimes," Leonard said.

I looked at Cason. "We owe you one."

"Oh, no, you don't," he said. "I'm still on this. You promised me the story if there was a story. I said I smelled one. I plan on keeping the nostrils wide open. I got contacts all over East Texas and elsewhere. There's this guy here in town called Weasel. He might be able to find me something. He's into everything, here and within two or three hundred miles of here. For all he's done he's only spent five years in the slammer. So he's pretty connected and pretty sneaky. Weasel may be our guy."

"Weasel?" Leonard said. "Now, that sounds trustworthy."

"I don't know his mother actually named him that," Cason said. "He's about five feet tall and slippery without being wet. He doesn't act dangerous, but I suspect he is, at least to some degree. He'll do most anything for a buck, and probably has."

"Can you trust him?" I asked.

"Not entirely, but enough to get what I want if I pay him a little. Out of the money you gave me, of course."

"So you're hanging on to that?"

"I'll give you half back now, but the rest I'm keeping for expenses and Weasel money."

"All right," I said. "For now, keep it all."

We talked a bit more about things, but it was just the same thing we had discussed recycled, and so we quickly called it a night. Cason walked across the yard and drove away.

Leonard said, “Is it a problem I sleep in my old room?”

“Of course not,” I said.

Inside, Leonard headed to his room, the one we had built onto the house for him, and I went upstairs. Brett was lying in bed with the lamp on, reading a book. Buffy was lying beside her with her head in Brett’s lap. I told her Leonard was staying the night in his old room.

“Okay,” she said. “How’d it go with Mr. Slick?”

“A little of something and a lot of nothing,” I said and told her some of what he told us, because as the owner of the business she needed to know.

“So Weasel’s our next step.”

“Unless we can find more steps,” I said.

“This is turning out to be harder than I thought,” Brett said. “This private-eye crap.”

“Sorry you quit the nursing job now?” I said.

“Still not missing wiping asses,” she said, “though now and again I long to change a colostomy bag. As for the detective business, what I’m feeling is I’ve bitten off more than I can chew with two sets of teeth. Now I’m worrying about paying the building payment, the lights, water, Internet.”

“I always feel like I’ve bitten off more than I can chew,” I said. “And usually I have.”

“But it works out?”

“Mostly. I have to chew some of it for a long time, though. Sometimes a little of it slops out of my mouth.”

I took off my clothes and put on my pajamas and crawled under the covers. Brett turned out the light. “No alarm tomorrow,” she said.

“Suits me,” I said, and we held one another. Buffy started pushing in between us, trying to find her spot.

It was very nice, very homey, and very comfortable. Why can’t things stay comfy like that?

15

Me and Brett got to the office about ten. It beat going into the chicken-processing plant at 6:00 a.m. or working in the fields from daylight to dark, but the idea of being an office man hadn't quite taken hold of me. I had also given Cason our advance from Ms. Buckner, and that made me a poor office man and might require a bit of explanation to Brett later.

When Leonard came we went to the house to exercise. Out in the carport we lifted light free weights, then worked on a score of self-defense techniques, sparred lightly with boxing for a while, then switched to kickboxing. There was no way to do ground work comfortably, which is one reason it can be overrated. You fall down on cement or the hard ground, it's different than if you're working a mat or fighting someone whose basic approach you know, someone who doesn't have a knife or pistol in their pocket or a buddy around the corner, or doesn't have ring rules about gouging out your eyes. Going to the ground is not a choice I'd make on purpose. Still, it was a weakness in our game, because you don't always get to choose if you stand or go down.

Leonard and I went at it for a while, making light contact, not anything brutal, just keeping ourselves loose, but it was hot already and nearly lunchtime, and we weren't kids anymore, so we gave it up, went in the house. Leonard took a shower downstairs, and I took one upstairs. Leonard still had some clothes in a drawer in his room, and he had those on when I came down. I had changed into something loose and comfortable. I decided to make sandwiches for all of us to have at the office. While I was opening a can of tuna and putting it into a bowl to mix, Leonard said, "Seems we're on to something, way Cason talked."

"Yeah," I said, spooning the right amount of mayonnaise into the bowl. "They're careful. Once they get their hooks in someone, they've got them in deep, and the cash cow just keeps supplying the milk until it can't anymore. Or they sense their victim is worn out enough to say, ‘Get me some popcorn and I’ll show the film myself.’ Maybe then they back off. It could become a standoff. You don’t care anymore, but now neither do they. So you don’t speak up about it, and they don’t show it to anyone. Everything stays even. I think it’s a careful con. They’ve done it enough to know when they can’t do it anymore, and I figure there’s some law involvement.”

“Some palms greased?”

“Yep. That way, say it’s a guy, he keeps his mouth shut because he can’t get any relief from either side, the law or the blackmailers. By just taking it in the ass, he keeps the wife, job, or both, or his civic pride, and they’ve made a healthy amount of money before whoever being blackmailed gets to the point where he, or she, doesn’t give a flying fuck anymore.”

“Thing is, our job isn’t to worry about the whores or the blackmail, it’s to find Sandy.”

“But can we actually leave the blackmail part alone?”

“Probably not,” Leonard said. “And they are most likely entwined.”

We wrapped the sandwiches in plastic, put them in a paper bag, got some cans of diet soda out of the refrigerator, including a Diet Dr Pepper, which Leonard cursed but would still drink in spite of the lack of sugar, and headed out to Leonard’s truck.

As he drove us over there, I said, “I’ll just mention this once, and then you can do with it what you want. How is it with you and John? Done?”

“I hope so, but then when it gets late, I hope not. I miss him then. I keep thinking if I had said this or that, or done this or that, it might be different. But I know deep down I wouldn’t do those things. I’m not going to ask a god I don’t believe in for forgiveness before I suck John’s dick or he sucks mine. But sometimes, when it’s late, I think I can do it for him. But a minute passes, and I know I can’t do it for anyone. I guess I’m selfish.”

“Just honest with yourself. After midnight everything is important, until about three or four in the morning, and then it’s still important, but less so. And then when you wake up in the morning most of it isn’t important at all.”

“I appreciate your letting me stay with you and Brett again.”

“You’re my brother. You’re always welcome, even when I don’t want you around.”

“It makes me feel better to know someone else is in the house, even if it’s not my house. That I’m not all alone.”

“And if John was at your apartment? How would that feel?”

“That wouldn’t feel so good, either. I think I’d try again, long as I didn’t have to play the games. I’d try until I pissed him off or threw him out. I’m actually thinking of buying a blow-up fuck doll. They have some very nice male ones.”

“Please promise me you will keep it clean,” I said.

“You have my word,” Leonard said.

“And that you will keep it at your place. For all that is holy, I do not want to wake up in the middle of the night and hear you making plastic squeak in our house.”

16

Weasel came by the office the next day with Cason. He was well named. He was small with a large nose and no chin and quick eyes and a wiry muscularity. He looked like he could squeeze through a hole smaller than he was. He was dark-skinned and maybe Hispanic, maybe black, maybe a whole gumbo of all kinds of folks. He wore a black shirt way too big for him. You could have housed two of him in it.

Even coming out of the heat and wearing black, he didn't seem to sweat much. He was as cool a customer as a corpse. He came in ahead of Cason, gave the room a sweep. He moved like a guy who was used to checking his surroundings, watching for predators or prey.

Cason looked his usual dapper self, though he had a sweaty glow about him, and the front of his blue shirt and the underarms of it were wet with sweat. No deodorant in existence could defeat the onslaught of East Texas heat and humidity. Unless you were Weasel.

Cason nodded at Brett. Brett nodded back. Neither seemed comfortable with the other.

Weasel's eyes continued to drift over all of us, then held on Buffy, who was holding down the couch. His eyes moved again, finally settled on Brett, who was sitting on the edge of the desk wearing white shorts and a loose green top.

Weasel said in a kind of Yankee voice with vowels so hard you could have used them to crack ice, "Oh, hell, lady, you are one sleek model."

"Yes, I am," Brett said. "Thanks for noticing."

Introductions were made. Weasel had a last name. Rolf.

Cason said, "Weasel's got some information. It's sweeter than we thought; not as sweet as we'd like. And I'm going to say it right up front. Maybe questionable."

"That hurts," Weasel said. "After all we've meant to each other you got to go on and say something like that."

"I can live with it," Cason said.

Weasel grinned, took a client chair, and crossed his legs carefully, as if he were a girl in a short skirt and had to be careful about giving a free show. “You let people smoke in here?”

“Only if they’re on fire,” Brett said.

“Fair enough. I got some chew. You got a bottle I can spit in?”

“I can give you a bottle, and you can take it home with you to spit in,” Brett said. “There’ll be no spitting in anything in here.”

“You’re a ballbreaker, lady,” Weasel said.

“Just sanitary,” Brett said.

“Tell them, Weasel,” Cason said.

“I know a little about all this, cause there’s lots of us off the grid, so to speak, who do know some stuff. Know what I’m saying?”

We didn’t respond. He wasn’t waiting for us to. It was just his way of talking.

“I ask around, and I say, what’s the deal here, you know? Not that blunt, but that’s what it finally got to, cause I know some people know Frank, and they think she’s hot, but they don’t know what I know, that she’s an ex-con, a man that got his goober trimmed.”

“So far,” Leonard said, “you haven’t told us anything we don’t already know.”

“All right, then,” he said. “I’m coming to the good part, part worth the money Statler here is paying me. Some of this stuff I asked about, to my contacts, see, some I already knew. Intimately, you might say.”

“By the way,” Cason said to me. “When he says ‘money’ he means your money.”

Brett looked at me.

“Takes money to make money,” I said.

“Or it just takes money to lose money,” she said.

“Hey, you going to let me say my say here or what?” Weasel said. “You paid for it, so let me give it to you. Otherwise I got things I can do.”

“Go on,” I said.

“There’s a fellow I know, said he knows a fellow named Ron Bantor, and Bantor bought a car from Frank’s place. This was, I guess, five years ago. In fact, this information is five years old, and the fella told me about it, he can’t tell me anything now. But I remember the story.”

“And how did this fellow know about Bantor?” I asked. “And why can’t he tell you anything? Though I have an idea.”

“Coming to that. So this Ron Bantor, he finds out with the car comes some A-one hole. Sorry, lady.”

“Tell it however you will,” she said. “There’s nothing you can say that will cause me to like you less than I already do.”

“So the snatch comes with the car, and the car costs more than it ought to, even with the snatch that comes with it, cause, hell, ain’t none of that snatch made of platinum. And at some point, way I see it, a car is just a car. But more to the point, rumor was the snatch was named Sandy.”

“You know that for a fact?” Brett said. “That her name was Sandy?”

“Heard this whole story from a guy what knew, and I’ve checked with some outside sources, got pretty much the same story.”

“Pretty much?” Brett said.

“Not like this stuff gets written down, lady. It’s a kind of story might grow some hair as it rolls downhill. I can only tell you what I know, hair and all. So Ron, he’s got the car and the girl, this Sandy, but then he finds out it’s got a trip goes with it to Italy, and he wants to take it. Nice trip. Nice tail. Figures then he can come home and ride around in a nice car.”

“So far, so good,” Cason said.

Weasel sucked on his teeth, continued. “He does the trio. Car, girl, and trip to Italy. Hear what I’m saying? Then he finds there’s a fourth thing. They set him up in some nice Italian hotel, and they got a hidden camera and they got a movie, minus previews, of him putting the sausage in the grinder, you know. He finds this out when he gets home with the wife and the kids. Gets the bad news there’s a film of his shiny, dimpled ass filmed by his automobile-and-poontang dealers. You following me?”

“Quite easily,” Brett said.

“This Ron cat, he works for a big law firm here in town. Got a trophy wife and a lot of good connections. Plays golf with the right people. He’s pulled the right dicks and pinched the right tits, if you know what I’m saying.”

“Yeah,” Leonard said. “We’re with you.”

“They start stretching those car payments, this car company,” Weasel said. “He paid in cash, he was that flush, but now it’s not enough. There’s some side money they want for not showing the nice little film of him to the wife, film of him lowering the helicopter into the canyon with this Sandy bimbo in Italy. He was supposed to be on a business trip, and there he is on film, bare-ass, in living color. They send it to him on an e-mail, take a chance, see. Something to really scare him. He checks that e-mail, opens that video, sees himself swinging his pecker, shits enough bricks to build a cathedral, e-mails back with a what-the-fuck's-up comment. That's when the serious contact starts. Frank—she, he, it, whatever the fuck she is—starts having him come by and drop off little packages with sizable money in it. He don't even go home with coupons. Ron goes to this fellow I know, cause being a lawyer in a big law firm he knows some guys not quite on the straight and narrow."

"Like yourself?" Leonard said.

"Like me, and my guess is like you two," Weasel said, nodding at me and Leonard. "I hear some things here and there. You seem like a couple guys been around the block, and not walking around all of it on a direct path. Taking a few alleys here and there, climbing through a few windows."

"Go on," Leonard said.

"Ron goes to this guy he knows, one he got off a prison sentence for murder. He knows the guy was as guilty as O. J. Simpson, asks if he can help him out cause he don't want to keep paying. He don't want his naked skin on his wife's or boss's e-mail, spread around town, then on the Facebook thing, twittered or twatted or some such shit. I don't know how all that crap works."

I had a feeling he knew exactly how that stuff worked.

"Bring it back on topic," Cason said. "You're starting to break gravitational pull, getting way out there."

"So Ron asks this old client of his who is not a straight citizen, asks does he know a guy can whack someone, and he'll pay some serious jack to get it done so that he won't have to keep paying serious jack for the rest of his life, and, too, he's just mad, you know. This guy I know tells him no, cause he thinks the money, good as it is, is light in the pants for killing folks, but says he might know someone, and he puts me on it, asks me to see if I can find someone, cause I know the kind of crowd he needs. And Ron, because he has a big mouth, lays out to me exactly why he wants Frank dead. Here he is dealing with blackmail, worried about people knowing his business, and him a lying piece-of-shit lawyer, but he don't know enough to keep his trap shut. What he's doing is telling people he shouldn't all his business he's worried about keeping secret. I guess he figures he tells the slum crowd, he's all right, but when you get right down to it, that's not the crowd to tell. But hey, saying something and having a film of it is not the same thing. I mean, he knows that film gets shown, that's more than talk. That's the shine on the baby's ass. You with me still?"

"In the neighborhood," Leonard said.

"Got to be honest. Thought I could whack Frank for the dough Bantor was paying. I don't know why he decided on Frank, cause I figure Frank is just the figurehead, not the top of the heap, but hell, who knows? And money is money, and who is who in all this is not important when that stuff is being waved under your nose. Pussy and money can get a man to do most anything but clean a sink after shaving.

"Sandy was on his list, too, cause she set him up, least that's how he figures it. Don't matter. It was some serious jack he was slinging around. Even thought I might could find this Sandy and do her, too, you know, if all expenses are paid and there's a good fee for the final job. Thought I did good on Frank, I'd be willing to do Sandy, you see. Pop. She's gone. That's how I was thinking when the offer was laid out there. Gave it some serious goddamn consideration. Stayed up a night or two thinking on it, decided maybe it's not my line of work. So I tell this other guy I know might like the job, and finally Ron has his man. Thing is, the man, this hired killer, ends up whacked himself."

"Frank got on to the game?" I asked. "Beat him to the killing?"

Weasel shrugged. "Can't say. Could have been like that. I doubt it, though. Frank's not that tough, with a dick or without. Not a pushover or nothing, but killing like that, I don't think so. Like I said, I don't think Frank is the top of the heap. Bottom line is someone finds the would-be assassin Ron hired, this fellow I know and put him on to, finds him some miles from here in the Sabine River, or maybe it was the Trinity—shit, I don't remember. Finds him with no shoes and an engine block tied around his ankles. He's got a cut throat and no balls, and word around is the cuts on his throat and balls are from a sharp wire, not a knife. Imagine that. Snapping off a man's goodies with a wire. That's the rumor, anyhow."

"Lots of rumors around," Brett said.

"I'm going to believe it, myself," Weasel said. "You should, too. Guy did this knew what he was doing. You might call him a throat-cutting goddamn deballing expert. Cut the balls off cause maybe that was just part of the fun. Maybe he took them back to lay on the doorstep of whoever wanted it done, like a cat will bring you a mouse. I don't know. But the balls weren't found. I guess they could be in the river, eat up by a catfish someone caught later and deep-fried, but I don't think so. The shoes. I think they just come off in the water, the current, you know?"

"This guy that was murdered," Leonard said. "He got a name?"

"Slide is what I knew him as. Black guy. Tough guy with muscles like you, had a shaved head, had that kind of look you got, except he was missing a light in his eyes. Kind of motherfucker makes a man nervous.

Looked like he could spank a cougar and send it to bed without its supper. What he caught was meaner than a cougar. He put up a fight. I got word from a guy I know at the hospital that he had broken fingers, scratches, and one eye near torn out. So he fought back. They scraped under his nails, all that shit, but they didn't find anything but more of him. And he had been in the water and all, maybe a week. Fucks with the DNA, that water does."

"You sure know a lot of guys," Leonard said. "On the street, in the hospital. Lawyers."

"That's what ole slick-ass Cason likes about me. I'm connected with the shit on the shoes. That's why he came to me and how I've ended up here brightening your otherwise dreary day."

"Slide have a last name?" I asked.

"Don't know it," Weasel said. "Me and him knew each other pretty good, but last names didn't come up. We didn't discuss pork-belly futures none, either."

"You know all this and you don't know the guy's last name?" Leonard said.

"You just got to have it, I can find out, but who cares? This guy's deader than dirt. Now what happens is the guy Ron asked first, guy told me about it…and you need a name I got it. Thurgood Small. White dude. He'd have made about four of me, some of it fat. Everyone called him Red Mop on account of this toupee he wore and didn't think anyone knew it wasn't real hair. Looked like someone froze a fucking flame on his head is what it looked like. Whatever it was made out of, it wasn't hair. He done a little time, and it was rumored he'd done some murders for hire and got away with it. But Ron, he asks Red Mop again, and this time he puts some blocks under the money, adds in some more stuff with zeros, and Red Mop decides this time he'll do it. He'll go in and kill Frank, and then he'll put the pop on Sandy for another slice of the pie, and anyone else Ron needs killing long as the money keeps climbing. Shit, them two killings was probably more than the first two or three blackmail checks ole Ron paid, but Ron, he's mad now, feels like he got his asshole reamed, and he don't like it. Matter of pride, I figure, not so much the money.

"So Ron's guy, Red Mop, goes after Frank, and then next thing I hear, he's not doing so hot, either. Died same kind of way. Second smile under his chin, propped him up down by a railroad track somewhere in our small world, pants down around his knees, dick hanging out of his shirt pocket, balls whacked off and gone, along with his toupee. Now two of the guys I knew was in on the deal were whacked. That got the hair on my balls to stand up, so me, I went quiet as a mute mouse in house shoes. Looked over my shoulder for a while. Two, three years go by, and no one comes to kill me. So I'm thinking I'm sliding. They, being whoever hired this deballing fellow, don't know it was me that was the middle guy, or so it seems. I fell through the cracks. Two more years or so slip on, and I'm still here because I kept my big mouth shut."

"Until now," I said. "Five hundred dollars and you're singing."

"Cason told me a thousand," Weasel said.

I looked at Cason. He grimaced. "I did."

"All right," I said. "A thousand. But still, why now?"

"Haunts me some, you know. It's on my head. Never even seen the bodies, but I can imagine them cause I know people who know people who know the cops, and they got the news, the specifics from them, the cut throat and balls and all."

"You told us that part," I said.

"Did, didn't I? Man, I just thought I could do something like kill Frank and maybe Sandy. Just thought it. I see this dead dog got hit the other day, you know, on the highway, and I pull over and throw up. I know now I couldn't have done no such thing. Think I'm even more puny now than I was then. I can step on roaches and I can rat out people, but killing for money, I can't go there. That's some kind of house I don't want to live in."

"Aren't you scared to tell us all this after keeping quiet for so long?" Brett asked. "Even for the money?"

"A little," Weasel said. "You got big mouths, I'm scared a lot."

"They don't have," Cason said.

"That's some partial comfort, brother. It's bothering me, this thing I considered doing, and had I done it, I'd have that shit heavy on my head. I didn't, but I led to the hit men getting hit, and they could just have easily have done the job they were hired to do. That would have been on my head, too. That's why I'm laying it all out to you. And there's the money Statler here is offering, too, so I'm not claiming just to be a good fucking Samaritan. But my conscience, and the money…well, I think, why not? Next day or two I'll be out of town for good. Going back up north. I've been down here, let me see…seven, eight…no, nine years, and I don't get it here. I'm going back where plain old bad people are just that. They don't come with a side of 'honey chile' and grits, then a blackjack or a pipe upside the head and a soda bottle jammed up the ass, or throats and balls cut off with sharp wire. Now I get my money?"

Cason looked at me.

"What about Sandy?" I said. "She doesn't show up in this story a lot."

"Not a major player is my guess," Weasel said. "Think she did her part, and it was over. Could be Red Mop got to her before he got his balls lifted, and that's why she isn't around to spend Christmas. I'm going to guess she quit stinking about five years ago. But hell, I don't know. I know he didn't get Frank, so that means he may not have got this Sandy, either.

"Frank's company could have done this Sandy in for some reason or another. I don't really know Sandy, just of her. Couldn't pick her out of a fuck movie if her name was tattooed on her naked ass in neon. Never met her. All I know is the name Sandy, and I got that from the guy Ron talked to, Red Mop, one they found down by the railroad tracks."

"And Ron?" Leonard asked.

"He turned quiet, like me. Decided he wasn't such a manipulator. Quit trying to hire killers. He's still alive. I figure they figure he gives up on trying to be a gangster they'll let him keep living. Guy like that, he goes dead, it might be bad for Frank, or whoever he…she…is connected with, so they might think it's better to let Ron live. And maybe Ron's still paying the blackmail. I don't know. I know this. Me and him are alive, and my balls are still swinging, and whatever happens to him is on his head, and the same goes for me, and he ain't my goddamn worry. I'm taking the thousand, and couple days from now, I'm gone. I won't even leave any body odor."

"Oh, I don't know," Cason said.

"All right, look down on me you want, but you won't be looking long, cause I'm going to be out of here like a goddamn winter goose. I had to talk to people, ask about this shit Cason wanted, and one of them, well, they might see a dollar in it for them, and there's guys out there that would eat a pile of shit and call it a chocolate soufflé if they were getting paid. I figure they would spring it all loose on me first chance they got. Way I figure, on down the road, this Ron, he might turn up dead after all. You know, enough time goes by. Some kind of accident, you see. I don't want the same for me. Neither me nor Ron are talking, not about that, and not to each other, but could be at some point Frank, his bunch, his boss, they could be thinking they want to make sure that never happens, the us-talking part. So when we think we're safe and they got enough distance between what went on, they hit us. That's my thinking. About that money? Going to need that for traveling."

"You said Frank's bunch," I said. "Who does Frank work for?"

"You see, it's just that kind of thing made Ron quit. He realized he hits Frank, maybe this Sandy, that's just the tip of the spear. Ain't you been listening? I done said that more than once, that I don't think Frank is the brains behind all this. I know her a little, enough to know she's smart, but she ain't that damn smart. Ron figured out he would have had to hire someone to kill every goddamn body, and he wasn't even sure who was holding the cards."

"So who can you name?" I said. "Come on—toss us something for our thousand smackers."

"Well, a guy that's got a finger in the pie is Doug Creese. His father, James, was just a bare-ass redneck that got lucky because he could make good barbecue. Said James used to find dead animals on the highway, fix them up good with sweet barbecue sauce and a long time in the smoker. Not unusual for old backwoods barbecue stands, using highway meat. People like that could barbecue a turd and make you think it was a sausage link. But his son, Doug, one you got to worry about, took it over, got prime meat and no more roadkill. He opened a string of barbecue houses. Played like they was upscale, charged more for a chopped beef than a filet mignon, and there was folks willing to pay the dough for it cause they thought they was, like, getting more for their money, it being on a fancy bun with seeds in it and shit. It was an all-right sandwich, but price like that, you could raise and kill a cow yourself and butcher it out cheaper. Well, all right, that's an exaggeration."

"Oh, really?" Brett said.

"Oh, hell, lady, you are so hot-looking I can take insults off you all day."

"Why, thank you, Weasel," Brett said.

"Creese's Barbecue," Leonard said. "Shit, I heard of that. Hell, I've eaten it. Good barbecue. But like you say, the prices are stiff. They're damn proud of it."

"Yep," Weasel said. "Creese's Barbecue. Doug wasn't really interested in barbecuing meat, though. He wasn't interested in having pocket money and a car didn't smoke oil. He wanted more. Wanted to fart half-dollars and shit thousands. He's that kind of guy. Hell, I'm that kind of guy, but I'm starting to know that isn't going to be how it is for me. It's always going to be pecking shit with the chickens, as you boys say. I come to that conclusion one long night after I looked in the refrigerator and realized I had a head of black lettuce and a bottle of water about half drank up."

“Actually,” Cason said, “it’s not your good or ill fortune we’re interested in.”

“Not that I was thinking it was,” Weasel said. “Doug uses the barbecue success to finance some other businesses, ones not so on the up-and-up. Finally, the barbecue gets famous, and he sells the joints, and for big money. That sets him up high and tight, but it’s still not enough. He was already running some low-level hookers in New Orleans. Had some meth labs cooking and all manner of shit going on. But now he has big money, and though he sold the barbecue places, he still gets a cut, so he’s got that dough pouring in, so he starts running higher-class whores, ones who can walk on stiletto heels without wobbling and can cross their legs with a happy promise. He starts setting up more businesses for fronts, finds ways to make big money in a lot of ways, some of them legal, some of them not so legal.”

“Like car lots and blackmail,” I said.

“That would be it,” Weasel said. “People don’t really know the businesses he owns because of the way he hides them. Some he’s up front with, but others he dresses down so it isn’t so out front. He’s the tail that wags the fucking dog.”

“So it’s really the former barbecue guy owns the car lot?” I said.

“That’s how I hear it, and all that comes the fuck with it, but I tell you, that’s just what I heard. All I got is what I heard. I heard most of it lately, when I was asking around, stuff I hadn’t heard before, or stuff that didn’t quite have a shape to it. Barbecue Doug may just be another cog in the wheel, which could be a really, really big wheel. One thing for sure, he lays low. Don’t see him around much. He’s tight to the house. Goddamn, I need a smoke or a chew. You know, I didn’t chew until I got around all these goddamn cracker motherfuckers here in East Texas.”

“Casting your nicotine habits aside,” I said, “anything else?”

“Rest of what I got is old news. But the new news, it could get me whacked, so like I said, I’m traveling. When I get the money.”

“You really just told us a lot of what we already knew,” I said.

“Don’t play me. There was some you didn’t know, right?”

Leonard reached out and thumped a finger on Weasel’s chest, causing him to wince.

“Better be telling the truth, Mr. Weasel, or you may never get to go up north, won’t have to worry about Frank or Barbecue Doug catching up with you. Being lied to makes me itchy, and I don’t like to itch, cause that makes me mad.”

"Cason, he's used me before," Weasel said. "My information is good. I mean, I'm not saying some of it might not be rumor, but rumor is what I got. There's some stuff in there I think is real. Tell them I'm reliable, Cason."

"So far you have been," Cason said. "But there's been a time or two where your information has lived on the border."

"This is smack-dab in the middle of the territories with rumor on the edges," Weasel said. "I keep bringing up the money, but nobody moves."

Cason took out his wallet and pulled out the money for Weasel. Our money.

"Nice doing business with you, kind of," Weasel said. "And keep me out of it. I don't want to end up with that wire-cut smile and my balls buried in some nut's backyard."

"You're out of it," I said.

"Good," Weasel said. "I was you people, I'd be out of it, too. Messing with Doug or Frank could be bad for you. One of them, someone connected to them, knows the guy with the wire, and money gets waved at him, the right money, he'll pick up that wire again."

"We'll keep that in mind," I said.

"So you're not hanging it up?" Weasel said. "Even after what I've told you?"

"Nope," Brett said.

"Have it your way, honey," Weasel said. "Remember I warned you people."

"We got that sweet thought right up against our hearts," Leonard said.

Weasel shrugged. "Listen here. I got one more thing for you. I wasn't going to expand on this, go the whole hog, but I got to get right with myself—know I told you not only what I know is fact, but I got to tell you what might be rumor. Wasn't going to say, cause it sounds maybe too odd, but that don't mean it's not coming from a solid place. Word is this deballer guy, he's a company man carries their freight. Let me say it different. They got a man sometimes works for the company, whoever it is that owns the company, and he's a free agent kind of guy."

"The car company?" Brett said.

"The company. Doug's businesses. It's like a fucking octopus. There's more than cars and women and blackmail in all this. Shit, I done told you that."

"It's nice to know your story doesn't change up," Cason said. "So we can stand some repetition."

"Only a little," Leonard said.

"Keeping in mind I'm still saying it's rumor, and yeah, I know, I say it a lot, but it's said by some that this wire-using motherfucker has connections with all the Dixie-flag-waving jackasses and southern assholes you can imagine."

"Dixie Mafia?" I asked.

"Call it what you like," Weasel said. "Doug and his bunch may be the saltiest crackers you can imagine, a bunch of good old boys. They're shit-cracker tough guys with sweaty pits and bent noses and swastikas on their necks. They got women in that group, too, just as bad and mean as the men. Some got three teeth and two are in their pocket, but they also got sweet women with butter skin and a smile that looks like something you'd see under a magnolia tree with a picnic basket, but when you get close, those are shark teeth, and the basket is a fucking coffin."

"How poetic," Brett said.

"Make fun if you want," Weasel said. "But they got those folks all over, some in businesses that you wouldn't suspect. Some in back alleys, and some in stylish apartments in downtown Houston. They got gangs to do their work, and more than that, they got them a hitter more dangerous than all of them. Some think he's just a story. The Canceler, they call him, on account of he cancels your fucking ticket, erases your plans. He's the guy with the wire is what I hear. He's got other methods, but when they hire him it's because they want it done fast and smooth, otherwise they let the tattoo-necks do it. Those guys, offer them some cocaine, a twelve-pack, and a rubber pocket pussy, they're ready to rock. But this guy, he's not someone I want looking for me, and neither do you. He gets the big bucks, and he don't get them by fucking up. What he gets paid is serious finance. The redneck Dixie-flag-waving cretins come and go, but this guy, he stays around. He hasn't got any agenda about the South, about family, or any such shit. He's got the ability if you got the money, and that's the name of that game."

"Have you seen him?" Leonard asked.

"I told you I don't even know if he's real. But someone is sure killing folks with a wire."

"Description?" Cason asked.

"If I had a description of him, way I hear it, I'd be dead before I could describe him. Ain't no one describing him, cause the ones might know him know better than to give that description. Just me giving out what I know, even if it turns out to be rumor, not fact, could be bad for me.

Thus my exit plans, and I advise you folks to do the same."

"Thanks for the tip," I said.

"You think you're tough," Weasel said. "Word about you guys is you are. That you've seen some shit and thrown some shit around yourself. That you're like the brothers Death and Doom. Maybe you can handle the rednecks. You might do that all right. But this guy, let me tell you, whoever he is, he whacked two badasses I knew, maybe bad as you two, so whoever this guy is, this Canceler, he's a special-ass hired killer. Hell. He's the very devil."

"If he exists?" Leonard said.

"Somebody killed them bad boys I know. That's no rumor. The question is, how bad is the bad guy who done it? Rumors about him are true, then he's the baddest of the bad, and you don't want that hellhound set on your trail."

"We might have another couple of questions before you leave town," I said.

"I might can find out the name of the guy whose last name I can't remember, you just got to have it, but let me tell you, I'm not going out of my way to do it. I told you my plans, and right before I make with the runaway, I'm going to score me some cheap trim and some expensive whiskey, then I am gone. You might not think so, but you got your thousand worth and some change."

"Have a nice trip," I said.

"You know that's right," Weasel said.

"I'll run him home," Cason said.

"Drive fast," I said.

17

After Cason and Weasel left, Brett said, “This has gone from a missing-person case to blackmail and murder. Now we’re talking an invisible hit man who cuts off balls. Anyone believe any of what Weasel said?”

“Some of it,” Leonard said. “He kind of gets wrapped up in his own story, and it grows. He mentions the hit man and what he did, then at the end he tells us stuff about him he didn’t seem to know at first, that he’s part of a syndicate or some such, and he’s just waiting for a phone call, carrier pigeon, whatever, to get his orders for another hit. I don’t know what to think.”

“A while back I didn’t believe there was a guy and a woman who took in orphans and turned them into killers, but I was wrong,” I said. “I should have believed it. Vanilla Ride is pretty badass, and this could be someone just as badass.”

“Or it could be Vanilla herself,” Brett said. “She might fit the time line, and she’d be a pro they might hire.”

Brett did not have a soft spot for Vanilla, because Vanilla had one for me.

I said, “I don’t think this is her style—the wire and the balls cut off—though a woman might think that way, cutting off the balls. It could be a comment on how she was treated when younger, and Vanilla wasn’t treated too well. Still, I don’t think it’s her. She goes for efficiency, not statement.”

“You have a blind spot for her,” Brett said.

“He has a blind spot for just about everyone, you give him time to consider,” Leonard said. “But I’m with him. I don’t think it’s her. Can’t say why, but I don’t. If this killer always does it this way, using the wire, maybe that’s an MO he can’t change, least not comfortably. It could be like a serial killer thing, a signature, except he gets hired to do it. He gets the pleasure and the money both.”

“Other side is,” I said, “maybe he does change up. Could be the employer is the one collecting nut sacks, way Weasel suggested. Hell, I don't know. Maybe he makes change purses out of them. But if he does a lot of hits, he may not do them all the same way, only does them that way because that goes with the payment."

"Good point," Brett said. "So see? It could have been Vanilla who did it, just fulfilling her boss's request."

"If it was, it wouldn't matter now," I said. "That's in the past. She's in Italy somewhere. Not here as a threat."

"So she told you," Brett said.

"I believe her," I said.

"Because she's beautiful?" Brett said. "That's why you believe her?"

"Her looks have nothing to do with me believing her."

"But she is beautiful, right?" Brett said.

"Some say so."

"Oh, Hap. Really."

"All right," I said. "There's nothing about her that makes you want to look away. Well, on second thought, she does carry a gun and will point it at you. She will shoot to kill, and we know she's blown a man up."

"Okay," Brett said. "That might make you look away. But you'd look as long as you could."

"You are putting words in my mouth. She's not my type."

"Damn, Hap," Leonard said. "That's one of them little white lies we were talking about."

"Whose side are you on, anyway?"

"Brett's."

"Thanks," I said. "Brett. She is not my type, because you are my type."

"And if I wasn't around?" Brett asked. "Honest answer."

"She might be my type. Except for that murderous assassin part. That would put me off."

Brett said, "Maybe it would be best if it was Vanilla did it—killed those two men, I mean. I don't think she'd bother you, and by extension, us. But if it wasn't her, and there is a Canceler, isn't that a bit scary?"

"I admit, it's a bit scary," I said.

She looked at Leonard.

"If he's out there I'd like a run at him," he said. "I think I can fuck him up."

Brett thought for a while. "Do we continue?"

"You're the boss," Leonard said. "I wouldn't trust Weasel to give me a cold. Hell, Cason brought him here, and he doesn't trust him. Not completely. Guy like that, he works like psychics. They listen around, figure out what it is we're interested in, then feed it back to us. He may have picked up clues from Cason when they first talked. I mean, Cason, he can be clever, but a guy like Weasel, fucking people around is what he does for a living. He takes a cold reading, swirls it around in his head a little, and by the time he comes to us he may have gotten enough from Cason to weave a story that fits the way we wanted it to fit. It's like making someone believe in flying saucers. You do the whole thing on a person's head, about how conceited it is to think we are the only thinking creatures in the universe, as if we think all that much. The flying saucers are a jump in logic. We are conceited, therefore extraterrestrial life is likely, therefore aliens have arrived on earth in flying saucers. But if that's logical, why do they always land somewhere weird with some two-toothed ignoramus standing on a stump with his dick up a cow's ass? The aliens cut the cow's udder out, haul Two Tooth off to some place high in space, spread his ass with salad spoons, play with his pecker, and send him home. Why is that? That makes no sense. They're so damn space handy why the fuck don't they just let everyone know they're here, hold a conference at the White House? Might be some folks out there that'll come in for a landing some day, but so far, not so much, and I'm not holding my breath. But you talk shit right, and people believe it."

Brett and I stared at him for a moment.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I said.

"I'm using a comparison, you two. Surely you get it. Bullshit can be given a solid platform so anyone that's willing to believe it can. It makes sense if you think about it," Leonard said.

"You think?" I said.

"It doesn't matter," Brett said.

"Don't wave me off. The flying saucer story really has to do with what we're talking about."

"No, it doesn't," I said.

"Does too."

"You had that hobbyhorse in your mental garage and pulled it out. You been looking for some spot to put that in a conversation."

"Have not."

"Have too."

"Boys," Brett said. "That will be quite enough."

We gave each other a wicked look, and then we looked at the floor.

"Thing is, unless she was abducted by aliens, as far as Sandy goes, we still don't know dick," I said.

"He hasn't quit," Leonard said. "He's picking at me."

"Boys. I mean it. That's enough. Look, we got a missing girl. We got dead folks connected to the missing girl. There are no cow udders and no aliens."

"What I'm saying," Leonard said. "I'm not saying there are. I'm saying it's easy to believe in incredible assassins and all manner of bullshit if it's presented to you right. That's all I'm saying."

"And now you're done," Brett said. "Right?"

"Right," Leonard said.

"Here's some hard, cold truths," Brett said. "There's no more money coming to us on this, and I don't like the old bitch that hired us. Stay on this we go in the hole as far as money is concerned. It's all gratis. And by the way, it's a deep hole. Everyone got that?"

"Got you," I said.

"Just so you know," she said.

"We know," I said.

"Story of our life," Leonard said.

Brett was quiet for some time, but I could sense she was arranging thoughts in her head like a bricklayer laying bricks. She said, "I say we stick. See how this comes out. It's about a missing woman, and I have a daughter, such as she is, and I know how I'd feel, cause I been there."

I nodded. Leonard and I knew, of course. We had sort of rescued her daughter, Tillie, twice.

"Seeing it through, that's all right by me, but sometimes it's not a pretty picture," Leonard said.

"I been around you two long enough to know that," Brett said. "It's not like I haven't had my tit in the wringer a few times."

"You've shown you've got what it takes more than once," Leonard said.

"I think so," Brett said.

"No doubt about it," I said. "You got tough tits."

"You can say that again," Brett said.

"All right, then," I said. "We're in to the end. As for the Canceler, finding out about him, there's another person I can think of has an ear to the ground. Better than Cason, I think. Maybe better than Weasel. We need someone wades through shit on a regular basis and can turn it into tapioca."

"Ain't that us?" Leonard said.

"I think this is deeper than our usual crap."

"Oh, hell," Leonard said. "You don't mean that cornpone motherfucker—”

“Jim Bob Luke,” I said.

18

Of course I can figure it out," Jim Bob Luke said. He smiled like an alligator and moved a well-chewed toothpick from one corner of his mouth to the other with his tongue. "You do know who you're talking to, don't you?"

"We know, all right," Leonard said. "But ego alone won't solve what we're up against."

"Oh, I don't know," Jim Bob Luke said. "That's only true if I'm a blowhard. And I'm not. I can do what I say. It has never occurred to me but once—and I was feeling kind of sick that day—that there might be something I couldn't figure, couldn't solve. And by the way, that day I had my doubts, I solved it anyway. That cured me from doubting me. I always say: I want someone smart to talk to, I go out back of the house and talk to myself. I am fucking sterling company."

We were at our office, and Jim Bob, who lived in Pasadena, just on the other side of Houston, had driven down that morning after a phone call the night before, and he'd even brought doughnuts. They weren't on my diet, but damn it, I had two of the chocolate-coated kind. Brett had three, and Leonard asked for his cookies and we gave them to him. I have no idea how many he ate. Now, if I could only remember how many doughnuts Jim Bob ate, I'd be one happy man. I think he also brought apple fritters.

Jim Bob wasn't a young man, but he wasn't exactly old, either. He looked younger than he was. He was long and lean with a quick smile and eyes that sometimes looked green and sometimes blue and I suppose were actually a shape-shifting gray; they changed with the light or the clothes he was wearing. Today they looked blue in his tanned face. He wore a black shirt with snap pockets, what we used to call a cowboy shirt. He had on crisp blue jeans and black boots with red explosions on the toes, like he had kicked something dead and bloody. He had a white straw cowboy hat with a wide paisley band and a big green feather in it. He had taken it off and had rested it on his knee. He always looked wrong without the hat on. Looked like the kind of guy that had been born with it on his head. His hair was a little sweaty and hat-shaped.

As always, Jim Bob appeared happy and in a good mood, though I knew behind that friendliness was a granite-hard reserve and a dark streak. He seemed like the biggest redneck that ever walked the earth until you spent time with him. Then you realized that behind that rawness, that laid-back coolness, was a sharp mind and quick reflexes and street-fighting skills. I had seen them in action. Woe to the man that thought Jim Bob was a simple Texas goober. He could not only fight, he could also think, and he was as brave as they come without being foolish. He had depth that he kept hidden, but you could sense it was there, the way the smell of ozone alerts you to the approach of lightning.

Brett told him everything we knew, even her thoughts about Vanilla Ride, whom he knew. He knew damn near everyone who had ever done an illicit deed, and he had done a few himself here and there, but in his mind, and my own, it was for the greater good. Still, knowing that, and sometimes being a part of such myself, didn't help me sleep all that well at night. I think Jim Bob, like Leonard and Brett, snoozed just fine.

Jim Bob listened quietly, looking like he always does, like he's already got the answers before you get through explaining.

"Weasel tells a good story," Jim Bob said. "Some of it might have the whiff of bullshit about it, but I'm thinking it isn't all fairy tale. I've heard word of this Canceler. He supposedly wiped out an entire Mexican drug gang that was bringing dope into Houston, not because he was trying to do a humanitarian thing but because he got hired to whack them. And he kept on whacking them until what was left of them decided to stay down below the Rio Grande and sell tacos. They were bumping into the drug business in Houston, hurting some of the local boys' revenue. This Mexican gang, the Canceler took them out one by one, and though he didn't use a wire on all of them, it was mostly that. He isolated the ones he could, wired them, cut off their balls, and in the end I think there were four left, and like I said, they ran back to Mexico. Canceler followed them somehow, broke into their stronghold in Mexico, and killed all four. Took their nut sacks and left."

"That part sounds like some of Weasel's rumors," Leonard said.

"Wouldn't sound like that if you knew better," Jim Bob said. "Some of that gang was seriously bad and mean as a snake in a latrine. I knew folks dealt with them. Bought drugs. Not saying they're friends of mine, saying through my underworld contacts I came up against them, and one of them was an American beaner who did enough business with them he thought he might be next on the list."

"Beaner," I said. "Nice."

"Oh, hell, Hap. I got friends that are beaners, real friends."

This was the kind of stuff that made Jim Bob confusing, but I didn't say anything else. I had long ago given up on trying to sort out who was who by what they said. It was as Leonard said, "It's not what you say, it's what you do."

Jim Bob continued.

"So, as I was saying, this beaner named Miguel, who is not a friend but comes to me for protection, wants to hire me for it. Tells me this Canceler is real, and Miguel knows he's on the list, cause he's been doing drug business in a heavy way with the boys from Mexico, and now those boys are missing their balls, not to mention their lives, and he wants to hire me. I don't have nothing for that shithead, so I tell him no, and a week later they find him in a storage container out by the docks with his pants off and his balls gone, his throat cut. Maybe with a wire. No one knows what's true and what's myth about the guy, but this Canceler fella is real. My bet is he doesn't take the balls to prove he's done his job but takes them as a souvenir."

"I guess they don't give out awards for best serial killer," I said. "So he has to provide his own trophies."

"Unless you count the prize the press gives him. And this guy, he doesn't get treated like a serial killer. He's a hit man. He gets paid. For him, those men's nuts, it's like a little boy stealing girls' panties. He likes to take them out, look at them from time to time, maybe sniff them and bat them around with a tennis racket or some such, no telling what all, but he gets more respect than the dime-store serial killer, least among those who pay for his services."

"Does the Canceler kill women?" Brett asked. "I'm thinking I might get a pass if he comes after us."

"I think he'd kill anyone," Jim Bob said. "Maybe he's got some vaginas in his collection, too. I don't know. Stretches them over his head like a horse collar. How this all fits in with the car business and the blackmail I don't know. That's a lot of working parts, and some of those parts grind together a little. Think what we ought to do, since you two took a run at this Frank, and then your friend Cason did the same, is I take a run at her. I am one charming motherfucker when I want to be."

"Really?" Brett said.

"Really," he said. "Girl with a dick or no dick, I can make them smile."

"Or feel ill," Brett said.

"You good-looking little darling, you are so right. I can do that, too. But sometimes you got to play a different card in a different situation. I can smooth out when I want to."

"Cason is as charming as they come," Leonard said. "He kind of charms me. But you, charming? I don't know, man."

"All right, let's talk straight," Jim Bob said. "Am I good-looking?"

"Oh, hell, man," I said.

"Really," Jim Bob said. "Brett? What do you think?"

"You are a handsome man," she said. "And to tell you true, if I didn't already have my man, you'd butter my biscuit, no doubt. I mean I'd probably kill you in a week, but as much as you're arrogant, you are somehow appealing, like whipped cream, which also makes me sick. I think calling people beaners and such would wear on me, and that toothpick annoys me, and I don't like the hat, unless it's to shit in, but as long as we didn't talk all that much, I can see you being appealing enough. I'd think of you as someone who could hit the high spots."

"I think I'm wounded to the bone," I said. And I was a little.

"All is well," Brett said. "I'm just giving my honest opinion as a beautiful and highly appealing woman."

"There you have it," Jim Bob said and winked at Brett. "Thank you, you fine-looking honeypot, cause your opinion really matters to me. Hell, Leonard there, even he's thinking—and tell me if I'm wrong, Lenny—you're thinking: that is one fine-looking man, and I'd like to do him. Aren't you, Leonard?"

"Hardly," Leonard said, but I thought there was a bit of a catch in his voice.

"Well, we need not worry about that. I don't throw the saddle on homos, just women."

"You are going to get hurt," Leonard said.

Jim Bob laughed. Unlike most people, Leonard didn't faze Jim Bob in the least. He liked messing with people, pulling their strings. Life was his oyster, and you were living outside the shell as far as he was concerned.

"Here's the thing," Jim Bob said. "I got me a date with a barrel racer tonight, a twenty-nine-year-old big-tittied blond home wrecker if you ever saw one. Fortunately for me I don't have a wife, so there's nothing to wreck. I don't even have a hog farm anymore. Sold it. But I do have that date."

“This might be a little more important than dating a barrel racer,” I said.

“You haven’t seen the barrel racer, Hap. She’s got legs so long you want to climb her like a tree. Least up to where it forks. I mean, yeah, she’s younger than me by some years, but shit, way I see it, if she dies she dies. But here’s the other thing. I don’t want to go into this car place looking to buy a car close to when all you numb nuts went in. I say we give it a week or so, let this Frank get your visit off her mind. She’s bound to have her flag up and ready to tussle. So I don’t want to make her think I’m part of the problem. I want her to see me as a mark.”

“Makes sense,” Leonard said.

“Also, I got to tell you, since you went in there and pulled on Frank’s string pretty hard, I figure she went to her boss and pulled on his string. People like that, they don’t like their strings pulled. If they’re connected like this Weasel says, they may not like it so much you might even get a visit from them, and they won’t be bringing flowers and a bottle of wine. On the other hand, they may just figure you guys aren’t really on to shit and are no threat.”

“Good,” Leonard said. “Then we get to meet the Canceler sooner than later.”

“I don’t think so. Guy like the Canceler, they don’t pull him out for just any old hit on a peckerwood and bop-a-nigger job.”

“Hey,” Leonard said.

“I’m telling you how they think, Leonard. First rule of becoming a good detective—not something I think is in your immediate future—is you got to think like they do, and sometimes you got to be them, at least in spirit.”

“Call me a nigger again and you’ll have my spirit up your ass.”

“Trying to say watch your backs, cause they might send problem solvers, one of those that’s on the low end of the totem pole. Not some hot-dog professional but a crowd of dick draggers that come cheap. Eyes and ears open, and keep your left up. And by the way, since you didn’t mention pay, I suppose this is one of them jobs where I’m doing this for you to have the pleasure of my company.”

“Looks that way,” I said. “Maybe something comes along later that we can’t do, don’t want to do, we can throw it your way, something has money in it, I mean.”

“Thoughtful. I figure it’s most things you three can’t do when it comes to real detective work, so I might have a long line of referrals coming my way. No offense, Brett, you can learn, these two, I’m not so sure. They are blunderers. How they have lived as long as they have and managed to have all their legs and arms is beyond me. Deal is, I'm going back to Houston."

Jim Bob looked at his watch.

"I got time to get there and shower up, put on some smell-good, buy a couple packs of rubbers, and meet my barrel racer."

"Couple packs of rubbers," Brett said. "Very romantic."

"Ah, honey, I'm taking her to dinner first, and I always let the woman put the rubber on, and I think two packs is enough. And don't worry. I need an extra pack, I can send her to the drugstore. I got a bicycle in the garage."

"You can leave now," Brett said. "Wouldn't want you to miss your barrel racer."

"And she wouldn't want me to miss, either, in more ways than one. But as you know, I'm a straight shooter."

He stood up, put on his hat, and went out.

As we listened to him going down the stairs, I said, "He can rub a dildo wrong when he wants to."

19

I won’t lie to you, next few days I was jumpy. I had a snub-nosed .38 revolver that I gave to Brett to keep in her purse, and I kept the same kind of gun in my glove box, and in the house I had a twelve-gauge Remington handy. I had another stashed in the attic. There were shotguns tucked into the closet at the office. Leonard was armed as well. I always felt like a hypocrite with all those guns, and I was. I hated them, but once you felt their power, they owned you to some extent. I disliked being owned by machinery.

Frank, if she had checked the car I rented as a decoy, and had a few contacts, it wouldn’t have taken her long to figure out who rented it and connect me to it, which connected Brett to it, if just peripherally. And Frank probably figured out who Leonard was, too, being as how there was no winter petunia tour, and the Internet probably revealed everything but our shoe sizes. If the car lot people were as sneaky at business as they seemed to be, as wealthy as they appeared, they could get things done, not only in finding us, but hurting us, if they were willing to go that far. When it came to bad criminal business, a few dollars and a hard piece of wood upside the head or a loaded gun works a lot better than a smile and a kind word most any day.

Few early mornings later, a weekend, I was in the kitchen reading the newspaper and drinking a cup of coffee. Our local paper was now about the size of a grocery pamphlet. It had an online presence as well, but I missed holding a heft of news sheets in my hand. I loved newspapers, and they seemed to be a near-lost business. News had become primarily a bunch of folks quarreling on TV and giving opinions about the news even before it happened. The actual news itself was hard to seek out.

I was thinking on all this because I was reading the newspaper for my entertainment, but the last few mornings Cason let me come over to his newspaper office and see the papers in the morgue—those that had been copied to their computer. Camp Rapture, where he worked, had as much news about LaBorde as LaBorde did, and I thought it might be wise to get their take on our news.

Leonard had taken the mission to look through the records at our local newspaper, telling them he was doing some research for something or other, which in a way he was. But we thought saying we were looking for clues of a prostitution-and-blackmail ring and a serial killer who cuts off balls might not be something to spread around. He did this while I was at Camp Rapture. What we were specifically looking for were articles, bits and pieces here and there about certain murders, that would substantiate what Weasel told us. Other murders of a similar nature, that sort of thing.

So far Leonard hadn't found anything in our local papers that I hadn't seen, and none of what I had seen seemed to matter. I had burned out looking through the Camp Rapture records and was, as I said, home that day, having my coffee and contemplating if driving over to Camp Rapture again was even worth it. Seemed to me I would have heard of those murders Weasel told us about, and if I hadn't, there would at least be some reference to them in the newspapers five years back.

Nada.

Could something like that be kept secret?

I called Marvin and left him a message, was waiting for him to call back. I was trying to keep him and the police out of it as much as possible, at least at this point, but I figured desperate as we were, it might be time to drag him in, if only for information he might have available to him that we didn't.

I called Cason next. He told me where Weasel lived, and after I had finished the paper and was sipping another cup of coffee, I decided not to go to Camp Rapture. I called Leonard, and he came over.

Me and him drove over to Weasel's joint for a closer talk. He was most likely long gone, but if he wasn't, Leonard suggested we start breaking his fingers off in his ass until we got some real answers. Leonard had the frame of mind now that Weasel wasn't giving us rumors but was in fact shining our ass a little. Giving us some real information but holding back things we needed, things he knew but wasn't saying. I didn't have an opinion on the matter. Truth was, going to see where Weasel lived, hoping he might not have gone north yet, was something to do other than look futilely through old newspapers. I liked my fresh morning paper, but those made my nose itch.

Weasel's place was a duplex. There were some standard box houses on both sides of the street. His apartment was upstairs. The bottom apartment seemed uninhabited. Windows were knocked out of that one, and there were no curtains and no sign of occupation. The duplex was the only one on the short block divided from the box houses by tall untrimmed hedges on either side, and there was a car parked out front. It was an old Ford that looked to have been bullied by other cars on the highway. There were dents, and the windshield was cracked in a spiderweb pattern, and it was plastered green and yellow with bugs that had chosen the wrong flight pattern. The tires were a little low. The trunk had been closed poorly, and a black rag dangled out of it.

We climbed to the top floor of the duplex and knocked on the door. No one answered. We gave it a good banging with our fists and worked the doorbell, which didn't work at all. That brought us back to more door banging with the same lack of results.

As we came down the stairs a black cat came out of one of the lower duplex's missing windows, jumped to the ground, then eyed us like we might be trespassing on his property.

Leonard said to the cat, "Get your goddamn windows fixed."

It was late morning by then, but no one seemed around in the yards or looking out windows. The area struck me as the sort where people minded their own business in case your business might be bad business they didn't want to know about.

Driving away, I called Cason and described the car we saw. He was the one who introduced us to Weasel, so I hoped he knew a little about him and the wreck he drove. When I described the car, he said it indeed was Weasel's wreck, but he thought it might have been something he'd leave behind. It was about twenty years old, and besides needing an oil change, probably had a lot of miles on it.

We went back to my place. Leonard dropped me off and headed for the LaBorde newspaper. He figured he had to take advantage while they were still friendly enough to let him sit in a chair in their morgue room and read the papers on computer and microfiche.

I went straight back to the kitchen table and resumed drinking coffee, decaf now, because I had swigged so much pure black coffee over the last few days I was almost dancing everywhere I went.

Sitting there at the table, thinking on these matters again, I came up with nothing. Brett, who had been sleeping in while Leonard and I had been out, came into the kitchen. She was wearing one of my long shirts, an old paint-stained one that she sometimes slept in. It wasn't pretty, but she made it look good, way her legs showed.

Pouring herself a cup of coffee, she said, "What you thinking?"

"Weasel's full of shit."

“Jim Bob verified some of what Weasel said.”

“I know. But still, though there may have been some truth in there, nothing he told us shakes out. Not in the papers; no word of it anywhere.”

“You may not be thinking this through,” Brett said.

“How’s that?”

“He said one body was down at the Sabine, or the Trinity, and one near a railroad track. He wasn’t specific, didn’t seem sure about any of it, not even sure which river was involved. I got the idea he knew the stories, but none of it first-or even secondhand. That could be the rumor part he was referring to.”

I let that sink in.

“Could be,” I said. “But I’d have thought something as bold as a killer taking someone’s balls and cutting their throat and leaving them out to be found would have shown up in the papers, even if it didn’t happen right around here.”

“Maybe, and maybe not,” she said. “Still, doesn’t mean it didn’t happen. Weasel is oily, but I don’t think even he is that good a bullshitter. He seemed legitimately scared of this guy.”

“Lying is his stock-in-trade, dear,” I said.

Brett nodded. “Yeah. I guess at this point we’re just circling the airport. So maybe we ought to get on with it, see if we can land this baby.”

Someone knocked on the door. Since what Jim Bob had told us was more than a little fresh on our minds, I was cautious about answering it. I went to the kitchen cabinet and opened the drawer and took out a little flat automatic I had put there since Jim Bob and Weasel had warned us. It was small-caliber and didn’t have that much stopping power, but it was something. I still had the revolver, but I liked to keep it in my glove box.

I eased to the window by the side of the door, edged back the curtain, and looked out. A young woman I judged to be in her twenties was standing there. She was very pretty, with black hair and dark skin, long-legged in blue-jean shorts, wearing red tennis shoes. She had on a loose shirt, black with red and blue parrots on it. She didn’t look like a Jehovah’s Witness.

I put the automatic at the base of my spine and pulled my shirt over it and walked over to the door. Buffy, who had been on the couch, got off of it and strolled over. Even she was curious.

I opened the door.

The girl stared at me. She reminded me of someone. A battered old brown Cadillac was parked at the curb.

She said, “Are you Hap Collins?”

“Yes.”

“Funny. I thought you’d be taller.”

“Okay. Do I know you?”

“Not exactly. What a pretty dog.”

“She is, yes.”

Buffy had eased out the door and was sitting now, looking up at her. The girl patted the dog, and Buffy liked it.

She looked up and studied my face. The way she looked at me, I don’t know if I can describe it. Wistful. Hopeful. Scared. Nervous. All of the above.

“Do you remember May Lynn Gomez?”

I did. We had dated awhile after the divorce from my first wife. She had been divorced, too. We pleasured each other, mostly, and it wasn’t exactly much of a relationship. She had been a fine-looking woman with a lot of problems. Other than her beauty and those problems, I didn’t really remember all that much about her.

“Yes,” I said.

“She has died,” the girl said.

“I’m sorry to hear it. Are you Chance?”

Brett came to the door, said, “Hello, dear.”

“Miss Sawyer.”

“Call me Brett. Dealing with getting older is not working out as well as I thought it would.”

We stood there in the doorway looking at Chance. Nobody spoke. Nobody barked. Buffy slowly wagged her tail.

“Mom thought I should look you up.”

“And why is that?” I asked.

“Mr. Collins…Hap. You’re my dad.”

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You could have pushed me down with a hummingbird fart.

Almost. I actually remained on my feet, though a bit stunned and confused.

Brett said, “Come in, Chance.”

Chance came in. She looked so much like her mother, though taller, and with a different sort of movement.

When Chance was inside and Buffy had followed, I found enough of my brain to remember the door needed closing. I did that, then wandered along with her and Brett into the kitchen, where Brett asked her to sit down at the table. Buffy trotted into the kitchen with them, lay down near her food bowl by the stove.

Chance sat and folded her hands together on top of the table.

I sat down across from her.

Brett said, “Have you had breakfast, hon?”

“No, ma’am. But I’m okay.”

“No problem to fix you something,” Brett said.

“It’s all right,” Chance said.

“No, really. No problem. Right, Hap?”

“No problem.”

“Okay, then. I guess I am a little hungry.”

“Hap, fix her something,” Brett said.

I looked up at Brett and smiled at her. Then I looked at Chance.

“What would you like?” I said and gave her some offerings.

She decided on toast and coffee and scrambled eggs. While I fixed those, Brett talked to her in a general way, things like where are you staying, simple stuff. I listened as I cooked. Chance said she had been living out of her car. I liked the way she talked. She sounded East Texas, but there was a kind of smoothness to her manner and movements, and I could sense a wounded confidence, like a tiger that had survived a gunshot wound.

I put breakfast in front of her, said, “Eat first, then we’ll talk some more.”

I poured Brett and myself coffee, then sat down at the table. I glanced at Brett. She glanced at me. I felt shell-shocked. Could it be true?

I studied Chance. She was about the right age, midtwenties. And she sure looked like May Lynn. Had beautiful coffee-colored skin. I remembered May Lynn saying something about being Hispanic, and what was it? Choctaw? I didn’t remember exactly. Frankly, we hadn’t been that close, except in bed. But the question wasn’t if May Lynn was her mother. The question was, was I her dad?

Chance finished eating and sipped at her coffee. She had been polite and careful as she ate, but it was clear she was hungry.

“Me and your mom, we only dated a little while.”

“I understand when it comes to sex,” Chance said. “It only takes the one time.”

“True enough,” I said. “But it’s been years. Why now? Why didn’t she come to me earlier? What did she die of?”

“Lot of questions pretty fast,” Brett said.

“Sorry,” I said.

“She didn’t blame you for anything,” Chance said. “She had sex, she got pregnant, the two of you moved on, and she never told you. She said the two of you hadn’t been that close.”

“Except for at least one time,” Brett said.

“Yes, ma’am,” Chance said. “There was that one time.”

“It wasn’t quite that simple,” I said.

“The drinking. She said that’s what did it. You liked her, but she drank, bad.”

“She had problems with the liquor,” I said. “Nice lady. Except when she drank. We never truly became an item.”

“She always loved me and treated me well.”

“I’m glad for that,” I said.

“She quit drinking for a while. I had a passel of unofficial stepdads. Not legally, but she lived with different men. She wasn’t strong. She drank a lot, and so did the men, but they came and went. It was really just me and her, and then she drank so much it ate her up inside and she died. She left me what she had. Five hundred dollars in the bank, her lifetime of savings, and then there was the car and a bicycle. Thank goodness the Cadillac is big enough to sleep in, though it hardly runs. A 1975 model. She bought it used, and it got really used after that. I also got a box of belongings in the trunk of the car. I pawned the bicycle.”

“So May thought you were my daughter?”

“She didn’t think, she knew.”

I nodded, not really knowing what else to do. I looked at Chance even more carefully. She looked like May Lynn, but I was starting to see myself in her face—little things, like the mouth and nose. Or maybe I was just reading that into place because I thought she might in fact be my daughter.

I sipped some coffee I didn’t want, searched for words, and didn’t find any.

Brett said, “Honey, here’s the thing. If you are Hap’s daughter—and I’m not saying I doubt you; you look a little like him, but you know, to be sure—we need to take a paternity test. It’s the right thing to do, just to prove what you and your mother believe to be true. Because if it isn’t, then you need to know that, too.”

“Mother was certain,” Chance said. “She said there was only Hap, and then she was pregnant, so it was him unless it was immaculate conception.”

“Of course, but she may not have judged everything correctly,” I said. “I mean, at some point there were others, your stepdads. There could have been someone else. And besides, she said she was on the Pill.”

“She was. It was that rare, rare chance when something that shouldn’t happen does, in spite of the Pill. It’s nearly one hundred percent, but not quite. Mr. Collins, I’m not asking you to be a dad, not asking you for money. I just wanted to see you. Have some idea what you look like, how you are. I researched on you for the last year. Asking around, finding out this and that. Mom only told me about you a year ago. By the way, a lot of people don’t like you.”

“And maybe with good reason,” I said. “Understand I didn’t mean what I said to sound like, well, that—”

“That you were saying my mom was a tramp?”

“Yeah. I didn’t mean that.”

“What did you mean?”

“What he meant is this is new for all of us,” Brett said. “It’ll take a bit of time, but a paternity check would figure it out for us. I think that’s only fair, to be sure. Your mom told it the way she remembered it, but say she was off by a little, forgot a few details?”

“That’s a big detail,” Chance said, and she turned her head slightly, and when she did I could see her mother quite clearly. She had a habit of doing just that, kind of turning her head to one side, as if it gave her greater perspective on an idea. Her mouth trembled ever so slightly. “She had a number of boyfriends later, but she wasn’t a slut. She wasn't."

"No one is saying that," Brett said. "Not even close. I'm not Hap's first, nor is he mine. It's the way life works. It's just if your mother was mistaken. If. Then you wouldn't want to miss out and not find your real dad, if you haven't already found him."

"If you're my daughter, Chance, then I'm more than fine with that. Completely fine. It's like Brett says, though. We need to be sure. For all our sakes. Before we invest hearts, we need to invest DNA and be sure. That's fair, isn't it?"

Chance looked into her coffee cup. She stared at it so intently you would have thought a small shark might be circling in there.

She lifted her head, settled her eyes on me. "Sure. That makes sense. But I haven't got money for that kind of test."

"We do," Brett said.

* * *

That night Brett and I lay in bed together in the dark while Chance was sleeping downstairs in what had been Leonard's room. Buffy was in her basket near the bathroom door, asleep. She made little growling noises as she slept. I think she was thinking vengeful thoughts about her former master. Or maybe she was just being beaten up by a rabbit.

I had made a move on Brett to make love, but Brett said, "Not with Chance downstairs."

"As you say, she's downstairs, not under the bed."

"It just doesn't feel right. Your daughter…possible daughter…right under us, and us, you know…"

"You know?"

"Making love."

"You're the one invited her to stay. I also want her to, but…hell, I don't know what I think. I like her, I know that, and I wouldn't mind her being my daughter."

"What if she's not your daughter?"

"She still doesn't need to sleep in a car."

"Why I asked her to stay. I want us to help her."

"But on the other hand, I sensed hesitation from you, a fear she could be down there putting the silverware in a pillowcase."

"I didn't say anything like that."

"Didn't you?" I said.

"No. I said I didn't want to make love because it makes me uncomfortable that she's down there."

"How about taking a pee? Will that make you uncomfortable knowing she's down there?"

"Don't be cute," she said.

"It wasn't that cute."

"No, it wasn't. It's just that if she is your daughter, what do we do? If she isn't your daughter, what do we do?"

"I really just wanted to make love and go to sleep," I said.

"We have to do something for her."

"We fed her. We gave her a bed. And if she's not my daughter, we'll see what we can do to help her get started. Until then, we let her stay, have her take a paternity test, and take it from there."

"My daughter doesn't come visit," Brett said.

"She hasn't asked to come visit."

"You don't like her."

"I think her nearly getting me and Leonard killed twice and her going back to being a drunk and a druggie on a regular basis is part of that."

"She has problems, too, Hap. Is it one daughter over another?"

"I don't even know Chance is my daughter."

"But if she is?"

"I said already. We help her out."

"My point. Your daughter we help, my daughter we don't."

"Would you consider me and Leonard, and even you, nearly getting killed one time, and then me and Leonard nearly getting killed a second time, helping her out?"

"You said that already."

"I think it has a certain significance."

"If my daughter had a home to come to, then it might be different. She might do better."

"Tillie has her own house. What she does there and who she brings there is her problem. And sometimes ours. And she's in her thirties now. This girl is young."

"I handled myself then."

"So did I, but that's not the point."

"I'm not trying to be a bitch, Hap."

"You're doing a pretty good imitation."

She turned the light on.

"Are we going to go there?" Brett said.

"You're the one that said you're a bitch."

"I said no such thing. I said I'm not trying to be one, and you said I was one."

“An imitation of one.”

“Don’t start splitting hairs with me, buster. You not only aren’t getting any pussy tonight, you might prepare yourself for what certainly could be a long drought.”

“Baby, come on.”

“So now I’m your baby, not your bitch.”

I could see this was going downhill fast. I said, “Sorry, Brett. I’m as confused, surprised, and startled as anyone. I go from one end of the spectrum to the other on this. I’m happy about it in an odd way, confused in another. I hope she is my daughter, and I hope she isn’t. But she’s a person.”

Brett turned off the light.

In the dark, she said, “I know. I’m sorry. But I don’t think you’ve given Tillie a chance.”

“Well, speaking of Chance, let’s see if this girl deserves a chance. Even if she doesn’t I still want to help her. And it’s not like I haven’t tried to help your daughter, but Tillie—”

“I know. It’s different.”

“I was going to say difficult.”

“You wanted a family. And now you just may have one. But I won’t lie to you: I’m uncomfortable about it. Maybe I’m jealous of one daughter over another, or at least that’s how I’m seeing it.”

“If she is my daughter,” I said. “Seems to me we have to let this lay and see how it plays out for now.”

I could hear Brett breathing gently in the dark.

After a long while she spoke.

“I guess. And Hap?”

“What?”

“We don’t actually have any real silverware.”

By the time we quit talking things had smoothed over pretty well, but I still didn’t get any.

* * *

I finally got up and slipped out of the bed silently and went downstairs. In the living room I picked up a book on the coffee table, an old Bill Crider western, and started reading it. I had read it some years before, but now and again I have to read or reread a western.

I had just started when I heard the door to Leonard’s old room open. Turning, I saw Chance, dressed in a pair of Brett’s footy pajamas that were too long for her, come into the room.

She came to the edge of the couch where I sat, smiled at me. “Brett is tall,” she said. She lifted one foot, and I could see the footy was dangling.

“She is at that.”

“She’s so different from my mom.”

“Yes,” I said. “She is. What you doing up? You look tired.”

“I am. I thought I might have some warm milk. What are you doing up? You look tired, too.”

“Wanted to read.”

“At three in the morning?”

“I thought two was too early and four was too late.”

She chuckled slightly.

“Come on,” I said. “I’ll warm us both some milk.”

We went into the kitchen, and I poured milk in cups and placed them one at a time in the microwave. When we both had our warm milk we sat at the table. We looked at each other. I think we both had a lot to say but had no idea how to say it.

“I have something special,” I said. “Well, I find it special. I hide it so Leonard doesn’t get it.”

“I know he’s your friend, but nothing else.”

I got up and opened a cabinet, and from behind a box of rice and a can of whole jalapenos I pulled out a box of animal crackers. It was one of those small boxes that has a zoo on the front and animals behind bars. Never liked zoos or circuses, really. Felt sorry for the animals. But I liked animal crackers.

“Oh, I love those,” Chance said.

“So does Leonard,” I said. “Vanilla cookies of any kind, animal crackers, Dr Peppers. Why I hide these.”

“That’s mean.”

“He’s a cookie-eating machine and kind of a bastard about it.”

She showed a lot of pretty teeth. “You two sound like kids.”

“In some ways we are. You end up staying around us, you’ll find we’re very juvenile and pretty crass.”

“Mom said she thought you were a fine man.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that, so I merely opened the box of animal crackers, divided them up between us. When that was done we both had a small pile of them in front of us, along with our warm milk.

“I guess I should have got a plate,” I said.

“No, this is fine.”

“Sure?”

"Yeah."

"I could get a plate—a saucer, or something."

"No, really. This is fine."

"Not a great host," I said.

"We don't need the good china for animal crackers," she said and popped one in her mouth. "Oh, wow, these are good. When I was little Mom would get me animal crackers and a carton of milk, put me in front of the TV, and let me watch cartoons. She used that time to drink. Still, it's one of my fondest memories—eating animal crackers, drinking milk, and watching Ren and Stimpy, whatever she recorded for me. I had stacks of those VHS tapes, and out in the car I have a box of DVDs I've used to replace them. I still like cartoons."

"I like the Road Runner in those old Warner Brothers cartoons."

"Oh, yeah, he's great. And Wile E. Coyote always going off a cliff, and there's that slow drop and the big pow and the cloud of dust that floats up."

"You bet. What kind of music do you like?" I asked.

"I'm eclectic. I like some rap, but not much. Sounds alike pretty quick. Liked more of it when I was younger."

"You're pretty young now."

"I don't feel all that young," she said.

There was a slight darkening of tone, so I said, "What else do you like?"

"Country, some. Kasey Lansdale."

"Oh, hell," I said. "Leonard adores her stuff. I like it, too, but he's a fanatic. He likes to sit around and be moody to country music, usually the older stuff. Hank Williams, Johnny Cash. I like all that, too. Patsy Cline. Loretta Lynn. And have you heard Johnny Cash's son's music? John Carter Cash. Man, he is different. I have a CD of his that I've about worn a groove in."

"I don't know Hank Williams's music much," she said. "I kind of like Hank the Third, some of it. I know who his dad is, and know songs of his sung by other people, but not him."

"Real deal, Williams."

That line of talk ran out, and we sat for a while drinking milk and eating cookies. I was glad I had the milk and cookies so I wouldn't just sit there and stare at her, still trying to see myself in her.

"I have a degree in journalism," she said.

"That's good," I said.

"Did I already say that?"

"I don't think so."

"I worked at a paper for a while. I had a short story published in a literary magazine."

"Really?'

"Yeah. *REAL,* out of Stephen F. Austin University. I didn't get paid."

"Still, it was accepted."

"Yeah."

We minced around for more conversation, but by this time the animal crackers had run out.

"I feel better now," she said. "Sleepy."

"Me, too," I said.

"Thanks for the milk and the animal crackers."

"No sweat."

She stood up from the table.

"I guess I'll go to bed."

"Me, too."

"Should I put the glasses in the dishwasher?"

"I'll do that. You go on and get some sleep. Wake up when you want."

I think we were both trying to decide if hugging was appropriate. We decided without a word that it wasn't. She lingered, standing by the table for a moment, then said, "Good night," and went away.

I got up and rinsed out the milk glasses and put them in the dishwasher. I threw the box that had contained the animal crackers away. I dampened a sponge and wiped the table clean, pushing crumbs into my palm and dropping them in the trash.

I climbed the stairs, and by the time I got to the bedroom and slipped under the covers my eyes were wet with tears that I couldn't entirely explain.

21

We still hadn't heard from Jim Bob and Marvin.

On Sunday me and Leonard went fishing. I'm not really much of a fisherman, but now and again I enjoyed casting a line in the water. If I caught fish I sometimes ate them, but more often than not threw them back.

The main reason I went was to get my mind off things, both the case we were working on and my possible fatherhood.

It was a private lake we had access to, thanks to a friend of Marvin's. More of a big pond, actually. We had borrowed a small boat with a motor, and the lake was infested with fish and alligators, not to mention ducks and all manner of swampy growth poking up through the water. The sunlight hit the water with a vengeance, and where the greenery was tall in the water, it made a lot of little shadows. Out in the center it was clear and deep-looking, and there was a sheen that made it look more like oil than water. On the banks birches grew, alongside a scattering of willows and elms, their roots spreading into the water where the shore had broken away.

Leonard was sitting at the bow, and I was at the stern. We both had on wide-brimmed straw hats to keep from cooking, and the brims made shadows on our bent knees. The air was stiff and hot. We were drifting near the middle of the pond, casting our rods. I always loved the moment when the cast happened and the line whizzed out and sometimes you would get a flick of silver from the sunlight falling on the business end of the line.

We had brought along a lunch in a big cooler, and besides thinking about Chance, I was thinking about food. I liked lunch. I checked my watch. Damn. Still two hours away.

"Where is the girl today?" Leonard asked.

"She and Brett went to Tyler for lunch and clothes shopping. They'll spend the day. Why I thought it was okay for us to go fishing. Course, Chance doesn't know about the business we're into. I mean, she knows what we do, private investigations, but she doesn't know exactly what it is we're working on, and I don't see any reason to tell her there might be danger in our lives."

"If someone were going to hit us, wouldn't they have already done it?"

"We have some reputation, Leonard. They might be waiting for when we least expect it."

"Good point. About the daughter thing, though. How's Brett dealing with this?"

"Truth is she was a little shitty about having Chance there, even if she invited her, but she isn't shitty to Chance. I think she kind of likes her."

"She's being shitty because of her own daughter. That's it, isn't it?"

"Damn, Leonard. You are alert and tuned in."

"I read a book once. It had lots of pictures, but it led to me thinking a little."

"Oh, did I tell you? Chance has your room now."

"I have things in that room."

"No," I said. "Your shit is in a cardboard box under the stairs now."

"That's my room."

"You sound like a teenager come home from college to find his room is now a home library."

"Well, it is my room."

"Was."

Leonard pouted for a few minutes, then said, "So you don't know for sure she's your daughter?"

"And if she isn't, you want your room back?"

"That would be nice. If she is your daughter, I guess she can keep it."

"Big of you."

"If she is your daughter, it will change some of my thoughts about you."

"How's that?" I asked.

"I thought you were lying to me about having sex. I though you were just masturbating and pretending to have sex. You have a daughter, that means you really did have sex. Yuck."

"What do you think Brett and I do?"

"I don't like to think about it. I don't think Brett would do something like that."

"Yes, Leonard. I may have a daughter. Fruit of my loins."

"I was sort of hoping you were the end of your bloodline."

That stopped the talk for a while, and we drifted in the boat and fished. We ate our lunch. When we finished eating, Leonard pulled the previous conversation out of the bag again.

"Do you want it to be your daughter?"

"Been thinking about family a lot in the last few years, like maybe I want one that's bigger than the one I got, which is pretty much you and Brett. I even in a moment of odd weakness tried to talk Brett into us having a child."

"Well, she looks fine, and I want to put that on record, and though it's coming from a queer, I think I can safely say Brett has held age off better than just about anyone I know, but a little old for child rearing, don't you think?"

"Like I said, it was a kind of irrational thought, not much weight behind it."

"She's got a cool name," Leonard said. "Chance. I like that."

"Chance told me this morning her mother had quit drinking when she was pregnant. That it meant that much to her. And that May Lynn talked about me all the time, like we had been together forever. Told Chance she thought I was the one and she had missed the boat, and that she didn't want to disrupt my life, because except for when she was pregnant, she knew she couldn't stop drinking."

"You're one of those that thinks alcohol is a disease, aren't you?"

"Don't you?" I asked.

"I don't think all alcoholics are that way because their body reacts to liquor in a different way than someone who can take a drink. I think it's true of some, but I think a lot of people just find something for a crutch, take hold of it, and support themselves with it. They can quit but won't. I don't think it's always about disease. It's like me being gay. I had no choice, it was in the DNA, but I think it can be a choice, too. I think you can just decide you want to suck dick, out of adventure or the fact that you think, hey, I'm bringing up my average of having sex with a warm body."

"I believe they call that bisexuality," I said.

"I don't know if that exists or not. I don't care. I say you want to suck dick or mess with the other, no matter what your DNA, that's up to you. Me, I don't get any urge to do the other. I like men, and it's that simple. But I think for some it's choice. Hell, prisoners fuck each other all the time, get out of prison, and never fuck someone of their own sex again. Provided they don't end up back in prison. Everyone is looking for a warm hole, Hap."

"Don't go changing, Leonard. Stay the fine and romantic person you are.”

“I’m just saying how I see it. Some things are more habit than disease. And I’m not saying being gay is a disease. I’m just saying a lot of things can be by choice. Might be a bad analogy, since I don’t have any problems with sexual choice, but I’ve known some drunks who I think just liked to wallow in self-pity.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Bottom line, May Lynn was a drunk, by choice or disease or DNA or whatever.”

“When do I meet Chance?”

“Whenever you like. I guess I didn’t want to put her in with all the family until I was sure she was family. It’s a dumb thought, but there you have it. We’ve already had swabs done to check for DNA. It takes some time, though. We have a wait of a month or longer. Private business that does those tests, they’re pretty backed up. Rest of the time, well, me and Chance, we’ve been talking. I’m getting to know her, and she’s very sharp and likable. It’s like finding a puppy that has a collar and is well cared for and you put an ad in the paper, flyers, and any day you expect someone to call or knock on your door looking for that puppy. And there you are, having invested all your heart into them, and someone shows up with a leash and a dog treat.”

“Speaking of pups, how is Buffy?”

“Tip-top. Brett actually boarded her for today. Picks her up tomorrow. Vet is giving her the once-over, checking that rib.”

“I hate to veer from all your boring personal matters, Hap, but this stuff with Frank, the car lot. Jim Bob might ought to have his tree shook.”

“We do that, a barrel racer might fall out.”

“Maybe the horse, too. But we will shake his tree. Right?”

“Right.”

“Wait a moment. Think I have a bite.”

He started reeling it in. It was a bicycle tire and wheel.

“Ah,” he said, releasing the wheel from his hook, tossing it in the boat for us to dispose of. “The rare bicycle fish.”

22

We fished, and the day slipped away comfortably. For a pond full of fish, we weren't having a lot of luck. We threw back three fish and kept the bicycle tire. Mosquitoes were becoming a real problem.

Running the boat back to shore, we packed up and loaded the boat on the trailer. As we were driving out of there my cell rang. It was Jim Bob.

"We got to talk, Hoss."

"You saw Frank?"

"Yep. We need to talk."

"We're talking now."

"In person. Your house?"

I hung up and looked at Leonard. "Guess who?"

* * *

By the time we dropped the boat and trailer off and got rid of the bicycle tire, it was close to dark. Leonard drove us down back roads of red clay and sometimes gravel and blacktop.

Once East Texas had been the land of bears and honey and even parakeets. These days the bears and parakeets were all shot out, and the bees weren't doing all that well, either. There were cows, though. We spotted them when we came to gaps in the trees and saw pastures. The cows looked happy and content. They didn't know they were waiting to be hamburgers.

The dwindling sunlight wrapped through the trees and darkened into black ribbons of shadow, and by the time we broke out onto the main highway it was full dark. With the night having arrived, the air was cooler than before. We turned off the air conditioner and rolled down the windows and let the night air in. We passed houses with lights on inside them. A few cars zipped by, headlights shining bright and then gone.

Twenty minutes later we were in town and came to my street, arrived at the house. I noted there were no lights on, not even a porch light. I glimpsed flashlight flares in the yard. We cruised by, down to the church parking lot below the house. Leonard parked on the far side of the lot behind the church. You couldn't see the car from my house.

Leonard said, "You saw them, too?"

"Yep."

"Jim Bob?"

"Did you see his Caddy at the curb? Anywhere?"

"Nope."

"Lot of flashlights," I said.

"Yep. Maybe Jim Bob brought friends. The barrel racer?"

"Not unless she brought her horse and he has a flashlight, too."

"I judge there were three lights, so at least three guys, wouldn't you say?"

"Shall we surprise them?"

"Ain't nothing like a surprise," Leonard said.

"One thing first." I dialed Brett on my cell.

She answered with, "Hap. Sorry, hon. We been shopping, got caught up. We're going to have dinner then be home. You ought to get with Leonard and eat something."

"I will. So you're still in Tyler, then?"

"Like I said, we're going to have a late dinner."

"Okay. Well, take your time. Love you."

"You sound a little funny."

"Tired. Long day fishing. Talk later."

I turned off the phone and put it away.

"So?" Leonard asked.

"She and Chance are still in Tyler."

"That's good," Leonard said.

"Didn't see any reason to alarm her."

"Shall we see if we can give the people in your yard reason to be alarmed?"

"They could be folks looking for a lost dog."

"They could."

"Or kids prowling the neighborhood."

"Also possible."

"Termite exterminators at the wrong house."

"Less likely," Leonard said. "They could also be assholes out to do you and your bunch harm, too. And that would include me."

Leonard cranked the truck, drove out of the lot by the back way. This led to a road that ran behind our house. There was a two-acre pasture of overgrown grass directly behind our house to the road. There were houses elsewhere, but whoever owned this property had never developed it. I hoped they never would.

We parked at the curb by the pasture. Leonard leaned across me and got my revolver out of the glove box.

“That’s my gun,” I said.

“You pick up a stick or something.”

“You have my gun.”

“Very observant.”

“How’d you end up with my gun?”

“Do you really want to talk about that right now?”

“What if we’re not being that sneaky and they’re in my backyard?”

“Then the surprise will be on us,” Leonard said.

Crossing the pasture, I half expected to be shot. I’ve been shot at a few times. It makes a memorable impression. There were streetlights behind us and some from houses back there, and that framed us nicely for a shot if anyone was looking in our direction.

No one shot at us. I did have some grass burrs sticking through my pants, but other than that, so far so good.

There’s a chain-link fence at the back of our property, but on the right side there’s a tall redwood fence. Someone started building it years before we bought the place but never finished. Maybe they ran out of money.

There’s no gate directly at the back. It’s on the far side, where the redwood fence dies. The gate opens between the fence and the back wall of the house. To get to the gate from the direction we were coming from, we had to cross our next door neighbor’s property. A few dogs barked, but none of them were going crazy. Maybe our intruders would think nothing of it.

We eased through my neighbor’s yard along the redwood fence. I saw lights in one of the windows of the neighbor’s house, and I could faintly hear the television. I was sweating more than the temperature demanded. My hair was dripping with it. When we got to the gate I used a key to unlock it, and we eased it open and slipped into the backyard. For once I was glad the automatic light we had above the back door was out. I had been meaning to replace it.

There was a shed out there, and it was locked. I got out my key and unlocked it and got a crowbar off the workbench. So far the only work I had done on that bench was lay the crowbar there. I had arranged some tools on the wall, none of which, except for the hammer, I knew how to use. If I couldn't fix it with a hammer, it would remain unfixed.

I felt the heft of the crowbar in my hand. It slipped against my sweaty palm.

Gently as possible, I unlocked the back door and cracked it open. I could hear someone jacking with the front door, picking the lock, most likely.

"I'll surprise the folks at the door," Leonard said. "You want to check out the garage?"

"Try not to shoot anyone if you don't have to."

"You're no fun," Leonard said. He slipped inside and gently closed the door. I went back through the gate and along the grassy path between our house and the neighbors, came up alongside the garage. I guess it's more of a carport than a garage. It's open in the front, and there's no garage door.

I crept and sweated along past the neighbor's window with the glow and the television sounds coming out of it. I got out of the path of that light as quick as I could manage. I slipped forward until I got to the front edge of the garage.

I took a deep breath. There was a time when I kind of looked forward to this sort of thing. These days I just wanted dinner, a comfy bed, and Brett. I could hear someone in the garage, trying to walk softly but not managing too well. I heard someone say, "Shall we jimmy the door?"

That would be the door from the carport into the house. It led directly into a hallway that led to Leonard's room. Chance's room now.

I took another deep breath and let it out slow and easy and quiet. I thought about hitting someone with the crowbar and didn't like that idea, unless they had a gun. If they had a gun a crowbar might not be enough.

Soon the one who was picking the front door lock would be in, and when he came in, there would be Leonard. It would be like expecting the lady and getting the tiger.

I heard a loud noise, like someone slapping water with their palm. It came from the front of the house, and I knew that would be Leonard. He hadn't shot anyone, but he certainly had hit someone. Maybe they hit him, but I didn't think so. I knew in that instant, the same instant I thought all these thoughts, that my time wouldn't get any better than right then.

I rounded the corner and stepped into the garage as two men ran out of it and headed toward the sound. They didn't see me, as their backs were to me. They had heavy flashlights, and they were big men. That's all I could tell from the glow of their lights. The streetlight out front of the house was out and there was no moon and they were mostly just shapes with a light going before them.

I heard another sound, scuffling, then that smacking sound again. I saw someone fall backwards off the porch. His flashlight went flying, and I saw a beam from one of the flashlights gleam against a shaved head of one of the men in the yard. I could make out Leonard standing on the porch.

I was right behind the two men with flashlights. One of them raised the light onto Leonard, who was leaping off the porch. The man had a gun in his hand, and he was lifting it when I came up beside him and struck his gun hand with the crowbar as hard as I could swing it.

I knew from the way the crowbar felt in my hand I had broken bones. The gun dropped, the man went to his knees, sick with pain, and now the other man was turning toward me. I stepped right into the middle of him and twisted my body and hit him alongside the knee with the crowbar. He let out a scream, staggered back on an uncertain leg. I dropped the crowbar and stepped in so close we were almost in the same pair of pants. I hit him with a straight right that I knew was a good shot because I hardly felt it. He went down and tried to get up. I kicked him in the head, and he rolled over like a doodlebug, the flashlight flying from his hand and rolling across the grass where it came to rest on the concrete driveway.

I picked up the crowbar and gave it to Leonard, searched for guns, found a very large automatic on the unconscious man by the porch. The guy I had hit on the knee was unarmed except for a blackjack. I gave it to Leonard. He stepped forward and hit the man holding his knee with the blackjack, a short, sharp blow to the back of the head.

“Goddamn,” said the man, shifting his hands to his head. “My leg is done broke; wasn’t no need for that.”

“I felt there was,” Leonard said.

“You broke my arm,” said the man I had hit on the arm with the crowbar.

“I would be disappointed if I hadn’t,” I said. “And you, asshole. How’s your leg?”

“Broke, I done told you,” said the man.

“Good,” I said.

I went over and collected his gun from the driveway while the man with the broken arm bent over and threw up in the grass.

That’s when a car glided up at the curb.

23

Jim Bob parked near a big tree and got out. I could see someone else was in the Caddy, but couldn't make them out. Just a shadowy shape. Jim Bob came strolling up with a big revolver dangling from one hand and a flashlight in the other.

"Y'all having a yard party?" he said.

"You could call it that," Leonard said. "Though I think me and Hap had the party and they mostly just rolled around on the yard."

"You got you quite a few little souvenirs there, don't you?" Jim Bob said, looking at the guns in my hands.

"They weren't offering T-shirts," I said.

Jim Bob walked around, looked at all three on the ground, one completely out, two others moaning. He put his flashlight on them. One of them, the unconscious one, wore leather pants and a jean vest, was bare-chested under it. He had a belly like a hairy boulder. The other two wore jeans and dark T-shirts. White guys, all three. All with shaved heads and scraggly beards, faces that looked to have been boiled before they were arranged over the skull.

"Man, they are indeed the warehouse for ugly," Jim Bob said. "Might want to drag these fuckers inside or somewhere before the neighbors wonder what you're doing."

We didn't ask who was in Jim Bob's car. We knew he would tell us in good time, and we didn't want to share any knowledge with whoever it was lying on our lawn.

Leonard turned off the flashlights in the yard except the one that I took to use. He tossed the crowbar and the blackjack in the grass by the driveway and dragged the unconscious man into the carport, the man's boot heels scraped along the concrete.

I put two pistols away in my waistband and one in my front pocket. Me and Jim Bob took hold of the other two guys. I clutched the one with the injured leg under the shoulders and slid him along on his ass, managing to stick the flashlight under my arm and clutch it there while

I did. Jim Bob pulled the other one to his feet, and we got them inside the carport.

They were too weak to fight. We got them in there easy. It was dark inside the carport, and we didn't turn on the light. What light there was came from Jim Bob's flashlight and the light I had. There were steps leading from inside the carport into the house. We sat our catch on the top steps, except for the unconscious guy. Leonard left him lying in front of the steps.

I said, "Who the hell sent you and why?"

"Fuck you," said the one with the broken arm.

Jim Bob strolled over and slapped the man twice, grabbed his injured arm, and cranked it. The man squealed, and I winced.

Jim Bob slapped him again. "That's for yelling."

"This is brutality," said the man.

"I know," said Jim Bob.

"Easy, man," I said.

Jim Bob looked at me. "You talking to me?"

"Yeah."

Jim Bob waved the revolver at the thugs, said, "All my life, doing what I do, I have dealt with the scum of the earth, the shit on the bottom of my boots, boots into which I stick my highly attractive feet, and tonight I'm fed up with it. Got no pity left for creeps. I don't know why they're here, who they are, if God or genetics made them ugly, but I know you guys are not the problem without even knowing how this got started. They are the problem. I know a place when we're done here we can bury them. Only way they'll be found is if the earth cracks open on the Day of Judgment."

"There's a shovel in the storage shed," Leonard said. "I don't believe in God, so I'm not expecting that big Day of Judgment other than what we dole out. So I reckon they'll stay hidden for good."

"Guys," I said. "Let's don't let this get out of hand."

I couldn't clearly see the expressions of the two that were sitting on the steps, but their body language told me they were scared. The man lying on the floor of the carport I was starting to wonder about. He hadn't so much as groaned. Leonard can hit pretty damn hard when he wants to.

"Who are you?" I said. "And understand that in this carport, I'm as close as you got to a friend, and I don't like you at all."

"That don't give me any confidence," said the man with the broken arm.

“Nor should it,” Leonard said. “Come to my brother’s house carrying guns and badly shaved heads, you got to understand how much I’d like to just blow a hole in your meat and dump you in a ditch and piss on you.”

“I wasn’t even here when it came down,” Jim Bob said to the man, “and I don’t like you.”

“You’ve made that clear,” said the man with the broken arm.

“I can make it clearer,” Jim Bob said.

“It’s now or never,” I said to the men, hoping Leonard and Jim Bob were just playing roles, but with those two, you could never be sure. I knew Leonard better than anyone in the world, but there was a place he could go I couldn’t. Jim Bob was even more unpredictable. We could be standing there one moment, next moment all three of those men could be dead and in the trunk of a car on their way to someplace dark and wet.

The man with the broken arm looked so much like the other two, the only way I could tell the difference was in tattoos. He had a tattoo at the center of his throat, like a wishbone. It was not attractive. It looked to be made with a ballpoint pen. Jailhouse tattoo was my guess. I thought of him as Wishbone. I moved the light off of him and pooled it at the base of the steps.

“We was sent by the boss,” said Wishbone.

“Narrows it right down,” Jim Bob said. “Shall I come over and yank on your arm some more?”

“The Big Dog.”

“Who’s the Big Dog?” Leonard said.

“Boss we don’t never see. We just been told Big Dog has money to pay for certain things being done, and one of those things was you guys, and the ones was told to do it was us. Big Dog ain’t really our boss all the time, but he hires us from time to time. You might call us freelance.”

“I might call you stupid,” Jim Bob said.

“I think you ought to consider a career in macramé if your arm heals,” Leonard said. “You damn sure aren’t any good at this business.”

“So you guys are some kind of crew?” I said.

“Bike club,” he said. “Apocalypse on Wheels.”

“I heard of them,” Jim Bob said. “I think they ride tricycles.”

“You ought not talk too mean,” said the man with the banged knee. “You might write a check with your mouth your ass can’t cash.”

“You boys are any example of the badass Apocalypse on Wheels,” I said, “then you ain’t so much. We can write as many checks as we want.”

“We got taken by surprise,” Wishbone said.

“Yes,” I said. “You did.”

Wishbone wanted to say something mean, but instead he was wise enough to sit and smolder. There was an air about him like the school bully who had been beaten up by the ninety-eight-pound math nerd.

Apocalypse on Wheels were known to be dangerous. Drug dealers, primarily meth. They were also known for dog-fighting rings, which in my view should have been punishable by a death sentence.

“Where’s your bikes?” Leonard said. “You boys come by stick horse instead?”

“I said tricycles,” Jim Bob said.

“Yes,” Leonard said, “you did. But I just graded them down another notch. Next Hap can say roller skates.”

“Oh, I got you,” Jim Bob said. “But wouldn’t skates be better than a stick horse?”

“You have a point there,” Leonard said.

“Car,” said Wishbone. “We parked on a backstreet and walked over.”

“Car?” Leonard said. “What kind of self-respecting biker gang comes by car?”

“Easier,” Wishbone said.

“Yeah, well, let’s get back to what you were saying,” I said. “Hired by Big Dog, who you claim you don’t know, to come over here and do what? Sort my shit?”

Wishbone held his arm, winced a little, said, “Pretty much. Supposed to be a warning. Give you a good ass-whipping.”

“You know where I live,” I said, “so you know who lives here with me, don’t you?”

“A woman.”

“You come here in the middle of the night with guns and flashlights, and you were just going to sort me out? What about her?”

“I guess we would have put some smoke on her, too.”

“All right,” I said. “Officially, I’m no longer even a faint resemblance to a friend.”

“Nothing happened,” he said. “We got hurt. You didn’t.”

“And man, that saddens us,” Leonard said.

“You were going to whip my ass for what?” I said.

“You know,” he said.

“Why don’t you define it for me?” I said.

“Well, we don’t get no details much, just the job and some street cred.

We was told you was meddling where you shouldn't be meddling, and that we was to whack you around a little, say stay out of business where you don't belong."

"But they didn't tell you the business?" Jim Bob asked.

"No. Didn't matter. It was a job."

"What were you getting paid?" I asked.

"It was to kind of go on our credit."

"Credit."

"We're acolytes," he said.

"Goddamn, that's a strange word to come out of your mouth," Jim Bob said. "I think you even pronounced it right. What you mean is you're trying to get into the gang as a full member and not just a wannabe. Right?"

"I suppose you could say that," Wishbone said. "I like acolyte better."

"So who came to you and said Big Dog wanted me worked over a bit?" I asked.

"They wanted the nigger popped around, too," Wishbone said, avoiding my question. "We thought we'd catch him at his place. He, like you, was easy to find. They gave us your names, and we went straight to the Internet. Wonderful thing that is."

"Ain't it?" Jim Bob said.

"Who is this cowboy fuck?" Wishbone said, nodding at Jim Bob.

"Hell in a cowboy hat," I said. "That's all you need to know."

"No," Jim Bob said. "I want you to know who I am, so you can maybe take a run at me if you survive, and I can fuck you up. I'm Jim Bob Luke. I live in Houston. I love a good enchilada and a medium-rare steak, a good-looking woman with a free spirit, and you couldn't hurt me if you was three people apiece and had three friends just like you. Fuck, you couldn't roll me over with a pry bar if I was dead."

"You just fucked up," said the one with the injured leg. "We'll damn sure remember you."

Jim Bob said, "Most people do." He stepped forward and popped the man with the bad leg in the nose with a sharp left jab. "That's for talking out of turn." Then Jim Bob hit him again. "That's for flinching." Jim Bob slapped him once across the cheek. "And that's for calling Midnight a nigger."

"Oh, thanks," Leonard said.

"My pleasure," Jim Bob said.

"Midnight?" Leonard said.

"I thought it made me seem less politically correct," Jim Bob said. "I got to keep up an image to work with the people I work with."

Bad Leg held his hand to his nose. In the beam of my flashlight I could see blood running between his fingers and down his face.

I said, "You haven't given us a lot of information."

"It's all we got," said Bad Leg.

I thought it might well be.

"You said you were hired by Big Dog and someone else," I said. "Who is this someone else?"

"Our club chairman. Samson House."

"Ah, hell," Jim Bob said. "I know that son of a bitch."

"You do?" I said.

"Nice guy, ain't he?" said Wishbone.

"A peach," Jim Bob said. "Same as his brother, Moses."

"Moses is dead," Wishbone said.

"I know," Jim Bob said. "Why don't you boys take us to Samson? I'd love to see him. I'm only pretending to ask, by the way."

"You know," said Bad Leg. "My leg ain't broke like I thought. I think it's going to be okay."

"You'll never know how that has made our day," Jim Bob said.

"Still hurts, though," Bad Leg said.

24

I soon found out who was in Jim Bob's car. To say I was baffled is to put it mildly.

It was Frank. She was wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and red running shoes. She had her hair tied back in a ponytail and wasn't wearing makeup. She looked good. That she had once been a man was hard to figure on my end. I guess it shouldn't matter, but the idea of her being male before she was female didn't exactly evaporate from my mind.

I walked out to the car with Jim Bob to see her while Leonard kept the three in the garage occupied by pointing one of the guns at them. Sleeping Beauty had finally stirred and was sitting on the steps with the other two.

Frank nodded at me as she got out of the car, but nothing was said. Jim Bob guided her into the house, and when he came back out, we got the bad guys out of the carport. None of them had seen Frank. Jim Bob made it clear we didn't want her seen and took Leonard aside to explain that she was in the house.

We tied up and gagged all but Wishbone, put the gagged ones in the trunk of Jim Bob's Caddy. Bad Leg was right. His leg wasn't broken. He managed to limp out to the car without assistance, moving the way you might if someone had taped your dick to one leg.

After they were tucked nicely inside the trunk, I noted there was plenty of room for them and the spare and maybe we could stuff Wishbone in there, too, if we needed to. But he was our pathfinder, so we placed him in the front passenger seat. Leonard sat behind him with a pistol. I stayed at the house.

Jim Bob drove away slowly. I drove Frank to our office, arriving well ahead of him. He was taking the long way around so Wishbone wouldn't get a chance to see her.

I put Frank inside the office, made the bed for her, showed her where the bottled water was, the coffee and such. We didn't discuss anything, nor did she offer any explanation for why she was with Jim Bob. I got three twelve-gauge pump shotguns out of the closet and a box of shells, told her to make herself comfortable, that I wasn't sure when we'd be back, and to stay inside and not answer the desk phone, then I left out of there.

In the parking lot Jim Bob was standing outside the Red Bitch, as his Cadillac was known, and Leonard was sitting in the backseat with the revolver. Wishbone was in the front seat, being very cooperative. Jim Bob walked over and helped me with the shotguns, taking two of them off my hands, leaving me holding one in one hand, the box of shells in the other.

Jim Bob said, "Got her set?"

"Yep. But I don't get it."

"You will."

"What if she runs away?"

"She won't."

"She might."

"She'll stay until we get back."

I looked at the biker dude in the Red Bitch.

"Considering where I think we're going, what happens if we don't make it back?" I asked.

"I always come back."

"But if we don't?"

Jim Bob shrugged. "Eventually she'll get bored and leave."

I could tell Jim Bob wasn't going to explain shit, least not right then.

"Was it like we thought?" I asked him.

"You mean the cars and the women and the blackmail?"

"No. I wanted to know if without her original elongated wee-wee can she piss up a rope. Of course I'm asking about the cars and such."

Jim Bob was unfazed.

"More to it than we thought. Not exactly like you figured. Think you and your buddy have opened up one big-ass can of worms, and these worms have some serious teeth. But we'll start with these assholes. We finish that, I'll explain about Frank. She can help explain. We don't get these honky tonk samurai sorted out, we might not need an explanation. What we're going to do is nip them in the bud."

"Frankly, I don't see how three of us can sort out a biker gang."

"No doubt it will be precarious," Jim Bob said and raised an eyebrow at me. "You scared?"

"Yeah."

"Not me."

“Liar.”

“Okay,” Jim Bob said. “I’m slightly nervous. I’ll own up to that much. But I got a plan. I’m not sure it’s a plan makes any sense until we get where we’re going. It doesn’t, well, we change plans. We shoot these three in the head and leave them in the woods.”

“I don’t like that plan,” I said.

“Then you better hope plan A works,” Jim Bob said. “Look. I know something about these bike-club sucks. They are part of the Dixie Mafia. You might even say they are actually a wing of it. They are connected to just about everything that smells bad in Texas except a little roadkill. Not just East Texas but the whole goddamn state. These biker fucks are mostly muscle for people with more brains and bigger plans then these guys got. Guys in your yard tonight, they are the lowest of the low. They were probably going to get their bones for putting you and Leonard and Brett out of the way. They were there to kill all three of you, not sort you out, but it didn’t work out for them. Their boss figured you guys weren’t much, so he sent some hitters who weren’t much, but don’t think there isn’t some serious trouble with these boys, and you want to nip it in the bud, and quick, or they will keep on coming until one of them gets lucky. Bottom line is, instead of talking to these three lame-ass soldiers, I say we talk to their main man. That doesn’t work out, then we shoot everybody.”

“How many is everybody?”

“How would I know? More than ten, twelve? Enough to make a biblical epic? I don’t know.”

“Not comforting.”

“True, but I think it’s best to confront them. You want them to at least think they got to consider twice they throw down on you. You can’t show weakness with them. Some of the Dixie Mafia head guys, you might even reason with them they see a profit in it. But these biker goobers, not so much.”

“And I’m saying you don’t crawl down a hole full of rattlers and expect to come out unbit.”

Jim Bob nodded slightly. “I hear you. Like I said, I’ve dealt with them before. They kind of lump up together like dog turds out Etoile way. We were in Houston, thereabouts, I’d know exactly where they are. Here, I just know the general location.”

“You know a lot of shit, Jim Bob.”

“That’s because I walk through it every day. Someday soon I’m thinking I’m going to throw in the rope and take up pig farming again full-time.”

“I didn’t even know there was a biker gang around here.”

“Did you know there are some Amish here in East Texas, north of town? The men use power tools and have cell phones and drive cars, but the women live on the farm, wear bonnets pulled down around their faces, and, unlike the men, only use hand tools.”

“I don’t know from Amish,” I said. “How did we get on the Amish?”

“It seemed like a natural segue. Bottom line is we need someone knows more than the bikers’ general whereabouts.”

“Meaning the young gentleman with the fucked-up tattoo in your front seat is going to be our guide?”

“Bingo.”

“You know, one thing we ought to take into serious fucking consideration is we got shotguns and revolvers and everyone else has automatics and rifles that can spray bullets faster than we can.”

“Yeah, I know,” Jim Bob said. “But I do so hate change. I haven’t got over that whole business about Pluto. I think Pluto got fucked, you know. One day it’s a planet, and the next day it’s not. I hate change, Hap. I’m the same with guns. Like to keep it old-school.”

“Well, when we get back, if we get back, we’ll draft a stiff note to Congress about that business with Pluto.”

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Inside the Caddy I laid a shotgun across my lap. Leonard placed one across his, the other I put on the floorboard at my feet. Leonard was still holding the pistol pointed at the back of Wishbone's head. I hoped we didn't hit a bump.

"Well," Leonard said. "You guys certainly took long enough. I hope you got some shit sorted out and it's nothing I need to know."

"We had some serious things to discuss," Jim Bob said. "We didn't need you for it. It would have been over your head."

"Nice," Leonard said.

"The guys, they do that to me all the time," Wishbone said. "I always feel like they're talking behind my back, like maybe the ass is ripped out of my pants and I don't know it."

"You shut up," Leonard said.

Outside of LaBorde, the trees grew thick and even thicker as we headed eastward.

I sent Brett a text that said I might be home late, maybe even tomorrow morning, and I'd explain later, and not to be surprised if she found a strange woman sleeping on the sleeper sofa at the office. I didn't tell her it was Frank. I thought about it some more and sent another text. RENT A MOTEL TONIGHT FOR YOU AND CHANCE. DO THIS. TRUST ME. DON'T GO HOME TONIGHT. NO EXCEPTIONS. NO EXCUSES. IN FACT, NOW THAT I THINK ABOUT IT, DON'T GO TO THE OFFICE UNTIL I SAY IT'S OKAY. LOVE, HAP.

I wondered what Brett would think if I didn't come back. Where is he? What the hell is he doing? What the hell was that text about? Will there be coupons this Sunday in the newspaper for granola bars and panty liners?

And then there was Chance. If she was my daughter I damn sure hadn't gotten to know her very well. She didn't know me well enough to miss me when I was gone. I really should just try to get a regular day job that didn't involve getting hit or shot at and that maybe came with health benefits and a retirement plan.

I glanced at Leonard. He was just a dark shape in the car, but he turned his face toward me. He sensed what I was thinking. He often knew what I was thinking. He said softly, “It’s cool, man.”

He’d say that with the hot wind of hell blowing in his face.

We passed very few cars, and in fact the presence of their headlights out there in that lonesome country was almost alien, like spaceships cruising close to the ground, zipping by so fast even the big Cadillac vibrated.

Wishbone sat stiff, giving directions, mostly saying, “Keep going.”

Finally we came to what had once, in the 1950s, been a prominent highway. Now it seemed narrow, and the old yellow stripe down the center of it was worn so dim you could hardly see it in the headlights.

It was two lanes, and we didn’t pass a single car as we went along. We traveled down it for a goodly stretch. The trees closed in on both sides and limbs came together overhead and made a kind of canopy. We had to dodge some rotten limbs that had fallen in the road, and once we had to stop so I could get out and drag a big limb away so we could continue. Finally we came to an asphalt road, the sides of which bled off into deep bar ditches on either side. Wishbone had us turn down it. In the woods I saw fireflies glowing in spots, winking out, then winking back into view. The headlights caught the glint of standing water in scattered spots. A mosquito paradise.

“All right, fuckhead,” Jim Bob said to Wishbone. “You better not be leading me on a wild goose chase, or you will be a cooked goose.”

“We’re down here on purpose,” he said. “It keeps prying eyes out, and the club owns the land.”

“How close are we?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Wishbone said. “A mile. Maybe two.”

“Tell me well before we get there, and don’t be cute about it,” Jim Bob said. “We show up in the midst of your comrades before we know it, you get it first. *Comprende?*”

We came to what was nothing more than a deer trail. Wishbone told us to turn down it. Jim Bob pulled off the road and onto the trail and stopped, turned off the headlights. He turned in his seat and looked at Wishbone.

“What?” Wishbone said.

“How close now?”

“Real close. You go down here a piece, then it widens out. It’s been logged down there. You’ll see a patch of trees beyond the bare spots, though, and on the other side of them is another bare spot, and you can see some mobile homes we got there, a big shed. That's where they cook the meth. And there are a bunch of dog pens where they keep the fighting dogs, though there ain't none there now."

"Tell you what we're going to do," Jim Bob said to Wishbone. "I'm going to get out of the car, and then you are going to get out. You are going to walk around to the rear of the car. My boys here will follow out after you."

That was just like Jim Bob. My boys. He had taken over. Thing was, right then, that was fine with me.

"Are you going to shoot me when I get out?" Wishbone asked.

"That's up to you," Jim Bob said.

Wishbone and Jim Bob went to the back, and me and Leonard followed. The air outside of the air-conditioned car was as stiff as wire and uncomfortably warm. Jim Bob opened the trunk and shined his flashlight into it. The two thugs hadn't evaporated or died of a carbon monoxide leak. They had been trying to work the ropes loose, you could tell that much. They were both still gagged.

"All right," Jim Bob said, and without being asked, Leonard readjusted the wrist and ankle ties on the two in the trunk. There was more nylon cord back there, and Jim Bob got that out and tossed it to Leonard, nodded at Wishbone, said, "You don't mind, tie his ass up and gag him and put him on the back seat floorboard. I just wanted to see how these guys were riding back here."

He reached down and pulled the gag from Bad Leg. "How's the ride?"

"Bumpy. And my leg hurts."

"I can live with that," Jim Bob said and readjusted the gag.

When Wishbone was well tied up by Leonard and lying on the ground, Jim Bob stood with his hand on the trunk lid, looked down at Bad Leg and Sleeping Beauty, and said, "Good night, sweet assholes. Better hope we don't get killed. It's going to be real hot tomorrow, and then you're going to get thirsty, and then, well, it's not a nice way to go."

There was mumbling behind the gags and a lot of squirming. Jim Bob closed the trunk. I got hold of Wishbone's head, and Leonard got his feet. We lugged him around and put him on the floorboard in the back of the Caddy.

Jim Bob said, "Let's go."

Leonard got in the front passenger seat, and I sat in the back with all the shotguns in my lap and my feet on Wishbone's head. I found it was a little uncomfortable. I don't know how Wishbone felt.

Jim Bob backed us out of the narrow trail and drove the Cadillac slowly and without lights down to where there was an indention in the woods. He pulled in there. There was a small trail off that. He drove down it a few yards, stopped at a dead end, and me and him and Leonard got out. Wishbone was thrashing around on the floorboard like a beached whale, but I had seen how Leonard had tied those knots that held him; he wasn't coming out of that without assistance.

I sorted the shotguns out. We walked away from the car and then stopped underneath a black willow tree that was growing near a little runoff of water that trickled down through the brush and trees.

"Thing we don't want to do is get surprised," Jim Bob said. "We'll do the surprising."

"How surprising are we going to be?" Leonard asked.

"The surprise is they'll never know we were here. But we'll get a lay of the land this way. This Samson fellow, like I said, I kind of know him. We find Samson, he can give us a more direct note on who hired him to hire the numb-nut squad, and that can lead us more directly to the problem you boys got. That and Frank. She had plenty to say, and I think she's got more."

"And you know Samson on sight?" I asked.

"You might say I knew his brother, Moses, better, but yeah, I know Samson on sight. Probably can smell him."

"What about Moses?" I said.

"He met with an unfortunate accident."

"What kind of accident?"

"Well, I had some run-ins with the Apocalypse bunch in Houston," Jim Bob said. "It don't matter what for, as it was a complicated mixture of events that involved a variety of nasty happenings. It ended with me getting outsmarted, which is a goddamn rarity in this universe. But it happened. I think I'd been a little sick that week."

"You mess up, you always say that?" Leonard said.

"I wouldn't want you thinking it's my fault. Thing was, it was a temporary lapse, but at the moment I'm telling about, they had me by the nut sack. I was caught up in something that got me taken out to their compound outside of Houston. Kind of like what's out here. They moved here not long after that. I didn't know exactly where, but knew it was in this area. You can bet I've kept an ear to the ground. They made a few runs at me afterward, but it didn't turn out well for them, and in time they quit. At least for a while. So knowing this location, and if Samson's here, I can also make sure I don't get run at again. They aren't known to be smart, but they aren't known to give up.

"Thing is, I killed a few of them, and that was their main point of contention. They were mad at me over some things I had done for a client that didn't do them any good, so they started sending these guys to hit me. I had three runs at me and was successful each time. But this time I'm talking about, I turned left when I should have turned right. To put it in a nutshell, they nabbed me, kicked me around a little, but didn't kill me. They had other plans, had me dead to rights, and they hauled me out to their compound so I could meet their head asshole, and he's talking about chopping off my head and doing some nasty things to it. I says to the brother, Moses, I says, 'You're pretty tough with me handcuffed, but for all your tough-ass talk, you couldn't pull a cotton wad out of a dead man's ass. What you got is muscle all around you. Those men of yours I killed, they came for me, and I took them on face-to-face and killed them.'

"Anyway, they've got me. I'm handcuffed, and I got some knots they knocked on my head growing larger by the moment, and one of my eyes is starting to close a little. Moses is going on about how he's going to cut my head off, pull out my intestines, stick a hot poker up my ass, pull my dick off with pliers—none of this laid out in any particular order—and it all sounded quite convincing. You can bet my asshole was puckering wind about then.

"I says to him again: 'You talk big with all these swinging dicks around you. How about it's just me and you, and that decides it?'

"Let me tell you, conditions I was under, I was throwing some serious pecker around. They wanted me to grovel, but I wasn't going to give them that. I was playing with pure shit talk and ball sweat out there, let me tell you. Had it been some of the other criminals I know, they would have just laughed and shot me in the head. But I knew how those suckers thought. Moses says, 'All right. Let's do it. How about a duel, pistols with two loads at thirty feet?'

"Now, that is my meat, boys, and I thought, I could do that and have as good a chance as most anybody. No use lying. I knew I'd win that way. Course, I did win, I wasn't certain they'd actually let me go. But right then the choices were shoot it out or have my dick pulled off with pliers. Dick like mine ought to be bronzed, not mistreated. But then Samson, he says, 'Do it the old bowie fight way.' He says he's done that and come out on top, and he lifted up his shirt and showed us some scars that looked like he'd been caught up in a very large electric fan. Samson says his brother, Moses, ought to do that, show me and anyone that would find my corpse that you don't mess with the Apocalypse fuckers, and so on and so on. He went on for some time. Another few minutes and I would have died from boredom."

"I know what you mean," Leonard said.

"Fuck you," Jim Bob said. "You love this and you know it. Well, now, this knife-fight idea was far less appealing to me. A knife fight, even one you win, usually ends up with you cut, and maybe you only win because the other guy dies first. I don't like knives. But that's not to say I don't know a thing or two about them. I been in a knife ruckus or two, but not like they were suggesting. You see, turns out these guys are fans of Jim Bowie, and not just the knife. There's this old story that back in his time Bowie fought a knife duel in a dark room. Story being Jim had a bowie and the other guy had a common butcher knife. Bowie won, though a lot of people don't know the part about how he was laid up with knife wounds and such for a long while. Add to this, Samson and Moses aren't little folk, and it seems when they aren't killing people, doing meth, they're lifting weights. They got so many muscles, they move and it looks like gophers running under their skin.

"Still, it was a chance to walk out with my head on or go down fighting. So I'm watching Moses, looking confident and just a little bit contemptuous, using my Elvis smile on them. I have practiced that motherfucker a thousand times in front of a mirror. I know how powerful it is.

"Thing is, this hat I'm wearing, with its high crown, same kind I had then. I got a little automatic pistol clipped in there, then and now. It's just a little homemade thing with a little silencer on it and it shoots two twenty-two rounds, and for it to do any good you got to be close and accurate. It's what we used to call a Saturday Night Special. So this crack team of bikers that searched me and took my larger artillery didn't no more see the gun in my hat than they noticed I got a couple of dark spots on my nuts. I mean, they searched me and left my hat on. Their stupidity that day worked in my favor. And before you worry about those dots on my nuts, it's not cancer, just some natural markings, like a spotted pup."

"Now we can sleep with comfort," I said.

"So the brother, Moses, agrees, and they give us both big ole bowie knives. These were like swords, man. I think they was over twenty inches and wide as my hand, sharp enough to shave with. And into this shed we go. It was about twenty by thirty, which is small to begin with, but when you get in there and the other guy has a knife, it's smaller yet.

He got one corner, and I got the other, and as soon as they turned out the light from outside and locked the door, I took off my hat and got the gun out of the little holster in the crown, tossed the hat in his direction. I hear him yell, thinking I touched him, and I could hear him grunting and the knife slashing the air. I got down on my hands and knees, stayed against the wall, and started crawling. His grunting and such had pinpointed him for me. I was close. I tried to see if my eyes would adjust, but it was so dark in there you couldn't find your ass with both hands.

"I bided my time, worried he'd walk up on me, bump into me, and stick that big knife in me. I had my bowie, of course, but I had stuck it in my belt at the back. What I had that gave me the edge was that tiny silenced pistol."

"Didn't know they could put silencers on little guns like that," Leonard said.

"Silencer is built in," Jim Bob said. "It don't come off, and it doesn't really work that well, but then again, it's not a gun makes a lot of noise to begin with. Anyway, I'm creeping around on the floor like a cockroach with a little pistol that feels small in my hand, something I hadn't never used on a human being and feared might not stop a mouse that had had a good breakfast. This guy is going nuts. Screaming at me, saying, 'Say something, cocksucker. Show me how tough you are.'

"I crawled along, and damn if I didn't run up against his legs. I might near blew a turd that was such a surprise. I had figured on where he was, but of course by the time I got that figured he had moved. I grabbed his legs, still clinging to my pistol, pushed my head forward into his knee, and took him down. He sat up, and that knife come around and I heard it whistle just over my head.

"I ran my gun up along his chest so I could put it right up close to his head, cause that little gun has to be right on you to do much good. When I had it under what I figured was his chin, I pulled the trigger. The gun coughed, and it was louder than I counted on, but it didn't sound like gunfire. It sounded like someone letting out his breath real hard. I felt Moses stiffen and fall backwards from where he was sitting, and his head cracked on the concrete floor. I dropped the pistol and got on him and pulled the bowie and went to work. I got hold of his head, pushed it back, and cut his throat, then stabbed the living dog shit out of him. When he was still and not breathing and I was wet with his blood, I felt around till I found where that twenty-two shot went in under his chin, up and into his brain, which I figure was a lucky shot there, that dude's brain having to be about pea size. I felt and cut around his chin with that bowie, so there wasn't no bullet hole visible. I wiped my hands on him, felt around until I found my gun, put it back in my hat, which I also had to hunt around for.

"It was then I realized I had been cut. I don't know how I got cut. I guess Moses still had some juice in him when I took him down and was trying to work that pistol under his chin. Anyway, I was cut in a few places, all of it superficial stuff, my manly beauty not being seriously marred. I figure the scars I got, they just give me a kind of rugged charm."

"You are one of the most delusional fuckers I've ever known," Leonard said.

Jim Bob laughed. "But there I was. Bloody and cut, and Moses lying there leaking in the dark, and I'm thinking, okay, I won."

"You cheated," I said.

"Wouldn't you have?"

"Yep," I said.

"Oh, yeah," Leonard said. "Big-time."

"Thing was, I had won, and they didn't know how I won. I'm thinking, all right, when I open that door they're going to be on me like bears on honey, and it won't matter I won. But there was one door in that shed, and one way out, so I didn't have no choice but to go out of it. I decide, all right, if I'm going to go out that door, I'm going to go out of it with the knife in one hand and have that dead fucking Moses by the collar with the other. And that's what I done. I knocked on the door with the butt of the bowie. They opened it, and I come out with the knife in one hand, dragging Moses with the other. There were a few steps leading up and into that shed, and I bumped Moses's big dead ass on every one of them, dropped him on the ground.

"I said, 'Next.'"

"Always a step too far," I said.

"Can't help myself. But you know what? They let me go. Samson insisted."

"Honor among thieves and murderers," I said. "How refreshing."

"Uh-huh," Jim Bob said. "But he regretted it. One of his boys took a run at me not so long ago, and, well, as you can note by my presence, standing here upright before you, I came out all right. Since then, no trouble. But I don't like him, and like I said, they got long memories, and that honor-among-thieves shit is only if they're in the mood to be honorable or feel they have to appear that way at the moment. But in the middle of the night, when they're considering on things, they frequently have a change of heart."

"What I figure," I said, "by the time we quit listening to you and get around to doing something, it'll be full morning."

"Believe me," Jim Bob said. "There will come a time, if we don't get killed, when you will in memory cherish moments with me like this."

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We came out of the trees and started down the road then, being watchful, and finally we could hear noise. Men and women laughing and cutting up. We had been using a little penlight Jim Bob was carrying to make our way, but now he shut that off. We stopped and stood in the black night awhile, not talking. We were letting our eyes adjust to the dark as much as possible.

After a few minutes we started traveling again, but it was so dark we had to stay on the road and not go back into the trees. You could hardly see a thing down there in the woods, and the road was only slightly better. The air was full of the stench of something that had died and was decaying, and it was intense. The sound of voices swelled.

In short time we put most of the stink behind us, kept on keeping on. Then we began to hear music, faint at first, but growing louder as we moved forward, loud enough to damn near make your ears bleed. Acid rock from ages gone.

Finally the road emptied itself into a field, and in the field we could see a huge bonfire. It was so large and so bright it was as if the shadows were on fire.

There were about twelve men and twice that number of women around the fire, which appeared to be fed by railroad ties, dead wood, old car and truck tires. The group was all white. Not exactly folks known for diversity was my guess. The music was coming from some device with real power inside a mobile home near the fire, and not far off were three other mobile homes. There was plywood over spots where windows had once been.

There was a horde of bikes parked out front of the mobile home where the music was coming from, and the door to the home was open. Now and again men and women staggered out or staggered in. As I said, I had counted twelve men in the yard, and twice that many women, but with people going in and out of the home, it was hard to say how many were actually there and how many, if any, were in the other homes. Out to the left was a long row of doghouses inside metal pens. There were ten pens. I didn't see any dogs.

Bright as it was, we decided we could enter back into the tree line that connected with the field and see quite well because of the bonfire. We slipped in among the trees—oaks, pines, and sweet gums. The air was rich with the stink of that fire, the mix of creosote and burning rubber, as well as the sweet smell of the gums and the turpentine-like bite of the pines swaying in the wind.

There was great light from the fire, but as the wind whipped it, it grew greater and flicked and flowed like levitating lava, rose up high against the sky. There were shadows and shapes of people dancing around the fire. I was reminded of the old Tarzan books—where they had dum-dums, which was a kind of wild party of apes with Tarzan himself, dancing and whirling, working themselves into a frenzy.

"Jim Bob," I said, "I don't know if you have enough fingers and toes to keep up with the number of folks out there, but you have enough to know there are only three of us."

"Yeah, that puts them at a disadvantage," Jim Bob said.

Leonard sighed. "Got to agree with Hap, Jim Bob. Those numbers bite the moose."

"Boys, I never had in mind we were going to ride in there with guns blazing. I thought we might catch them at low tide, so to speak. Maybe only a few around, and we could sneak in there like bandits and nab Samson, get his firsthand take on the dealership, folks he's working for. The Big Dog. That don't look like such a good plan now, way things are set up. We can go back, get Marvin in on this, have the three back at the car tell him what they told us, and he can send some cops out here to break this shit up. I bet they find drugs and all manner of illegal stuff. I think these are the kind of boys would steal, don't you?"

"Oh, no, I can't imagine a nice, clean-cut group of folks like that stealing," Leonard said.

Jim Bob said, "Yeah. You're right. Hard to imagine."

"We go to the law, how's it going to go down with us riding around with our friends in the trunk and floorboard?" I asked.

"We made a citizen's arrest. We get all these other biker turds arrested, we can get them off your backs, maybe permanently. If not, we may have to find a way to mess their shit up big-time."

"Weren't you the one that said we couldn't get them all and that we had to worry about them showing up later?" I said.

"I did say that," Jim Bob said. "But I'm feeling more optimistic now, and besides, I don't know what else to do. There's just no easy way to slide in there like I hoped."

About then we heard motorcycles humming, saw headlights from them. We got down low and stayed behind the trees, saw three bikes pass on the road. They were heading toward the compound; I guess you could call it that.

Guy on the lead bike was so big he looked like a bear riding a motorized tricycle with the seat stuffed up his ass. Bearded, broad-shouldered, hulking, knees bunched up high because of his size, wearing what looked to be a leather cap. Under the cap his long, dark hair snapped in the wind. He probably weighed three hundred pounds and was at least six feet seven without the cap. I noted he had a very large scabbard on his hip in which was placed a very large knife—a bowie, most likely. Behind the bikes came an El Camino, one of those car-truck combinations, this one being one of the last in the model run, made in the eighties. A man was driving. A woman sat in the middle. Another man was on the passenger side. I was already feeling nervous, but now I felt really uncomfortable, like something with a beak and tentacles had parked itself inside my head.

When the truck passed, a couple other bikes behind that, Jim Bob said what I expected: "Big dude on the lead bike, that's Samson."

"You say his brother was the same size?" Leonard said.

"Moses was the baby brother. Not quite as big as Samson. But it would have been a difference mostly of who had the most change in his pocket."

"Good thing you had that pistol," Leonard said.

"Why I always carry it now. Experience. But a guy size of Samson and Moses, you got to place the shot just right, otherwise the bullet might bounce off."

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Having found out where the base camp was, all we had to do was go back to the car, take the boys in the car back to Marvin, and have the law descend on the place. That was the plan. But, as is the usual situation with anything that has to do with me and Leonard, things went wrong.

Creeping back on the road, staying close to the trees, ears cocked for bikes or cars, we were hustling along pretty good, and then those cocked ears of ours got filled with sounds.

More bikes.

We edged off the road again and hunkered down behind some trees. That dead smell was strong now, strong enough to gag a vulture. The bikes, two this time, went by on the road. When they were past, Jim Bob said, “I think we can use the penlight if we flash close to the ground. Think the Red Bitch is over there.”

Jim Bob pointed.

That was about where I thought it was, too. Me and Leonard were both pretty damn good in the woods. We had grown up living in the country and knew our way among the trees and bees, as they used to say. It was towns and cities I had the most trouble navigating.

Going along, the stench growing stronger and stronger, my gag reflex causing me to heave a little, we came to a large ditch, cut there naturally by time and runoff water. There was a little scummy water in the ditch. We could see that when Jim Bob flashed his light down there. But there was plenty of something else.

The decaying bodies of dogs. Dozens of them. Flies, startled by the light, rose up in a nauseating buzz, and the dim moonlight between the trees filled with their collected darkness, and then the flies split and the dull light came through again.

Most of the dogs were of the pit bull persuasion, full-blood or mixed. Some of the bodies were fresh, but most were not. The less fresh ones were terribly ripe, bony, and decayed.

“The motherfuckers,” Leonard said. “They fight them, then toss the dead ones in this ditch.”

“They don’t always die from the fight,” Jim Bob said. “A dog loses, they figure it’ll never be good in a fight again, so they shoot it in the head to get rid of it or just to show it who’s boss.”

“I’d like to show them who’s boss,” Leonard said. “Jesus. How can those pieces of shit think of themselves as human?”

“A monkey thinks more profoundly than those hunks of crap do,” Jim Bob said.

While we stood there, looking down on that sorry sight, our noses plugged with that dead smell, I felt the uncomfortable thought I had felt earlier when I saw the El Camino go by with its passengers. The thought started to float to the surface like a corpse floating up from the depths of the sea. I thought again about the woman I had seen in the pickup. I had a sudden flash. At first it was just a passing flash, and then it came back and swelled into a thought that was more substantial. I said, “Goddamn it. Woman in the El Camino. It was Frank.”

“You sure?” Leonard said.

“I think so. I mean, now that I think about it, it looked like her. I saw her right off, but it didn’t register. She shouldn’t have been in the truck. She should be tucked tight at our office.”

“They found her somehow,” Jim Bob said.

“I can’t be sure,” I said.

Leonard said, “I say we get in the Bitch, roll down the windows, and drive that motherfucker right into the midst of them, shooting the shit out of the place and packing Frank up and taking her out of there.”

“Need I add it would turn out bad and not in our favor, and we might end up shooting her,” Jim Bob said. “Remember it was you guys telling me about the finger count. They are many. We are three.”

“Here’s a little something I just thought of,” I said. “What if she called them? What if she’s in cahoots? What if she’s the Big Dog?”

“There’s a thought,” Jim Bob said. “I don’t like that thought, but it’s something. She got on my side of the game pretty quick. I’ll tell you about that later.”

That’s when a roar went up from back at the camp. We were a goodly distance away, but the sound of that roar was heard clearly.

None of us said a word, didn’t discuss it, but we automatically started easing back toward the sound, which had been replaced by hooting and yelling and laughing.

When we got back where we were before, the trees near the clearing, the fire was blazing higher and it lit the place up almost as bright as day.

Like ants, the bikers were moving into a wad around something, and since the pickup was parked near where they were gathering, I had an idea what it was.

“That doesn’t look like a welcome-home committee,” Leonard said.

“Thinking on it,” Jim Bob said, “I can’t see Frank coming out here to party. She’s a little too high-class.”

I had my palm against a sweet gum. I looked up. The bottom limb was well above my head. I put my shotgun on the ground, said to Leonard, “Brother, give me a boost.”

Leonard put his shotgun down, cupped his hands. I put my foot in them, and he lifted me up. I grabbed the lowest limb and pulled myself higher into the tree. I could damn sure feel those extra pounds on me. Normally I’d have been up that tree like a young squirrel. That night I was a plump old squirrel, and less spry.

I climbed up higher, going slow. When I found a limb high enough and big enough for me to stand on, I did that and put my hand against the tree for support. It wasn’t a great view, but I could see who was who.

It was Frank. She was in the middle of a circle made up of the biker gang, men and women. For her, things didn’t look so good.

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The circle closed around Frank. She was being shoved, felt, and snatched from all sides. Even the women were giving her hell. Pack mentality, wolves with a single lamb, and the wolves were hungry.

I started down. Leonard grabbed my legs when I dangled from the lowest limb, helped me onto the ground.

“It’s her,” I said. “And she’s not here for a hootenanny. She’s meat. Someone gave her to this bunch for whatever reason, and I think they are planning a series of festivities that she won’t enjoy.”

“How many of them did you see?” Jim Bob asked.

“I didn’t count them,” I said. “But it’s more than before, and not just the ones who rode in a while ago. Trailers must have been full. I think every man in that group has plans to wet his wick in Frank’s handmade doohickey, and the women might have something special in mind as well. There will be no get-well-soon cards.”

“That clears up our plan,” Leonard said. “We go in.”

“It’s already too late to help her,” Jim Bob said.

“I think it’s only going to get later,” Leonard said.

We gathered our weapons and started hurrying back to the Cadillac. It took a full fifteen to twenty minutes, tearing through the brush. The roar of those beasts back at the compound filled the night.

* * *

In the car, Jim Bob driving, me riding shotgun, Leonard in the back, we took off.

“We have the element of surprise,” Jim Bob said as he drove the Red Bitch onto the road and gunned it. He had yet to turn on the headlights.

“More like the elephant of surprise,” I said. “I think they’re going to hear us coming.”

“Then we’ll give them plenty of noise,” Jim Bob said. He had laid his shotgun on the floorboard, at my feet. He had his revolver in his lap.

“Can you shoot left-handed?” I said.

"Hell, I had to, I could shoot left-footed and reload with my dick."

No wane in confidence there. I had to say that for him.

"You think the boys in the trunk are enjoying the ride?" I said.

"I hope not," Leonard said. "The boy here on the floorboard is a little wiggly."

"They should all go 'Whee,' " Jim Bob said.

"They're gagged," Leonard said.

"Oh, yeah," Jim Bob said.

"Hap," Leonard said.

"Yeah."

"Brother, in case things go wrong, it has been quite a ride."

"Oh, yeah," I said. I jacked a load into the twelve-gauge and prepared to hang my body out the window. My hands were shaking.

"Can you actually see the road?" I asked Jim Bob.

"Not really," Jim Bob said. "I'm guesstimating."

Jim Bob let out with a cackle and floored the Red Bitch.

Man, that motor did howl.

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Situations like that, it's like you and time are frozen in amber.

And then the amber breaks, and you're not frozen, but everything moves for a time in slow motion. If it's your first time or two doing something like that, going into the midst of danger and uncertainty, you have tunnel vision. You see what's in front of you as if looking down the length of a tunnel. Everything to the right and left of you is a black wall. But if you've been there before, it's not that way. On some level, like the samurai of old, you have accepted your death. You are neither there to win or to lose. You are there to be in the moment. Things may be slow, but they are viewed wider with experience, not inside that fearful tunnel of the neophyte. That's how it was with me. I could see clearly. I could feel clearly.

I might add right here that I say fuck the samurai. I planned to win. I planned to go home. And I knew that plan had about as much chance as a slug in a salt block. I knew, too, I had survived worse situations. And as that thought galloped through my head, another less pleasant thought showed up.

Sometimes your luck runs out.

So on we went, the car seemingly hanging in time, moving slowly in my mind's eye, but in actuality barreling down on that crew at a rate of at least sixty miles an hour. We came off the road and hit the pasture with a bumping motion that jarred my teeth. The Red Bitch went hopping over that rough ground like a metallic rabbit, and then everyone in the camp turned to look at us just as Jim Bob hit the headlights and put the pedal to the floor. The pasture in front of us was flooded with gold light. I glanced at the speedometer. I could see it because Jim Bob had turned on the lights and the dash light had lit up. The Bitch jumped to seventy and was growling as the needle on the speedometer swung wide to the right.

Jim Bob hit the horn and didn't let it go, guided the car by using his other hand to precariously hang on to the suicide knob. If that thing snapped we'd end up in a ball of hot metal and shredded tires rolling along the countryside.

I was partly out the window now, and Leonard was hanging out in the same way from the back driver's side window.

Now, let me tell you, a big red Cadillac bearing down on your ass will do one of two things. It will cause you to stick to your spot like a tree, or you will attempt to spring away like a deer. The ones who stick to the ground like a tree are not going to turn out well, and the ones who spring away like a deer, well, truth is, a deer is quick, but a big red Cadillac going over seventy miles an hour is far quicker.

When the Red Bitch hit into them we discovered that the old adage is wrong. Men can fly. So can women and motorcycles. Jim Bob hit the brakes as we came up on them, but not completely; just a firm tap and a turn of the wheel. We slid into that circle and hit three or four of those fuckers and knocked them into the air, slammed a bike so that it went skidding past Frank as close as a foot. Had our luck been off by a hair, had the bike hit her, we could have just backed out and yelled a polite "Sorry" and gone home.

Way we hit caused a stocky woman with short ragged hair to do a sort of cartwheel that whirled her past Frank and a big man in the middle who was clutching Frank's shoulder. Frank was wearing only a bra and fragments of blue jeans, which had been cut or ripped off of her.

Frank and the man, the mighty Samson himself, watched the biker bitch twirl by, performing a dynamic cartwheel. Samson seemed calm, like a paying customer observing a circus trick. I hung out the window, fired the shotgun, and blew a tire out on the El Camino. Leonard slithered out the window on his side and blew the leg out from under a big blue-jean-wearing guy with no shirt and a belly big enough to have contained a few cases of beer and a Thanksgiving turkey. The man's kneecap went flying out of his torn pants, and then he was on the ground. Those blue jeans were ruined.

"Oh, goddamn it," the man said. I could hear him clearly as I hung out the window, and then his forehead went to the ground and his shot-up leg extended behind him. He had passed out from pain and shock. The air smelled of burning rubber, and it made my eyes water. I wondered how they stood it, standing near that fire. Besides, the night was too warm for a fire. It was too warm for a cup of coffee. I guess devils like those don't mind a little heat.

All of a sudden I was out of the car and into the crowd, which was no longer a circle but instead a clashing mass of flesh. A big woman next to me, wearing a bandanna with bits of hair hanging out from under it, reached for a little gun that was hanging out of her baggy pants pocket. I hit her with the stock of the shotgun hard enough to see teeth fly. I was all out of chivalry. I would have gunned down Minnie Mouse had she pulled a pistol, a pocket knife, or a too-large comb.

I heard one of the shotguns go off behind me and didn't realize until later it had been a warning shot by Leonard, a blast over the crowd's head.

I had the shotgun to my shoulder, and I knew there were people closing in behind me. A shotgun barked again and I heard someone scream and then there was a rustling as people ran for it, knowing now we weren't fucking around. I walked right up and took Frank by the elbow, said, "Come with me."

Samson let her go. I turned with her then, knowing Jim Bob and Leonard had my back going in and had it as I walked out. I pushed through a few bikers who wanted to be tough but were a little weak in the knees from our arrival; I could smell shit where some of them had crapped themselves.

Directing Frank to the car, I noticed that the Bitch's front tires were pretty deep in grooves of dirt they had plowed. I was hoping in the back of my mind the Bitch would back out of there without a snag, because if she didn't, our moment of shock and awe was over with, and all that was left was us being thrown in that ditch with those poor dead dogs. Our elephant of surprise was near over.

Frank got in on the backseat passenger side of the Bitch faster than the snap of a whip. "There's a man here," she said.

"Put your feet on him." I said.

Jim Bob, who was holding a shotgun, tossed it through the window onto the front seat, got in behind the wheel. He had left the motor running. In the car lights the crowd had begun to clutter up like moths before a porch light. Leonard and I stood with our shotguns, pointing them, moving them from side to side, trying to take it all in, hoping no one moved. It was so quiet you could have heard houseflies fucking.

Leonard got in the backseat, closed the door, and dangled himself out the open window with the shotgun. I stayed where I was for the moment. If we lived through this, I would tell Leonard later that with him hanging out the back window he reminded me of a black Labrador with a shotgun.

Samson moved forward, close to the car. He yelled out, "Jim Bob, I'll get you, you son of a bitch. You are mine."

Jim Bob stuck his head and arm out the window, pistol in his left hand. He said, “Samson, it is so nice to see you.”

He shot Samson in the throat. Samson dropped to his knees as if in need of sudden prayer, then rocked forward on his face.

Jim Bob said. “Hap. Get in the fucking car.”

I swung the shotgun from side to side, but no one asked for a load of buckshot. I got in, and before I could close the door, the Red Bitch was in reverse and we were flying out of there backwards, spinning dirt so hard it flew up and over the front of the car. By then the biker assholes had their brains back and had found guns. Bullets popped around us. One, a rifle shot, I’m sure, hit the windshield and went through it like a hot knife through butter. It zipped between Frank and Leonard and took out the back windshield. The front windshield merely had a hole in it, but even as we bounced along that pasture in reverse, Jim Bob looking over the backseat, eyes squinted, trying to see what was behind us in the red taillights, the front windshield collapsed like a Baptist deacon’s morals at a strip club.

We were really being fired at now. One of the headlights went out as we backed up, and I could hear little impacts as shots popped the Caddy, but it didn’t slow us and we didn’t lose a tire, and none of us gathered up a bullet.

Jim Bob, soon as those tires hit the road, jabbed the brake and whirled the wheel, still holding on to that stupid suicide knob, and all of a sudden we were turned completely around and roaring down the blacktop, shots snapping in the air and some of them still hitting the Red Bitch. But she kept running, and away we went, our visibility based on one headlight. There was a kind of rumbling from the back of the car. Something was rolling around in the trunk.

Oh, yeah. Now I remembered.

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The Red Bitch was rocking along, that one remaining headlight punching the night like a Cyclops with a heat beam. Through the busted-out windshield the air was smashing into us like a fist. The little hula girl and the plastic Jesus stuck on the dashboard of the car did the shimmy-shimmy-shake in overdrive. I think even Jesus was worried how all this was going to come out. My hands were trembling.

Jim Bob saw a little cutoff into the woods, about bicycle wide, shot past it, braked hard, burned rubber, backed into it, and kept going in reverse. Limbs scratched the Caddy, bent the aerial. Jim Bob bounced the Bitch along quite a ways until the limbs grew closer and began to brush over the car as thick as shadows. He turned off the one remaining headlight.

"Let's get out of the car," Jim Bob said.

We all had shotguns with us when we got out, except Frank, of course, who paused long enough before getting out to wipe her feet on Wishbone. Got to stay tidy, even if you're barely wearing pants.

Outside the car we'd at least have a fighting chance. We moved to the back of the Caddy, pushing through the tight mesh of limbs and brush. There was tapping going on in the trunk. There was a bullet hole in the trunk.

Jim Bob snapped the stock of his shotgun down on the trunk, said, "Quiet in there."

The tapping ceased.

"At least one of them is alive," Jim Bob said.

"I'm sorry," Frank said. "This is all my fault."

She stood there shaking in fear, dressed only in the fragments of her jeans, bra, and shoes.

"I was thinking it might be," Leonard said. "I was thinking that a lot."

"Save it for now," Jim Bob said. "I'm pissed off enough right now without having to hear something stupid. We'll hear stupid over a cup of coffee or some such later."

I don't know exactly how long we stood there at the back of the Bitch, but finally we heard the roaring of motorcycle motors. I wondered if the burned-rubber smoke and smell was still in the air, that they'd notice there was probably half the Caddy's tires on the road out there.

"They come down this way," Jim Bob said, "is it every man for himself?"

"Nope. Musketeer way," Leonard said. "All for one and one for all."

"Suits me," I said.

"Done," Jim Bob said.

"I'm out," Frank said. "They show up, I'm into the woods like a goddamn rabbit."

The roar of the motorcycle engines grew louder, and then we saw headlights from the bikes striking the road. The bikes came flying by. One, two, three. After a bit I lost count. But a lot of bikes shot along that road and past us.

We stayed there for a while, not moving. Then Jim Bob took his keys, found the right one by lighting a match, and opened the trunk. He held the match in such a way we could see inside. No one had turned to smoke and slipped through the cracks. A bullet that had gone through the trunk had passed above them. Later, Jim Bob would tell us he found that it had passed through the trunk, split the backseat between Leonard and Frank, and had killed the radio on the dash. As for the two in the trunk and the one lying on the floorboard, they were all alive but uncomfortable.

We waited a bit. No one came back for us. We pulled Wishbone out, dragged him to the back of the car, and laid him out on the ground.

Jim Bob reached in the trunk and pulled a little bag out. Leonard and I picked up Wishbone and put him in the trunk with them. Tight fit. We bumped some heads pushing the trunk lid down.

"I figure they're all right for a few more hours," Jim Bob said.

"They'll get pee-pee in the trunk of your car," Leonard said. "May have already done it."

Jim Bob opened the bag from the trunk and got a dark western shirt out of it. He gave it to Frank. "Put that on."

She did. It fell down over her thighs, giving her a little more dignity than before.

Another twenty minutes passed, and it was a good thing we waited, for during that time a couple more bikes roared along, having gotten into the mix late. After a while, though, we decided we'd pull out. We did that and went along in the direction the bikes had taken, and then when we got off the back roads and onto the main highway, we tooled right on into town. No police pulled us over for having one headlight, a broken aerial, and three thugs in the trunk.

“They could be waiting at your place,” Jim Bob said. “The three in the trunk know where you live; so may the rest of them.”

“Good point,” I said. “And since Frank is with us, I’m going to guess they know where the office is.”

“They do,” Frank said. “I fucked up.”

Frank started to cry. I wondered if she cried like that when she was a man. I was her right then, I would have cried. Hell, I wanted to cry, and I wasn’t her.

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Well," I said, "at least one of the bikers out there is dead for sure, unless he has been resurrected. Maybe more. Depends on how hard the car hit them and if the guy without the kneecap died. The one I know is dead is named Samson. Jim Bob said his last name is House. Like in Son House, the blues guy. Jim Bob shot him in the throat."

"Ah, shit," Marvin said. "Is there anything you didn't do? I mean, you might as well add you got through shooting folks, you dug up a corpse, fucked it, and named it Dixie."

"I can honestly say we didn't do that. We named it Ethel."

I was sitting on the bed in a motel room talking to Marvin on my cell phone. We were all in that room, us and the biker shits.

We were lucky that night. Lucky to have pulled through and lucky the motel was mostly empty. The only gun we decided to take with us inside the motel was Jim Bob's pistol. Jim Bob had plunked down in a chair by a desk that was under a TV screen mounted on the wall and laid his gun hand across his knee. Leonard stretched out on the bed, his back against the headboard. There was a table with chairs, and Frank sat there. I found myself checking her out. I felt funny about that. An old East Texas boy studying her curves, trying to imagine what she had looked like as a man. We sat all three thugs on the floor with their backs against the wall. Wishbone and Bad Leg complained, the third man had still yet to say a word.

When I finished up with Marvin, he said, "I hate you guys. See you in thirty. Hey, you aren't going to shoot anyone else or burn anything down in the next thirty minutes, are you?"

"We have plans for a time of solitude," I said.

"Good. I need to shower and have some coffee and eat a bite. Make it forty-five minutes to an hour. Again, can you stay out of trouble that long?"

"I think so," I said.

When we were through talking, I told them Marvin was on his way.

“Oh, good,” Jim Bob said. “I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to see us and get more details.”

“Who the fuck is Marvin?” Wishbone said. We had removed their gags but left their hands tied, though we had only fastened down Wishbone’s unbroken arm by tying it to his belt. The broken one we put in a sling we made with a bath towel. They were all three at a point where they couldn’t have outwrestled a dying frog in a best two out of three, but we kept their hands tied anyway.

“Someone you won’t like,” Leonard said.

I said, “I was pretty thorough with Marvin, don’t you think? I didn’t tell him about the dead dogs because I didn’t want him to be really mad. He thinks we should just take these dudes off in the woods somewhere and shoot them in the head and let the buzzards sort them out. Oh, yeah, he said if we decide to do that, we got to get rid of the gun.”

The thugs sitting against the wall gave me a look and shifted on their asses.

“Nah, he didn’t say that,” I said. “Just fucking with you.”

“It’s an idea, though,” Leonard said.

“Oh, man,” Frank said. “I really messed up.”

“Hold that thought,” Jim Bob said. “We’ll come back to it in short order. Right now I’m still as mad as I want to be.”

We allowed them to go to the toilet one at a time with the door open and Jim Bob standing there with the revolver. “Jesus,” Jim Bob said to Wishbone. “Do you have to shit now? I don’t want to see that.”

“Think I like doing this? I’m modest.”

“Just get it done,” Jim Bob said. “Oh, man. I’m going to have to light some matches for sure. Maybe get a fucking blowtorch. Have you been eating something dead off the highway?”

“How am I going to wipe my ass with my hand tied and one arm broke?” Wishbone said. “You doing it for me?”

“Not likely,” Jim Bob said.

He ended up untying Wishbone’s hand. Wishbone took his time in there. He had really been saving up. The other two, thank goodness, were quite content with number ones.

When everyone had their bathroom trip finished, and all had washed their hands, using soap, as Jim Bob instructed, and when Wishbone was tied up again, we lined them up against the wall and had them sit as before. We let them keep the gags off. They promised to be good boys.

The one with the injured leg was starting to look bad. He had beads of sweat on his forehead, and his lips had grown pale. His leg was outstretched and had swollen bad enough Jim Bob had to cut the fellow's pants open to accommodate the swelling.

"Can we order a pizza?" Wishbone said. "I'm hungry enough to suck shit out a pig's ass."

"Eeew," Frank said.

"Would you like us to rent you a movie, too?" I said.

"That would be nice," Wishbone said. "But nothing violent."

"You're showing your spine, ain't you?" Jim Bob said.

Wishbone shrugged. You'd have thought we were all old buddies, way he acted.

"Can I bum a cigarette, then?" he said.

"Nobody here smokes," I said. "Jim Bob just carries matches."

"I wouldn't mind taking you outside and setting you on fire, though," Leonard said.

We ended up ordering a couple of large pizzas anyway. Hold the pig shit.

Forty-five minutes passed, then an hour, and still no Marvin.

About an hour later there was a light knock at the door. It could have been Marvin, the pizza, or the bikers having figured out where we were.

I glanced through the peephole.

Marvin.

I let him in. He looked around the room, settled his eyes on Frank for a moment, trying to figure who she was and what the hell she was doing there. He looked at the three men sitting on the floor. He grinned at Wishbone, said, "Jared Fonteneau. My man. How's the old hammer dangling?"

"It's waiting in the toolbox until needed," Wishbone, a.k.a. Jared, said.

"And Thomas Peers. Or should I call you Hopalong Dumbass? Man, you don't look so good."

"Leg's fucked up," Thomas said. "I could walk a little an hour ago, now I can't."

"I can see that."

"I need a fucking doctor. A nurse. A goddamn big-ass dog with a barrel of brandy hung under its neck. Something, man. I'm in pain here. I'm starting to get way past not feeling so good."

"You do in fact look as if you might be moving past your expiration date," Marvin said.

Marvin moved his gaze to the man who was yet to speak. "And Mute Boy Gavin. Tongue hasn't grown back, has it?" Then to us: "Mute Boy there. He don’t say much because he can’t. He was five his mother decided he talked too much, and it was screwing up her crack high, so she used a pair of pliers and some pruning shears and took to his tongue.”

Mute Boy gave Marvin the finger.

“He has, however,” Marvin said, “acquired some ability with sign language.”

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The pizza came. The pizza boy looked like he just got his driver's license.

Leonard gave the pizza boy money, said, "You took long enough. You have to go to Italy to get it?"

"It's a busy night," the pizza boy said.

"I'm so busy you're not getting a tip," Leonard said, taking the pizza and closing the door with his foot.

I got up and went out and gave the pizza boy a tip. I said, "It's all right. He found out today that his penile implant isn't going to work."

"Oh," the pizza boy said and went away.

Wishbone said, "I told you no onions."

"Shut up," Leonard said.

Everyone ate, onions or no onions, though Bad Leg was good for only one piece. He really was starting to fade. Wishbone was actually starting to be jovial, even cracked a few jokes. I think he was a little delirious from the injured arm and all that had happened to him. He told us a limerick—not that we asked for it:

There was an old hermit named Dave
Who kept a dead whore in a cave.
He said, I'll admit
She does smell a bit,
But look at the money I save.

On that note, me and Marvin went out of the motel and took a ride in his car. I got picked because Leonard didn't want to do it, and that was that. As we cruised, I told Marvin what I had already told him. I explained about Frank. At least all the stuff I knew, which was pretty much that she had showed up with Jim Bob, been nabbed, been rescued, had enjoyed pizza with us in the room, and had said little to nothing since we pulled her away from the bikers and the party in her honor.

“Frank was a man?” he said. “That’s hard to believe.”

“I try to be cool about it,” I said. “You know, moving with the times, but the whole thing jacks me around some. Odd thing is she looks damn good. I mean, now that he’s a she she does. Am I saying that right? Shit. You know what I mean.”

“She’s got good legs, and I like the way that shirt hung on her, minidress-style. I saw her, I felt my dick wiggle. Don’t tell anyone.”

“Lips are sealed. By the way, you took long enough to show up.”

“The missus felt friendly. She doesn’t always feel friendly. I thought I ought to take what was offered.”

“That explains a couple of minutes,” I said. “What about the rest?”

“You are not nice,” Marvin said.

“I will say this, you don’t need any outside dick wiggling if there’s wiggling at home.”

“I agree,” he said.

No use denying it. Men, even honorable ones, can think like dogs. There’s an old joke about a guy that’s been without loving so long, a friend takes him into the woods and suggests he fuck a knothole in a tree. The other guy says, “Does it have to be just that tree?”

I told Marvin how those motorcycle shits were most likely out there looking for us and that if they found us it wouldn’t be good, us no longer having the elephant of surprise on them.

“Don’t know how you two do it,” Marvin said. “You could start trouble at a kid’s birthday party. And Jim Bob, too. You two and him, that’s a disaster in the making. It’s the *Hindenburg* and the *Titanic* and the Great Hurricane of 1900 on Galveston Island all rolled into one big mess. Look here, Hap. Seems to me this is some bad poo-poo. Getting you out of it, I’m not sure it’s worth anything to me.”

“I can understand that. New job and all.”

“Guys came and attacked you in your yard, that’s easy to make self-defense. But you put them in the trunk of a car, took them for a ride while you went out there after the others, shot and killed one, at least. Blew a kneecap off another and knocked some folks around with the car. That shit there, that’s hard to explain.”

“Knowing their location was a self-defense move, way we saw it.”

“Making that play so anyone believes it, that’ll take some work, buddy.”

“I know. But that’s all we intended. The other, rescuing Frank—that just happened. We had to do it. No red-blooded American would have done any less. I think we could ride the hero horse with a jury, it came to it."

"We might have to dress it up a little, buy it some new shoes, but it might work."

We rode up North Street and on out of town, along the highway, where the trees were thicker. Marvin turned around in the driveway of a liquor store that was oddly placed out in the middle of nowhere, then we started back south, driving slow. We didn't talk for a while. Marvin was considering.

"Tell you what," Marvin said. "I can go in and talk around things a little, see how things hang, so to speak. But if it doesn't hang so well, I got to throw you boys to the dogs. Maybe I can do it so you only spend most of the rest of your life in prison, and I'll have them put you in with some nice man won't hurt you too much if you call him Mama."

"That's not much relief."

"What the fuck you expect? Jesus, Hap. Look here, what we'll do is we'll take those three in, get that one with the messed-up leg to the hospital, get a cast for the one with the broken arm. In the meantime, I'm going to call the sheriff, see if he can get his men out there in the county. I can probably have a few of our local cops go out there, too, without there being some big jurisdiction battle. Thing is, we'll check the place out. We'll check your house and Leonard's place. Where the hell is he staying now?"

I told him.

"Shit," Marvin said. "Brett. Where is she?"

"A motel somewhere," I said.

"Good."

I decided to tell him about Chance.

"Man, that would be something. A grown daughter. Think of all the money on formula and diapers you saved. And there's that prom-dress thing."

"Leonard said pretty much the same thing."

"That's because he's a thinker, Hap. He's the thinker of you two. That prom-dress thing, by the way. Wouldn't believe what something like that costs, and for one night. There's also weddings and such, and you have to deal with son-in-laws, and ex-son-in-laws if they divorce, and they got kids, it's a real fucking stinker. Worse, you get other in-laws, and some of them are no treat. I know. I been through it."

"If she is my daughter, maybe I can still catch the marriage part, the grandkids, the angry ex-son-in-laws, and the shitty in-laws."

"Being a father is very rewarding, except when it isn't. And then there's being a grandparent—same thing. That can be great, and it can suck. But then you remember Gadget and how that went?"

I did. She was Marvin's granddaughter. Real name Julia. Nickname Gadget. Me and Leonard had once rescued her from some drug dealers. As well as from herself. She seemed to be doing much better these days. Had married to what I understood was a pretty good guy with a handful of college degrees and some family money. They had moved off to Wyoming, where they both ended up working in real estate.

Marvin drove us back to the motel, having called some law on our way back. When we got there a city cop had already arrived, and right behind him came an ambulance. People were poking out of doors and standing on the landing watching Jared and Mute Boy being loaded in the cop car. Bad Leg was fading, so he got placed in an ambulance and driven away fast with lights and sirens.

When the cops and ambulance had gone away, Marvin stood out in the lot by his car talking to me and Leonard and Jim Bob. Frank was in the room.

"You could have had the cops come without lights and sirens," I said. "It makes us stand out like sore thumbs."

"Truth is, I wanted for it to be a big to-do. That way it looks like we mean business and that we've brought in some real desperadoes. That part could be good for you, being involved with bringing in these three. Truth is, these guys aren't so tough, and I think if I put the screws to them a little, they'll speak in tongues I ask them to."

"You sound a bit more optimistic about our chances than you did earlier," I said.

"I've been thinking on it," Marvin said. "And I got an idea or two. I'll put a couple of cops at your place for a few days, Hap, until I can sort things out. You might want to stay away from the office, and Leonard, you shouldn't go home. I hate to bring it up, don't know how things are between you and John, but he shouldn't show up there, either."

"Don't worry about John," Leonard said. "I changed the locks with extreme prejudice. May that motherfucker go with Jesus and Mary and the Holy Ghost and the young Casper."

"Just stick with Hap," Marvin said. "And Jim Bob, no use talking to you, as you'll do what you want. In the long run, so will these two. I could have made friends with quieter, more agreeable people, I guess."

"But you wouldn't have all the excitement we bring to your life," Jim Bob said.

"That's sort of what I meant," Marvin said.

“I can tell you this,” Jim Bob said. “I leave here, I’m going to take my now wreck of a car back to Houston and have it fixed up so that it shines like a newborn fawn. You need me for something else, I’ll come back. Give me a call. Hell, I got my sneak-around cars and my old wrecks at home, so I’ll come back a little quieter and a little less shiny.”

“All right, we got one last thing before we call it a night and I find out if you boys are going to jail. Explain to me about Frank. Got the general business already, but I got a feeling there has been a new portfolio added. Hap only knew so much.”

“Tell you what,” Jim Bob said. “Let’s the four of us retire to the fine living arrangements of this cheap-ass motel, sit with Frank, and me and her will sort you out on that new portfolio. It’s a doozy.”

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I don’t have a comb, makeup, or anything,” Frank said.

We were all in the motel room. I was starting to come down off my action buzz, beginning to feel tired. The pizza had not settled well with me. I needed an antacid. It felt like a dogfight was going on in my belly.

“You look fine,” I said.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Yeah, you’re all right,” Marvin said. “Way you look isn’t what I’m concerned with here.”

He looked at me, remembering full well his comment about the shirt she was wearing.

I smiled at him.

Marvin cleared his throat. “I got some of the story, what Hap and Leonard know, not what you and Jim Bob know. What I want to know is why Apocalypse on Wheels put the nab on you. How do you figure in this story, front to back? Tell it straight. It might mean the difference in you having to wear an orange jumpsuit and share a cell with Big Bertha, or spending lazy weekends at home with a beer and a vibrator.”

“That’s just vulgar,” Frank said.

“I’m up when I should be sleeping, and I’m going to guess you are involved in what I like to refer to as nefarious fucking shit, so don’t get holy on me.”

Frank nodded. “Jim Bob came to see me, lying about wanting to buy a car. Almost fooled me. But I have a kind of radar, like with you two and Cason, who, though a dreamy piece of meat, I figured was in with you guys, me being able to radar things, which is why I have the job. Though I got to tell you, that stuff about the petunias and screwing the old folks sort of had me going for a moment, and I almost thought Hap here might have patents on sex toys. Bigger the lie, easier it is to believe. Well, truth is, that was too big a lie.”

“Get to the backbone of it,” Marvin said.

“Jim Bob came to the dealership, told me his name was something or other—”

“Tommy Jasons,” Jim Bob said. “It’s a name I use now and again, even have an identity established online, a past, whole shooting match, right down to my shoe size.”

“Jim Bob was very convincing, but I had some small doubts, an itch at the back of my mind, and after he left, after I told him I could put him in a car and a vagina, I looked him up—or, rather, I looked up Tommy Jasons—on the Internet. Did that, I knew I was being scammed. Never scam a scammer. Guy Jim Bob hired to build his past has a certain method for building those sites, a certain look. He changed them up, of course, and he was good. But I saw plenty of things he did for our own business. Pasts he had built. I recognized his style. No matter how differently he approached those sites, constructed those pasts for certain people, he had signatures that I recognized, same as a fingerprint. I knew him personally, too. Called him up, got it confirmed, found out Tommy Jasons was Jim Bob Luke. That’s when I looked up Jim Bob, read about him and his agency. He didn’t have a photo there, but as I said, I knew it was him. Saw what he did, private investigator. I did a bit more research, decided he was exactly what I needed to get my ass out of a crack. I called him on the Tommy Jasons number, told him my situation.”

“Which I’m still guessing at,” Marvin said. “And this guy creates false identities. Going to need to know more about him. Sounds big-time illegal.”

“Here’s something cute,” Jim Bob said. “He is better known as Weasel.”

“Oh, shit,” Leonard said.

“Yep,” Jim Bob said, pulling a toothpick from the band of his hat, sticking it in his mouth. “He is in fact a weasel. I didn’t know he was your man until Frank told me. That makes some things fit together, don’t it?”

“Like fingers in a glove,” I said.

“There’s a lot of lawbreaking going on among friends here,” Marvin said. “I can’t like that too much, you know. And I’m a cop. Not a game-show participant. I’m not here to guess what the fuck is going on. Tell me straight out and avoid taking the long path to the rabbit hole.”

“I’ll get there,” Frank said.

“Yes, but will you arrive by Shetland pony?” Marvin said.

“When I saw that site, I called Weasel and asked him about it, about Jim Bob’s connection. He didn’t know Jim Bob was connected, but he figured it all pretty quick, told me he had to lay some bad words down about me to you boys, but nothing that really got me in trouble, just some smoke-screen stuff."

"Was any of what he told us true?" Leonard asked. "Like that stuff about the Canceler?"

"The Canceler is true, though I haven't heard anything about the company using him in a while. I never had anything to do with that. I've never seen him, only heard of him. I was a figurehead at the dealership. I do the front-end work. When a deal is set, others take it from there. I know cars and peddling ass, but the blackmail stuff, that came from on high. I didn't have anything to do with it."

"But you knew what was going on."

"Got set up by someone else. Not me."

"Who?" Marvin asked.

"Never met them. Didn't want to. Car company is just one head of the hydra. It's hard to know which head is in charge. I went with the blackmail because I was getting paid extra, but to tell the truth, I didn't see any harm in it. Men they blackmailed were mostly entitled shits cheating on their wives, talking false about family values at community meetings and political rallies. They had money. Plenty of it. It wouldn't hurt them to let go of some of it, but then things started changing. They got tougher. A mark didn't go for the blackmail, or someone got too far out of line in some way or another, they brought in the Canceler. It wasn't like that when I started; that kind of too-tough business wasn't the way then. Things shifted. First a little, then a lot. It got grittier. Not just the blackmail but money laundering. They'd go to one of the rich guys, one of the girls would, or one of the men who was servicing some rich woman, and say, 'Hey, I got this money, couple hundred thousand, and I need it to sort of find its way into the system without going through normal banking channels.' Rich folks always knew someone who knew someone, and they'd get the deed done. Next thing you knew, FBI was on them."

"FBI?" Marvin said. "Damn, call me a fart and paint me green."

"Top of the game, someone giving information to the FBI as confidential informers. That made them paid informants, and it gave them a lot of liberty as well as a lot of money when it was a high-profile case. FBI wanted to close cases more than they wanted someone running a prostitution ring. They wanted it bad enough to turn their backs on the prostitution, blackmail, and even a lot of the thug work. That included the Canceler. They just greased the CI with olive oil and let him slip through the cracks. The feds were protecting the Canceler and the rest of the car-lot owners as government informants, and they were getting paid serious money, too. Way the feds saw it, the Canceler's killings weren't nearly as important as the info they were getting, and it was an easy way to solve cases. Saved legwork and having to deal with killers that might kill them."

"Law enforcement isn't quite like I thought it was when I was a kid watching *The FBI Story,*" Leonard said.

"I been here before," Jim Bob said.

"What's that mean?" Marvin asked.

"Means I've been in on a bad deal once where the FBI were protecting someone they shouldn't have been protecting."

"How'd that turn out?" Marvin asked.

"Messy," Jim Bob said. "Thing is, FBI gets concentrated on one thing, they can't see the forest for the trees. They focus on what they're trying to accomplish, and if they are using people, so be it. Sometimes guys they got as informants are doing just as bad or worse than the ones the FBI is concentrating on. FBI gets focused, they're willing to give themselves a hand job and call it pussy if it meets their needs."

"Not much justice in that," I said.

"That's where we come in," Leonard said.

"I didn't hear that," Marvin said.

"Just because you're a cop doesn't mean you're out of it clear and free," Jim Bob said. "You show up too big and tall, they might want a big ole piece out of your ass."

"Puts me where it puts me," Marvin said. "But I don't need to be supporting you guys on vigilante missions."

"What about Sandy?" I asked Frank. "That's what we're really after, though it has sort of morphed into something else."

"I don't know any more about her than I've told you. I'm being honest with you. I just want out of this mess."

"Want a deal," Marvin said, "got to tell this to the DA, and it's got to pan out. Though I'm going to tell you, I think you might have had your finger in the pie a little more than you're letting on."

"If I can give you most of the pie and most of the fingers in it, that would help me, wouldn't it?"

Marvin creased his brows. "Might. Time you and me went to the station, Frank."

"Can I have a private cell?" Frank asked.

"We have one cell we call the suite. Just like all the other cells but only has one bed. We'll start there. In the morning the DA will take your statement. Got to tell you, though, I still don't think you grew a conscience, and I want you to know where I stand. I think you'd feed shit to children and tell them it's chocolate."

Frank looked hurt, but when Marvin's expression didn't change, she said, "I had a feeling they wanted to replace me. I had been borrowing a bit of money from the dealership, and I hadn't been paying it back. They take things like that seriously, and their severance package doesn't contain a golden parachute, just a hole in the ground, or maybe they grind you up for sausage. I don't know. But it wouldn't have been good."

"Why tease the tiger?" Marvin asked.

Frank gave that beautiful smile. "Once a con, pretty much always a con. Doing it the wrong way always seems right to me."

"And you ended up in the woods with a bunch of bikers how?" Leonard asked.

"Started having second thoughts," she said. "Thought maybe it wouldn't be so smart to go to the police after all. Decided since the FBI was in on this, they and my employers might find a way to seriously get me messed up or killed. I called a friend in the business with me. I thought she and I were close. Thought for sure she would be sympathetic. I decided I'd get out altogether and not tell the police anything. That I'd run for it. You know, got cold feet. It was stupid. She told someone at the top, and they sent someone at the bottom to collect me. By the way, I think you'll have to replace your door. It got kicked in and is still standing wide open, far as I know."

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When we came out of the motel it was cool for a change, and there was the smell of rain in the air. A pink glow rose in the east and expanded and turned gold. Some dark clouds floated overhead.

As we stood there by Jim Bob's busted Chevy with Marvin's unmarked car parked next to it, Marvin said, "I'm going to make some calls, and then maybe you can go by your house just for a moment, because I'm going to have a few cops there, though it'll take me a bit to line them up. I can't afford to post a long-term guard. Go there and get some things you need, and then leave. I'll have a place for you to go. We have a couple of safe houses that the city owns, and we can put you up in one of those for a while."

"How safe is a safe house the city owns?" I said.

"Safer than being home," Marvin said. "In the meantime, I'm raising a posse and we're going to try and go out to where you said the bikers are. They are bound to have given up on you guys by now. And if not, we can toss their place because we have cause. The dead dogs you told us about. A suspicion of dogfighting is a good way in. Now draw me a map to the place."

"Shit," Leonard said. "We'll just go with you. We might as well."

Marvin thought on that awhile. We all stood there while he considered, watching the morning grow older. Frank was leaning against Marvin's car. In the light she looked older and more tired and considerably less full of beans than when we first met her.

"All right," Marvin said. "Here's the thing. I'm not going out there with just us. We got our own little SWAT team here, and since mostly they don't do much, and the equipment they use is going to waste, I'll rally them, and off we'll go. I got to get Frank squared away first. Meet me at the station in, say…oh, how about two hours? That will give the bikers time to drift back. And they will. We're not talking brain surgeons here. They won't figure you guys going to the cops, not after what you've done, Jim Bob. From what I'm understanding, you killed a man, and that is eventually going to at least bring you downtown for a cup of our bad coffee."

"I'll pick up some creamer," Jim Bob said.

"Tell me he was armed."

"He might have been, but he was threatening me, and there were a lot of folks around him that had guns, and he was their leader, so to speak."

"Not as good as I had hoped for," Marvin said. "And Hap, if there are others dead, and one of them is missing a kneecap, like you told me, you might have to have that cup of coffee, too. Right now, do what I've told you, and we maybe can get things to shake out how we want them. Even Frank might end up with the FBI giving her a nice little retirement fund. They're on the other side now, but this is going to put their reputation in a blender we let it out. They may be willing to make a lot of concessions for all you guys. Frank, too, though that irks me a bit."

"I haven't hurt anyone," Frank said.

"That's a matter of angle," Marvin said. "I want you to get in my car and sit and close the door and be quiet."

Frank got in Marvin's unmarked car and sat quietly.

Marvin said, "Hap, you asked me about the stuff Weasel told you. Why it's not in local papers."

"Yeah."

"That's because it didn't happen here. It happened on the outskirts of Houston."

"You're saying he had the murders right, not the location?" I said.

"Exactly. Why he didn't tell you the exact spot I don't know. Maybe he didn't really have as much contact with what went on as he wanted you to think, and maybe he didn't want to be too specific. Figured you didn't find mention of it locally, places he said, you'd give up, figure he was bullshitting. He'd have your money and be on his way up north. Want more, check the *Houston Chronicle.* I'll send you some special links you can check out. It fits with what he said happened."

"Thanks," I said.

"See you in a couple hours at the cop shop," Marvin said.

* * *

Jim Bob drove us to Walmart in the Bitch. It was just then solid daylight, and when we parked and got out, he looked at his car and moaned. "Goddamn them," he said.

"Man, there are lot of holes," Leonard said.

“Good thing is, none of them is in us,” I said.

As Walmart was open all hours, we went in, and I bought a hammer and nails, and Jim Bob drove us over to the office. Upstairs we found the door kicked in, as Frank said. We closed it and used the hammer and nails to sort of jury-rig it shut until we could call someone to fix it.

After that we went straight to my house. The cops hadn’t been put on duty yet. No motorcycles were in the yard. No bikers had built a bonfire with our furniture. No machine-gun nest. No meanies had soaped our windows.

We drove past. Jim Bob wheeled us to Leonard’s ride on the backstreet where we had left it, and Leonard drove me and him around to the house. Jim Bob followed.

Leonard parked in the driveway, Jim Bob at the curb. We got out with shotguns and stalked over to the front door. I hoped no neighbors were up early to see us carrying heat. I went through the carport, unlocked the door, went inside. Leonard came through the back door, Jim Bob through the front.

We looked through the house. Leonard went to check on the cookies. They were intact. No one appeared to have been there beyond the three we had nabbed, and they had never made it beyond the front porch, the yard, and the carport. So far so good.

I relaxed and gathered up a few clothes and toiletries, simple stuff, and put them in a suitcase. I went into the closet and stepped up on the stool there and opened up the little trap to the attic, reached around until I found the two revolvers I had there. I always had a scattering of guns around due to the fact that Leonard and I had made a few enemies over the years. The ones in the attic were clean guns, not traceable, and if we used them, they would be tossed. There was ammunition up there, too.

I pulled a pillowcase off a pillow and slipped the guns inside of it. They would leave an oil stain on the pillowcase, and Brett would give me hell, but right then I couldn’t worry about that. I gathered a couple books off my nightstand, a Bill Crider Sheriff Rhodes mystery I was halfway through and a book by Lewis Shiner I had been meaning to read. I went to Brett’s side of the bed, and out of the nightstand I got her Kindle and charger. I gathered up some DVDs and stuck those in the bag. I could just have gotten the porch swing in my suitcase I could have a home away from home.

Downstairs I found Leonard brewing coffee. I sat the suitcase and the pillowcase full of guns by the couch. Jim Bob was helping himself to eggs and bacon in the refrigerator. I showed him where the frying pan was, and he went about frying us up breakfast.

I tossed some bread in the toaster, then went upstairs again, sat on the bed, and called Brett on my cell.

When she answered she sounded like a sleepy bear. I realized then just how early it was. “Sorry to wake you,” I said. I gave her a quick rundown on things, asked that she and Chance hang tight where they were, because we’d all be moving to a safer place late morning or early afternoon. I told her she might as well tell Chance what was going on but to keep details down to a minimum. She deserved to know what kind of mud she was in just by possibly being my daughter. That alone might send her packing. If she was my daughter I didn’t want that to happen, though it might actually be a hell of a good choice, blood kin or not.

“I might wait awhile on that,” she said.

“You be the judge, hon.”

“Being in love with you certainly never gets boring,” Brett said.

“I could actually use a little boring,” I said. “Chance?”

“I think I love her and wish she was my daughter,” Brett said. “Though she knows more than I ever wanted to know about James Joyce.”

“I’ll have a stern talk with her and give her some Steinbeck.”

Finished with the call, I went downstairs and ate breakfast with the guys. Every now and then I got up and looked out the window. Still no bikers. It was beginning to rain lightly.

Jim Bob said, “If they come, my thought is they’ll show up in the dead of night. They like to do that. Cover of darkness; unsuspecting, sleeping prey. I once heard there’s an hour of night when even watchdogs aren’t very alert. I think it’s something like three or four in the morning. I doubt that’s true, but I’ve heard that.”

“Me and Leonard won’t be here for them to sneak up on.”

“Thing to do is let them sneak, but be prepared,” Leonard said.

“Too many of them,” Jim Bob said.

After eating, I wanted to sleep, but that wasn’t in the cards right away. I had two cups of coffee, went upstairs, showered, and put on clean clothes while Leonard did the same in the downstairs bathroom. Jim Bob was sitting with his revolver on the table when I came back down.

“No ninjas showed up?” I asked.

“Nope.”

I looked out the kitchen window. Still raining. It was a light and simple rain, but steady. I liked a rain like that. I liked to sleep to the sound of it. No thunder and lightning, just rain. Right then I so badly wanted to go upstairs and go to bed.

"I'm heading home now," Jim Bob said. "Putting the Red Bitch in the shop. Then I'm going to nap and find that barrel racer and show her a few tricks that don't involve barrels. I'm a phone call away."

"You've already done a lot," I said.

"I have, haven't I?"

Leonard came around the corner then. He wasn't wearing a shirt or shoes. Just blue jeans. He may have gained a few pounds, but he still looked like he could turn over a truck, fuck it in the gas tank, and make it raise his gassy children.

Jim Bob shook hands with us and left.

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We drove over to Leonard's place. I waited outside in the car in case any baddies appeared. After a while Leonard came downstairs carrying a small canvas bag with clothes and such in it.

At the cop shop we met up with Marvin, and then we led him out to the bikers' lair. I like to think of it that way. A lair. I've read far too many Doc Savage books.

Behind Marvin came a few unmarked vehicles and some guys in a couple of Humvees and a green pickup truck, probably army surplus. German Shepherds were in the truck bed. The dogs, with their tongues hanging out, looked like they were going to the dog park.

The lair was easier to find in the day. When we got near it, Marvin pulled over, and the Humvee pulled up on the passenger side. Leonard rolled down his window.

"Go in and check it out, Billy, and don't get shot," Marvin said to the Humvee driver, who had gotten out and was leaning on Leonard's door, looking in through the rolled-down window.

"Yes, sir," Billy said. He was a stout man, probably in his forties, who had kept himself in shape. He had a series of small moles along the side of his nose that resembled stair steps leading to his forehead. He had the air of someone who could take care of himself. My guess was he had actually been a soldier and had probably seen some action. Then again, maybe he was just constipated and wanted to go home.

Leonard explained where the place was and how to finish getting there. He told him where the dog bodies were as well. Billy got back in the Humvee, and away they went. We let the two Humvees move ahead, the pickup truck following. The dogs looked happy. They didn't know they could be shot.

We waited where we were until we got a radio message from Billy.

There wasn't much to it. Happily, it was anticlimactic. They found most of the bikers sleeping around the remains of the tire fire and in the trailers like a bunch of kindergarteners who had played too hard and had gone back home and were taking their naps. There wasn't any resistance. They had used their energy chasing us.

Cops had a warrant, so they searched the place good, found meth and meth-making supplies. They found a lot of weapons and ammunition. When they went out to the place in the woods where the dead dogs were, they found Samson on the pile. Regime change had taken about one evening and possibly part of an early morning. Sentimentality was not strong among that biker club. In that crowd you're the head badass until you aren't.

At some point, whoever took over decided they had chased us enough and it was time to start fresh. They hadn't even so much as thrown Samson in the ditch before they got high on their own product. As an old gray-haired addict called Two-Toe George told me and Leonard once, "When you start wanting meth more than you want pussy or a rib-eye steak, then you know you got, like, a serious fucking drug problem."

Two-Toe George was a philosopher. He was, as you might expect, short in the toe department, having cut off a chunk of his right foot with an ax while trying to smash a snail with it. He said he did that when he was high. Was certain right then that the snail was actually a spy machine made to look like a snail, that it had cameras and was watching him.

Turned out it was just a snail. But the loss of those toes put Two-Toe on the clean-and-sober chart for three days, and then he went back on the meth as soon as he could. Couple years later, in a scummy motel outside of Lufkin, Texas, he put a cheap automatic he had used the day before to rob a gas station of sixty-five dollars and a Peanut Pattie to his head, told the whore he was with he could bounce a bullet off his skull, and said he'd like to show her. He proved in a split second he could in fact not bounce a bullet off his head. It blew his brains all over the motel wall. The whore stole his meth and was caught four days later by the cops trying to sell her three-year-old child for a fix.

Fortunately, the addicts the whore tried to sell the child to weren't as far gone as she was, and they turned her in. The child went to Texas Child Protective Services, and she went into the system, was probably making license plates or such somewhere in a big concrete compound with guards all around.

More cops arrived. Two of their vehicles were large vans. They put their captives in that and drove them to the police station. The guy with the missing kneecap was still alive, and nobody else had died from the car collision, though the woman who had done the nice cartwheel had a broken arm and a broken ankle. She was so high she was feeling no pain. Billy said she tried to get up and dance a step or two to show she hadn't been using. Her ankle cracked, and down she went. She and a few others got a ride to the hospital.

When we were back at the cop shop we didn't go inside. Marvin thought it best we not see any of the bikers who might have seen us.

"Doing what I can to slide you two out of this," Marvin said. "Here's the address where you're going to be. Bring Brett and Chance there as well."

"What about Frank?" Leonard asked.

"We decided no cell for now. We got her tucked away in a nice little apartment with a twenty-four-hour guard. Next thing is to figure how much of her story is true and how much is bullshit."

"Quite a coincidence that Weasel, who helps people create new identities, is also the guy who helped Jim Bob create one."

Marvin nodded. "As I've said before, coincidences do happen. I can live with that if the rest of Frank's story checks out."

As we drove away, I called Brett, told her to stay where she was for a while and that I'd get back to her and tell her where to meet us before too long. I gave her a bit of the rundown. She took it in stride, switched the subject.

"You know what?" she said.

"What?"

"Me and Chance, we've had a lot of fun."

"That's good. What's she up to?"

"She's showering, and I'm making motel-room coffee. It smells a little like the dirty-clothes hamper. Chance and me, we just been talking, almost nonstop. It's like a mother talking to a daughter, for real. My daughter I mostly yell at and try to tell her how to screw her head on straight. Chance, she's got some emotional wounds, but overall, she's okay. Shit, Hap. If she isn't your daughter I'm going to be disappointed. I think there may be a real monkey wrench somewhere in her path."

"You explain to her about what me and Leonard were doing?"

"I decided not to even play with that idea. Not just yet, anyway. I'm working up to it. Thing is, it's hard to explain what you do."

"She doesn't need to know all the gory details," I said.

"Sandy? Anything?"

"Nothing, really. That girl disappeared off the face of the earth."

"More likely she is in the face of the earth," Brett said.

"Looking more and more that way."

"Shower has quit running. I'm going to let you go. Call me when you're ready for us to come home. I think I can keep us busy for a while. I like spending money."

I rang off.

"You're already starting to look like a concerned parent," Leonard said.

"Think so?"

"Oh, yeah. You want that girl to be your daughter, don't you, brother?"

"I think I do."

"Family isn't always about blood. We prove that."

"Yeah, we do. But it would be cool if she was. I think she may be someone special."

"You can help her, kin or not," Leonard said. "Shit, man, that's what you do, help people."

"So do you."

"Yeah, but except for a chosen few, I don't really like them."

"There is that," I said.

The phone rang. I looked. It was Brett again.

I answered it, but it was Chance, not Brett.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey yourself."

"Last night we bought some animal crackers out of the motel vending machine, a carton of milk. It made me think of you. I enjoyed our talk."

"Me, too. I don't remember what we talked about, except animal crackers, but I enjoyed it, too."

"We talked about music and warm milk," she said.

"We did at that."

"I just wanted to tell you about the animal crackers."

"Yeah, well, that's good. I'm glad you had some more. Watch Brett, though. She'll eat them up."

Chance laughed softly. "She is so cool."

"Tell me about it," I said.

"You go on and take care," she said. "I'll see you soon."

"Sure," I said, and she rang off.

Leonard looked at me. "I think I detect a mist over the eyeballs."

"Fuck you."

"A tremble of the lips."

"You heard me."

"She's your daughter, can she call me Uncle Leonard?"

"She can call you Uncle Asshole. That would be more accurate."

"I like it," Leonard said.

"Listen," I said, changing the subject. "Maybe we ought to go back and see if Weasel really left town. He might be still hanging around."

"Why would he?"

"Because he may never have been under threat like he wanted us to believe. He and Frank may both be in on this deeper than they admit. Weasel wanted that thousand, told us enough to make us happy to let him have it, but maybe he knows a lot more. Like who this Canceler actually is."

"All right, then. Let's saddle up."

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Weasel's place hadn't been urban-renewed since last we saw it, and no volunteers had dropped by to brighten it up with fresh paint. The bottom part of the duplex still had the windows knocked out. Weasel's car was still parked where it had been before. It hadn't been detailed. It looked like the same piece of shit.

We put on cloth gloves we kept in the glove box, which was a swell place for them, went up the stairs again, and leaned on the door. It was still locked. There were windows on either side of the door. We tried them—Leonard one, me the other. They both slid up.

I looked around. There didn't seem to be anyone watching. In fact, there didn't seem to be anyone around at all. It was like it had been last time. The whole area looked abused and then forgotten. The morning light didn't freshen it any.

I climbed through the window I had opened, and Leonard went in through the other. We both had handguns.

The house smelled stale from having been closed up, and it was hot because there was no air-conditioning—no electricity, in fact. It had that odd feel you get from an empty house. Then again, that didn't mean it was really empty. We went through the house with our guns and looked around. There was one very nice room with a bed in it and a computer on a desk, and there was a laptop in a case by the closet. I opened the case up and looked at the laptop. The closet was full of clothes. The desk drawer had a number of flash drives in it.

I joined Leonard in the kitchen. We looked in the refrigerator. There was food in there, lots of it. Of course, he decided to leave, he could have abandoned the food. But his clothes and the laptop? The place wasn't much, but it was clean. I hadn't expected Weasel to be a good housekeeper.

We sat at the kitchen table, having helped ourselves to cold diet colas from the fridge, our guns on the table.

"Could be the computer is here because he's coming back," Leonard

said.

“Maybe it’s like I thought. He isn’t really on the run. But then again, I get a feeling he hasn’t been here in a while, so I’m starting to shoot down my own theory. But if he did run, would he leave the computers? They’re the tools of his trade. Or at least part of it, creating identities. He’d make a false one for himself and not leave anything behind that might incriminate him if the cops came looking.”

“And maybe he writes letters to the editor on one, watches porn on the other.”

We drank the diet colas and took the cans with us, trying not to leave any DNA around that might come back and bite us on the butts in the future.

Outside on the landing, our pistols tucked under our shirts, we pushed the windows closed, went downstairs. We were about to get in the car when something struck me. I turned and looked at Weasel’s junker and that black piece of cloth hanging out of the trunk. I was thinking I knew what that cloth belonged to.

I pointed it out to Leonard, said, “I got a shitty feeling.”

In the back of my car is a tool case with tools I mostly don’t know how to use, but there was one thing in it I could handle. A crowbar. I could break an arm and I could jimmy a lock with it. After the hammer, it was my tool of choice. I got the crowbar and Leonard looked up one side of the street and I looked up the other.

Nothing but a black cat crossing the road. I thought it might be the same cat that Leonard had told to clean up the bottom of the duplex the first time out.

At Weasel’s car I stuck the crowbar under the edge of the trunk and tried to pry it. Leonard said, “You’re being so goddamned delicate you’re making me nervous. Give me that.”

He took the crowbar and rammed it into the crack of the trunk near where the black cloth dangled and sort of squatted as he pulled down on the bar like a handle. There was a snapping sound and the trunk popped open and out of the trunk there came a smell that once you smell it you never forget it.

There was the rest of the black cloth. It was part of what Weasel had been wearing the day we saw him. A loose black shirt. Weasel didn’t really look much like Weasel now. The heat and time had done some work. He was lying on his side away from us, but his head was turned as if he were trying to look over his shoulder, and his mouth was open. There were teeth missing. One of his ears had been cut off. I could see that his throat had been cut. His pants were pulled down to his ankles, and one knee was lifted slightly. I had an idea that if we were to roll him over and look he'd be missing a set of balls.

"Well," Leonard said. "He's had a bad day."

"Yep."

"Seems he wasn't making that stuff up about the guy who cuts throats with a wire and takes balls away with him. He really should have left town sooner."

We closed the trunk and put the crowbar back in my car and looked around. Still nobody. Even the cat was long gone.

We rode away.

37

The address Marvin had given us for the safe house was on the edge of town, and just five years back would have been in the country, but the town had spread out and almost met it. Few more years and it would be part of LaBorde. But for now the little yellow house was off the highway and down an asphalt road, set back off that by a long gravel drive that ran straight up to the house.

There was a faded gray garage separate and near the house, and the garage door slid up to let cars in and had to be opened by hand. Inside there was room for two cars. We opened it and parked the car inside but left the garage door up. Across the asphalt road was a large pasture with a big barn on it. It was worn and made of logs and the logs had began to rot; it was for the most part a full structure, though there were gaps in its side and you could see hay stored in there in bales.

The house was small and untidy. The living room had a saggy paisley-covered couch and one fat matching armchair and a coffee table with so many coffee rings stained into it it almost appeared to have been designed that way. There was a small TV on a stand. It was an old-style TV. The face of it was about the size of a microwave oven. There was a DVD player stacked on top of it. A wire ran from it through a gap in the wall. Apparently we had cable.

The kitchen smelled of old grease, and the floor was covered in cheap yellow linoleum with blue flowers and some long-ago stepped-on cockroaches. When we walked, something sticky on the floor grabbed at our shoes. The linoleum was curling where it met the kitchen cabinets. The cabinets were stocked with quite a few canned goods, and that was swell if you wanted to eat beets or green beans, because that's all there was, except for a can of cranberry sauce with the berries in it. There were blue plastic plates and jelly jars to drink out of, and the kitchen drawers were stuffed with utensils, including a few plastic forks and spoons. There was a kitchen table with a series of mismatched chairs drawn up around it.

I sat on the couch, and the cushion sagged. I called Marvin, told him what we had found at Weasel's place and that he ought to get over there while there was evidence to get.

Marvin sounded worn-out and anxious and was in no way pleasant.

"I told you to go to the safe house," he said.

"We're here."

"Now you are. You had suspicions, you should have called and told me. I could have checked out Weasel's digs myself. What the fuck, Hap?"

"No one knows we were there," I said. "Though we did pry the trunk with a crowbar."

"Damn it. Don't mention you were there or that you pried anything open. That part will be marked down to a worn-out trunk that popped open. You wipe prints?"

"Duh. We wore gloves."

"Actually, that was pretty good detective work. Don't tell Leonard I said that."

"Leonard, he said we did some good detective work."

Leonard saluted.

"Funny," Marvin said. "Go to bed. We'll discover Weasel on our own."

There were two bedrooms. Leonard was quick to choose the larger one and make camp. I slung my overnight bag into the other one, pulled the blinds to keep out the morning light. I climbed out of my clothes and into bed in my underwear. I lay there and listened to Leonard snoring across the hall. I had meant to close the door but had been too tired to do it. I thought I really ought to get up and do that. That was going to be my next move, but to do that I first had to open my eyes and will myself out of bed. I was seriously planning that when I fell asleep.

Late afternoon we were up and dressed. We split the can of cranberry sauce, said to hell with all this sneaking around, and drove to town. We do not follow directions well. I remember my kindergarten teacher telling my mother, "Hap would do very well if he could just learn to follow directions."

And I remember my mother sighing and saying, "Tell me about it."

We bought a large cardboard container of coffee at Starbucks as well as a quickie breakfast of eggs and bacon inside what might have been an English muffin and drove back to the safe house and ate and sipped our coffee. When we finished, I called Brett. She answered on the first ring.

"How are you?"

“Peachy,” I said and gave her a rundown.

“You had quite a night. I can tell by your voice that you’re not quite right.”

“I saw a person shot, some people hit by a car, blew a man’s kneecap off, was shot at, a lot, was chased by thugs, scolded by Marvin—unfairly, I think—and me and Leonard found Weasel dead in the trunk of his car stinking to high heaven. And the toilet here is small and rocks when you sit on it. So the usual.”

“Sorry, Hap.”

“My own fault, getting into shit like this.”

“So nothing on Sandy?”

“Zip,” I said. “I get to thinking she might be out there, alive, hiding somewhere, or maybe just a stack of bones and rotting clothes under a rock, and mostly what we do is ride around and shoot at people and take a regular shit.”

“There’s not much else you can do, Hap. It’s been some years since she disappeared. And if she’s dead, and I don’t mean to sound cold, but what’s the hurry?”

“*If* she’s dead,” I said.

“What do you think?”

“That she’s been fertilizing the soil for some time, but I don’t want to think that. What if I’m wrong, and she’s in some hellhole being forced to whore out? Maybe they’re doping her, hurting her. I think about it too long I feel sick to my stomach.”

“I know how you take things to heart,” she said, “even when it’s not your fault and there’s nothing you can do about it. You can only take it a day at a time, love.”

“Look,” I said, “I think you should stay where you are. There’s not enough room here, really. And I think it’s best we just stay separate for now. Can we afford for you to stay where you are or someplace similar?”

“For a while,” she said. “Then we’re going to have to make new plans. And Chance, she doesn’t know about all this, not the real inside scoop, anyway. But she’s no idiot. I can’t find my way into ‘Daddy is back home shooting the kneecaps off bad guys and breaking legs with crowbars, so we have to stay away right now.’”

“I assume she is not in the room with you.”

“Downstairs having breakfast. She thinks we’re just spending time at the hotel because you’re having the house sprayed for termites.”

“That was your story?”

“I thought about telling her you and Leonard had been quarantined for bubonic plague, but that seemed a little extreme.”

“You told the right lie. You know this means we are no longer empty nesters. We have a dog and maybe a daughter.”

“At least it isn’t Leonard. I say that with love.”

“Damn. I didn’t even think to ask I’ve been so preoccupied. What about Buffy?”

“Right here beside me. We got her from the boarder, brought her back here this morning. We couldn’t leave her, Hap. She is really doing well. I think hotel life agrees with her. They not only allow dogs here, they have dog treats and doggie beds and a place outside for them to poop, provided you clean up afterward. This is a life Buffy could become accustomed to. She seems to like watching cartoons.”

“Sounds fun.”

“It is, but what I’m thinking is maybe we should get out of East Texas for a while. I’m thinking up a big lie to justify that, and I may be getting one cornered. I’m going to lay it on Chance when I get it worked out. I have to tell her something. Say I was planning a vacation and she ought to go with me, all expenses paid as long as they aren’t large expenses. I think I can talk her into that, justify it with some bullshit. But Hap, she isn’t stupid. The girl is smart. She’s going to know I’m telling her shit don’t smell when it does. It might take a little time, but she’ll come to it.”

“If anyone can sell her on a line of shit, it’s you.”

“I’m not sure that was a compliment. You know, Hap? I really, really like her.”

“I don’t actually know anything about her. I want to like her.”

“You can’t help but,” Brett said. “I’ll be devastated if she isn’t your daughter. She’s a buddy. We have so much in common, and she’s so young to be such an old soul.”

“Or you’re a young soul,” I said.

“Aw, how sweet. I like that. Baby, I feel like I’m running out on you. Taking a sabbatical during a time when you need me there with a shotgun and some face paint. I just don’t know what to do with Chance under the circumstances. I don’t mind putting my ass on the line, but not hers.”

“You’re making the right choice. Let her have some time when she’s not scuttling to survive. Daughter or not. You like her, that’s enough. And there’s really nothing you can do here. To be honest, I’m not sure there’s much further we can go as far as Sandy is concerned. She dead-ends at the dealership.”

“So you want to throw in the towel?”

“Just because I don’t think there’s much further we can go doesn’t mean I’m smart enough to quit.”

“You’re a terrier, and Leonard is a pit bull.”

“Technically, I think pit bulls are terriers, too. Leonard is waving hello.”

“Wave back. And let him have his cookies, and don’t get killed, okay?”

“Not in my plans,” I said.

“Tell Leonard I said to watch after you.”

“He always does.”

38

I guess we had been at the safe house about a week when things changed. Brett was traveling with Chance and Buffy on some of our money stash, and I had been keeping in contact with her on a daily basis. She said Chance had never been out of East Texas, except for Louisiana, and was having the time of her life. She said this as if she and I were great world travelers.

They did a tour of Sun Records in Memphis, went to Nashville for a few days, and were uncertain where they were going from there. Thing was, they had to come home sometime because the money would run out. It might not be so bad now. The bikers were still in the can. Frank was stashed away somewhere, and if she were able to give a bit more insider information than she already had, she might do a lot less time, not that she deserved less. Jim Bob wasn't off the hook altogether, and neither were we, but so far we were still footloose and fancy-free.

I called and had our mail and newspapers held until we were ready to pick them up. I wondered if Chance's DNA test was in the mail. I was almost afraid to find out. The door at the office had been fixed, but except for the workmen who had been out to do the job and our dropping by quickly to check on the door, we had mostly laid low at the safe house. As for leads on Sandy, we were out of ideas.

We were sitting on the porch in lawn chairs, letting the hot air settle on us, trying to figure what we were going to do next, when Jim Bob showed up. He wasn't driving the Bitch. He came in a late-model black pickup truck. It looked like a lot of trucks. Nothing fancy. No dice hanging from the window. No plastic Jesus. No curb feelers. He parked in the drive in front of the garage.

He got out and came across the yard. "*Qué pasa,* motherfuckers?"

"How'd you find us?" Leonard asked.

"I'm a detective. Don't be silly."

"Marvin told you, didn't he?"

"I was smart enough to ask, wasn't I?"

“For a moment I thought the safe house wasn’t so safe,” Leonard said.

“I’m sure it isn’t,” Jim Bob said. He came up on the porch and sat on it with his feet on the steps. The gray boots he wore had blue stars sprinkled over the toes. His snap-pocket cowboy shirt was blue as well. He took off his hat and placed it on his knee.

“So far no trouble,” I said. “And we’re ready to go home.”

“You might want to hold up on that one,” he said. “Unlike you, I haven’t been hanging out on the front porch of a supposed safe house eating cookies and drinking coffee and playing with my pecker.”

“We have neither coffee nor cookies,” Leonard said.

“Guess not,” I said. “Leonard ate all the cookies and drank all the coffee.”

“I drank coffee because we are out of Dr Peppers.”

“Well, we do have peckers,” I said.

“You got some news?” Leonard asked.

“Well, me and the barrel racer broke up. I had too much stamina.”

“That’s your news?” I said.

“No. I been researching our hired killer with the comic-book name—the Canceler—and I been looking deep into the car company where Frank worked. I have friends in the FBI, some others on the edges of organized crime, and a few snitches I wouldn’t call friends but I would call reasonably reliable. I been putting together quite a résumé.”

“Where is it?” Leonard asked.

Jim Bob tapped his head with a finger. “Right’cheer. That car company has its main hub in Fort Worth, but its tentacles stretch all over the place. Houston. Austin. Dallas. There’s one in Tyler and one in El Paso. There’s one in Denver, Chicago, Los Angeles, and a number of other places. LaBorde must have been a long shot for them, but then again, they’ve been here for a while, so they are doing well enough. Most people here don’t have money, but the ones who have it really have it, and some of the ones who have it really want cool cars and women and long trips to Italy. Course, they didn’t know being blackmailed came with the deal.

“As for the Canceler, well, he’s supposed to have killed a lot of folks in a lot of places, people who seem to have something to do with the car company. Clients turn up dead, maybe because they wouldn’t pay or got sideways with the companies. Maybe they threatened to go to the police or were going to testify. I don’t know the reasons, but that’s fair-enough guessing. Also others that may or may not have bought cars but were internal problems or external problems—snoops. Weasel would be a prime example. I heard about him, by the way. He sure could build a good website."

"Marvin told you?" I said.

"Yep."

"Sandy could have been one of those snoops," Leonard said. "And she might have paid for it."

"A cog in the wheel that didn't quite fit. Don't know yet. But the thing that doesn't add up, when I started looking at all the similar killings my FBI buddy let me in on, is the timing. Too many killings too close together, happening in too wide a range to be one person. There's a crew. Have guns, will travel. They operate to create this idea that it's one deadly bastard, but it's several mean-ass bastards. They get paid well to do what they do and to make it scary. That way, word gets around, especially to the underworld: you don't fuck with the dealership, because if you do, you get whacked and lose your balls. It's all been men they've whacked that I know of, but maybe they just aren't as theatrical with women. Sandy, for example. Which may be why she hasn't turned up. Thing is, they fucked up by being too generous with their killings. That way, cause of times and locations, we know it's not one killer, it's several. And from what my friend at the FBI says, sometimes it's several of them on one job. Inside sources think it's eight people, and they think they know who the eight people are, but they won't get nailed because the FBI has contacts in the organization that are helping them out."

"It's like Frank was saying," Leonard said. "They let some bad people go to nail other bad people."

"Yeah," Jim Bob said. "It's fucked-up, man. I always say when the law breaks the law, there isn't any goddamn law. I don't care who they're nailing: if there's stuff going on as bad as what they're focused on, it's still bad. For them it gets down to closing high-profile cases. At the moment, bunch of dead rich guys, or a bunch of dead thugs that were going to challenge the company, are no skin off their asses if they can nail some others more easily. That fake money-laundry business, for one. That's just folks being set up by the bad folks so they can turn them in and get paid, and paid a lot. I told my friend this, the fed, and he says, 'We know. But it's easier to nail the money-laundry folks, even if they're innocent, than a bunch of bad motherfuckers that will kill you.' "

"Damn," I said.

"Our friends in the government," Jim Bob said. "Tomorrow the worm may turn, but right now the feds are getting what they want out of the deal. In the long run, even if they turn on these guys, they'll end up letting most of them go, giving them new identities and hiding them in the witness protection program. That could mean the Cancelers, too. It's less embarrassing for the FBI that way. They don't have to admit they been ignoring crime to catch crime. Of course, these guys, they get new identities, and pretty soon most if not all are back at their original business, and it becomes even more embarrassing for the feds, so they got to continue keeping it under wraps. Deeper they get into this, the more desperate they are to hide it."

"That is fucking wrong," Leonard said.

Jim Bob nodded.

"Knowing that and changing it are two different things. Thing is, the car company is vengeful, and since their cheap biker help blew the job, well, they'll send someone from the crew, or all the crew. The Cancelers, if you will. Local law enforcement will suddenly find their hands are tied, at least where it would matter to us. The feds will put the pressure on them. The bikers will get tossed into the deal as patsies and serve time, but the real big wheels, they'll keep on turning, and so will their hit men, ones who grease the wheels for the real owner, who seems to be our Barbecue King."

"So it's just a matter of time before the Cancelers know where we are," I said.

Jim Bob made a clicking sound with his tongue.

"It's possible we might negotiate our way out, say we're going to hang up investigating Sandy. We could be put with the right people to have that meeting. Kind of a catch-and-release program, but then again, you have to know they might catch and not release."

"You know us better than that," I said.

"I do. You're not smart enough to quit."

"And besides," I said, "we slither out of the deal for now, who's to say they won't come back later and whack us just to make sure?"

"My thoughts exactly," Leonard said.

"And mine," Jim Bob said.

"So what do we do?" I said. "Wait until they decide to hit us?"

"That could be an idea," Jim Bob said. "Thing is, it could be any time. Now. Tomorrow. A month from now. What we got to do is prepare, and then we got to annoy the shit out of them until they come out of the dark. Or find a way to take the fight to them."

"The Barbecue King?" Leonard said. "We brace him."

"That's a good idea," Jim Bob said. "Go to the top."

“That will get the shit stirred, no doubt,” I said. “But we do that, and there really are eight of those guys, then we got to consider all eight might come after us at once.”

“Three into eight goes how many times?” Leonard said.

“It goes badly,” I said.

“We need a crew,” Jim Bob said. “I’m sure we would do just fine, the three of us, but I don’t know about you guys, lately I get a little more tired than I used to.”

“Me, too,” I said.

“Not me,” Leonard said. “I can fight all day and fuck all night.”

“Sure you can,” Jim Bob said. “But maybe we ought to put this crew together anyway.”

“I have an idea or two,” I said.

“Good,” Jim Bob said, standing up, talking as he walked toward his truck. “Me, I’m going to venture out into the wilds, fearless and handsome. Strong and noble. One man alone against the elements.”

“So what’s that mean?” Leonard said.

“Figure we’re in for a long haul, so I’m going to go buy some groceries and such. I’m not back in a couple, three hours, you fuckers start looking for my balls. If you find them, find me next. I’ll need them back.”

39

I gave Cason a call.

“Hey,” he said. “I been researching the shit out of things. Or, rather, I got a friend here at the paper who has. He’s like a computer wizard. You know what he figured out?”

“That there is more than one killer?”

“There goes my news.”

“Weasel’s dead,” I said.

“No shit? Damn. I didn’t like him and can’t say I miss him, but I got some good information from him. I had already sort of cut him loose, though, knowing he was planning to move. Guess he didn’t do it soon enough.”

I told him what we knew about Weasel. “That’s not for public consumption, but in time it can go into your article, leaving me and Leonard out of it.”

“Who’s going to believe an article about a league of assassins?”

“I don’t think they’re quite that impressive. Eight guys who kill people is all they are.”

“That’s pretty impressive.”

“It’s presumptuous, but me and Leonard want to set things right.”

“No way that can ever be done,” Cason said.

“Not completely,” I said. “But in increments. I’m tired of not sleeping in my own bed. I’m tired of being nervous. I’m tired of Brett being gone on a permanent vacation until this is over. I want my life back. We need to put together a crew to help us get things straight.”

“That won’t be me. I did a thing not long back for an old army buddy, and it wasn’t a thing I wanted to do, but I went against the grain and did it. I’ve had enough. But I know a guy who lives for this stuff. He throws in with you, long as you don’t fuck him over, he’ll stay until things are done. Someone else comes along next week, hires him to whack you, well, he might just sign up. You can never tell about Booger.”

"Booger?"

"What he prefers to be called. And believe me, he is a booger."

"I can't promise money."

"Can you promise bloodshed?"

"Most likely, but if I find a way to do it without killing, that's the route I'll take."

"Just so you know, he's violent, efficient, but hard to manage. Kind of guy you don't know much about, because there's not much for him beyond the moment. He only likes a few people, and who knows? One day he might get out of bed, have a tough bowel movement, and decide to kill everyone in the house. With him it's like playing Russian roulette with a one-shot revolver."

"Don't sugarcoat him so much."

"Oh, actually I am sugarcoating him."

"Well, we're not looking to have someone to do the dishes and macramé sweaters."

"Good thing. You want me to call him?"

"Yeah. I'll chance it."

"Let me know where you're staying, and he'll come. I'll be with him, but I won't stay. Later, don't say I didn't warn you."

When we rang off, I turned to Leonard, said, "We got one more."

"I know of another," Leonard said.

40

Couple years back I started getting cards from places in Italy. I knew who was sending them. I only knew one person in Italy. The cards were random kinds of cards. Christmas, birthday, get well, Halloween, all manner of things. There was a stack of them. There were no notes in them. Only a single number. Except the last card, which read: IF EVER.

Me and Leonard drove to my house and parked boldly in the drive and went inside. Leonard stood near the front door while I went upstairs and climbed on a footstool in the bedroom closet and removed the little door there that led up into the crawl space. I still had a few cold guns and some ammunition up there. There was also a small metal box. It had those cards in it with the random numbers. I carried it to the bed. I removed the cards from it. I looked at the envelopes and laid them out by date. Then I took each card out of its envelope and lined up the numbers by dates. I had figured out months ago what they were. If you arranged them in order, then put Italy's country code in front of it, it was a phone number. Plus the card that said: IF EVER.

Brett knew about them and knew what they were. She didn't like it, and I said I would throw the cards away, but I didn't.

I used a pad and pen by the bed and wrote out the complete number and put it on the night table by the bed, sat on the bed, and used the home phone to call the number. It rang for a long time. A machine picked up. The words were first in Italian. I had no idea what was said. I kept listening. Then in English. "Dry cleaner's. Leave a message." It was one of those mechanical female voices, robotic and clear.

I said, "It's if ever," and hung up.

I tore up the number I had written out and tossed it in the trash can, put the cards back together, placed them back into the metal box, and put it back where it belonged. I went down, said to Leonard, "Now we'll see."

"All right, then," he said, and we left.

41

When we got back to the safe house Jim Bob was inside making lunch. He had cooked steaks and baked potatoes and had bought all the goods that go with them. He had bought a six-pack of Dr Peppers for Leonard, two jugs of unsweet ice tea, and a six-pack of Lone Star for himself. He had bought an apron and was wearing it. It had writing on it where it draped over his chest. The writing read: KISS THE COOK.

Over lunch—which, I might add, was well prepared—we told him we had one thug lined up for sure and a professional who might come on board.

“That makes four, maybe five,” he said.

“I want to talk to the Barbecue King first,” I said.

“To rile him?” Jim Bob said.

“Maybe.”

“What I’d suggest heavily is that if we want to take the fight to them, let’s not just march up to his house and start some shit. If he’s behind this, and it looks like he is, he might have a little army at his command. There’s the eight guys, but then there’s the Barbecue King’s own guys.”

“Technically he doesn’t run the barbecue business anymore,” Leonard said.

“Beside the point,” Jim Bob said. “He’s rich. He’s powerful. He owns the car company, and that means he runs the illegal side businesses, which will make him cautious in the extreme. Guys like that, they are always scared, because there’s always someone looking to take over, and frequently they plan to do it by giving their rivals a nice vacation, so to speak. Give me a few days to do a bit of surveillance. I’d rather do it alone. Easier to hide one than two or three. So in the meantime, hang out and stay cautious.”

* * *

After two days a small four-door white pickup pulled up out front, and a man got out on the driver’s side. He was tall, dark of skin, but it was hard to get an ethnic take on him. His head was shaved and shiny. He could have been black, Samoan, American Indian, or maybe even Asian. Probably all those things. He was wearing a tight white T-shirt that showed he worked out. He wasn't bulging with a lot of theatric muscle but instead was lean, had a boxer's build. He was carrying a compact leather bag. He moved like a cat.

There was a man on the passenger side, and he got out. It was Cason.

It was just me and Leonard in the house. We were in the kitchen looking out the window at their arrival.

"Looks like Cason has brought us the cavalry," I said.

"Looks like one big asshole to me," Leonard said.

We went on the front porch as they walked up. The big man moved as if well oiled but not in any hurry. He had the languid but somehow threatening stride of a tiger. When they were standing at the bottom of the porch, Leonard and the big man took to eyeing one another immediately.

"This," Cason said, "is Booger."

"How you fuckers?" Booger said. He had a sweet baritone voice that might have encouraged his mother to have enrolled him in the high school choir.

"Us fuckers are fine," Leonard said.

Booger gave him a Cheshire Cat grin.

"Where's Jim Bob?" Cason said.

"Out," I said. He had, of course, been gone a couple of days, and we hadn't heard a peep yet.

"How about all us fuckers go in the house?" Leonard said.

Booger made with his Cheshire Cat grin again.

We went in the house, and Booger went straight to the refrigerator and looked inside. Leonard had been doling out his Dr Peppers since Jim Bob brought them. There was one left. Booger grabbed it and swigged about half of it down instantly.

Leonard looked at him as if he had just taken a shit in the middle of the floor.

I touched Leonard's arm casually. He turned and looked at me.

"Son of a bitch," Leonard said.

Booger swigged more of the soft drink, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, said, "What was that you said, Leroy?"

"Leonard," Leonard said. "I said, son of a bitch. That's my Dr Pepper."

"Not anymore," Booger said. "Maybe I can save you a swallow."

"I'm the only bad nigger drinking Dr Peppers in this house," Leonard

said.

“Now there are two bad niggers,” Booger said. “Though, technically, I’m as much of this as that. I’m what you might call a mutt. More of a junkyard dog, really.”

“That’s not what I was thinking of calling you,” Leonard said.

“Come on, guys,” Cason said. “I’ll buy more Dr Peppers.”

“A case,” Leonard said.

“A case, then,” Cason said.

After a while Cason went away, left Booger with us, and let me tell you, there was one big draft in the room when he departed. Partly it was due to how Leonard and Booger felt about each other, but it was more than that. Booger was like a slice of cold shadow.

Late afternoon we fixed supper, sat and ate at the table. I said, “Booger, we’re glad to have your help, but the pay sucks. Meals and this roof over your head and a chance to get killed.”

“I won’t get killed,” Booger said.

“You know what we’re up against, or may be up against?” I said.

“Cason told me.”

“Maybe eight guys, and who knows, it could be more.”

“That’s all right.”

“Course, we got to find them. It may take time.”

“I got time.”

“We’ll have to fix you up with some guns.”

“Got my own equipment.” Booger looked at Leonard and smiled. “When’s Cason bringing those Dr Peppers?”

“You know,” Leonard said, “one day you’re going to pull on the wrong rope, and it just might be tied to me.”

“Wouldn’t that be delightful?” Booger said.

“Maybe less so than you imagine,” Leonard said.

“You look to me, both of you, like you might be getting a little past it.”

“There have been various opinions on the matter,” Leonard said. “The ones who held your opinion lived or died to regret it.”

Booger grinned, leaned back in his chair, said, “You going to make coffee, Happy?”

“Hap,” I said. “And you can make your own damn coffee.”

“You old men watch football?”

“Not really,” I said. “But there’s a TV here if you want to watch it. Keep it turned down, though. I plan to read.”

“I hope you plan on being alert,” Booger said.

“How alert are you if you watch TV?”

“I can hear a dog taking a dump in the yard and watch TV at the same time.”

“And leap small rivers and buildings at a single bound, and you’re half horse and half alligator,” Leonard said.

Booger gave Leonard a cold smile.

“You know,” Booger said, “I killed my mother and fucked her dog, and her I liked.”

I wasn’t sure if he was kidding.

Leonard said, “Yeah, but what if it had been a Doberman, smarty-pants?”

Booger delivered his cold smile again.

After a while Booger padded lightly into the living room and turned on the TV. He found a sports channel and watched an old classic football game.

Me and Leonard went out on the front porch. We sat on the steps and watched the day grow gray. Leonard said, “I don’t like him.”

“If he’s as bad a dude as Cason thinks, as Booger himself thinks he is, we are going to need him.”

“What if he isn’t?”

“Then he’ll get himself killed. Does he make you nervous?”

“No,” Leonard said. “He irritates me.”

“Sure,” I said.

“Okay,” Leonard said. “A little.”

“What makes him scary is that he doesn’t seem to really have anything or anyone inside that shell. He’s here so he can kill someone, and that’s it. Maybe some odd loyalty to Cason. But in the end, it has nothing to do with setting things right. It’s a whole different country where Booger dwells. My guess is he isn’t all that different from those we have been calling the Canceler. They’re serial killers who have made killing their profession. Slight bend in the road, and Booger could be one of them.”

“I believe that,” Leonard said.

“Believe he killed his mother?” I asked.

“No,” Leonard said. “Well, I don’t think so. He might have fucked a poodle, though.”

“Do you believe he can hear a dog shit in the yard from inside the house while watching TV?”

Leonard gave me a serious look. “Can’t everyone?”

42

The days were hot and the nights were warm, but in the house around Booger there was a coolness stronger than the air-conditioning. Sometimes Booger decided to talk, and he talked at random about all kinds of things, sports and such, and he loved to talk about dead things, and things he wanted to make dead, and it was a long list and seemed to be made in order of desire.

We had one CD that Leonard had brought with him, and we played it on the laptop I had brought with me. It was *Restless* by Kasey Lansdale. Booger took to playing it more than us. He played over and over one cut in particular. “Sorry Ain’t Enough.” I wondered if those words meant something to him. I doubted he was sorry, but I figured anyone who had done him wrong, at least in his eyes, could never be sorry enough to please him.

We hung out like that for three more days, growing nervous about the wait, and me and Leonard growing nervous because of our companion. I could hardly sleep at night for worry Booger might get bored and decide to kill us in our sleep. But on the last of those three days of waiting, midmorning, Jim Bob showed up.

When he saw Booger he did a kind of double take. “Who’s this? The fucking golem?”

“You can ask me,” Booger said. “I know all about me.”

“Okay,” Jim Bob said. “Who the fuck are you?”

“Booger.”

“Ah, well, that clears it right up,” Jim Bob said. “And I don’t like the way you’re looking at me, asshole.”

“The hat and boots, you look like one of those little dolls you buy in Texas souvenir shops,” Booger said.

Perfect. Jim Bob and Booger, like Leonard and Booger, were already in love. Soon bloody kisses would follow.

“I’ve known you a few seconds, and I wish you dead,” Jim Bob said.

“You can’t imagine how important being liked is to me,” Booger said and showed that smile again.

“Son, you maybe ought not mistake a rattler for a king snake.”

“Here’s a little conversation starter,” Leonard said. “Booger here killed his mother, who I think was a mountain lion, and fucked her poodle, who I actually think was a stuffed plush toy.”

Booger and Leonard did a stare-off. I could see this was not going the way I wanted.

“We’re all on the same team,” I said. This was kind of like that lame invocation “Why can’t we all just get along?”

Leonard spent what seemed like an eternity trying to stare down Booger. Booger didn’t even seem to notice. He yawned.

“Again,” I said. “Same team.”

“Yeah, well, same team or not, right now, since I’m the one with the information, I’m the goddamn quarterback,” Jim Bob said.

“Call the play,” I said.

“You sure this fucker is okay?” Jim Bob said.

“You can depend on me,” Booger said.

“Cason vouched for him,” I said.

“Don’t let us down, kid,” Jim Bob said. “You turn out to be someone doesn’t know the difference between diarrhea and hamburger gravy, you may not only get yourself killed, which I can live with, you might, most importantly, get me killed, and that would be a fucking loss to the world, I guarantee.”

Booger’s face was a blank.

“According to Cason, he’s done stuff,” I said.

“All right, then,” Jim Bob said, and he finally quit glaring at Booger. “Here’s the score. I got our Barbecue King’s schedule down. He’s got a couple of bodyguards, which tells me that any doubts to the contrary about him not being into some shit other than barbecue royalties can be tossed. If you’re just making money off a barbecue deal you don’t need thugs.”

“There are just the two?” Leonard asked.

“From what I can figure. You wanted to talk to him, Hap, and I think that’s a good idea. As far as a squad of hit men, I got nothing out of my surveillance. Not that I expected them to all be hanging out at his house eating free barbecue and swapping recipes for making their own ammunition. I only got his schedule down for a week, but it seems pretty rigid. He gets out and about some, but it’s the same thing over and over, and then he stays home a lot. I watched his house for so long I began to know the birds that were sitting on the telephone wires and named each and every one. The house has a very tall fence around it, but if you drive up Livery Drive and park up there, you can look down over the fence. Nothing odd seems to be going on, but then again, not every week is going to be go-daddy time. Here's the thing, though. Every day he goes to a Japanese restaurant to eat sushi. I guess he's had enough barbecue to hold him. Doug looks to be in his fifties, good shape, gray hair. Looks like a retired businessman. Polo shirts and dress pants and comfortable but expensive shoes."

"How would you know a good shoe from a bad shoe?" Leonard asked.

"I know lots of things," Jim Bob said. "Thing is, I think the best time to brace him without everything going Sam Peckinpah is to catch up with him at the Jap joint."

Nice. Jap joint.

"The bodyguards don't even go inside. I don't think he's really worried about anyone wanting to snap his ass, and that makes me wonder about some other things."

"If he's actually connected to all this?" Leonard said.

"Maybe he just thinks he's invincible," Booger said.

Jim Bob gave Booger a stare. There was a lot of malice in that look. It didn't change Booger's demeanor at all. He could have been talking about gutting someone or going out for an ice cream.

"All right," I said and looked at my watch. "He eat at noon?"

"For whatever reason he's at the restaurant twelve-fifteen on the dot. I watched him go there every day. One day I went in and ate not too far away from him. He sits by himself. He has his phone with him, and he puts it on the table, and now and then texts or e-mails on it. He takes his time. He's there at least an hour, sometimes longer. I think it's kind of a temporary office. He finishes, pays his bill, goes out to the car, where the two guys are waiting. They drive him home. Actually, once in a while it's just one guy. Like I said, the bodyguards seem more out of habit than need. Like he's keeping up appearances. I haven't got that figured altogether."

"I think it's best I go see him alone," I said. "We don't want to overwhelm him with numbers."

"You know what you're going to say to him?" Jim Bob asked.

"It'll come to me."

"All right, but one of us, at least, ought to be nearby," Jim Bob said.

"That'll be me, of course," Leonard said.

"All right, then, you watch his back, and me and Booger will not be far from there, a phone call away if it comes to that. There's a Burger

King just down the road."

"I don't like fast food," Booger said.

"Then order a fucking salad," Jim Bob said, "or just hang over a soda. I don't give a shit. Anyway, things go bad, you got Leonard, and all he has to do is have a text prepared and punch it. We'll be there in two or three minutes. I think the two of you can probably handle two or three minutes."

"I doubt it will turn ugly, not in public," I said. "I like bearding him in one of his neutral dens, so to speak, see if it causes him to get the hit crew stirred and moving in our direction. That will be our chance to clean out that nest, provided it comes to that."

"It better," Booger said. "It was a long drive from Oklahoma."

"We only go code red if we need to," I said.

Booger grunted.

"And somewhere in all this," Leonard said, "I hope to figure out what the hell happened to Sandy."

43

We arrived at the restaurant at straight-up noon in my car, but with Leonard driving. Actually, we parked down from the restaurant a ways, but we had eyes on it.

Leonard said, “I hate waiting around.”

“Me, too.”

“I’d rather have to fight and mate with a wild tiger in a ditch than just sit around waiting.”

“No tigers in a ditch for me, but I do hate waiting.”

“If you didn’t have to fight the tiger, but just mate with it, how would that be?”

“Female tiger?”

“In your case, yes.”

“Count me in.”

“You know, Hap, I think we ought to smother Booger in his sleep. He doesn’t seem trustworthy to me.”

“I haven’t seen that he sleeps much.”

“Every time I get up to go pee, I see him sitting up in a chair with the light on. Reading books you brought. He always smiles at me. He has a creepy fucking smile.”

“We may in fact be getting old. We’re sleeping, he’s watching.”

“You got a point there,” Leonard said. “I sleep light, but I sleep. He seems like a fucking machine.”

“What he is is a sociopath. Cason said as much, and I guess he’s as close as Booger’s got to a friend. I think he seems odd because he doesn’t quite understand human discourse. I think when he gets our goat, he believes he’s being pleasant or friendly. He doesn’t really know what that’s supposed to look like.”

“Jim Bob, like us, he’s been around, and when he was talking to Booger the other day, talking tough, you know what I thought I saw?”

“A moment of hesitation.” I said.

“Like maybe the tiger saw the elephant.”

"Thought I saw it, too. Thought I saw the same thing in your eyes a couple times."

"That was a trick of the light, buddy boy, nothing more," Leonard said.

"All right, then. But I assure you, he makes me a little weak in the knees."

"Hey, that may be your man."

A black SUV pulled up in a parking spot near the front of the restaurant. A big man with black hair who looked like he lived in a gym got out on the driver's side, stepped to the back driver's-side door, and let a man out with stylishly cut gray hair. He was slim and wore blue dress pants and a lighter blue polo shirt. I didn't notice if his shoes were expensive or not, but they were black.

He went inside.

I said, "Okay, heads up, brother. I'm going in."

I got out and strolled along the sidewalk to the Japanese restaurant and went inside. The place had a few scattered customers. The waitress, an attractive Asian lady, asked me how many.

"I'm joining a friend," I said and nodded toward the booth where Doug Creese, the Barbecue King, sat.

"You're the first."

"How's that?"

"You're the first to ever sit with him."

I walked over and sat down in the booth across from Doug. He looked older close up. There were lots of lines in his face, and his mouth drooped at both corners. He studied me for a few seconds.

"Do I know you?"

"No, but I thought you might like to."

"You're not selling insurance, are you?"

"Depends on how you look at it."

"How should I look at it?"

"Like I'm here to save us both a lot of problems."

"Yeah?"

"My name is Hap Collins."

"I know of you."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I hear you're a cracker that runs around with some queer nigger named Leonard and you think you're a tough guy and he thinks he's tougher."

"That's us. And by the way, he just might be tougher."

“I haven’t got any business with either of you.”

“Then how come you know who we are?”

“I hear about you because I’ve known some people who know of you. The name stuck with me. Hap. Unusual. Hap and Leonard. I remember that.”

I nodded.

“Word is you own a car lot downtown, the fancy one.”

“That’s the word, huh?”

“Yep. And word is you don’t just sell cars. You sell pussy, too, maybe dick, and you like film, especially ones where someone with money is caught naked with his pecker hanging out and a prostitute dangling on the other end.”

“You heard that, huh?”

“I hear, too, when people cross you, there’s these guys known as the Canceler, except there are several—eight, I believe—and they get a ticket to kill, and then they get paid really well for it. That’s what I hear.”

“You’re hearing from all the wrong people.”

“Am I, now? Funny. No matter what we hear, it always comes back to you.”

The waitress came over.

Doug gave his order. I told her I’d have the same. I said, “I’ll even pick up the bill.”

She went away.

“You’re ruining my lunch,” he said.

“What I’m doing is telling you that I’m not going to stop what I’m doing, and the people I have with me are not going to stop, either, and we are going to put holes in anyone who wants to cut off our balls or any variation thereof that leads to any of us being dead in any manner, shape, or fashion or, for that matter, just made unnecessarily tired.”

“You should do that. It’s got nothing to do with me.”

“I’m also saying the only thing we really want is to find a lady named Sandy Buckner, and if we can do that, we can save a lot of trouble, because if we know what happened to her, where she is, or where what’s left of her is, we’ll take our toys and go home.”

“How nice.”

“We think so. We wouldn’t want to mess up your lunch routine by you being dead.”

“You threatening me?”

“I’m telling you how it might work out if you start the ball rolling.

But on the other hand, you don't want to cooperate, I got one guy with us who will kill anyone for anything and skull-fuck them. Hell, he scares me."

The waitress brought us both unsweet ice teas. I reached over and got an artificial sweetener from the rack on the table, tore it open, and dumped it in my tea. I stirred it with the straw.

"Collins, I'm tired. Real tired. I just want to spend the rest of my life being comfortable. I don't want any shit. None."

"We're in the same ballpark."

"No, you have on the wrong uniform and have showed up for the wrong game."

"Have I?"

"Listen. Ten years ago I'd have been all over this. I'd have wanted war. I'd have had so many men and resources at my service you'd be dead by the time you left here to get in your car. Your car would be dead. I'd have it shot in the engine block. I'd have your house burned down and your plumbing dug up and have your shit shot, turd by turd."

"So what's wrong now?"

"I'm retired."

"That's lame."

"I didn't choose retirement. I was forced into it. The car lot—I don't really own it. Haven't for years."

"I'm not sure I believe that."

"Believe what the fuck you want. It's still in my name, but own it? Only on paper. It and damn near everything I ran at one time is no longer mine. I had a good business; some of it was legit. I made good barbecue. You know, I don't actually own that anymore, either. I get some payments, a percentage, but I sold that off. I sold it off so I could retire, and I got paid good to let the car lot stay in my name, but I don't make money off of it anymore. I'd like my name off, but part of the deal was it had to stay attached, at least as the owner. That keeps the real owner at a distance. I'm a fucking lame duck in an orthopedic shoe. I can still quack, but I got nothing left to quack about."

The waitress came over with our lunch. It was sushi and California rolls. It looked good. I asked for a fork due to the fact that I might put my eye out with chopsticks. She went away and came back with a fork. I thought she looked a little disappointed when she gave it to me.

I reached for the soy sauce.

"Put some wasabi down first, spread it around, mix the soy in that, gently, and then dip the food in it. It gives it real taste."

“I’ve had it before,” I said.

“Yeah, but you don’t know how to eat it. It’s a one-bite thing, you know that? Though it should be done with chopsticks, because a fork gives it a funny aftertaste. Stir it around in the stuff, and then eat it.”

“I appreciate that,” I said, “but I kind of had another conversation I was interested in. One about you not owning anything anymore.”

He ate a piece of sushi. He put his chopsticks down and sipped his tea. He said, “I got drummed out, and if you got a beef, it isn’t with me. I can tell you some things, though, things that might even help you, and I don’t mind doing that. I got my own ax to grind. That said, I ask you to keep me out of it.”

This was an interesting turn of events.

“All right,” I said. “Tell me some things that might help. I’ll decide if they do.”

“I’m a king without country, Hap. I still got a big house and nice cars and some money, good money, but I have about as much power as a toddler. I’m almost in prison, you want to know the truth.”

“I been to prison once. I didn’t care for it. Comparatively, what you got isn’t nearly so bad.”

“That’s because you don’t have what I have. And in fact, guy out there in the car, he’s my bodyguard in name, but not really. He watches me. He sees you in here, well, he could make trouble for you.”

“I got so much trouble now that adding to it doesn’t matter much. Besides, there’s someone out there watching after me who might as well be named Trouble.”

“You are in deeper than you even imagine, and you still haven’t got a clue what’s going on. I think you think you have a clue, but you don’t.”

“Are you going to enlighten me?”

“I’m trying. Just listen. Don’t talk, don’t answer unless I ask you something. Just listen. Let’s start with Sandy Buckner. Few years back she went to work for me. I had the car company, and I was peddling tail on the side, and she comes in wanting to work for me. Talks to Frank first.”

“That right?”

“Yeah. You know Frank’s a split stump?”

“Heard that.”

“Frank tells me about Sandy, cause then I was boss. Called the shots, hired the help. Frank tells me there’s this girl I might like to hire, a real looker, and I set up an interview. Sandy’s well turned out. I don’t trust her at first. Did a bit of research, like I always did. She had a journalism degree, and I'm thinking she might be playing *Brenda Starr, Girl Reporter*. So I take the position that I'm interested, but she's got to give me a sample of the goods. I'm thinking this might be the breaking point, that she won't let the beaver loose if she's just there to do an exposé. I mean, sure, she could not care, but it was one way to test. Not definitive, but something. She did me more ways than I thought could be done, and hell, I was running a high-class whorehouse. Still, I was cautious. Time passes, a year or so, and she does her job well, and I think she's all right. Next thing I know there's some guys come to talk to me, my own guys. They say, 'Hey, we're going to put you in more of a consulting position.' My own fucking business. I hit the roof, of course. Consulting? Who the fuck are you? Well, know who they were?"

"How many guesses do I get?"

"The new owners. They didn't buy shit, but they had someone who invested a little money in the right place to get the right guys interested, some real hardware slingers from Houston. They got businesses all over the United States and overseas."

"You got steamrolled."

"That's right. Sandy had some money of her own, quite a bit of it, I think, and she goes to these guys, says she's investing. Besides money, she offers something better, says she's got all the inside dope on the business. And she did. She had done her fucking homework. She tells them she can go wider, spread it overseas.

"Turns out, too, she's been doing this blackmail thing, and she tells these Houston guys, these bent-nose motherfuckers, they can do what she's doing on a wider scale, cause they got some real dough to expand. They dive in, and all of a sudden I'm sitting home with the cold fucking north wind whistling up my asshole. They pushed me out and told me to eat shit and call it caviar."

"Sandy did that?"

"Goddamn right. She is one smart hot-ass bitch, and she screwed me not only on the couch in my office that time, she screwed me over and took my business. Went to work for these Houston turds. Bottom line, I was out, she was in. That's when this Canceler crap got started."

He paused, ate a piece of sushi, put his chopsticks down, and drank some tea.

"Woman you're looking for, she's the fucking mastermind. She doesn't call herself Sandy anymore. She's wheeling and dealing. These guys, these hit men you got the fancy name for, I think they're all kin. Brothers, cousins. Maybe there's some friends thrown in. And Sandy expands the business with them. Used to be one guy, or maybe it was two. I'm not sure, but pretty soon it's a family business for a family of fucking psychos. I've done my share of things, Collins. Or had it done. Some bad shit. I knew it was bad shit when I did it, but I didn't lose sleep over it. It was business."

"Well, then, that makes it just fine," I said.

"Don't even know I disagree with you. Being away from it, I got to say, what the fuck was that all about? I started out selling my dad's barbecue and peddling used cars, next thing I know I'm in the sewer without any hip boots."

"I doubt that was an accident of nature."

"I'm not asking for pity. I come from a family that was so poor the soles of their shoes were the bottoms of their feet. I come from ignorant shits, and my old man was the one taught me how to be crooked. But I was better at it than he was. I got some education and I got some plans and I got rich. I liked being rich. I'm still well off, but I haven't any power, and these bodyguards, they don't give a flying wet sausage in a whorehouse about me. Long as I keep it simple and don't go much of anywhere without them, don't try to take the business back over, they're all jake with me. I had that business back, you know what I'd do? I'd get rid of all those high-end cars and go back to selling Chevrolets. On a bad day I'd sell a Ford. I'd quit running poontang, and there wouldn't be any blackmail. I know it's rare and hard to believe, but I've grown a conscience."

"I think what you've grown is desperate."

"Have it your way."

"So Sandy, she runs your business now?"

"What I said, and someone runs her business. The Houston people. But here's a bit of a rat turd in her soup. What she don't know is I got some records that I kept, old-school, on paper, and I got that and I could maybe cause her a real pain in the ass I was to give it up to the law. It's stuff happened under my watch, but now she'd get asked about it, long as someone knew to ask her. She could have me whacked at any time, though. I expect it every day. One day I go to eat sushi, and instead I'm in a lake somewhere and the fish are eating me. It could happen. Truth is, you sitting here could cause me serious problems. Bodyguards have got more lax in the last few years. They're not right on me like they used to be, but I don't want them to think I'm spilling out of school."

"But you are."

"Suppose I am. Thank God they don't like sushi, which is why I eat here. They're the greasy hamburger types. They think class is what they attended in school. If they went."

"Are you offering this information to me? Sounds like it."

"I'm looking to get out of this trap, but I'm not giving anything to anyone with those hit fucks out there."

"The Cancelers?"

"Who else? Yeah. Them. Listen to me. What I'm thinking is you want what I want."

"Not exactly," I said.

"Yeah, but you want it close enough it works for both of us. What you want is to take their bad asses down. The real ones. The ones that really own the business. Sandy, too, and the ones they hire for the big kill jobs. Start with the teeth, the Cancelers, and you get rid of a whole lot of their bite."

"They'll just buy implants, new killers."

"Not if you go after the teeth, then get them while they're nothing but gums.

"Let me tell you something, Hap. I heard through the grapevine about the biker screws you messed with. I heard that from someone who's part of that club, one of the few spies I got left out there. He's damn near worthless to me, really, but now and again I get some news because he wants some money. He said three guys came down on the whole fucking club and shot the shit out of them and ran over some of them with a car. He said two of those guys were you and this Leonard Pine."

"That sounds about right," I said.

"Who's the third guy?"

"You don't need to know."

"They said Frank was there and you came and got her from them."

"Right again."

"You trust her?"

"No."

"Good."

"But she gave us a bit of information. Some of it would groove nicely with what you're telling me. Some of it. I think Frank might have a way of dressing up things so that it's all in her color. Know what I mean?"

"Frank is an opportunist. She didn't mind I got skunked and Sandy took over and that the Houston people took Sandy over. Long as she has a job and the money comes in, she's hunky-dory with it. Don't start thinking she's got a conscience."

"No need to worry," I said.

"And Sandy, that bitch, she doesn't get her clock cleaned, another five years and she'll be running the Houston group, you mind my words."

I thought: damn, if he's telling it true, I've found Sandy, but Lilly Buckner will not have the cockles of her old and somewhat creaky heart warmed by my discovery. The thought of that made me feel deeply disappointed, as if I had somehow expected something different from the human race.

"Thinking about what you did to those bikers, and you coming here to talk to me, bold as the pope in his underpants, it's got me thinking you might can find a way out for me."

"Does it?" I said.

"It does."

Doug leaned out of the booth and looked outside. I looked, too. His so-called bodyguard was in the front seat of the car with his head thrown back and his eyes closed.

"See?" he said. "Something happens to me, no one's crying. But if you were to get rid of those hitters, then I'm not scared of who else they might bring. But you see, the cops, they can't protect me from those Canceler motherfuckers, because cops and feds, they're all entwined. Some of those Cancelers might just walk into the police station and shoot hell out of everyone while the cops are busy trying to open a box of fucking doughnuts. But if the Cancelers are gone, I would start to believe I can be protected long enough to squeal like a dying rat. I got stuff the feds would want. More and better than what they're getting now. I got about twenty years' worth of material, a lot of it on the Houston guys, the ones who have their peckers in most of the serious moneymaking crime in Texas, might be something the feds would trade for. I used to deal with the Houston assholes all the time, but they didn't own me until Sandy came along, the crafty cunt."

"So what you're saying to me is I should see that the Cancelers are canceled, and then you'll come forward and pin the tail on the donkey?"

"That's the size of it."

"How do I know if I get rid of them you won't just go back to doing what you were doing before? Laying low and having sushi for lunch?"

"Because I want a nice witness relocation by the sea somewhere. Hell, I'd settle for the high desert, fucking mountains. I just want to start over and live the rest of my days reading books and pumping some good-looking widow with grown or dead children. Preferably the latter. Saves money at Christmas."

“If I were to think this was a good deal, where would I find these Cancelers? How spread out are they? Where would I locate Sandy?”

“Sandy works out of Houston. She goes by the name Florence Gale. There’s some humor in that name somewhere. People she works for, the Houston crowd, they’ve done her up right. Got her named changed, given her a nice clean business front that hides the dirt under her fingernails.”

He reached out and touched my hand. I wasn’t expecting that.

“Do this for me, get rid of these Cancelers, then I’ll help you, and that will pull Sandy into the light. I’ll take my chances with the feds.”

I eased my hand away from his, leaned back in the booth, fastened my eyes on him.

“Let me explain something to you, Barbecue King. We do this, and then you welch, you won’t be doing any better than before, cause we’ll have to come see you. Understand?”

“You’re able to take out the Cancelers, then I figure you can take out me. I haven’t any reason to play you.”

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They are believed to be of one family, and their father was a man named George Greely," Doug said.

George Greely. It came back to me. He had been in the news some years back and is now part of criminal history as well as criminal legend, but not for being a mastermind—simply for personifying evil in human form.

George Greely had been in the military, and according to all the psychoanalysis by people who knew something, or people who knew nothing but thought they did, all the editorials and comments and news reports, Greely was the kind of guy that should clear your head from thinking everyone in uniform, or that's worn a uniform, is a hero. The military suited him because it gave him structure. Something he hadn't had early in life, as his father died when he was two and his mother left him to a couple who in turn gave him up to a orphanage. He became a bully, taking out all his anger for being abandoned on anyone smaller than him. He was a giant of a man, tall, with a barrel chest, dead-white skin, shark eyes, and a thick gray beard. I remembered seeing his photo in the newspapers.

When he left the military he lost his structure and tried to re-create it for himself with rigid rules about what he ate, when he ate, how he slept, and so on. He'd sleep on the floor with the window open in winter with nothing but a thin blanket over him. He read the Spartans did that, and it made them tough, and that's what he wanted to be, a kind of Spartan.

He married a woman he could control. Told her what to wear and how to talk and who to talk to, kept her from using makeup and perfume, even body deodorant. Showers were once a week and don't waste water and to hell with soap.

Greely finally decided she didn't need to talk to anyone but him, period. He isolated her on a farm outside of Crockett, Texas, away from everyone, and there over the next thirty years he built a junkyard and scrap metal business. He and that poor woman had a passel of kids. Greely had kids not only by his wife, but in time, by one of his own daughters. Pretty soon this compound he made of mobile homes linked together was surrounded by a concrete-block fence ten feet high with barbed wire at the top. His land was a hundred acres bought when land was cheap, and five acres of that was Greely compound central.

Later, when they came to take away the bodies, they determined from survivors, cause there were a lot of children there, that the daughter Greely had a child by had managed to move out of the compound by not coming home from school, and in time, a year or so later, word drifted down to him that on the outside she found a boyfriend. Greely felt like a jilted lover and coaxed her and her boyfriend to the compound with promises of money and a slice of the land.

They showed up, he murdered them, and killed two of his older children just for sport while the others scattered like quail. He put their bodies in a pit that was beneath an outdoor privy. He then drove into Crockett with a plan to kill anyone he saw. His first pick was a police officer. Greely's gun misfired, and after a ferocious fight, in which the police officer was assisted by citizens, Greely was arrested and taken away.

Greely told his story in a matter-of-fact way, and the papers were full of it for weeks. He mainly talked about guns and large knives and how he loved them, how he knew things that others didn't, had some direct insight with God. He said God told him to do what he did, and no matter what man's law was, he was right with God. God was testing his faith, same as Abraham and Job.

Bottom line was, some few years later the state of Texas gave him a hot shot. But the family, mostly boys, a few girls, survived. When the news lost interest in them, they slipped into obscurity. According to Doug, the Greely survivors had not learned a damn thing and had taken up their father's habits of incest and fanatic gun and sharp-weapon love. Children were born between daughters and brothers, and they were raised in Greely's unique way, out there among the junk in the compound; it was a family tradition.

In time most of the folks in the compound drifted away, a few died there. That left seven or eight boys. The number varied, depending on who was telling the story. No one knew much about them after that. The Barbecue King knew more than most, because he knew about the Cancelers, and he knew some of the people who hired them. They were all Greely men from early thirties on up. They had found their niche. In time they became the go-to boys for the Houston crew, the Dixie Mafia.

They were perfect. They killed as much for love as money, and they were isolated out there on their land, inside their compound. No one knew what they did or how they lived, because no one was allowed out there, and there was very little contact between the general population and the Greely clan.

“You know something about Greely,” Doug said, “then you know the Cancelers. They aren’t a bunch of fucking masterminds. It’s not like you could get them in a room and they could explain to you why they do it, other than for money. I would do it for money, situation was right, and I could see it as business, but not pleasure. They enjoy it. They have a need to do it. They are stone-cold killers, plain and simple. I’ve heard a rumor they’re all mute, but that could just be a story that gets told because there’s so little known about them and nothing known that came directly from them. I also know that the ones out there are the last of it. I guess they ran out of sisters to fuck. You won’t find a damn thing about them anywhere, because except when they’re on a job, they’re to themselves. You aren’t going to find some profile, or a list of crimes, because they’ve never been caught. Not because they’re so smart but simply because they know one thing. Isolate the prey and kill it, take the nut sack, leave. Here’s the good news, though. I do know this because I do get a whiff of what’s going on through my former company now and then—someone will drop something and I’ll hear it, pick it up, and tuck it away. I’m not a hundred percent isolated. Ones out there, those boys, they’re the last of it. When they’re gone the Cancelers have bought their last pairs of underwear. If they wear them.”

“You’re sure these guys are it?”

“One of the few things about them I’m sure of. As much as you can be sure of anything. I can’t be certain exactly how many of them there are, but I think what I’ve told you is more than reasonably accurate.”

“All right, then. Can you tell me where they are?”

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With directions from my new pal Doug, me and Leonard drove out beyond Crockett, named after frontiersman Davy Crockett, who stopped there on his way to the Alamo and his date with destiny. We drove through Crockett into the boonies, where the woods grew wild. The hundred acres the Greelys owned were thick with woods, and there was one narrow dirt road that led into it. It was dark down that road, even in dead-solid daylight. Tree limbs came together from either side and knotted up with branches and leaves and made a kind of canopy over us. There was brush growing on the sides of the road, and there were long stems sticking out of the brush, waving in the gentle wind like great insect antennae.

I said, “This looks like the road to the witch’s house that Hansel and Gretel found.”

“What if it’s just a bunch of inbred motherfuckers he’s sent us out here to see? Shit stains on the ass of humanity, but maybe not killers at all.”

“Occurred to me,” I said.

“We get the gang together, come out here and kill them all, and they got nothing to do with any of this business. That would suck.”

“It would,” I said, “though I think Booger would be happy either way.”

We drove down a ways and found a gap where the local assholes tossed their trash instead of taking it to the dump. There was all kinds of rotting garbage there, including a dead white cat with its feet sticking out of a dilapidated plastic trash can crammed with all manner of stuff. Next to the trash can was a couch with springs poking through it, coiled and bobbing in the wind. There was a thin, well-worn path next to the road not too far from the trash heap, and that was the path we wanted.

I said, “Wait a minute, brother. Stop the car.”

Leonard stopped near the garbage heap. I got a shovel out of the back of the car and dug a hole by the trash can. I levered the cat out of the can with the shovel, dumped it into the hole, and covered it up.

"All done, Saint Francis?" Leonard said. He was still in the car with the window rolled down.

"All done," I said and put the shovel away.

It was midafternoon, but as I said, it seemed later due to all the tree shadows and ink-dark clouds clustering together in the heavens and showing through the gaps in the trees, threatening rain. Leonard pulled the car up farther into the gap with the trash, pulled around behind a tree. It didn't totally hide the car, but it was only noticeable if you were looking in exactly the right place.

We got our handguns, and Leonard got a pair of binoculars that were on a strap from the trunk of the car. He slipped the strap over his head and put a penlight in his pocket.

We walked back to the long road that led to the witch's house and started down it. There were NO TRESPASSING signs as well as others that said TRAVEL AT YOUR OWN RISK and one that showed a gun pointed at us and the words: WE DON'T CALL 911.

We walked a long way. Finally the trees opened up and there was cleared land. Wild grass grew on it in spurts of green and yellow as well as twisted dead, gray grass. We walked along, and then Leonard said, "Hold it. Look there."

The wind had done us a favor. It had lifted a patch of the dead grass enough that Leonard had spotted the outline of an opening in the ground. We moved over there cautiously. The dead grass had been dug out in lumps and stacked on top of a piece of thin ply board. Leonard got out his penlight and shined it into the crack. There really wasn't anything to see. Leonard found another place to duck down and poke the light. Finally he laid down on the ground and lifted the ply board slightly and poked the light in.

"There's a pit under that ply board," he said. "It's wide, and it's very deep. They must have used a backhoe to make it. I could see a bit of water shining at the bottom. My guess is that ply board is just strong enough to hold the wads of grass, but had we walked across it, it would have folded. There's a smell in the pit, like old shit. There are stakes down there, and the shit looks to be smeared on them. It was one of the Cong's favorite tricks in Nam. You not only got the spikes, but if you survived, you got a tremendous infection that worked in the long term as well as a bullet. Old Man Greely spent time in the military, maybe Nam. He could have passed that on to his family, such as they were. It's a fucking booby trap, and I'm going to guess there are others."

“They may not use the road much,” I said, “but they use it, so they have some way around this stretch of land.”

“Exactly what I was thinking.”

We went back up the path a ways, stood and looked. It emptied right into that field, and beyond the booby trap was a thick swath of trees. The path split through them and turned slightly left. There was nothing visible of it beyond that.

“Look there,” Leonard said.

He was pointing to a spot to the right of the road. There were no trees there, just tall brush, and the brush was dead like the grass on top of the ply board, touched with dust from the road in a way that made it look as if it had been sprinkled with nutmeg. We walked over and peeled back the brush and took a look. On the other side of it was a narrow road, more of a trail, really. It wound down between the brush and trees.

“They have their own secret road,” Leonard said.

We got hold of the brush and found it was all wired together and on a wooden swivel. We pulled at it, and it slid back like a door.

“Let’s do a bit of recon,” Leonard said. “But watch for booby traps.”

We found one right away. There was a wire across the trail. I walked to one end of it, Leonard to the other. There was a little wooden box on both sides. Leonard said, “My guess is someone trips this wire, the box opens, and something shoots out, backed by an explosive. It could be glass, nails—hell, anything.”

“I’m starting to get nervous,” I said.

We stepped over the wire and went along. No more traps were discovered. In time the trail wound around a large patch of trees, and then there was another clearing, and in the center of that clearing, about an acre away, was a great wall of concrete blocks, just as the newspapers and the Barbecue King had described it. A huge Dixie flag snapped in the wind above it on a tall pole made from a skinned tree.

We squatted down at the edge of the trees and studied the place.

“See those cameras?” Leonard said.

I looked and saw. They were positioned in several places along the wall.

“Think they can see us?” I said.

Leonard lifted the binoculars and studied the wall.

“They look to be pointing down. I think we got within twenty feet of the wall they’d pick us up. I can see lights mounted near them, probably those automatic things that come on when they sense movement.”

“This seems to be more complex than I expected.”

“They may be white trash—inbred, fun-for-the-dollar killers,” Leonard said, “but that doesn’t mean they’re stupid. Inbreeding doesn’t always result in people with quarter-sized moles on their faces and a hole where their noses ought to be. It doesn’t do much for emotional development, though, and it confuses folks at family reunions.”

“What’s our plan now, bwana?”

“We play Jungle Jim. You see how the woods narrows when you look to the right side of the compound fence? We ought to go that way, be in the tree line. Might be the best bet for taking a closer peek at the place.”

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The woods was full of heat-wilted greenery, crosshatched limbs, and briars, and it was dark and deep and painful to make our way through. I was stabbed and poked, ripped and torn, and I could feel ticks and chiggers crawling on me, racing over my flesh on a mission to create a warm nest of my pubic hair.

We came to a rise in the forest where the trees draped over a hill and thinned enough you could stand in a clearing and look at the compound. The narrow trail had some deeper grooves there from vehicles going down and climbing up the hill. The concrete-block wall did not go all the way around. There was a medieval-looking gate in the side that was wide enough to let a tank through.

The concrete wall, except for where the gate was, was in the front and on both sides, but at the back there were tangles of barb wire fence fastened to metal poles. In front of the metal poles was a wide ditch, and there was mucky water in the ditch and no telling what else. The ditch ran along the back side and draped in at the corners toward where the barb wire fence met the concrete blocks.

Inside the compound we could see cars and trucks and all manner of equipment, most of it rusted and weather-pocked. There was a Ferris wheel and sections of tracks and fragments of old rides strewn all about like dinosaur bones. The sunlight sticking through the trees coated those "bones" with a blood-red sheen.

In the center of the compound, drawn in a circle, like covered wagons defending themselves against Indian attack, were a series of mobile homes, and near them was a large wooden shed. There were ten homes, and they were all connected by slapdash ply board walls, and in some cases only by porches, from one to the other. There were outhouses out back and around the circle of homes. There was an old-fashioned satellite dish weathered to the color of dirt. There were no trees in the compound, no grass, and no sign of life.

I turned around and looked behind me. More trees, but at the top of the hill and slightly to the back of it was a weather-peeled deer stand. It was set back in some trees. From there you could look down on the compound.

"We have to decide: is it over the wall or through the wire?" Leonard said.

"Wire and that ditch are a lot of trouble."

"Over the wall?"

"Ten feet is ten feet, and then there are the cameras and the motion-sensor lights."

"Thing to do, I guess, is go back and tell our bunch what we've found and put some plan in action."

"I don't see a car or truck out there that looks like it could run," Leonard said. "That may mean no one is home."

"You wanting to investigate?"

"Best to come back at night," Leonard said.

"And if there are traps out there?"

"Someone will be really surprised."

"We should send Booger across."

"I was thinking that," Leonard said.

* * *

We worked our way back to the gate of dried brush and closed it and tried to make it look the way we had found it. After walking out, we got in my car and drove back to the safe house, but we stopped and ordered hamburgers and french fries first. By the time we got back the day had mostly run its course. The safe house was dark. Jim Bob's truck was out front, and Jim Bob and Booger were on the front porch, sitting on the stoop. I wondered if there had been a moment of bonding. I dismissed that when I got up close and saw that neither was talking. Jim Bob looked unpleasant, and Booger looked bored.

"So, nice fun day?" I asked.

"Well," Jim Bob said, "it's been a day."

"You two boys been playing pretty?"

"Shit, yeah," Jim Bob said. "Me and him, we're fucking."

That made even Booger smile.

"Then there have been no harsh words, slap fights, or water spitting?" Leonard asked.

"So far so good," Jim Bob said.

"We made some hot chocolate," Booger said. He seemed very happy and sincere about that event.

“We did,” Jim Bob said. “I brought a few things in my rucksack. What you guys got there?”

“Hamburgers. A few extra if anyone feels really hungry.”

“I could lick shit off the sidewalk if there was undigested food in it,” Jim Bob said.

“This will be better,” I said, and we all went inside.

At the table, in the dark, we ate our meal without turning on the lights. Leonard told them all that we had found and what we feared about more booby traps beyond the ones we knew about. He explained that it would take some work to get inside.

“We just have to prepare for the mission,” Booger said. “Go prepared, go in quick, and then get out.”

“We didn’t see anyone,” I said. “No movement. No signs of life. Not a working car there. Electricity is probably from a generator or generators. No wires were visible outside the compound. Us not seeing them could mean they’re out on their various missions. Or on a singular mission together. Or they’re just real quiet. What I fear is that Dougie may have given me a line of manure, and they may just be a bunch of crazy fucks who like to be alone so they can diddle each other in the ass.”

“No,” said a voice from the dark of the living room. “It’s not like that at all.”

We all nearly turned the table over when we leaped up, grabbing at our weapons. A light was turned on by the armchair near the living room window. In the chair sat a fine-looking woman with long blond hair and a silver dress that fit tight and rode high on her thighs, rode low at her chest, revealing the tops of two creamy white mounds, as they used to say in the sex books. Her long, pale legs were crossed, and one very uncomfortable-looking white shoe with a heel designed by Masochist Incorporated dangled off the end of the toes of her crossed leg.

“Oh, they might be diddling each other in the ass,” she said. “But they aren’t just a bunch of crazy fucks, though they are crazy.”

She smiled. “Hi, Hap.”

“Vanilla Ride,” I said.

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I have arrived," she said.

Her message in the greeting cards had worked, and she proved she could still move like a ghost. I wondered how long she had been inside the house, in the dark. I tried to remember if I had even looked in that direction.

Booger stepped forward, ahead of us, eased into the living room and closer to Vanilla.

"Who are you?"

"I'm the cavalry," she said.

"You?" Booger said.

"Me," she said.

Jim Bob laughed. "I know you."

"Yes, you do," Vanilla said. "Not well, I might add."

"We can remedy that," Jim Bob said.

"It's so sweet of you to think so," she said.

"You look like a wispy piece of ass, you ask me," Booger said.

"No one did," she said.

Booger was still holding the gun he had drawn, and now he pointed it at her and walked over closer. "Shit, I could jerk you up from there, pop you like a whip. Pop you so hard your snatch will snap off and smack the wall."

"So," Vanilla said. "How was charm school?"

Booger put the gun in its holster. Vanilla flicked her foot. The shoe popped off and snapped Booger between the eyes. He yelled, lunged forward, ready to grab Vanilla. She was on her feet then, one foot lower than the other due to the height of the one shoe she was wearing. She reached out and took hold of the hand he was reaching with by one finger, quickly, and made a slight movement, pulling her little finger in just below the joint that connected Booger's finger to his hand.

He hit the floor on his knees hard enough to jar John Wayne's hairpiece, and Wayne had been dead and in his grave for years.

Vanilla manipulated the finger until Booger, who was trying to reach for his gun with the other hand, was stretched out on his belly. He made a mewing sound that was music to my ears.

Vanilla said, “Up, up, up.”

She turned his hand over, palm to the ceiling, and that made him come to his knees. She turned slightly, putting his hand against her chest next to her throat, and pressed his finger. He came to his feet with a grunt, tried to dance around her in a circle. She went under his arm, still holding his finger, and with a twist of her wrist sent him hurtling over the couch. He hit hard on the other side of it.

When he rose up from behind it he had his gun in his hand. Vanilla had one, too. I had no idea where it came from. It was very small and shiny, and the barrel was pressed up against Booger’s forehead. She said, “I think I snapped you hard enough your dick came off, don’t you?”

“You bitch,” he said.

“Now you know my middle name. Drop your gun on the couch, or I’m going to give you a small, bullet-size ventilator shaft.”

Booger dropped the gun, and Vanilla reached out and snatched it up with her other hand. Slowly she pulled the gun back from his forehead, slipped it into the gap of the dress at her bosom. She tossed his gun into the chair where she had been sitting.

Smiling at me, ignoring Booger, she said, “Hap, honey, you have any more hamburgers left in there?”

I nodded.

“I don’t normally eat that stuff, but right now I’m hungry. It was a long flight and a long drive, and then I had to sit in the dark all by myself while you boys discussed things.”

“How long have you been here?” Leonard asked.

“Long enough. If this is your idea of security, I can tell you now, you boys are screwed, considering who you’re up against. They aren’t smart in the normal way, but they are stealthy and determined.”

“Never had anyone sneak up on me before,” Booger said, massaging his finger.

“Now you have,” Vanilla said. “And leave the gun in the chair for now, or I’ll shoot you before you can pick it up.”

Booger didn’t move.

“You know who these killers are?” I asked.

“I do.”

“How could you possibly know what we’re up against?”

“I have quite the network, Hap.”

“Baby,” Jim Bob said, “you are my goddamn dream girl.”

Vanilla gave Jim Bob one of her wide, wicked smiles.

“Girl? Girls play with dolls. I’m a woman. I play with men. I can even get them to dress up funny.”

“Better yet,” Jim Bob said.

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Booger was out from behind the couch now, but he was moving slow. He was glaring at Vanilla. She didn't seem to care. I knew better, though. She was aware of his every move.

"You can have your gun now," she said to Booger.

He picked it up and eased it back into its place.

"When did you get in?" I said.

"A bit ago. Bad flight and bad food, and then a drive from the airport in Houston. I came by Harley-Davidson."

"We didn't hear you come up," I said.

"I know that. I hope you boys are going to perk up, otherwise the Canceler—and he is a group, which, from listening to you talk, I see you've figured out—is going to have your itty-bitty testicles for lunch."

"How long were you sitting there?" Leonard asked. "Answer straight."

"I was here before you guys came home. I was here while Jim Bob and Sore Finger were here farting about on the front porch."

"In that chair?" Jim Bob said.

"No. In the back, and later in the chair, when it started to get dark."

"Goddamn," Jim Bob said. "No one, but no one, sneaks up on me like that."

"That's what he said," Vanilla said, nodding toward Booger.

"You are one lovely, mysterious woman," Jim Bob said.

"Tell me something I don't know," Vanilla said.

"Come," I said. "Sit down at the table. You can have Booger's chair."

We all sat down at the table again, except for Booger. He came and sat on the kitchen counter with his legs hanging down. It was the first time I had ever seen him look less than confident, and maybe it was the first time he had ever felt less than confident.

"Me and the Cancelers are in the same business," Vanilla said. "Or were. I'm what you might call semiretired. We didn't run in the same circles, exactly, but our circles crossed now and then. Gets right down to it, they're nothing but backwoods rednecks who like to kill."

“You’ve done some pretty brutal things yourself,” Leonard said.

“For money. But I’m what you might called reformed. I have a new way of looking at things. Now I only kill those who need killing, or I do a few favors for friends.”

Vanilla reached out and patted my hand. God, I loved Brett, but when Vanilla did that an electricity went through me that made my pants strain at the crotch.

“How good a friends are you two?” Jim Bob said.

“Not as good as I’d like,” she said.

“I don’t get it,” Jim Bob said. “Booger you just made piss himself—”

“She did not,” Booger said.

“Leonard is queer, and Hap looks like he’s been through the mill, and here I sit, a handsome piece of meat wearing manly footwear and a cowboy crown, and you’re patting his hand.”

Vanilla grinned at him.

“I don’t understand it, either, but Hap here stirs me.”

I felt myself blush.

“And I thought I’d seen every strange thing there was to see,” Jim Bob said. “And I once saw a fellow eat a dog turd for a dollar.”

“Goddamn heterosexuals,” Leonard said. “What you guys see sexually in women confuses me.”

“It should,” I said. “But just for the record, me and Vanilla are only friends.”

“Unfortunately,” Vanilla said.

“I agree with the fag,” Booger said. “You guys are making me sick.”

“Enough bullshit,” I said. “Vanilla, you know anything about this bunch that could be helpful?”

“Basically the best thing to do is kill them all.”

“I’m liking you a little better now,” Booger said.

“How nice,” Vanilla said.

“I prefer we turn them in,” I said.

“Please, brother, please,” Leonard said. “That stuff where a guy goes into a psycho’s den and shoots the gun out of his hand and asks him to give himself up—and the guy does—is for old *Lone Ranger* episodes.”

“I like *The Lone Ranger,*” Jim Bob said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Me, too.”

“But,” Jim Bob said, “I have to agree with Leonard.”

“We saw their nest,” Leonard said. “It’s a bitch to navigate.”

Me and Leonard went on to explain in more detail about it. I drew a map on a burger wrapper, drew a kind of design of the compound as we knew it. “As for what’s inside, we have no idea.”

“Seems to me,” Jim Bob said, “the weak spot is that hill you guys said you stood on. You can see right down into the place.”

“We were thinking the same,” I said. “That would be the spot for a lookout.”

“But you don’t know that anyone’s home,” Booger said.

“We didn’t see cars that looked like they would drive,” I said. “So we figure they were out. Hell, for all we know they’re killing folks in Maine right now, packing up testicles to mail home, and won’t be back for a while. They might decide to take a holiday. It could all be futile, but it’s the only plan we got.”

“There was a big building in the middle of the compound,” Leonard said. “Storage shed, maybe, or that could be where they keep their vehicle or vehicles. They may be home and are tucked up in one of those trailers playing cards or stringing their collected testicles on strings for Christmas ornaments for all we know.”

“Hap ought to be posted on the hill,” Leonard said. “He can shoot well. He’d be best with a simple twenty-two rifle. It would do fine from that range, way he shoots. He could kill them with that, and there wouldn’t be a lot of noise. It might make it harder for them to figure where the shot is coming from.”

“It might take a bit more firepower than that,” I said.

“I can do it,” Vanilla said. “I have my own gear, including a sniper rifle. Depending on how far away the hill is, Leonard’s right. A twenty-two might be the thing. These days everyone thinks they need a rocket launcher, but it’s loud and messy and may take out more than you want to take out.”

“I bet that gear of yours was rough to bring in your carry-on,” Jim Bob said.

“I don’t carry it with me. I have suppliers in a lot of places, and I have the money to buy it. I’ll pick it up later.”

“You are so cute when you talk about guns and murder,” Jim Bob said.

“I say we lay out the plan, get anything else we might need, and tomorrow night go out there and see if they’re home,” I said. “If they’re not, we might have to regroup at a later date.”

“This is the full run for me,” Booger said. “I just want to have fun and go home. I don’t know I could stand you people again.”

“I don’t know we’d invite you again,” I said. “And if your ass feels chapped, you can leave at any time. Vanilla promises not to twist your finger and make you cry."

Booger frowned.

"All right, I'm in, now or later," he said. "Let's just do this thing."

49

We bought some supplies the next day and then rested as much as possible at the safe house, except for Vanilla, who brought out the Harley she had hidden in the barn across the way. She told us she needed to make some preparations, that she'd be back in plenty of time. She put on purple leathers and a helmet and rode into town.

When she was gone, Jim Bob looked down the road she had taken, said to Booger, "That little wisp of a girl sure made you eat shit, didn't she, big'n?"

"She surprised me," Booger said.

"That's what she does," I said. "Surprises folks. Sometimes she surprises them to death."

"I respect that," Booger said. "I made a mistake. I underestimated."

"Being underestimated physically is her greatest strength," I said. "That and the fact she's quick and smart and knows some tricks and carries a gun and can shoot the eye out of a gnat in the dark."

"And she's got that long blond hair, those sleek legs, and a face like a goddamn rodeo angel," Jim Bob said.

"You really are smitten," I said.

"One time with her would bring me closer to God," Jim Bob said. "I might even start believing."

Me and Leonard grabbed a couple Dr Peppers, went outside, leaving Jim Bob and Booger in the house. We walked across the street toward the old barn, slipped through the barb wire fence, and kept walking. We hadn't discussed doing this, we just all of a sudden did it, somehow knowing it was something we both wanted to do.

We opened the Dr Peppers and walked out to the barn, went behind it, and leaned against the old log wall and looked at the sky. It was late day, and the sun was beginning its slide to the west, like a fried egg on a tilted Teflon skillet.

"We'll be all right," Leonard said.

"Sure," I said. "We always are."

"I guess we'll be all right until we aren't."

"There you go."

"Think we can trust Booger?"

"I don't like him," I said. "But yeah. I think we can. Cason says he's reliable, and I think he wants to kill someone so bad he'll do the job. I only fear he'll want to do it too well."

"You still thinking you're going to bring some of the bad guys in and that the cops are going to go, 'Oh, sure, you went out there alone and brought them in without telling us, and we have to trust what you told us is true. We like that. Thanks, boys. You can go home now. Here's a lollipop.' "

"I just don't like the idea of shooting them down in cold blood."

"You knew it was leading to this."

"I know. But I don't have to like it."

"I don't like it, but it is what it is, and I do believe there are just some folks that need killing. You and I, this isn't our first county fair, now, is it?"

"I know."

"If I was making a list, brother, these motherfuckers would be right at the top, just under some that are already dead, like Hitler and Jack the Ripper and some that ought to be, like the Pillsbury Doughboy."

"You know I hate that doughy bastard, don't you?"

"You always say you want to take a rolling pin to him."

"I'd make cookies out of that cocksucker," I said.

"And then eat them."

"You got that."

"Vanilla, the extract, not the woman, would be added for me."

"You know it."

"We could dip the cookies in coffee."

"You know we would."

Puffy clouds were blowing across the sky like marshmallows floating in water. We watched them. I didn't say it, but I knew Leonard was probably thinking the same. What if this was the last time we ever paused long enough to study those clouds? It was an odd thought, really, because if we died we weren't going to miss them. I didn't believe in life after death, only in life, and I wasn't sure how good I had managed mine, but I liked it enough I wanted to hang on to it.

We sipped our drinks. It was really hot out there, but the heat felt good. I liked it on my face.

"In case anything happens," Leonard said, "I have a confession."

“All right.”

“One time I used your toothbrush.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“Goddamn, Leonard. Recently?”

“Yep. Last time I stayed overnight at your house. I wanted to clean the toilet, and it was handy.”

“Oh, go fuck yourself,” I said, and we both laughed. Right then anything could be thought funny. We leaned there for a long time and drank our sodas and watched the white clouds rolling over the high blue sky and were pleased to have a breeze come up. The hot sun felt good, but the breeze drying the sweat on our faces felt even better.

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Vanilla came back when the long blue shadows began to crawl and there was only a strain of daylight left. She was in a black Buick Grand National sedan, circa 1980s. It roared into the drive like a lion. We all went out and looked at it. I don't really know diddle about cars, but I knew it looked cool.

Vanilla was wearing black leather pants so tight you could see the outline of a quarter in her pocket, a black shirt, black leather jacket, and tall black boots. She got out and walked around and leaned on the Buick like she was about to have her picture taken at a car show.

"Where'd you get this?" Jim Bob asked.

"Don't ask," she said.

"Stolen cars will give us an unneeded headache."

"It's not stolen," she said. "But still, don't ask."

She opened the back door and took out two large black metal cases. I stepped over and took one from her. It was light. We took the cases in the house and placed them on the couch. Vanilla opened one of them. There was a series of black tubes and truncated rifle stocks inside, along with a scope and boxes of ammunition—.22 longs.

"I brought a very large van with me from Houston. Inside is the motorcycle and this stuff. I had the car arranged for here. Stored the van and bike in town at a storage unit. The car is a 1982 Buick Grand National. Last of the good muscle cars. I hope we won't need the speed, but if we do, we're ready. I'd prefer to just kill them, drive back slow, and have a small decaf later here at the house."

"It looks brand new," Booger said.

"Freshly repainted to match the original. It has a four-point-one liter turbocharged V-six, two hundred thirty-five horsepower. Go to sixty miles an hour in five seconds in spite of its size. Six seconds is common, but this one has had some serious modifications. It also has nice cup holders. Drinks gas like a fish drinks water. But the thing we really need is the stuff in this case."

“I don’t recognize these weapons,” Booger said.

“That’s because they are special made. Not from any gun company. Light. Durable. Heaviest stuff on this trip will be the shotguns you carry. I saw them in the closet.”

“You are quite the snoop,” Leonard said.

“I like to know my surroundings. This one”—she pulled out two pieces of black gun barrel and screwed them together—“shoots a twenty-two round. Technically they have a bit more firepower due to the design of the rifle. Screw these barrels into this”—she reached in and pulled out the body of the gun, and then the stock, which was black and shortened at the back—“and you load it and go. It has a light clip, holds twelve shots. There are spare clips under the foam padding. There’s a night-vision scope that fastens on it.”

“I know what a night-vision scope is,” Booger said.

“Good for you,” Vanilla said.

“What’s in the other case?” I asked.

“My underthings and changes of clothes.”

“Can we look at those?” Jim Bob said and gave her his charm-them-out-of-their-pants grin.

Vanilla said, “No.”

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The Grand National roared through the night, Vanilla at the wheel, me in the front seat. Behind me was Leonard and Booger and Jim Bob. It was a wide car, and there was plenty of room in the backseat, even if Booger took up a lot of it.

It was just after midnight, and we were tearing through the dark and out into the hinterlands, as I liked to think of it, where the evil bastards lived in their dark little mobile houses with their sharp little wires and their grim little thoughts. Right then, my thoughts were pretty damn grim. I thought of Brett, and I thought of Chance. I even thought of our rescued dog, Buffy. But I didn't let myself think too long.

We hummed along, and I showed Vanilla how to go. When we turned off onto the back road, Vanilla went slow. Hot summer road dust swirled in the headlights and settled on the windshield. We came to where I buried the cat, and Vanilla parked behind the tree and brush where me and Leonard had stopped before.

"Walk in from here," I said.

"Turn off your phones," Vanilla said. "Anyone gets a phone call while we're sneaking, I'll take him out. I'm not getting killed for stupid reasons. But you will."

We checked our phones. Everyone was dressed in black. Vanilla had changed the black leather pants for black leotards. They fit even tighter than the leather but were far more flexible. I know, it's sexist, but I notice that kind of thing, and just about every heterosexual male who walks the earth and isn't neutered or too old to know ducks from chickens, and some that don't, notice those sort of things. It's biology, and it's a bitch. In polite society what you say to an attractive woman who is dressed in a way that makes you understand the power of biology is, "You look nice."

Vanilla had Booger hand her the case from the floorboard of the backseat. She put her rifle together. I knew, too, from watching, she had that little gun of hers in one leather jacket pocket, and strapped on her in clear sight was another pistol, also an automatic and also made of plastic, light as a child's dreams.

We got out of the car and walked to the back and got some rolled-up thick blankets out of the car. That part had been Jim Bob's idea. It was a good idea, but I'll come to that. There was a coiled rope with a grappling hook. Booger took that and draped the coil over his shoulder. Me, Jim Bob, and Leonard grabbed the shotguns. All the shotguns had shoulder straps on them, so we slung them. The shotguns were fully loaded.

We all had extra shells. I had a cold-piece Smith & Wesson revolver with me and it was loaded and the belt it was holstered on had shells in the bullet loops, just like an old cowboy gun belt. Booger had only his bag and whatever it was he had in it.

We walked together, watching for headlights, but there weren't any. Finally we came to the path through the woods with its tight limbs and brush and went along that. Once a raccoon darted across the road in front of us and was nearly shot by all of us who were carrying shotguns. Vanilla didn't so much as quiver.

We stopped at the brush gate and looked around carefully with our penlights in case new booby traps had been placed there, but found none. We opened the gate and went through, and when we came to the wire across the path, Booger studied it with the light, went to one end and used his knife to pry the top of one of the wooden boxes. We stood there with our assholes clenched while he did this, but he knew what he was doing. He said, "The wire pulls a trigger, and it causes an explosion that launches whatever is packed in this plastic bag with gunpowder. Looks like glass and nails."

That was as I had figured.

"We can just step over it," Jim Bob said.

"Yeah, but we come back this way quick we might not want to worry about it."

"Fair enough," Jim Bob said.

Booger used his knife to gently cut the string that pulled the explosive into action. "You got to cut it smooth and without much pressure. This stuff, it goes off, it sprays like skunk stink but hurts more."

He went over and cut the cord on the other side. He tied off the cord to limbs on either side so it appeared to be rigged.

"Now, we come back through here hauling ass, forget about where this is in the heat of the moment, we don't have to worry."

"Good job," I said.

“I know,” Booger said.

We went on up the narrow trail, came to where it rode up on the hill then coiled down through a small patch of divided trees and on down to the compound. At night there were lights in the compound. They were on the wall and inside on large posts, and there was a small light coming from two of the trailers.

“Either someone’s home,” Leonard said, “or they just left a few lights on for giggles.”

“There’s the deer stand,” I said and pointed. “I can position myself there.”

“You’re a good shot,” Vanilla said, “but I have the rifle for it, and I’m used to how it works. I think that should be my job.”

I nodded. “Take it.”

“All right,” Vanilla said. “Good. Stand has a clear look down on the compound. I’ll use it as my crow’s nest. I feel like I need to come down and join you boys, I will. Otherwise, I’ll be shooting from there.”

“Well, don’t shoot us, baby girl,” Booger said.

“Baby girl shoots you, then you know I did it on purpose. I don’t miss a whole lot, not when the target is standing still and doesn’t know I’m out here, and a lot of time even if they do.”

“Holding you to it,” Booger said.

“First I need to take care of the motion lights,” she said.

Vanilla went to the deer stand and climbed up the little wooden ladder quiet and quick as a squirrel. A moment later I saw her rifle barrel poke out of a slot in the stand.

“Do you think me and her might hook up later?” Jim Bob said.

“I wouldn’t know,” I said. “Keep your mind on the business at hand.”

“I can be easily of two minds and know what I’m doing. Don’t you worry about that. Have I ever given you cause to worry?”

“No,” I said.

“Still,” Leonard said. “I worry a little.”

“Shit, Leonard. You can fold those worries into a little square and set fire to it when I’m on the job,” Jim Bob said. “You can rub my head for luck.”

“Still a little worried,” Leonard said.

Booger opened his bag, took out a sawed-off shotgun. There was a holster of sorts that he draped over his back and slipped the weapon into. He already had a Colt .45 automatic in his hip holster; it looked like a collector’s item, had pearl handles. He had a knife on his other hip, and I knew in his boot he had another. He had a pair of small wire cutters stuck in a little bag on his belt. He had a light that fastened to the top of his sawed-off. We all had that, though Booger's rig was special made; mine and Jim Bob's and Leonard's were rigged with duct tape.

Booger stood up and said, "No one leaves anyone behind. That's the military way."

"I'm not, nor have I ever been in the military," I said. "But I'm with you on that one."

I looked down at the compound and the lights around it. It wasn't that well lit, really. In fact, the center of it was dark and shadow-crowded. I thought of the compound Vanilla Ride and I had broken into once, but she had known the place, and it was more organized and easier to navigate. Down below was a pile of mobile homes and carnival junk and old cars and a lot of unidentifiable metal. It made me a lot more nervous than the other compound had.

There was a hissing sound, like an arrow in flight, and one of the lights went out, and the sound was followed by others just like it in rapid succession. The lights on the wall, and the motion lights that would come on if we came within range, were out of commission. Vanilla took them out quickly and efficiently, and she didn't miss once. It was dark on that side now, and it would stay that way.

I glanced toward the deer stand, raised a hand in acknowledgment, and then we slipped down the slope of the hill, using the road. We were about a hundred feet outside the wall when Booger said, "Hold it."

We stopped and waited. "Look out there," he said.

We looked. I didn't see anything.

"You see how the moonlight hits along that line of grass there?"

I looked and saw that there were spots of yellowed grass about ten feet apart, and the spots went on for a long ways.

"Grass is green between, but in those spots it's yellow," Booger said.

"Traps," Jim Bob said.

"Mines is going to be my guess," Booger said, "cause if you look carefully, real carefully, between each spot is a strand of wire. Can you see it?"

I saw it.

"Hit one of those and it'll pull two of the pins off, and when they explode, my guess is they're the sort that will go up and out."

"Sure they're mines?" Leonard asked.

"No," Booger said. "But sure enough."

"The wire is designed so you hit it and it tugs, it'll go. I've seen mines like it before, or similar, in war. All you got to do is not step on the cord. You cut it gently, don't tug it or push it, it'll release tension on the mines. You step on one it'll still knock your nuts up under your chin, but I'm going to slip up there and cut the cord and then we'll go through. If they're real clever, they'll have another line not far from it. That way you see one, the other one will be behind some grass, and you think you're home free, trip the second one up, and—"

"Balls under your chin," I said.

"You get the teddy bear," Booger said.

"Here's an idea," Leonard said. "Let's just go down the road."

"We could do that," Booger said. "It even seems smart, but I got a feeling that road isn't all it looks to be, either. I think you'll note there are holes in the gate, and if you look carefully, there are gun barrels poking out of the holes, and I'll assure you, they are not manned, they are gimmicked. One of them comes in, they most likely got it rigged so they hit a switch, a button, whatever in their automobile, and those guns are disarmed. Way they're set now—and again, this is me guessing, and you're welcome to walk up the road and check out my theory—but way I see it, that's how they're set. Got to be disarmed by some device that we don't have. So we take our chances with the mines. I'll do that part."

He moved then, and I started to come up behind him, but Jim Bob caught my shoulder, said, "Let him run it through. That way, we lose him, it's only one man down."

"And it's Booger," Leonard said.

"Yeah, he'll be missed all of five seconds, though we might be wearing parts of him."

"He blows up, the noise will give them a small clue we're out here," Leonard said.

"Yes, but Booger will be gone, and we'll live to fight another day."

"Good point," Leonard said.

Booger eased forward, took out his knife, and clipped a cord between two spots in the grass, then he eased forward, found another cord, and cut it.

"Damn," Jim Bob said. "He made it."

Booger stood up and waved us forward, showing us where to go between the mines he had disarmed.

We ran along then, and when we got down to the wall, Booger uncoiled the rope and tossed the grappling hook over. It caught in the wire at the top easily enough. Booger pulled on it, and the wire sagged but held. Booger took one of the rolls of blankets we had brought, tossed it over his shoulder, and started climbing up the rope. He went up it quick and silent as a hummingbird.

When he got to the top, he found a handhold without hanging his fingers up in the wire, tossed the blanket over the wire as a barrier between himself and the barbs, climbed up, hesitated momentarily at the top, then dropped to the other side without use of the rope.

Jim Bob went up next with his blanket and his shotgun dangling on the shoulder strap. He went up as quickly as Booger and put his blanket on top of Booger's to make it even safer and pressed the wire down even more, then he was over the wall and out of sight. I followed with my blanket and my strapped shotgun. When I dropped over Jim Bob and Booger had already moved on. Leonard dropped down beside me, and I heard him take a deep breath in anticipation of what was to come.

The big shed was right in front of me and Leonard. Jim Bob was moving to the left, through some cars, toward some high-rising carnival equipment and, beyond that, the ring of mobile homes. Booger was going at the homes from the other side, threading his way through rusted cars on blocks and time-crusted wheel rims.

Leonard and I darted toward the shed. I went on the right side, and he went on the left. Easing along, I came to a door, tested it gently to see if it was locked, and it wasn't. I took a deep breath and cracked it open and stuck the shotgun inside, flicked on the light at the top of the gun. There were a couple of large pickups inside, and there were shelves all around. I slipped all the way in and waited until I heard Leonard come around from the other side and across the front and over toward the door. He came to the door and in a soft voice said, "Don't shoot."

"You're good," I said, and he slipped inside.

It was a pretty big shed, and there were two wide doors pulled together at the front of it for the trucks. We looked around, and what we found made my blood grow cold. On all those shelves were a lot of fruit jars, and I mean a lot. I thought at first they held canned goods, but when I put the light on them I saw that what was floating in the liquid in the jars wasn't new potatoes or jelly. In each jar there were testicles, sometimes in the sack, so to speak, and sometimes free of it. The liquid was yellowish, and in some of the jars were thick streaks of blood. In one of the jars I saw something red and floating, like a bloody jellyfish. Up close I realized it was a red toupee. Red Mop. They had not only taken his balls but also his cheap-ass hair.

If I had any doubt that we had the wrong place and the wrong people, it was gone.

“There’s got to be well over a hundred of them,” Leonard said.

“Easily,” I said, and I could feel my skin crawling as if it were trying to tear off my bones and make for home.

We walked and looked around, me on one side, Leonard on the other, using the flashes on the tops of our weapons. There were a lot of old photos in cheap frames along the shelves. They were dust-coated and showed of a lot of people who looked alike. Family photos tucked among jars of balls. Nothing more homey and nostalgic than that. I leaned in and looked at them carefully, realized they were shots of the dead, men dressed in suits, women dressed in long white dresses, maybe the same suits and dresses for all of them. It reminded me of the old Victorian photographs of the deceased, where they dressed the recently departed up in Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes and photographed them. The Victorians didn’t think it was weird, and apparently neither did the ball snatchers.

Leonard joined me. “I think these are all family photos.”

“Yep. And all dead.”

“What?”

Leonard took the flash off his shotgun and looked closer.

“Goddamn, fuck a lame goat in the ass. You’re right. I have seen some shit, my friend, but in some ways this creeps me out more than the balls in the jars. All we need now is to come across an altar for animal sacrifice.”

“I think this is the ball-snatcher dynasty,” I said. “One dies, they have another to take over the work. I think it’s like Doug said, incest and continuation of the line. They get old enough, they move into the family business.”

“Could be more here than seven or eight,” Leonard said.

“Doug was pretty certain.”

“There you go. Doug, a fucking big-time criminal gave you the true dope, and why doubt his word?”

“Because us killing these folks is to his advantage. If he’s right, we are looking at the last of the line.”

“If he’s right.”

Leonard replaced his light on top of his shotgun.

“How do people end up like this?” I said.

“Choice.”

“Can’t all be choice. They had to have been treated like shit. They think this is normal.”

“Tell you what. We get through here, you get rested, you write a paper on it, and I'll read it while I'm scratching my balls. But since there's no one in here except these balls and some cheap photos, and since that paper ain't written, let's get down to business."

We slipped out the door and trotted smoothly toward the circle of homes.

Jim Bob and Booger were by this time both out of sight.

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Leonard and I spread apart. I went closer to the center of the homes, where there was a sizable gap between them. Leonard started in the direction Booger had taken. I hoped to hell Jim Bob and Booger didn't shoot us. I thought of Vanilla up there in the deer stand with her makeshift rifle, and that gave me some comfort.

I cruised past one of the outhouses, and the stink was strong. I thought, who in this modern age lives like this by choice? But a better question would have been, who cuts people's throats with wire and cuts off their balls with the wire and keeps them in mason jars in a goddamn shed with pickup trucks?

I hustled on until I could slip through the gap in the circle of homes. They had plenty of ways to keep you outside, but so far nothing I had seen that would alert them you were inside. To my right I saw Booger. He was pointing at the trailer where the light burned. I nodded and joined him. The trailer's front door was on the inside of the circle. There was a set of wooden stairs, sloppily built, that led up to a wooden porch with a short roof that extended out from the trailer and over it all.

I went up first. The stairs creaked, and when I stepped onto the porch it squeaked sharply. I took a deep breath and put my ear to the door. I could hear a TV going inside. I looked down at Booger.

He came up without so much as a creaking sound. A house cat would have made more noise. He leaned his weapon against the door, got a lock pick out of his pocket, and went at it. It wasn't much of a door, and it wasn't much of a lock. It came undone as easy as a whore's bra.

Booger put the lock-pick kit away, picked up his gun, and looked at me. I took hold of the door handle with my gloved hand and turned it and went inside. It was dark inside, and I had turned my flashlight off. I slipped in and stood on the left side of the door, then decided to squat down. Booger came in and took the right. There were only two ways to go in that trailer, left or right. I went left, Booger went right.

Drifting toward the sound of the television and the weak, yellow light, I came to the section of the trailer that served as a living room, slipped through an open space without a door and into the room. The back of the couch was facing me, and there was a man sitting on the couch. All I could see was the back of his head and broad shoulders. He had long, greasy, dark hair. The little light on the left side of the room near a window, and the flickering motion of the TV, made the whole scene surreal. Worse, he was watching an episode of some fucked-up reality show.

Slipping the rest of the way in, I pointed my shotgun at the back of his head. I hadn't gone more than a foot forward when I heard a shotgun cut loose in the yard. The man on the couch stood up suddenly and turned. He had a gun in his hand. That figured. Guys like this probably went around armed 24-7. But that's all he had. He was naked except for underwear, though at that point I couldn't see his feet. He might have been wearing high heels for all I knew. He saw me and let out his breath. It sounded like a snake hissing in high grass.

"Don't do it," I said. And he didn't. He tossed the gun on the couch.

Booger came in then. "Got you one, huh?"

"Who fired that shot?" I said.

"Let's hope Jim Bob."

"Who are you two?" the man behind the couch said.

"Motherfucker can at least count to two," Booger said.

"Ease around here where I can see all of you, much as I hate the idea," I said.

He did. He was skinny and white as snow, and from what I could tell in the lamplight, his hair could have been brown or black or purple. He wasn't wearing high heels. He was barefoot. On the walls were shelves, and on the shelves were jars. I knew without examining them what was in them. They had quite a collection. There were photographs as well as a faded framed invocation: GOD BLESS OUR HOME.

"How'd you get in here?" the man said. His accent was East Texas, but it seemed of some other era, not tampered with by time and association with others. The legend they might be mutes was squashed.

"Teleportation," I said. "Lean your ass into the couch. Booger, why don't you check on who fired that shot, just in case it wasn't Jim Bob?"

Booger went away, and I heard the front door open. Me and the man in the dirty underwear stared at each other until I glanced again at the rows of jars. I said, "You couldn't just buy a few knickknacks?"

The man said nothing. I stared at him, amazed at the banality of it all. This man was part of a tribe of infamous killers who traveled under a single name, and he was really nothing more than an average-looking man in stained underwear. A psychotic sitting around watching TV, scratching himself, drinking beer, and now and again taking a peek at his nut-sack collection. Nothing monsterlike in his appearance, nothing special about him in any way. He was merely a psychopath who liked reality shows, needed a shower, and a lethal injection.

I don't know how long we stood like that, but it seemed like a lot of time passed before Booger came back. He had Jim Bob with him. Jim Bob said, "Shot one coming out of the toilet. I went around to the trailers and looked and didn't see anything."

"You shot Derrick?" said the man.

"Did he look a lot like you, but had pants on?" Jim Bob said.

The man nodded.

"Don't expect him at breakfast," Jim Bob said.

"Leonard?" I asked.

"Didn't see him," he said, shaking his head. "I went and looked inside a couple of trailers, and no one was there. I came around on the side to look in the others, and here come a guy out of the outhouse carrying a roll of toilet paper in one hand and a pistol in the other. He saw me, and he didn't know if he should wipe his ass with the paper or the gun. He decided to shoot at me. With the gun, not the paper. I took him out, and not to lunch. Did you hear a twenty-two fire after my shot?"

"No," I said.

"Pretty sure Vanilla hit him in the back of the head about the same time I shot him. It was a pretty quiet shot. Damn. Look at all those jars full of nut sacks."

"I want to know where Leonard is," I said.

"Told you, don't know," Jim Bob said. "Hell, that's a lot of jars. Cut my nuts off they're going to need a lot of room, lot of jars, more likely a washtub and about ten gallons of rubbing alcohol to preserve them."

"What do we do with this one?" I said.

"You know the answer to that question," Jim Bob said.

"You ought to just go on and find someplace to hide, you know what's good for you," said the man. "You got some chance like that. Not much, but some. Better yet, you might want to get over the wall before my brothers find me."

"And when you and your brothers aren't fucking each other in the ass," Jim Bob said, "where might we find them?"

"Go fuck yourself with a dog's dick," the man said. "They'll be back soon enough, and you'll wish they wasn't."

Booger laughed and lifted his shotgun quickly and cut down on the man. It was messy.

“Goddamn, Booger,” I said.

“We didn’t come here to sort out their issues,” Booger said. “We came to rid them of them.”

“Jesus,” I said. “He gave up his gun. He wasn’t armed.”

“Sounds like a personal problem,” Booger said.

53

We went out through the door we had come in one at a time, quickly, Booger first, me, and then Jim Bob. We walked inside the circle of trailers. No one shot at us, and there was no sound of movement until Leonard came through the gap in the line of trailers I had come through.

“I heard shooting,” Leonard said. “Saw one out by the shitter who will shit no more.”

“Me and Vanilla nailed him,” Jim Bob said.

“One inside got caught with his pants off,” Booger said. “He won’t be around for the holidays.”

“Where are the others?” I said.

“Now, that’s a good question,” Leonard said. “I didn’t see anyone among the junk and cars. Been in all the trailers?”

“Just one,” I said.

“I was in a couple others,” Booger said.

“I checked some,” Jim Bob said.

We sorted out that only one trailer hadn’t been checked.

We didn’t bother with a lock pick this time. Jim Bob kicked the door down, and we went inside. It smelled like a buzzard’s breath. There was no one there, and there were no balls in jars. It looked more like it was used as their crash pad. Mattresses were thrown about on the floor, and there were sheets and blankets twisted about on those. There were a number of automatic weapons leaning against the wall and on hooks. Their bedroom was also their armory.

In the corner there was a yellow curtain supported on metal poles and stanchions. We walked over and looked behind the curtain. There was a window that looked out over the compound. There were no curtains on it. There was a small wooden table with a couple of thick books on it. The moonlight and the compound light came through the window. There was a hospital bed. It had an electronic device, a little plastic bar with buttons on it, for raising the bed up and lowering it. There were metal stands with metal racks around the bed. There were empty glass containers hanging from the racks, tubes dangled loose from those, like snakes that had died of boredom. The ends of the tubes were fixed with rusted needles. The bed itself was yellowed by time and stank of human waste long left and long rotted. The pillow on the bed had a head on it, and the head had some dark hair on it, though most of it had come loose and lay on the pillow. Attached to the head was a body. It wasn't exactly mummified, but it wasn't completely gone, either. It was simultaneously in mid-rot and mid-mummification. I wasn't sure which was going to win out. Obviously, it was the source of the smell. The light through the window caused it to appear to be coated in a thin film of cheese. The eyes had a strip of duct tape over them. There was a thin once-white gown on her, and it had become one with the rotting flesh.

"Okay," Jim Bob said. "We killed two, and the rest of them ain't here, unless you want to count this guy. Woman. Whatever. Jesus."

"They torturing somebody?" Booger asked.

Jim Bob picked up one of the books on the table, flipped it open.

"I think they were doctoring somebody," Jim Bob said. "A relative. Doing it themselves. This is a medical book."

"I'm going to go out on a limb here and say no one on their staff actually had a medical degree," I said.

"At least someone could read," Leonard said.

"Not well enough," Jim Bob said. "The page is turned down on delivery."

"Delivery?" Booger said.

"Babies," Jim Bob said. "They were trying to deliver a baby."

"Since we haven't seen any babies," Leonard said, "I'm going to take it this is the potential mother and they failed."

"It's like Doug was saying," I said. "They ran out of sisters."

"Looks that way," Leonard said, wrinkling his nose against the stench.

They may be awful people, I thought, but they had tried to save one of their own, give birth to another. I liked it better when they were faceless killers who needed killing and there wasn't any humanity involved. I wondered if they propped her up and photographed her after she died.

The stink was making me sick. I was starting to cough. We went away from there quickly, outside into the circle at the center of the trailers. As we were starting back to the wall, we saw automobile lights coming down from the hill, between the trees. They were high enough up that the lights shone down into the compound and lay on us like laser beams. Then there was a loud clicking, and I saw red-dot lights on the inside of the gate go off, and I could see the butt ends of half a dozen machine guns positioned below those dots in the gate, just the way Booger had said. Soon as those dots went off, the big gate sprang open electronically, groaning like an old man straining at stool, and into the compound jetted a black Hummer.

As Underwear Man had said, they'd be back soon enough, and here they came.

We scattered like quail as the Hummer braked to an abrupt stop inside the compound. The Hummer's doors were thrown open on the passenger side, front and back, and two men who looked like stockier versions of the one in his underwear came out into the open with automatic weapons that sprayed the air full of lead. I barely had time to jump behind some piled-up washing machines, and still the bullets tore through them and scattered rust and one nicked my ass as I dove. Once I was on the ground, I immediately began turning my head, looking for Leonard.

I didn't see him, but I heard him off to my right, opening up with his shotgun. That old Remington of his had a certain sound when you pumped it. He was pumping fast. There was another rattle of automatic-weapons fire, all of it in Leonard's direction. I lifted my head cautiously and looked through a gap in the washing machine pile and saw that both armed men were hurrying toward me. Neither had been hit that I could see. And then one of them snapped his head forward and then back, and where his eye had been there was a leap of liquid spurting into the lights of the Hummer. The man with him yelled out something, dropped low, and then turned to race back for the Hummer. By then the spray of bullets ceased, and Jim Bob and Booger rose up from the old cars they had ducked behind and starting firing, but that bastard must have been blessed, because he didn't get hit, or if he did it was minor. It damn sure didn't stop him.

There came that faint snapping sound from the deer stand, and Vanilla nailed him. He turned his head suddenly as if to look in our direction, then banged into the Hummer and slid down it slowly until he fell with his head under it. His ass humped a little, like he was fucking the dirt, and then he was still.

"That bitch can shoot," I heard Booger yell out.

That's when the Hummer roared and burned backwards, running right over the man who had been humping the dirt, squirting what passed for brains out of his head in all directions. The Hummer roared on through the gate, swung around, and turned its nose up the hill with the tires tossing gravel. All of us were firing at it, but nothing we hit on the Hummer caused a problem.

Up in the deer stand, Vanilla snapped off two shots, and I heard the Hummer windshield crack, but it kept going, climbing the hill. We all started running after it.

When it got to the top of the hill, the Hummer turned and ran off the road and went straight for the deer stand, hit it and sent it flying, breaking it apart, launching Vanilla out of it in a flash of black clothes and blond hair. The Hummer tried to run her down then, but she limped behind a tree and the Hummer hit it, backed off, spun around, and started out of there.

We ran up the hill, and by the time we got up there, Vanilla was limping up to us, and the Hummer was gone.

"Get me to the car," she said, "and I will teach them to knock me out of a tree."

"Deer stand," Booger said.

"Whatever," she said, throwing the rifle across her back by a strap she had fastened to it.

She got between Leonard and me, threw her arms over our shoulders, and with Jim Bob and Booger in the lead, we carried on. We made it to the brush gate, or where it used to be, but the Hummer had gone right through it.

"They just thought they were badasses," Booger said, "and then they got a load of us."

"We got lucky," Jim Bob said.

We limped Vanilla along until we got to the end of the trail that led to the outer road. Booger leaned down with his light and said, "They went to the right. You can see where they dug in turning."

Our problem was that the Buick was to the left, so we limped Vanilla along that way, finally got to the car. I thought the Hummer might at this point be all the way to the North Pole.

I was still closing my door when Vanilla got the Buick started. She put her good right foot on the gas and spun us out of there backwards, braked, hit the gas, changed the gears, and away we went. Every time Vanilla shifted gears the car roared louder and flew faster. Vanilla was down the road a piece before she turned on the lights, which was a good thing, because the road was growing narrow and there was a bar ditch on either side. The headlights caught standing water in the ditches and made it shimmer.

"We'll never catch them," Leonard said.

“Yes, we will,” Vanilla said, and she hit another gear. She wasn’t kidding about the car being souped up beyond reason. We tore along like that for what seemed like ten or fifteen minutes, and then we caught the taillights of the Hummer. Vanilla pushed her foot down, and the Buick’s engine sang like a siren; the tires clawed the road with a vengeance.

I hadn’t thought to put on my seat belt, but right then I remembered and snapped it into place and tried not to shit myself. We were going so fast the car was starting to wobble and the trees to either side of us looked like a solid wall. One thing about a Hummer is it doesn’t run that fast, and the Buick was a goddamn ground jet.

We were closing fast.

54

Let me tell you how I screamed. It was loud and long and it blended with Leonard's and Jim Bob's screams and it was almost loud enough to smother Booger's cackling laughter. Vanilla made not a sound.

What caused the scream was that it appeared we were going to run right up that Hummer's ass. We were so close, had the Hummer had a bumper sticker we would have collided. The Hummer had a modified door, so that the back end swung open, and as it did two men with automatic weapons, down on their knees, started firing.

Vanilla braked and drifted sideways into what I thought would surely be a bar ditch or a tree, but we were lucky. There was a wide spot there, and the next instant we were beside the Hummer. I saw that the windshield in our ride was punctured in several places and the punctures sprang fractures and then the fractures spread rapidly with a sound like thin ice cracking under a fat skater's feet.

The glass blew back on us just as I ducked, and I heard Jim Bob yell, "Goddamn it."

When I rose up the windshield was gone and there was blood running down my face. I glanced at Vanilla. She had cuts on her forehead and cheek, and there was a small piece of glass sticking out of the top of her hairline, but if she'd even blinked when the glass shattered, I didn't notice it. Then again, I had just had my head between my legs and had been trying to crawl up my own asshole, so I might have missed something.

I looked back over the seat. Leonard raised a hand in a polite wave. His mouth made a wiggle that I was supposed to think was a smile. He didn't even seem to be cut. Jim Bob was using a gloved hand to pull a bit of broken glass from his shoulder. Booger was on the right-hand passenger side. He rolled down his window and stuck his head and arms and the sawed-off out of it. Blood drops flew off the cuts on his face and blew back into the night like red drops of sweat. The back windshield was gone, too.

I turned back to the front, rolled my window down, and looked at Vanilla.

"I'm going to brake."

"I know," I said.

She downshifted and braked so fast it was like a single motion. The car's hum lowered to a purr, and as we slowed that sent the Hummer flying in front of us again. When it did, I hung my head and arms out the window with my shotgun and hoped Booger wouldn't shoot the back of my head off. Me and Booger fired close together, and the sound of those shotguns made my head feel as if a horde of crazed monkeys were beating on bongos inside my brain.

Booger yelled, "I was born for this!"

I pumped the shotgun, fired again at the open back door where the men stood, and one of them dropped down and rolled out even as the other man tried to grab him. The Buick went over his head with a bump and a loud squish.

Vanilla shifted gears, and we swung to the left side of the vehicle again, just as the other man tried to fire at us. He caught the tail end of the Buick, dancing shots across the trunk and into the woods before we pulled directly alongside the Hummer.

The Hummer driver tried to take the middle of the road and drive us off of it. We were coming up on a narrow bridge, and there wasn't anywhere else for us to go but off of it or back behind the Hummer again. We eased back behind it.

Me and Booger opened fire. By this time Jim Bob had rolled down the window on his side and was sitting in the window with his shotgun swung over the top of the Buick's roof, firing. I heard Leonard say, "I'll just sit here quiet in the middle."

The Hummer clumped its tires over the bridge, and the man in the back who was on his knees firing went backwards and dropped his gun, got himself together long enough to close the back door. No sooner was the Hummer over the bridge than Vanilla was riding the Hummer so close we were like a hemorrhoid on its ass.

The Hummer braked, and in that moment I thought we were all going to be sitting in the front seat with the driver, but Vanilla jerked the wheel left and went forward and alongside the Hummer so close it took the mirror off on my side and scraped the door handles front and back. Since me and Booger had just pulled heads and arms inside, the timing was perfect, even if it hadn't been on purpose.

Vanilla started rolling her window down. She said, "Hap, take the wheel."

"What?"

"Take the wheel and sit on my feet."

I snapped off my seat belt and grabbed the wheel. Vanilla was out the window, drawing her big automatic as she did. I slid over, and she locked her feet under my ass. I put my foot on the gas and pulled us directly alongside the Hummer driver. His hand came out his open window, and it was full of pistol.

Vanilla, sitting on the window frame, twisted and fired over the roof of the car. The driver was close enough to our car I heard him make a sound like a gasket blowing, and then the Hummer went off the road and into a bar ditch and out of that and through some small trees, fetched up finally against a large sweet gum with a soul-breaking impact that scattered bark like confetti. A burst of white smoke rolled out of the back of it, and on the far side a door opened, and I caught a glimpse of a man making a run for it through the woods, carrying a long gun.

Vanilla swung back inside the car with such force she knocked me out from behind the wheel, and the Buick wavered. She caught the wheel and whirled it and hit the emergency brake even as she downshifted. The Buick swung around, facing back in the direction we had come from.

"Yeah," Jim Bob said. "But let's see you make it dance."

Vanilla gunned us forward, came to a stop across from the place where the Hummer had left the road. We all got out of the car. Booger went about three feet and fell down. "Shit," he said. "Took one through the leg. It's broken."

Me and Jim Bob and Leonard ran to the Hummer. Jim Bob jerked open the back door. There was the wounded man with a pistol in his hand and the barrel pressed up under his chin. "I just wanted you to know I made my own way," he said and fired the pistol, launching the top of his skull with its greasy hair against the roof of the Hummer, spraying it and us with brains and blood. The skullcap hit the floor of the Hummer, spun around like a hubcap that had come loose, rattled against the flooring, then stopped moving.

There was no one else inside.

When I turned around Leonard was gone. I went the way I figured he had to go, where the trees and brush were thinnest. I had almost caught up with him when he came to a spot where the trees were sparse and the moon was bright. He went along quick-like—too quick-like, because the man he was hunting lifted up as he passed, pointing an automatic rifle. I fired quickly with the shotgun, and the blast tore through the brush, but if I hit him it wasn't a killing blow. He turned toward me, his teeth flashing in the moonlight, his rifle swinging around, and when he did Leonard turned and shot him, knocking him down behind the brush where he had been hiding.

We were both on him now. We peeled back the brush. He had dropped his rifle on the ground. He was hit bad but not dead. He was reaching for the rifle. I kicked it aside. He lay on his back and looked up at us. He looked small and pale and like someone you wouldn't notice twice. He looked like all the others that made up the Canceler, as if they had been cut from the same bolt of cloth. The moon floated in his eyes.

He turned his head toward me. His mouth opened and closed, trying to find air. I remembered when I was a kid and had a BB gun, thought I was a mighty hunter, and shot a bird. When I went to pick it up, its beak was open and it was trying to find the air it couldn't put back into its small lungs. That was the end of killing birds for the hell of it. I still have that bird's soul on my head, and a lot worse things now. Leonard raised his shotgun to shoot, but then hesitated.

The man quit gasping. The moon floated out of his eyes.

55

Me and Leonard have a veterinarian friend who sews us up in secret when we need it. He charges a lot. He has to. If he got caught he'd be sewing up shank wounds in Huntsville prison.

We went to him. He took care of us, Booger in particular. A fragment of a shell had found a place in his leg where it wanted to live. It was pretty deep, and maybe someone else would have died of shock, but Booger had him take it out without deadening the wound. I think he enjoyed showing us how much tougher than us he was. I thought it showed how much smarter we were.

The vet cut the piece of metal out of him, and Booger only grunted, but when the vet started sewing the wound up, he passed out.

"If he dies," Jim Bob said, "we can call it a win-win."

"That's not very nice," I said.

"Oh, but so true," Leonard said and kind of laughed, or maybe it was a cough.

We all had some cuts and such to patch up, and we got that done. None of us had been cut badly by the glass, though Vanilla was going to have a small scar right in the middle of her part. I looked at her while the vet doctored her up. She was cut in places, and there was blood in her hair, and damn if she still didn't look like a goddess.

When it was all done and Booger came awake and consented to some pain pills, we paid our vet friend with Jim Bob's money and went back to the safe house. Soon as we were there, Booger, who found a place on the couch, said, "I counted seven, not eight."

"I thought about that," I said. "Maybe there were only seven to begin with."

"And maybe," Booger said, "the ones in the Hummer were coming back from some paid mission, and the guys we caught at the compound were holding down the fort. That means there could still be one more out there prowling around, on a job, and when he comes home, boy, is he going to be mad."

"It's possible," Jim Bob said. "Problem is, it's hard to figure out how much was real about those guys and how much was myth. One thing is for sure, they had a lot of balls in jars."

Me and Leonard told them then about the shed and what we found there.

"Jesus," Jim Bob said. "That's a lot of killing these creeps have done."

"I always heard there were eight," Vanilla said. She had just come out of the bathroom, where she had changed into jeans and a loose T-shirt, slipped on white tennis shoes.

"But you don't know it for a fact?" Leonard asked.

"No."

Next morning I made a call to Marvin, and later in the day me and Leonard went to town to the Japanese restaurant, arriving at 12:15. Leonard waited in the car, and I went in. I promised to bring him an order of rice and hibachi beef.

I walked past the SUV parked out front, this time with two guys in it. They didn't look like they were taking their bodyguard duties seriously. One was sitting behind the steering wheel with his head thrown back on the seat and his eyes closed. The other sat on the front passenger side reading something on his cell phone.

Inside I found the Barbecue King in his usual spot. I pointed at him when the waitress came over. I slid into the seat across from him.

He looked at my banged-up face, with its bruises and Band-Aids, observed my stiff movements.

"You look like you shaved with a brush hog."

"I feel worse. Lunch is on you, and I want a takeout order."

"I assume I'm paying because you have good news."

"Your exile ends. Be here tomorrow, and a policeman named Marvin Hanson will be here to visit with you. You will go away with him. More policemen will show up at your place at the same time, and the guys outside, any others that might be around, will have their ass in a crack before they can ask, 'Are those handcuffs new?'"

"I have to take your word for it that you killed the Cancelers?"

"You do," I said. "Here's the thing, pal. It's best you have the meeting, set yourself up to have a chance at rolling over on the others. Maybe the feds will decide you're more important and will find you a nice warm spot in Albuquerque with a new name and a retirement plan. They've been protecting those you say are worse than you, so now you get your chance."

"I'm no angel, Collins, but yeah, they're worse."

“If you got some information you want to show Marvin, and it’s something you can have with you when you show up here, I would. That way nothing gets lost in the arrest and no one can say they just found it and you didn’t give it to them. Put you out of the deal altogether. You want Marvin first, not the feds.”

“I can put it all on a memory stick and have it in my pocket, close to my heart, but since I’m having to give it to the cops, I’ll put it in my front pants pocket, close to my cock.”

“You can put it up your ass for all I care, just have it. Or you will go down, and in a lot less pleasant way.”

He leaned back and crossed his arms. “I’ve conned my way out of the police before.”

“I wasn’t talking about the police.”

He smiled at me.

“Waitress,” he called out, “we’re ready to order.”

56

Now, let me tell you, for a few days I worried about that eighth member of the Cancelers, but after a while I didn't worry so much. I decided, as Leonard did, that there were only seven.

Booger went home, and so did Jim Bob, and Vanilla stayed at the safe house with us for a few days. She came to me one night while I was sleeping, limping a little still. She wore nothing. She crawled into bed.

"It's not going to happen, Vanilla."

She stretched out and put her arm over my chest.

"At least I hope not."

"No?"

"Well, I mean I hope not. Jesus, Vanilla. Really?"

She giggled a little. It was the only time I had ever heard her sound less than reserved. She could talk about anything and sound reserved, but that giggle, it wasn't like her. It was girlish.

"Nobody need know but us," she said.

"I would know."

"You know what I mean."

"Sorry, Vanilla."

"Let me put it like this, Hap. You called me. I came. This is the price."

"And if I don't pay?"

"Don't ever call again."

"Maybe I shouldn't have called in the first place."

"Think about how it went down out there and tell me that again."

I couldn't tell her that again.

"I just don't feel right about it, Vanilla."

"You will," she said.

"Jesus, Vanilla. You're making it hard."

"That's the idea."

"Not what I meant."

She ran her hand over my crotch, said, "There seems to be some activity."

"Damn it," I said. "Don't do that."

"You're not fighting me that much."

"I want to."

"Do you?"

"Less than before," I said. She pressed her lips to mine, and we kissed. I pushed her away and got out of bed and pulled up my pajamas that she had pushed down.

"I'm going to shower," I said. "In cold water."

She slipped out from under the covers and stood by the bed. It was dark in there, but there was enough moonlight from the window to see her standing there in all her glory. I could even tell she didn't shave down there, at least not completely. Good. I didn't like women to look like children. I thought I might tell her how much I appreciated that later, but right then, a shower.

"Good night, Vanilla."

There was a bathroom off the bedroom, and I went in there and closed the door and took off my clothes and turned on the cold water and got in and pulled the shower curtain. A moment passed. I heard the door open, and then the shower curtain was pulled back, and Vanilla reached out and turned on the warm water, and then I just couldn't fight it anymore. I kissed her and held her. But finally I had a moment of strength and pushed her back from me.

"It isn't right, Vanilla. I made a promise. I intend to keep it."

Vanilla looked at me with those beautiful eyes of hers.

"You know, Hap Collins, I think that's why I'm in love with you. You keep your word."

"I try. But I won't lie. I don't know how much longer I can keep that promise if you stay in the shower, so one of us is getting out now."

She took my chin in her hand.

"Oh, Jesus, Hap Collins, you don't know what you're missing."

"I have a pretty good idea," I said. "I have a feeling that tomorrow sometime I'll drive off by myself to someplace private and scream for a while."

She laughed and kissed me, and it was almost enough to undo me. Then she got out of the shower.

I turned the cold water back on.

57

So the others went away, and that just left me and Leonard. I was surprised that I missed them so much. Except Booger. I didn't miss him at all. We continued to stay at the safe house for a time. With Vanilla gone I didn't have to lock my door and spend the night in a steamy sweat hoping she didn't take an ax to the door, because one more time and my resolve might crumble like old cheese.

We found out from Marvin that the material the Barbecue King had given him was good. The super crime ring in Houston came apart quick, with lots of arrests in conjunction with not only the Houston police but the FBI, the latter being kind of ironic. But alliances change rapidly in the world of crime and law enforcement. I'm sure it had a lot to do with what could come out if the FBI didn't comply.

Marvin had me and Leonard meet him in town at a sandwich shop for lunch, told us all about it.

"Sandy Buckner, she calls herself something else now."

"We know," I said.

"I know you know, but I'm just saying. Her days as Lex Luthor are all over."

Leonard shook his head. "It's so unsatisfying, being out there on the search, and then when we find her, we find her secondhand. We didn't actually see her in person, just a photo in the paper."

"And it turns out she wasn't worth finding," I said.

"She is worth sending to prison, though," Marvin said.

Leonard said, "She stole that money from her grandmother to get herself in the business deeper. Screwed who she had to, backstabbed who she had to, set herself up sweet, and she cared about her grandmother the way a lion cares about a baby gazelle. She got away with her shit for a long time."

Marvin nibbled at his chicken salad sandwich, said around chews, "That's right, but thanks to you guys, and to my fine professional police work—"

“What the hell did you do?” Leonard said.

“Kept your asses out of the blender, that’s what I did.”

“Oh, yeah,” Leonard said. “Okay.”

“You killed them all?” Marvin said.

“We won’t answer that on grounds that it might incriminate us and lead to a long prison sentence and possible death by lethal injection,” Leonard said.

“Good reason not to answer. But let’s speak hypothetically, just so I would have some idea what might have happened.”

“Us and a few helpers killed all them son of a bitches,” Leonard said. “I mean, that’s what might have happened.”

“Do I know these helpers?”

“Maybe,” Leonard said. “Some.”

“Went out there to the address you gave, the spot where the body was in the woods,” Marvin said. “Birds had been at that old boy in the woods.”

“One in the woods,” I said. “You’re talking about the fellow who hypothetically got killed near the hypothetical Hummer with the dead bodies in it?” I asked.

“That would be the one, and the dead guy in the road looked like a jelly roll someone had stepped on. Others in the Hummer, and the ones at that fucked-up compound, didn’t look so good, either. Someone was shooting good. Looked like a twenty-two had been at work. Gun like that, had to be some good shooting. And thanks for the tip on the booby traps. That was some sneaky shit they had out there. Tell you something you don’t know. We found a bunch of graves out under the Ferris wheel. Don’t think they were murder victims. The graves were well tended, and there were markers on them but no names. Just numbers. I think it’s their own clan, but we won’t know for sure until they’re dug up, checked for the ways they died, and if there’s a DNA match with the seven dead fellows.”

“They were just some guys,” I said. “Nothing really amazing going on there. The Cancelers were people willing to kill, and there were a lot of them to do it. I pretty much heard that definition from Dougie.”

“That definition could fit you boys, hypothetically.”

“Don’t give Hap any more of a complex than he already has,” Leonard said. “You know and I know the right thing was done. There’s no comparison between us and them. Hypothetically, of course.”

“Of course. Fact is, the feds, they think it was some kind of turf war. You know, other hitters wanting to take them out to take their place or some such theory.”

“So hypothetically,” Leonard asked, “how are the chances for those guys who hypothetically killed those seven guys?”

“If, hypothetically, you did do anything, you are in the clear. Frankly, those boys being dead, and all those balls in jars, nobody gives a shit who killed them. By the way, lunch. You’re buying.”

“You should be buying us lunch,” Leonard said.

“You’re buying for me out of sympathy.”

“And why are we sympathetic?” I said.

“Because everybody be hating on the po-po,” Marvin said.

58

We went over to see Lilly Buckner, but found out from a neighbor that she had been taken downtown to the hospital, and we drove over there. She was in a private room—the last of her money, I guess, or maybe her Medicare. I don't know. But when I asked the plump female nurse about her condition, she asked if we were relatives.

"No," I said. "But we know her."

"You're the only ones who have come to see her."

I repeated my question. "How is she?"

"Not good."

"What's wrong?"

"Old age. So pretty much everything."

"Can we see her?" Leonard asked.

"You're not supposed to," the nurse said, "but you might as well. She's awake, but I don't think she has long."

"How long?" Leonard asked.

"No one can say for sure, but I can say this for certain. The doctors have given in. She won't make it out of this hospital alive. I'm sorry to tell you that, but I believe it's best you know."

"We're not really all that close to her," I said.

"Like I said, so far, you're all that have come to see her, and we haven't found any living relatives."

"And you won't," I said, knowing full well there was one, but considering all that had gone down, I doubted they would let Sandy come see her, and I doubted Sandy gave a damn. She had chosen a different path.

We got the room number, rode an elevator up. We went into her room, and she lay in a bed that seemed far too large for her. She was under white sheets with a big white pillow under her head. She didn't have any makeup on, and she looked even older than before. Her eyes were closed. She reminded me of a starving bird lying in the snow.

I went to one side of the bed, Leonard the other.

We stood looking down at her. I gently took her hand, and Leonard took the other.

She opened her eyes. “You two,” she said, and her voice was as raw as if she had been drinking lye.

“Yeah, us two,” Leonard said.

“So it’s down to this. Two people I don’t really know coming to see me before I take the big siesta…Sandy? Anything?”

“Yes,” Leonard said. “We found her.”

Her eyes brightened a little. “Is she okay?”

“She is,” Leonard said. “She is married and living in Oregon.”

“No shit?”

“No shit,” Leonard said.

“You lying son of a bitch,” she said. “Something is wrong, isn’t it?”

Leonard pulled a chair up with one hand but never let go of her hand with the other. I did the same. We sat beside her bed.

“It’s true,” I said. “She’s in Oregon.”

“Why the fuck would she be in Oregon?”

“Maybe she likes the climate,” Leonard said.

“I been to Oregon. I don’t think the climate is all that good. Now, tell me the truth.”

“Truth is,” Leonard said, “she is in Oregon. She got in a bit of trouble with cashing bad checks, so she took your money, meant to pay it back, and then she met someone and got married. You have great-grandkids.”

I thought to myself, wow. Leonard is lying his ass off.

She looked at me. I nodded.

“She was embarrassed to come back and tell you, having taken the money. She was cleaning up her check debt.”

“So you saw her?”

“Absolutely,” I said. “Why it took us so long.”

“She was ashamed more than embarrassed,” Leonard said. “She has two kids, your great-grandkids, two girls. One is named Lilly.”

“She did that?” She could hardly speak now, her voice was so full of phlegm and emotion.

“Yeah.”

“The other?”

“I think she said Buddy,” Leonard said. “I’m sorry. Don’t remember for sure.”

“A girl named Buddy?” she asked.

“I probably have that wrong,” he said.

“Brenda,” I said. “Not Buddy. It’ll be in our report, the correct names.

She'd like to come see you, but the thing is, well, she's kind of wanted in the state of Texas still. The checks."

"Can't they arrest her in Oregon?" she said.

"Maybe so, but no one is pushing it," Leonard said. "I think that's just an excuse, though. Like I said, she's ashamed. That's the main thing."

"Tell her I don't care about what she did. Can you do that? I got a feeling this bed is going to be my last friend."

"Ah, hell, you're tough," I said. "You'll be all right."

She squeezed my hand and smiled. She didn't have in her false teeth, so her mouth deeply wrinkled more than smiled. "You two are the biggest fucking liars I have ever known. Thought you really had me buying into that shit, didn't you? Thought, throw the old lady a bone, like I don't know when bullshit isn't strudel."

"I thought I'd done pretty good," Leonard said.

"Buddy. What the hell, son? No. No, you didn't do good. You looked kind of cute telling the story, though. But I appreciate it. A man from the FBI came to see me. Being Sandy's grandmother and all, he thought I might know some things. He told me a little about her. She fucked up, and now you boys come lying to me because you know I'm dying."

"Yeah," Leonard said. "We aren't worth a shit."

"What I been trying to tell you."

"We shouldn't have done that," I said.

"You did it out of kindness, not something I've received in a while, mostly because I don't deserve it. Even if I hadn't spoken with that FBI turd, I still wouldn't have believed you. But as I was told when I was young, if someone gives you a shitty present, you pretend you like it, because it's the thought that counts. I'm tired now. So damn tired. Will you sit with me a while?"

"Sure," I said.

"Good. I'd like that. I still love her, you know?"

"Of course," I said.

"I thought she'd do well, but she didn't. She turned out to be a bitch on wheels. She stole my goddamn money because she wasn't anything other than a goddamn thief."

"Looks that way," Leonard said.

"She was here right now I'd punch her in the nose. Course, I'd have to ask her to raise the bed first, puff my pillow, and bend over within reach."

A small tear rolled out of her right eye.

"It's such a disappointment," she said.

“Wish it would have worked out better,” I said.

“Stay with me, boys.”

We did. She closed her eyes and slept, and a half hour later or so, a nurse came in and saw us. Not the same nurse as before. A male this time, but still plump. He looked at us and said, “You’re not supposed to be here.”

“We know,” I said.

“Let me check her vitals,” he said.

He did. When he finished, he stood there looking at her for a moment, and then he looked at us, and said it like he meant it. “I have bad news. I’m sorry. She’s gone.”

I knew that before he did, and I’m sure Leonard did as well. Her hand in mine had turned cold as ice shortly after she closed her eyes.

59

Me and Leonard ended up staying at the safe house for another two weeks. Brett and Chance and Buffy were still traveling. I called Brett one Saturday afternoon from the front porch of the safe house.

"You can come home," I said.

"Good," she said. "I was about to anyway, hell or high water. We've had fun, but I think we're both a little sick of it. And I don't like to think I need protecting. Besides, we're running out of money."

Leonard went back to his home, and damn if John didn't come around again, and damn if they weren't trying again. John wasn't talking religion anymore, and he brought his sixteen-year-old niece with him. She wanted out of her father's home, and part of that was due to her having realized that she, like her Uncle John, was gay. She came to live with Leonard and John in the loft, and at least for the time being, things were good for my brother.

The DNA test was in the mail when I got home, and that was two days before Brett and Chance and Buffy came back. I just couldn't open it. The morning before they were home, I did. The note inside said the sample had been ruined accidentally, and would we like to try again, no charge?

The air went out of me.

Brett, Chance, and Buffy arrived that same afternoon, and I was so glad to see Brett I teared up. Buffy, who seemed like a different dog, happier and more sure of herself, came bouncing up to me with great excitement. She hadn't forgotten me, or maybe she was just the kind of dog that was happy to see anyone but that asshole who had kicked her for entertainment. Chance was smiling and nervous. She took the news about the DNA test stoically. She hugged me, and I hugged her. Damn, I really hoped she was my daughter.

When I took Brett in my arms, I have to tell you, right then I was glad I had turned Vanilla away. Another heartbeat that night and we would have been at it. I was a little ashamed of how far it had gone, even if I hadn’t initiated it. Jesus, that woman.

But the one who came back to me was every bit as delicious.

More so.

Because I loved her.

60

We sent off the new DNA sample, but we didn’t do it until the fall. I can’t tell you exactly why we waited that long, but that’s how it was. I think we feared the answer might not be what we wanted.

As October blew in with a gust and the leaves turned yellow and brown and blew down from the great oak in the front yard by the curb, I was at peace. It gave me great joy to walk across the yard and crunch those drying leaves underfoot, because I damn sure wasn’t going to rake them up and burn them.

We had done a number of jobs at the agency since Brett came home, and they had all been simple, and even Chance helped on a few occasions. Nothing big—little things, like watching someone who needed watching, making notes and snapping photos from concealment for divorce work, that sort of thing. She had a kind of knack for it, and with her beauty she was easily welcomed most anywhere.

So life was good, and one night in late October, on my birthday, we invited Leonard and John over, John’s niece, and we had a kind of birthday celebration that turned out to be large pizzas and too many side dishes, including Leonard’s favorite, vanilla cookies.

I received a few small gifts, little things I liked, mostly gift cards to food places, a box of animal crackers from Chance, and then it was over and everyone was going home or preparing to turn in for the night. Leonard decided to stay behind awhile and visit, and I agreed to take him back to his loft after an hour or so. We helped Brett and Chance store the remaining pizza away. I put the trash from the feast in a bag, and then we sat and had cups of decaffeinated coffee so we wouldn’t be up all night. Leonard and I talked about the old days, how we had first met as teenagers on a dark night in the Sabine River bottoms. Brett and Chance sat and listened to us talk. We were on a roll.

When the ladies left the room, Leonard said, “Think I’m going to give John one more chance.”

“You said that four chances ago,” I said.

"I mean it this time."

"Did you not mean it the other times?"

"Not enough."

"Okay," I said.

"You don't fucking think I ought to, do you?"

"It's not about what I think. It's about what works—"

"Shut the hell up. Be straight with me. No psychology horseshit. Should I or shouldn't I?"

"You don't, you'll feel miserable," I said. "You do, you'll feel miserable."

"No opinion, then?"

"Frankly, Leonard, I'm fed up with the motherfucker."

"I should be."

"You were last time we talked, I think. I lose count. I think you've kicked him to the curb for good, next thing I know he's back greasing your asshole."

"I get fed up, and then I get over being fed up. Right now I'm over it. One more time into the breach, and you know what I mean, and if it don't work this time, seriously, I'm out."

"Brother, you got to make yourself happy if you can. Go for it."

"Thing is, I don't know I can. I'm starting to think the best relationship for me is a fresh box of Kleenex and a bottle of baby oil."

"Eeew."

The women came back then, and Leonard picked up his coffee and sipped it.

We all visited awhile, talked nonsense, mostly, and then the talk died down and our energy died with it. I decided to take the garbage out before I took Leonard home. I carried the bag out the back door, toward the garbage can. My mind was so engaged with the pleasantries of the evening I didn't sense the presence of someone in the yard until it was too late. He rose up from between the two garbage cans by the redwood fence, and as he did, I dropped the garbage bag and turned toward him. I was pretty quick for being distracted, but he was quicker.

There was a glint of light on an edge of steel, and I tried to use both hands to catch the man's wrist, but I was late and the blade was long, and it got me. It went into my stomach, and I groaned. I felt as if a cold wind had washed over me, and there was a numbness followed by a sensation like an electric shock, and then I stumbled backwards and fell against the garbage cans, knocking them over with a loud clatter, but somehow I managed to stay on my feet. The knife, a bayonet, actually, came loose of his hands, and I sort of melted backwards until my back came up against the fence. I clutched at the blade, cutting my hands, making them slick with blood.

He came at me again, bare-handed. I felt strange and detached, like I ought to do something but suddenly didn't know how. And then there was a great shadow looming behind my attacker, and the shadow struck out with two ridge hands to the man's temples and dropped him. The shadow was Leonard. The man on the ground turned and grabbed at Leonard's legs, and took him down. The man tried to scuttle onto Leonard's chest, but Leonard grabbed him by his jacket and jerked him down close and slapped a palm over one of the man's ears, a man I now realized had to be Number Eight, the last Canceler.

Number Eight screamed with pain, and then Leonard rolled him over and was on top of him. Leonard hit him in the throat, I think, because I heard a gasp from the man and then a gurgle, and then Leonard's hand went down two more times, the last in a clawing motion and then a ripping-back movement.

I saw all this as I eased down to the ground with my back against the fence. I so wanted to get up, but my legs weren't working and my mind seemed to have hit the Pause button. Next thing I knew Brett was bending over me, and she was screaming in a way I had never heard before, and then there was Chance bawling and Buffy was licking my face and whimpering.

Leonard reached down and picked me up and carried me out the redwood gate as if I were nothing more than a small sack of feathers.

Leonard lifted me into the back of the car with Brett, and away we went, Leonard at the wheel. Me holding my stomach with both hands, the bayonet still in me, my head in Brett's lap, Chance up front beside Leonard. Chance leaned over the seat and touched my face. Her hand was cool.

Number Eight had found out Leonard and I were involved, no mean feat if anyone from the car company had escaped arrest. Hell, Frank, from behind bars, might have given them the word to make it less likely they would pay someone in prison to stick her. It could as easily have been Leonard who had been stabbed. I was glad it wasn't him. I hoped Jim Bob was okay. Vanilla, I knew, would be long gone and damn near impossible to trace. And Booger. Well, fuck Booger.

As he drove, Leonard yelled from time to time, just some kind of wild exclamation full of fear and disappointment. I thought, happy fucking birthday, Hap.

61

By the time we got to the hospital I was weaving in and out, and as the folks came out with the stretcher and loaded me onto it, they began to do something to my stomach—apply pressure, I guess. I couldn't really feel much by then. The pain had gone away. I realized I wasn't wearing a shirt anymore because I felt the cool October wind. I wasn't wearing a bayonet, either.

As we entered the hospital hallway and Leonard raced alongside me, I saw an odd thing on his shirt. I couldn't figure what it was at first. Some kind of sea creature, maybe. It had a small, bulbous body and lots of bloody tentacles. I was studying on that when we went through some swinging doors, and one of the ladies pushing the stretcher said, "You'll have to leave, now, sir."

And I heard Leonard say, "Screw you. I'm here to stay."

"We'll call security," said the nurse.

"Tell them to bring a couple days' rations. They're going to be here awhile," Leonard said.

I realized then what was stuck on Leonard's shirt. It was Number Eight's eyeball. That clawing and ripping motion he had made, he had tore it right out of that bastard's head.

* * *

The lights came and went, and I closed my eyes and felt weaker and more tired than I had ever been. When I opened my eyes I was in a big white room, not unlike the one Lilly Buckner had been in, and by my bedside were Leonard, Brett, and Chance. The only one missing was Buffy, and I'm sure she would have liked to come.

I might have laughed at that thought. It's hard to be sure.

And then I blinked, or it seemed that way, and the only one in the room was Leonard. He was in a chair pulled up close to the bed and he had my hand in his and his head was dipped, and I knew he had fallen asleep. I tried to speak to him, but the effort of it sent me spiraling again, down into blackness, around and around, and I came out I knew not where. But sometime down in that place of no recognition, I heard a voice I didn't know, a nurse, maybe, a doctor, say, "He probably won't make it past another night."

I went away again, and there was a tunnel of light, but I went backwards, away from it, and when I came out of the unknown place with its tunnel of white light, I was glad to be back, not thinking that long, white tunnel was any goddamn path to heaven, knowing full well it was merely my brain trying to die, my focus narrowing, the kind of tunnel vision beginners get in a fight. I told myself that I was no beginner, and I would not go gently into that good night.

I fought hard, and I came back, and I was glad to be back. I rose up from the darkness like a ship on the peak of a wave, and when I did, there were Leonard and Chance and Brett, all by my side, and I think I said, "It's okay. Doesn't matter anymore," but maybe I just thought it.

I looked at them and loved them, and I thought, there stands my brother, who ripped a man's eye out of his head for me, and I love him as if he were my own blood. It was him I hated to leave the most, the way you think you'd like to keep both legs, because in that instant I knew I was leaving. The tunnel of white light was beckoning. I felt my ship on its wave starting to go down on the other side, my timbers squeaking with stress, my sail folding with pain.

I heard Leonard say, "You're just getting even cause last time it was me in the hospital. Let's just call it even."

He smiled when he said it, but he couldn't hold the smile, and I heard him say, "Goddamn it," and I continued to sail away on those dark waters, and then I felt calm, as if I had made it to the dock. I felt good. It was a strange kind of good. Free of all pain except regret. And then I felt those dark waters stir again, and my ship slipped loose of its moorings, sailed away from the pier toward what could have been the rising or the dying of the sun.

I looked up and saw Brett's face again, crying, then Chance, trembling, and finally Leonard. He was bawling like a child. My hand couldn't feel his hand anymore, but I knew he was holding it.

Then my ship sailed out farther into deep, dark water, toward that great light. I was having trouble breathing. I heard Leonard yell like he was trying to get my attention from across a great distance.

The bright sky beyond the black sea went as dark as the waters that were carrying me away, and I wasn't sure I could make it back.

About the Author

Photo credit: Karen Lansdale

Joe R. Lansdale is the author of more than three dozen novels, including *Paradise Sky,* the Edgar Award–winning *The Bottoms, Sunset and Sawdust,* and *Leather Maiden*. He has received eleven Bram Stoker Awards, the American Mystery Award, the British Fantasy Award, and the Grinzane Cavour Prize for Literature. He lives with his family in Nacogdoches, Texas.

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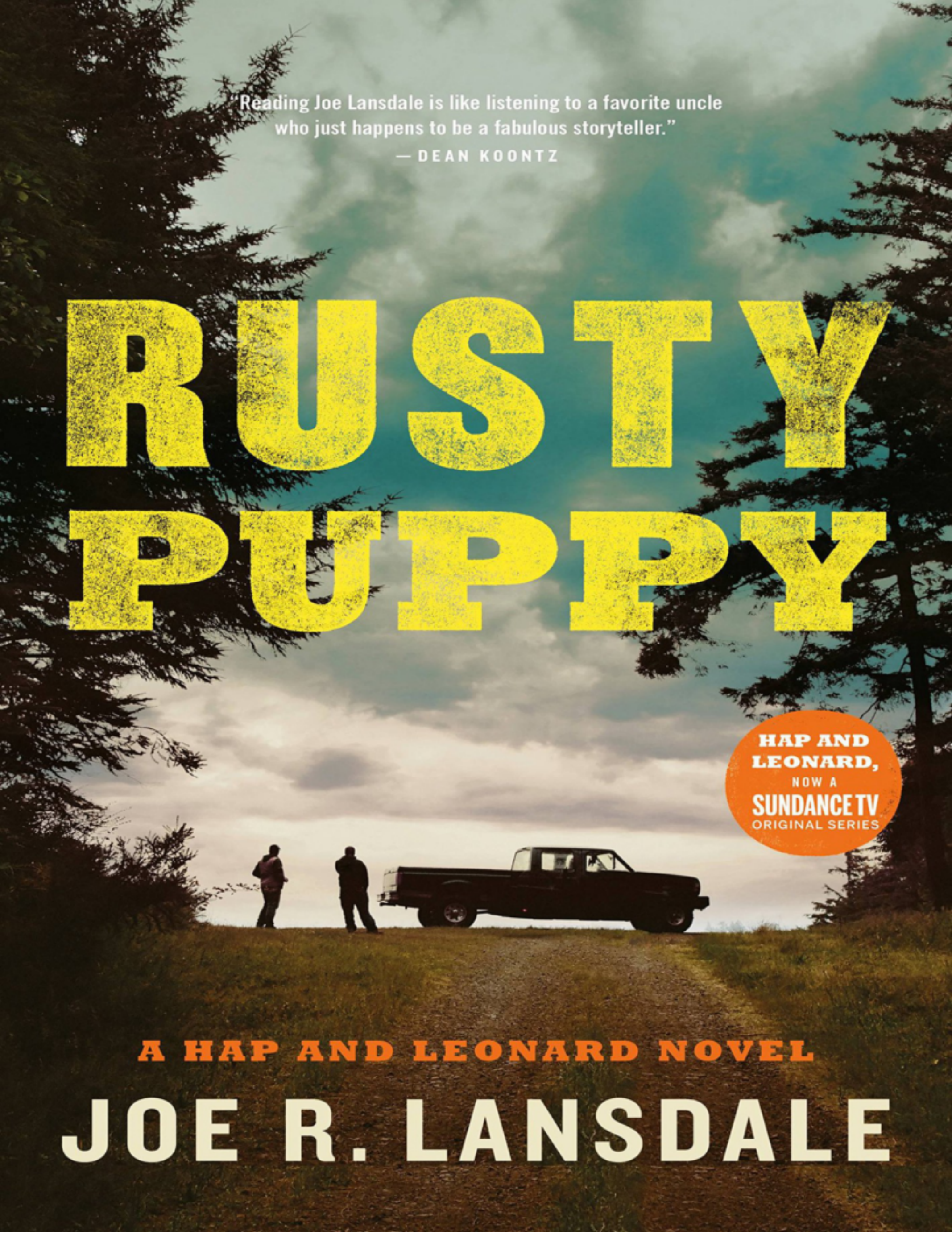

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Also by Joe R. Lansdale

This one's for my literary agent Danny Baror and my film agent Brian Lipson, both of whom have helped make my life more comfortable, and to them I send my sincere appreciation for their consistent efforts to improve my career, which can be a full-time job unto itself, and for being good friends. Thanks, guys.

And an acknowledgment to my friend Jim Mickle for directing my works so well on screen, and for my brother Nick Damici for adapting those works so kindly and carefully.

Once you get dead, then you ain’t dead anymore, and you come back because somebody pressed on your chest and you took a breath and shot a turd, you got a different view on things. That being said, if I ain’t in the hospital, and I can get around, I never miss Tuesday night chili.

—Jim Bob Luke

1

I was still getting over being dead, and let me tell you, that's a comeback.

I died twice in the hospital after being stabbed, and the last thing I remember before I awoke from death was Leonard being there, shoveling vanilla cookies into his face, waiting for me to wake up. Actually, I was awake, but I couldn't fully open my eyes other than just enough to see him. I repeatedly felt as if I were drifting away on a slow boat to nowhere with a stick up my weenie. That turned out to be a catheter, but it felt like a stick. A big one.

Doctors and nurses saved me from the big, dark plunge, and I didn't thank Jesus when I came around. I thanked the medical staff, their years of schooling, their tremendous skills. I always figured if I was a doctor and I saved some person's life, and the first thing they said when they came around was "Thank Jesus," I would have wanted to stick a pair of forceps up their ass and tell them to see if Jesus could yank those out for them.

Bottom line was, I was back. It took me a few months to pull it together, but finally I was out and about regularly, and on this day I was totally on my own. I had lost a few pounds while being on the tube-down-your-throat diet (not the same tube as the one in my pecker, I hasten to add) but as of recent, my strength was back. I felt like I could bench-press two-fifty and beat an angry gorilla's ass, but maybe not in a fair fight.

That said, I also had days when I would weep uncontrollably and had the concentration of a squirrel. Doctors told me there would be days like that, days when I not only knew I was mortal, but had come smack up against the concept. Watching cartoons helped. I came around pretty quick, and the doctors were amazed that I didn't have any real posttraumatic stress. I didn't mention it to them, but I thought, *No, I only have that when I kill people,* and I'd learned to live with that stress as if it were merely a quarrelsome comrade. I had plenty of practice there, having known Leonard much of my life. But as far as quick recovery went, I've always been like that. Recuperation skills and a hard head have served me well in life.

So there I was, doing better, back to work, feeling mostly normal, only having brief visitations from the mortality fairy and a now-and-then concern about the eventual heat death of the solar system from the inevitability of the exploding sun. I'm something of a worrier.

On this day I had office duty at Brett Sawyer Investigations, where I worked for my girlfriend, Brett, worked with my best friend, Leonard. I was sitting with my feet on the desk, noticing my socks didn't match, feeling like a classic private eye, though my detective skills were right up there with my mathematical ability, which means you shouldn't ask me to do your taxes. But I'm persistent. That's another good trait you can add to quick recuperation time and a hard head. When I was sixteen my dad got me a job with a fellow who had me help him haul brush and tear down old houses he had bought to sell for scrap lumber. My dad said to him on my first day at work, "He might fuck up a lot, but he's no quitter."

That was kind of my motto.

I was at the office alone because no one else could be there that morning. Leonard was in Houston having sex with some guy he met on the Internet, which made me nervous for both of them, and Brett was nursing a cold. She shared her cold with a young woman named Chance who had turned out to be my daughter. DNA tests proved it, and I was damn happy about it. I had only known about her a short time, but she meshed with my family of Brett and Leonard and Buffy the dog as if she had been with us since birth.

Chance was staying at our house and working part-time at the local newspaper as a proofreader, looking for full-time employment. She had a journalism degree, which is kind of like a degree in Latin. The uses are small.

Like Brett, Chance was off work, home with her cold, resting on the couch. I figured I was next to get the bug, but so far I felt tip-top. After being stabbed in the stomach and dying for a while, coughs and sniffles could kiss my ass.

Buffy, the German shepherd Leonard rescued from an asshole who was kicking her, was with me at the office, lying on the sofa. She was remarkably well mannered, and much better housebroken than I was. Ask Brett. She'll tell you.

It was a pleasant morning, sitting there in the office wearing a pair of new blue jeans that my lady Brett said for once fit me in the ass, and I had on some new tan shoes that Buffy had chewed only slightly. I had on a nice green pullover shirt without food stains. My underwear was clean. My thinning hair was combed, and I had a cup of coffee with real cream in it and one package of Sweet'N Low. I had an open bag of Leonard's vanilla cookies that he had hidden behind our office refrigerator, and they were so good. Not only because of the taste, but because Leonard thought they were well concealed. I planned to eat them all and put the empty bag back behind the fridge. I might even put a note in there that said *Cookie Fairy was here. Fuck you. You didn't share at the hospital.*

As I sat there, contemplating on my return from the dead, I think I was starting to catch on to something about that whole nature-of-the-universe thing, bordering on some incredibly brilliant revelation that might be written up into some kind of philosophical paper, when the door opened and a black lady came in.

She was well groomed, overweight, wearing red stretch pants, a loose green top, and pink house shoes. All she needed was a church-lady hat with a fishing lure and a golf ball sewn onto it. She was carrying a purse about the size of an overnight bag. She could have been forty. She could have been fifty. She was certainly tired-looking.

I took my feet off the desk.

She said, "You the only one here?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Where's that black one?"

"Leonard or Marvin?"

Marvin was no longer there. He had sold the business to Brett, but I thought she still might be referring to him.

"They black?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. All the time."

"They both work here?"

"Actually, only one of them does. Like me, he's a worker bee."

"Which one of them black fellows looks like he's pissed off?"

"That would be both of them. One is stocky and sometimes carries a cane, and he's maybe five or six years older than me. He's no longer here. The other one is muscular and my age and likes vanilla cookies. Just like these."

I patted the bag.

"I guess it's the muscular one I saw."

"Now that I think about it, they're both muscular. But one is older and heavier, like a bear that was trained to wear clothes."

She was studying me hard.

"As you can see," I said, "I'm not either of the black ones."

"I was just thinking I can't tell how old you are. White people, they're hard to judge. Can I have a cookie?"

"Take two. Would you like coffee?"

"You got a clean cup?"

"You bet I do."

She told me how she liked it. I got up and fixed her a cup. No artificial sweetener for her; she took four packages of sugar, stirred it with one of our plastic spoons, tasted it, asked for one more package, and I gave it to her. While she drank her coffee, she dunked one of her cookies in it and nibbled. She knew what was up.

"I guess it don't matter which one it is. I seen him come up the stairs and go down, so I figured he worked here, and him being black, I thought I'd want to talk to him."

"Some of us white folks talk and investigate pretty good."

"I guess so."

"How'd you see him?"

"What do you mean?"

"The black guy, Leonard. I assume you weren't in the tree by the parking lot with a pair of binoculars."

"Are you being a smartass?"

"Only a little."

"I live across the street, Master Detective. That's why I'm here in my house shoes. I sort of put on what was in front of me."

"I guessed that."

"No you didn't," she said.

"All right, I didn't."

"I got some money. I don't want anything for free."

"I've offered nothing for free."

"Uh-huh," she said. She removed a change purse from her very large handbag, which had enough room for an alternate universe, and probed around in it like she was digging for King Solomon's gold. She took out a wad of bills that would have choked a dinosaur and slapped those on the desk, poured some coins on top of them.

She looked at me. I reached over and pulled the money close and counted it out. It was a big wad, but most of it was in small denominations. Forty dollars in ones, a five, a dog-eared twenty with a chewed corner, chewed by an actual dog, maybe. There was twenty-eight cents in change and a nice pile of lint and a round chunk of peppermint wrapped in plastic. She took the peppermint back and dropped it into her purse. I bet that peppermint is still falling.

“What’s that buy me?” she asked.

“Honestly? A cup of coffee, some of these cookies, and maybe you and me could go to the movies.”

“I don’t date white men.”

“I know how to show a lady a good time.”

“I ain’t prejudice, mind you. I just don’t deal with white people any more than I have to.”

“That’s kind of the definition of *prejudice*.”

“So that won’t get me nothing?”

“Tell me what’s going on, and maybe I can see what this will do for you. It might be a simple business that I can take care of quickly.”

“I need you to talk to a fellow.”

“I guess we’ll be talking about something specific?”

“What’s that mean?”

“Means you have a point to all this. You would want me, or the darker gentleman, to talk to him about something that’s on your mind, right?”

“I suppose you could say that,” she said. “I think my son was murdered.”

“Oh,” I said.

Now I was truly interested. I had feared this would be a lost-cat job, and though I’ve nothing against reuniting folks with their lost pets, most of the time a cat will just come home.

“I want the black man to do it ’cause he’s black.”

“You think that would help?”

“You might not fit into the projects in Camp Rapture.”

I nodded. “That could be true. Sounds to me like you need the police. I know a good cop that can help you.”

“I been to the cops. They say I need proof.”

“Yep. That’s the way it works.”

“This *is* in Camp Rapture,” she said.

“Ah,” I said. “The pit.”

“Shit hole is more like it,” she said.

“Cop I was talking about is one of the black men you saw here, Marvin Hanson, but he’s a LaBorde cop, not Camp Rapture.”

“Then get the other one,” she said. “I want the black man here to get proof. Dealing with cops makes my ass hurt and nothing gets done.”

"When I'm not toting a bale for them ole white masters or hoeing a row of cotton, I work here as well. And I gave you the vanilla cookies. Trust me, the black one, he wouldn't have given you the crumbs in the bottom of the sack."

"You ain't never hoed no row of cotton."

"And neither have you. Only cotton around here in the last fifty years is in an aspirin bottle."

That made her grin.

I said, "I have done farmwork, though. Used to work in rose fields. I worked in an aluminum chair factory, had an unfortunate period of employment at the chicken plant—"

"You worked there?"

"I didn't fit in. It was what you might call an unsuccessful period in my work history."

"I worked there."

"When?"

She told me.

"I was there then," I said.

"Say you was?"

"I was."

"You remember that woman got attacked on the other side of the fence, and a white fellow climbed over it and saved her?"

"That was me."

"No it wasn't."

"Yes it was."

"You the one…you was thinner then, wasn't you?"

"Thanks for noticing."

I had just been congratulating myself on how much weight I had lost, and now she was telling me I was thinner then. Certainly I had been a bit more spry.

"I was right there in the crowd," she said. "I didn't know that was you."

"Yep. I got a free vacation from the employer out of it. It wasn't as refreshing as I would have hoped. But that's neither here nor there."

I didn't mention the black man she wanted to take her case had gotten us left by a cruise ship, and then we had been attacked by thugs on a beach, and Leonard had gone around wearing an embarrassing hat and a bad wound. We got wounded a lot. We had a way of annoying people.

"Okay," she said. "Okay. That's good. You was the one, that's good.

You did good by that girl. Saving her like that. You're hired."

"Keep in mind I can only do so much for this amount of money."

"You talk to this fellow seen the murder, that's all I want. Start there."

"All right. Tell me what it is me and this fellow will be talking about. Besides murder, I mean. I'm going to need details. I'll want to visit with the cops too."

She shook her head. "I don't like that. I said I talked to them. Shit. I'm pretty sure they was the ones done it."

2

Her name was Louise Elton, and she had a hell of a story. When she finished giving me all her details, I called Leonard. He didn't pick up, so I left a message. I'd hoped he might be back in town but didn't expect him to be. He and John, his longtime lover, were still broken up, something they did about as often as cows went to pasture, and Leonard had decided to play the field. That's how he met the guy on the Internet.

Louise's son's name was Jamar. There wasn't any proof the cops killed him, except there was a guy who claimed to have seen it. But there were problems with his story, or at least that's how the cops saw it. She was convinced this guy had information I could use.

I thought I could at least talk to him and get a read. His name was Timpson Weed. The projects in Camp Rapture were where Timpson hung his hat, if he wore one. It was not a nice place and white people were still considered the enemy down there. Thing was, though, I was bored, and Leonard wasn't around, and I had a number for the apartment.

After having a lunch of some very bad soup I heated in the office microwave, I gave Buffy a pat, got my coat, and drove over to Camp Rapture. It was a fairly short drive from LaBorde, and the projects looked like a place where dreams went to commit suicide and hope got screwed in the ass.

It was a cold day, and my breath came out white when I got out of the car. I pulled my coat tighter around me, started walking along the cracked sidewalk toward a row of apartments. They looked rough. The bricks were chipped, the walls were painted with graffiti, sweet nothings like I FUCKED YO MAMA AND HER PUSSY STANK.

There were similar remarks here and there, names plastered on the wall with what the police liked to call gang signs. Sometimes, if the same signs were on an underpass, they claimed they were satanic. They liked to keep it simple. Whatever they wanted them to be, they became.

Cops in Camp Rapture had really gotten a bad rap of late, though for that matter, they had always had a bad rap, and there was some evidence it was deserved. Not six months ago, they had "discovered" a car thief in a ditch near the car he had stolen, and he'd been shot in the back of the head five times. He was written down as a suicide. That didn't hold up, of course, but I think they thought it might, which gives you some idea of their level of professionalism.

I saw a group of young black men moving in my direction. Late teens and twenties. They were walking that kind of tough-guy walk where one leg seems to drag behind the other. They had their hands in their pockets and there might have been something other than hands in those pockets. Not expecting a shoot-out, I hadn't brought my gun with me. I hated how it was for them, young men without jobs or much in the way of future plans, but mostly I hated there were five of them and there was one of me.

"How are you gentlemen?" I said as they gathered around.

"We fine," said one of them. He was a tall kid with long, lean muscles and a red shower cap on his head. I've never quite understood that fashion statement, but I will say this: If it rained or he decided on a quick shower, he was ready.

"What you want?" said the one with the shower cap.

"Money and fame, of course."

"You a smartass?" said Shower Cap. This question came up frequently.

"Yep."

"You won't be so smart with your teeth on the ground and your ass kicked up around your neck."

"I would neither be smart nor happy if that were to happen," I said. "I'm looking for a fella. You might know him. I have an apartment number."

"We know him, you can bet your white ass we won't be pointing him out," Shower Cap said.

"Well, as I prefer not to bet my white ass, thank you for your time," I said.

I walked through a gap in the near circle they had made and didn't look back. When it came to young men with nothing to do and chips on their shoulder, you handled it the way you handled junkyard dogs. Show no fear, don't make eye contact, and walk away slowly and hope they don't bite you on the ass.

I walked toward where I thought the number of the apartment might be but wasn't. The numbers were wonky. I went around the other side of the apartment. There were a bunch of kids playing on that side, boys and girls, eleven years old or so, kicking a ball around.

They stopped as I came around the corner. White-man sightings were as rare as Bigfoot in those parts. One of the little girls said, “What you doing around here?”

She was rough-looking, had her hair in cornrows, and was wearing clothes that looked to have been handed down from someone larger. She had on pink tennis shoes with dirty white shoestrings in them. She wore an oversize T-shirt with writing that said MY ASS MATCHES YOUR FACE.

Charming.

“Looking for someone?” I said.

“You po-po?”

“I am not the po-po. Aren’t you kids supposed to be in school, or maybe setting fire to something?”

“It’s Saturday, fool,” the girl said.

“You know,” I said, “it is.”

“Course it is, and tomorrow be Sunday, and the day after that be Monday.”

“In school, I bet you make As.”

“Naw I don’t.”

“But your marks in personality are high, aren’t they?”

“What?”

“Nothing. I’m looking for a man named Timpson Weed. I got five dollars for the first person points me to where he lives, and if he actually lives there, I got another five when I come back from seeing him.”

I was already out a large part of my initial down payment on the case.

The little girl gave me the hairy eyeball, like a banker considering your credit report. “Let me see you money.”

I took a five out of my wallet and held it between my fingers.

“Right there,” she said. She pointed at a door on a landing above us.

“I was told number nine-oh-five, not six-oh-five.”

“You know so good, why you asking?”

“That is a very good point.”

I had asked because the lady who hired me said she couldn’t remember if it was a nine or a six. This way I had confirmation. Either that or I had just been worked out of five dollars.

I gave her the bill, went up the stairs and over to the door. I could smell cooking food from under it, chicken and dumplings and a lot of onions. I could also hear the TV going, a game show. I knocked on the door. I waited through a couple of ice ages before it was opened.

It was a short woman with a flower pattern on her housecoat. She was about thirty-five. She had her hair cut close. She was a little thick, with breasts that appeared to need somewhere else to live, there not being enough room in the housecoat. She wore fluffy pink house shoes, a fresher pair than those Mrs. Elton had worn; must have been a trend. They were open in the front and her toes stuck out and her toenails were painted silver. Her fingernails didn't match. They were red.

"What you want?"

"And good afternoon to you."

"What the fuck you want? I got things to do."

"I was told this was the address of the charm school."

"The what?"

I was being uppity and an asshole, but all I was trying to do was help Louise Elton get a fair shake for her son and I had gotten nothing but shit from an eleven-year-old on up. For all I knew, Louise's son Jamar was a bad guy and had died being bad, but the idea was to find out, and so far I was batting nothing. On the other hand, considering how it was in Camp Rapture, at least in some sections, I'd be suspicious too, especially if they thought I was a cop.

"Who's that at the door?" I heard a voice say.

I tried peeking around the woman in the doorway, but that wasn't possible. She had a way of moving so that she was in my eye line. A moment later a big black man without a shirt came to the door and eased her aside.

"What's all this racket?" he said.

"This peckerwood done here asking questions," the woman said.

"Go on back in there and watch the stove. And pull that goddamn housecoat together, woman."

She gave me a look that almost knocked me over the railing, then disappeared in the back to watch the stove and whatever was cooking.

"What you want?" the big man said. He was really big. Tall, wide, and though he had some belly, it wasn't all fat that was moving around under it. Somewhere in there were some abdominal muscles that wanted to show me they were still hard, just slightly marbled.

"Are you Timpson Weed?"

"What if I am?"

"Louise Elton sent me?"

"She did? She still on that business with Jamar?"

"Still is."

"That nigger's dead and most apt to stay that way. Ain't nothing else for it."

"I'm a private investigator, and she hired me to check into his death. See if maybe there was more to it than the police say."

"Course there is. Always is."

"Police aren't always out to screw you," I said. "I know some good ones."

"Ought to try being a nigger for a day."

"Black cop, I'm talking about."

"Yeah, he's just a white man painted over. I've had some experience."

I didn't see any point arguing.

"I'm just trying to help her out," I said.

"Taking her money, you mean."

"Not much money."

He studied me for a while. "I ain't got nothing much to say."

"Tell me the little you have to say?"

He had grown quiet, as if there were spies in the woodwork.

"I don't know," he said.

"It's to help a lady out. If it's not what she wants to believe, then that's better than not knowing what happened."

"Tell you what, you buy me a beer."

"Where?"

"The joint outside the city limits. Seven o'clock."

"Joint have a name?"

He laughed. "That's just it. It's called the Joint."

"Seven p.m. I'll find it."

"Might want to bring a razor and a billy club with you. The clientele is old-school."

"Meaning?"

"They don't like white guys. Hell, they ain't that fond of each other."

3

I went downstairs and started across the lot, and here came those young men again, the red shower cap in the lead, all of them doing that leg-drag act. I had a feeling they had decided to give me a bit of a bounce just to show Whitey who was in charge down here. I was glad to let them be in charge.

I glanced around to see if there was another way to my car, but there was only a clearing to the right and the projects to the left. The clearing led across a dried-out field of grass littered with broken bottles and no telling what all. On the other side of it was another housing project. I would have had to have packed a camp stove and provisions to walk that far around to avoid trouble. That's what I should have done anyway, but my pride wouldn't let me. Or, to be more exact, I was too lazy to do it.

The little girl I gave the five dollars to came out of an open door in the projects and said, "You find him?"

I stopped, kept an eye on the young men. They were still coming.

"I did," I said.

"Then you owe me five dollars now, don't you?"

"Guess I do."

"Ain't no guessing about it."

I got five dollars out of my wallet, glanced toward the young men. They had stopped and started to mill, like they were waiting on me. Behind them, coming up the walkway, I saw Leonard. He had gotten my message, which meant he had been near home when I called. He was walking in that kind of swagger he has, his head held up; his eyes, even from a distance, looked like two hard nuggets of coal. He had on a shadow-black fedora, his new affectation, and he wore it like he was a black Humphrey Bogart and was swinging two sets of nuts.

"Them boys don't like you none," said the little girl, glancing in their direction.

"I don't even know them."

"That why they don't like you."

"I don't plan to agitate them."

"They always agitated. That big one, got on the blue shirt, that Laron. He lives to fuck people up."

"You got a mouth on you, kid."

"Ought to heard my mama."

"What about the one in the shower cap?"

"He bad as Laron. Laron, he don't talk much, but Tuboy, he a talker, and he sneaky. He got a razor he carry behind his back under his shirt."

"Thanks for the tip."

"Won't do you no good."

The boys were starting to come my way again.

"They gonna sort yo' shit just 'cause they can."

"It might sort out different than they expect."

"Why, you gonna turn into a bunch of white boys? That your superpower?"

"My superpower is a friend in the right place," I said, and started toward the crowd of men.

Leonard had come up behind the boys now. He had already read the situation, and since he had on his badass hat, he was talking shit.

"Get the hell out of the way," I heard him say, and they parted before him as if he were a Mack truck. Leonard isn't a little guy, but he's not supersize either. He always gives the impression of being bigger, way he talks and walks. He leads with his dick, as one old man we trained martial arts with once put it.

"Hey, man," said the big one, Laron. "What the fuck you doing? Coming up in here like that."

Leonard hooked him to the head with a right and knocked him down. Laron lay still, either unconscious or wisely aware that getting up would be a bad idea.

Red Shower Cap, also called Tuboy, turned then, brought his hand out from behind his back. I got a glimpse of the razor opening. I started running toward them.

Leonard stepped up and hit Tuboy in the mouth while he was bringing his hand around. Tuboy fell to his knees and dropped the razor. He rocked in place.

One of the young men looked as if he might try and pick the razor up.

"Fixin' to be a stack of you assholes laying up in here," Leonard said, whipping his head around, glaring at the others.

They stepped back.

I arrived.

"Good," Leonard said. "Now you show up. You stop for a bowl of chili?"

"Came as fast as I could, but I did want that chili."

Leonard reached over and grabbed the shower cap on Tuboy's head, yanked it off. There were cornrows underneath and there was lint in the cornrows.

"What you got this on for, you stereotypical country motherfucker," Leonard said. He looked at the others. "I ought to just slap the ever-loving pig shit out of all of you. Living up in here like a pack of roaches, wearing a fucking shower cap. What are you, animals?"

I thought, *Animals wear shower caps?*

"You ain't got no call to talk to us like that, brother," said one of the young men.

"I ain't your fucking brother. Shoo on out of here, and take these fat asses with you. I'll keep the shower cap. I'm going to shit in it."

They scattered like geese. They didn't bother to take Laron or Tuboy with them. It was every asshole for himself. Tuboy was still on his knees. His eyes were glazed. He was probably seeing little blue gnomes riding on unicorns.

"He's out, Leonard," I said.

Leonard used the palm of his hand to push him. Tuboy groaned a little, toppled, and lay on his side.

The little girl came over. "You think you're bad, don't you?" She said this to Leonard.

"Baby girl, I don't think, I know I'm bad."

"Them boys hold grudges," she said.

"Do they now? Well, that's going to worry me for days. Who the hell are you?"

"Reba. I was named after a white lady that sings."

"Yeah?" Leonard said.

"Mama liked that cracker shit. I don't. I like me some real music. I mainly go by Little Woman."

"You just made that up," Leonard said.

"Startin' now, then."

"I like Reba," Leonard said. "I mean the singer, if that's who you're talking about. You I don't like at all, you little snot-nosed pile of rat shit."

"Leonard," I said. "Kid."

"This ain't no kid. That there is a fucking four-hundred-year-old midget vampire.”

“Fuck you,” Reba said.

“Fuck you too,” Leonard said.

“You ain’t black at all?”

“What the fuck color am I? This look like shoe polish to you?”

“Uncle Tom is your color.”

“Yeah, well, you want to stay in the goddamn projects and wear your own shower cap and house shoes and whine about the Man keeping you down, you go on and do it. Me, I spit in the Man’s fucking face, tell him it’s face wash, and he’s got to like it.”

“I hope you get et up by a tiger,” she said, walking away.

“Not likely,” Leonard said.

“Leonard, really? You’re going to pick a fight with a kid?”

“She started it. Ancient midget-ass motherfucking vampire.” He yelled out to her then. “I hope your fucking tricycle has a flat.”

She kept walking away, and without looking back, she stuck her hand up in a fist, extended her middle finger.

4

Leonard carried the red shower cap out to his pickup like a scalp he had taken in battle. He opened the door on the driver's side, tossed it inside.

"Can you believe that? Motherfucker going around with a fucking shower cap on his head, and he didn't even have a new do drying out under it, just a nappy head. What the fuck, man?"

"You are not a nice man, Leonard."

We climbed in our respective rides and drove back to LaBorde. Leonard passed me with his window down, waving at me and showing me nearly all of his teeth. He had removed his fedora and was wearing the red shower cap.

Back in LaBorde we drove to the office, went upstairs, Leonard now wearing the fedora again. Buffy met us at the door and I took her out for a walk and to do her business. When she finished and I had a plastic bag of dog poo in the dumpster, I went upstairs and washed my hands. While I did that, Leonard hugged Buffy. He was the one who had rescued her, and I was the one who took her home. He said, "So give me the usual shit about my hat. Get it over with."

"I like it."

"What's that? My hearing going?"

"I like it."

"Be still, my fucking heart."

"No. The fedora works. Only hat you ever wore that worked, except for a cowboy hat. Though, I have to say, that shower cap was precious. Seemed closer to your true soul."

"Fuck you. What exactly were you doing in the projects, anyway? Your message was cryptic. Old as you are, you ought to know the projects ain't a good place for you to be. You might fall down and be yelling, 'I can't get up 'cause a bunch of niggers are whipping my ass.'"

"I was doing fine," I said. "Since when have a bunch of jerks like those guys scared me?"

"I give you that, but that was a double-team job. You being up in there talking to my peeps without backup, and you lily-white, that's not smart, Hap. We go into a place where it's all cracker motherfuckers, I like you with me, so you could have waited a while."

"I concede your point."

"Do you now?"

"I do. But they're not your peeps, Leonard. Except for me and Brett and your reflection in the mirror, you pretty much don't have peeps. And I don't think you would wait on me if you got a wild hair up your ass, cracker motherfuckers or not."

"True. Up in there, though, them projects, you can get your ass killed. Them ain't good people."

"They're not all bad people."

"Yeah, but there's bad enough ones there to get you killed while the good ones watch. You'd think someone would clean that place up, way it is."

"Easy to say from the outside," I said.

"Shit, man, you drove by a white-trash fucker's house and seen it falling down, a washing machine and a stack of tires on the lawn, you'd just think he was lazy-ass trash. You see black folk living like pigs, then you start handing out your liberal bullshit about how they are downtrodden."

"They are. You should know that."

"I know black folk been run over by a lot of shit, but a lot of what runs them over is their own self-pity. I was taught to work."

"They need a job so they can work," I said.

"Need to get off their ass and go look for one, same as them white-trash motherfuckers, who I bet you ain't so sentimental about. Way I see it, color ain't got nothing to do with that lame-ass shit. You go to work or you don't. Opportunities ain't always been there for black folks, but there sure ain't any when you're nested up in some shit hole living on a government check with a crack den next door."

"Wow. That is stereotypical, Leonard. You really got to stop watching Fox News and listening to white-boy talk radio and using the word *nigger* so much."

"It ain't got a damn thing to do with black and white," he said.

I knew there was no way we were even going to meet in the middle on this, so I told him what Louise Elton had told me.

"So she says cops killed her son, and this fellow you were talking to seen it, but he don't want to talk to you in the projects?"

"Pretty much it, yeah."

"He wants free beer, Hap. You take him out, buy him a beer, and he'll tell you he saw an alien eating green cheese out of a dead dog's ass on the fucking landing outside his window."

"You have very little faith in mankind," I said. "Of course, I don't have much either. But I'm going to hope on an individual. Hell, he went in and told the police for Louise. They didn't believe him, or didn't want to. Also, the backstory is a little more complex."

"Whose backstory?"

"Louise's. She gave me some background on things."

"Let me get a cookie…Wait, what the hell, man? Those are my cookies. Why are they on the desk?"

"Louise was company. I thought we should share."

"Fuck Louise. Them cookies were hid."

"You are a lousy hider."

"Damn near the whole bag is gone."

"She liked to dip them in coffee."

"I bet she wasn't the only one."

He snatched at the bag, pushed the fedora back on his head, and started eating what was left. That wouldn't take long.

While he ate, vengefully, I told him all Louise had told me.

5

Louise has a young teenage daughter and, according to her, a fine-looking one. And one night, driving home, she gets pulled over by the police. They tell her she's drunk, but she doesn't drink."

"That may not mean much, a mother telling you her young daughter don't drink," Leonard said. "I bet, to hear Mama tell it, she don't fuck or wear white after Labor Day neither. You know how that is."

"Agreed. But she's pulled over, and the cop, a white cop, he says, 'Tell me your birthday,' et cetera, and then 'Say your ABCs,' and she does this, doing the singsong way of saying the ABCs, and Louise said her daughter, Charm, didn't miss a lick."

"Her name is Charm?"

"Yeah."

"What the fuck happened to Alice, Mary, Karen, and such?"

"Leonard. I didn't name her. So Charm does this, and then the cop says, 'Tell me your driver's license number.' And she does. Can you do that?"

"I can't."

"Louise said Charm did, but the cop, he has her follow him to the station. He takes her in, puts her in an interrogation room, but—get this—handcuffs her. It's just him and her in there and probably no camera. That's my guess. Anyway, Charm says this officer, Officer Coldpoint, he checks her for weapons, but mostly he just rubs his hands over her tits and ass, presses his cock up against her backside."

"This is Charm's story now? Right?"

"Right. So when Coldpoint gets through, he kind of tugs her pants down a little in back, and then he takes her out and cuffs her to a radiator in the back hallway where they bring in baddies. She says she was standing there all night, handcuffed. She asked to take a Breathalyzer right away, but Coldpoint didn't do it. Said he didn't need to, had her dead to rights. She asked for a phone call, asked for a lawyer. Nothing. All night she's handcuffed there and they're bringing in druggies and all manner of assholes, and they see her as they go by, and one of them wets his finger and dips it down her pants into her ass crack, and she's got to hear all the usual smartass remarks jerks make about a good-looking woman, 'cause that kind of talk works so well for lining up dates. Dumbasses with brains a lot smaller than their balls."

"You think things like that," Leonard said. "And sometimes you say them to me, about women."

"I don't manhandle or mistreat women," I said.

"True. But you notice what you think is a good female ass. I don't know exactly what that is, liking men and all. I do know you don't have a good ass."

"Uh-huh. Next morning, this lady cop, Manuela Martinez, she sees Charm there, asks her what's going on. Charm tells her, and Martinez lets her out of the cuffs, lets her go. No questions. No explanations. She's one moment handcuffed, next moment out on the bricks."

"I'd have had me about two lawyers buried up their asses then, and one little back-up lawyer just so I'd have someone to argue with them in the hallway. I'd go hire me that fucking four-hundred-year-old vampire midget at the projects. She could just be there to give them folks shit."

"I hear you," I said. "But Charm didn't do anything at that point. Was just glad it was over. Or thought it was. Next thing she knows this cop is following her around. She drives to the store to get a quart of milk and a box of tampons, there he is. She goes to bed at night, looks out the window, he's parked there, shining a laser pointer at her, that kind of shit. She calls the police station to lodge a complaint, and no one seems able to take it. She even goes to the police station. They're not having it. This other cop, this Manuela, she's fired. Charm doesn't know why, but Manuela has been given her pink slip. So she can't even talk to her about it, least not in an official capacity.

"This harassment shit goes on for months, this cop following her, pulling her over for a broke taillight that wasn't broke before but got broke in the night."

Leonard leaned back in his chair and looked into the emptiness of his cookie bag. "That's some serious shit, man. You believe this Louise lady?"

"I believe it's what she believes. But I haven't gotten to the good part yet. So Charm's brother, Jamar—"

"What is up with these made-up names?"

"All names are made up, Leonard. So the brother, he's pissed, and he's in the car a couple times when this cop is following Charm around.

He goes in to see the cops, and the next thing, he's arrested. They said for starting a fight with Officer Coldpoint. He claimed he only spoke to him, said he was mad, all right, but didn't shove, hit, or bother anyone the way they said it happened."

"This is what he told his mother?"

"That's right. He gets out of jail pretty quick, 'cause they decide to let him go. Next thing Jamar does is he starts filming the cops outside his house—"

"Wait. You said cops, but I thought it was just Coldpoint."

"And his partner. I have his name in my notes somewhere. Maybe some of the others' too. I think other cops were drafted into the cause, at least now and then."

"Hell. Wait a minute. I remember Coldpoint. You remember? He worked at the LaBorde cops for a while."

"I don't remember, but I'll take your word for it. Anyway, Jamar is videoing them with his phone, taking notes, keeping track of when they show up and what they do, and next thing Louise knows there's word Jamar got in a fight and got killed at the projects."

"That's the place for it," Leonard said.

"You're going to stay on that, aren't you?"

"I am."

"Except why was he there? Didn't have any reason to be there, Louise said."

"Louise may be more deluded than Lois Lane about Superman's identity. I mean, really, Clark is wearing a pair of glasses and has his cowlick pushed back. That's a disguise?"

"Is this going to lead to can Captain Marvel beat up Superman? Are who runs the fastest, Superman or the Flash?"

"Well, the comics always cheated on that part about who could run fastest. I think it should have been the Flash. I mean, that's his power. He's fast, and now Superman, he can do that too, he can tie him? I don't buy it. He's got all them other powers, and they have to have him fast as the Flash? That ain't right, man."

"Back to business. Jamar had never been in trouble, nothing. Straight-A student in high school, same as his first year at college."

"But still he was found dead in the projects, and probably went there in the middle of the night?"

"That's the speculation."

"You know why folks go to the projects in the middle of the night, right?"

"To score drugs, mostly. Maybe take in the beautiful sights."

"Bad things do go on there, and as you saw earlier, bad things can happen to strangers who show up there."

"The bad things I saw there were you punching people in the head. The homeys had bad things happen to them, not the strangers."

"True."

"Okay, Jamar, he could have gone there for a nice little bag of something in powder or pill form, what have you, and he didn't have the money, or the would-be seller didn't care he had it or not, could have decided to keep his wares, take Jamar's money, and mash his head. It could be that and nothing more."

"It happens," Leonard said. "Tweakers selling to tweakers, folks get crazy easy."

"Yep, but we don't really know why he was there, and that doesn't mean he needed to die. And then there's one other thing. This man I'm going to see tonight at the Joint. He says he saw cops kill Jamar."

"Yeah. That's some bad business, buddy."

"East Texas hasn't exactly been the land of opportunity for black people."

"Not that much opportunity for anyone here. Not unless you're a doctor, a lawyer, or a drug dealer. But being black and poor doesn't mean I'm going to live in the projects and be tormented by some fucking thug in a shower cap. I live where I want."

"No. You live where you can afford to live. And you're right. That is fucked up about Superman tying the Flash. I'm not buying it."

"Now you're talking."

We bumped fists.

6

We drove to Camp Rapture that night in Leonard's truck to meet up with my secretive snitch.

"You kept the red shower cap, didn't you?" I said as Leonard tooled us along, head thrown back, fedora dipped in front, one hand on the wheel.

"Did not."

"You had it on and were fucking with me."

"That was it. I was fucking with you."

"So I'll never see the shower cap again."

"I don't think so."

"Don't think so?"

"Don't pressure me, Hap."

"You do look cool in that fedora."

"Like I value your opinion."

"But you do."

"Do not."

"Do."

"So you like it?" he said.

"Stylish, brother. You found something that works for you. I know how hard that must be for you."

"You're still searching, though," Leonard said. "Your daughter doing okay?"

"Yep."

"That's working out?"

"Except she and Brett have the colds from hell. I think it might be flu. Brett actually asked that I stay at the office tonight. They are seriously infectious. And I don't want that shit they got."

"But you don't mind sharing their germs with me?"

"I don't have a single symptom," I said. "And I'm keeping it that way. I'm actually kind of enjoying being on my own at the office. Well, there's Buffy. It's nice for a change of pace. Me and Buffy can play checkers until late at night. She hasn't quite got chess down yet."

"You can stay at my place, asshole."

"I'm fine at the office. John and you might get back together, and I'd rather not hear you fucking behind the wall. I can't enjoy that. I keep thinking something is in the wrong hole."

"Long as I've known you, you are still bothered by it?"

"Not the gay, just the act. I don't want to hear it going on."

"That's the same."

"How do you feel about heterosexuality?"

"Nothing against it, but it makes me kind of go eeew."

"Now you get it."

"I'm going to tell Brett you referred to her equipment as a hole."

"I was just speaking in a general way."

"Uh-huh."

"Please don't," I said.

"I'll consider on it," he said.

We pulled up at the Joint. There was a scattering of cars in the lot, most of which looked to be on their last set of rims and happily ready for the car crusher. As we walked toward the entrance we could hear hip-hop popping on a jukebox. When we got to the door, pushed it open, and stepped inside, the place was mostly dark except for neon word twists and beer signs that gleamed with colored light. There was the pulsing glow of an old-time jukebox to the right, and to the left mostly empty tables, except for two guys in a booth against the wall. I didn't see Timpson Weed.

The air smelled of beer and barbecue, a faint aroma of fried hamburgers and onions. There was a little kitchen at the back, to the side of the bar. There was a lit window there and a shelf where the orders could be picked up. There was a sharp-looking black woman with a kerchief over her hair. She was tucked into a pair of shorts so brief the back of them was disappearing into the crack of her ass. She had a tray with beers and food on it and was carrying it toward the rear. She turned her head and gave Leonard a look. Hell. What was I, smashed peanuts? He ain't even batting for your team, gal.

She went on by, and Leonard swaggered over to the bar and sat down on a stool in front of it. I sat beside him. A bartender glided up like a wraith. His face was dark and the blue and red neon lights along the back of the bar made his longish, wild hair shine oddly. His teeth caught the neon when he turned toward us, and the lights gave them a colorful sheen. They looked small in his enormous head.

“You gentlemen might be in the wrong place,” he said.

“No, this is it,” Leonard said.

“Well, I was thinking your friend here might have taken a wrong turn at Sears. Last time a white man in here probably about 1700 and he was scalped by Indians.”

“You’re a real historian,” Leonard said.

“I’ve been told.”

“You ain’t no Indian.”

“Oh, I got some Cherokee in me.”

“When that Indian did the scalping was up in here, did he order a beer? I know I’m going to. Hap here, he’ll have a Diet Coke or some such, and if you got Dr Pepper, I’ll have that for a chaser.”

“You are some tough drinker,” the bartender said to me. “Diet Coke?”

“Put it in a dirty glass,” I said. “Though from the looks of things, that might be standard.”

The bartender smiled broadly. There were bubbles of spit on his teeth, and the teeth and bubbles shimmered with neon light. The bartender had a way of holding his mouth open when the smile was gone, like a whale cruising for plankton.

“It’s just that my clientele don’t enjoy me having white folks for customers,” he said.

Leonard looked around. Besides the waitress, dropping off orders, in the back, two black men at a booth lingered there with all the excitement of a poetry reading. They didn’t even look at the waitress, which might suggest blindness. At a couple of tables nearby, some lonely drunks sat staring into their beer bottles, hoping for genies to come out of them and offer them their youth back, along with a fresh beer.

“Looks to me your clientele doesn’t know work sweat from bottle sweat,” Leonard said. “You give this man a Diet Coke if you got it, and if you don’t, you give him one anyway. As for that white stuff, what the fuck you think this is, 1960? You hear of integration, motherfucker?”

“You better put a wheel lock on that mouth of yours,” said the bartender. “Integration worked the other way around.”

“Actually it works both ways,” I said.

The bartender looked at me. Leonard looked at me.

“Don’t get your fingers in my jam jar, Hap. I’m kind of on a roll here.”

“Only roll you gonna be on is rolling out that door with my foot up your ass,” said the bartender.

"Now how can I roll with a foot up my ass?" Leonard said. "That don't make sense."

The waitress glided behind us and started through a door at the back. She paused at the door, cocked her ass, and gave Leonard a look that a straight man would remember on his deathbed.

Leonard said, "Save it, honey, I suck dicks."

She looked startled, lost her smile, went on through the door and out of sight.

"I bet you do," the bartender said.

"Oh, I do. Just not yours."

The bartender realized Leonard was serious, and his mouth made a shape like he had just bitten into a sour persimmon.

"I like my dicks clean and attractive, and I like the bodies attached to them not to look like they pull a beer wagon on its way to the barn."

"I done told you where my foot's gonna go," said the bartender, "but considering what's been up your ass, I'm reconsidering that."

"Your foot goes in there, little gel might get on it. I just had a fresh one up there this morning, and I don't mean a foot. Wasn't that good, actually. It was like fucking a bedpost with Vaseline on it. I like it warm and loving. This wasn't. That's all right, though. A dick in the ass is better than a greased cucumber any day."

The bartender was going through a list of snappy comebacks in his head, but his mouth wasn't delivering.

Leonard checked his watch.

This confused the bartender.

"How long does this fucking song last?" Leonard said. "What is that shit?"

"Music," said the bartender.

"That what you call it?"

"I like it," I said.

"You got no taste in music," Leonard said. Then to the bartender: "Jesus, you need to get you some Hank up in here, some Loretta, Kasey Lansdale, Merle Haggard, or Reba. Going too fast for you? I was wanting you to write this down. You know, make a list for your distributor."

"You some kind of hoedown nigger?" the bartender said.

"I thought you was about to put a foot up my ass," Leonard said. "I think you got a certain hesitation, is what I think."

About that time Timpson Weed came in and strolled over to us. He sat on the stool by me.

Bartender said to Timpson, "You know these motherfuckers?"

“The white one.”

“That would be me,” I said, raising my hand.

“I’m starting to like him better than the other one,” the bartender said.

“It’s all right,” Timpson said, nodding at me. “I invited him in to talk. I don’t know this other one.”

“This is my partner, Leonard Pine,” I said. “We work together.”

“On what?” the bartender said.

“Freelance plumbing,” I said. “Let’s have that beer and Diet Coke, and whatever this man wants. Put it on my tab.”

“You don’t have one,” said the bartender.

“Fix me one up,” I said. “You got any peanuts?”

“Not for you,” the bartender said.

We slid away from the bar and went over to a table and sat down.

“You have me come here so you could screw with me?” I said.

“I ain’t screwed with you,” Timpson said.

“Yeah, but the bartender has.”

“Me and him ain’t got our legs tied together,” Timpson said. “He does what he wants.”

“Like you don’t know a honky is going to get his chain jerked in here, or worse,” Leonard said.

“He looks like he can handle himself,” Timpson said. “I seen them scars over his eyes, knot on his nose.”

“He handles himself all right,” Leonard said.

“So you were fucking with me?” I said.

“Some,” Timpson said.

He looked at Leonard, said to me, “So who is this dude?”

“Same guy he was a minute ago,” I said. “Leonard Pine.”

The barmaid brought our drinks over, but she didn’t look at Leonard this time. She put them down and moved away quickly. As expected, there were no peanuts.

I nodded at Timpson. “Tell again what you saw? Tell me what you couldn’t say at the projects.”

7

I could say it," he said, "but it worries my woman to hear it. She don't want no cops coming down on us. I tried to do the right thing, and that didn't work out so well. Ain't no right thing when you come from around here."

"Let me get my violin out," Leonard said.

"What?" Timpson said.

"Forget it," I said. "It's just us now. No cops. Me and Leonard work together, so we both need to hear it."

Timpson Weed gave Leonard a hard eyeball, but that didn't cut any ice. Leonard didn't blink. Timpson turned his attention to the two men in the back booth. They looked at him for a moment, then looked away.

"I went out on the landing to smoke," Timpson said. "I could see what anyone could see if they was out there. Figure there was plenty witnesses, but I'm the only one ended up talking. What I saw was this boy getting a beating out there in the lot. Last time I seen a beating like that it was on television and it was Rodney King, only he was big and this boy wasn't big at all. Teenager. They hit him so much like a piñata, I expected him to shit candy."

"Sure they were cops?" I asked.

"They had on cop uniforms. Three of them. They had nightsticks, them old-fashioned kind, and even though it's some distance, there's enough light there to see by. They looked at me, and I went in the apartment."

"How long did the beating go on?" Leonard asked.

"Before I went inside, maybe a minute or two, but a lot of smacking takes place in a minute or two, as they had them a three-man team. I wasn't all that against it, as there's these meth heads all up in there, and my woman's son by another man, he died of that stuff. She had a little problem on it herself for a while. But I tell you, in that time I seen them, they beat on that boy until he was flat as a rug, and then they looked and seen me, and like I said, when they looked and saw my ass, I went inside. I expected I'd get me a knock on the door. But I didn't. Next day I find out who that boy was. Not no drug dealer that anyone knew of. Though some said he was there to buy from some of them wandering niggers we got there, ones think they're tough. I heard a story about a man wearing a hat like you come up and knocked a couple of them fuckers so hard their nuts flew off. That was you, wasn't it? I'm putting it together now."

Leonard nodded. "I think their nuts come a little loose, not completely off. I was feeling a little poorly that day."

Timpson grinned, then almost immediately turned as serious as a rattlesnake.

"I got to thinking on that beating, and I thought, buyer or seller or whatnot, he was just a kid and he took a hard whacking, hard enough to smack his life loose. But he didn't have that drug-dealer look. You can't tell by looks all the time, but you get so you got an idea. I went down to the station and reported on those cops. No one had heard of them, way I described them. No record of a call-out to the projects. They didn't know nothing, including their own shoe size. I come back to the apartment, and then I got word to that boy's mother, what I seen, and I tried calling some people that said they could get me up in there with the police chief, but what that got me was a cop car following me for a few days. Finally I dropped it. I never mentioned it again. I didn't want to be another dead nigger in a ditch with his asshole pulled up over his head. Boy's mother tried to talk to them, brought up what I saw, and that's when the police start on my ass again. I drive to town to get a six-pack, they was there. I go in the toilet at a filling station, hell, they was damn near there to wipe my ass. I didn't say no more about it. I got the picture and the frame it was in. They quit following me again. I shouldn't be saying nothing to you. I don't want to get dragged in on it, but I can't forget how it sounded out there, them clubs laying into that boy. I could hear bones break up like peanut brittle. It was some shit, I tell you that."

"We'll keep you out of it for now," I said.

"For now?" Timpson said. "Man, I come in here and try to do you a solid, and you gonna put me out there in it again?"

"Only way you'd have to come back in it," Leonard said, "is we get enough shit on those cops that killed that boy, the law might want them to put you on the stand."

"Camp Rapture ain't got no law. It's a goon town when it comes to law."

"Case like this," Leonard said, "I bet we could get a trial moved to someplace like LaBorde. Cops there are run by a good man and a friend of ours. You'll get played fair by him."

"I don't trust any cops," Timpson said. "I could start having some memory loss."

"You could," I said. "But I think you could still hear them bones breaking like peanut brittle in your head. We find out what the hell happened and why—"

"He got beat to death is what happened," Timpson said.

"—we'll nail the killers' dicks to a wall, then maybe you'll feel freer to talk to the authorities."

Something passed over Timpson's face that was hard to identify. It could have been a heavy thought; it could have been gas.

"Don't count on it," he said. "Right now, consider me and you two done. I just come here for a beer. But I wish you good luck."

"By the way," I said. "Were these cops white, black, Hispanic…"

"White," he said. "Big mothers, except for one. Well, he was big, but not tall. He was about as wide as a beer truck without the wing mirrors."

"One more question," Leonard said. "Who all else did you see out there while you were watching? Who else might have seen what went down?"

"I didn't take note," he said. "I got my ass inside."

"Did you see a car the kid might have been driving?" I asked.

"No. I didn't. I didn't even see a cop car. I wasn't taking notes or taking pictures, just trying to smoke a goddamn cigar."

He turned his beer up and finished it, stood, and pushed his chair back.

"Good night, fellas," he said. "Try the pulled pork here, it's fucking divine."

He went out.

8

We sat and drank our drinks, watched the fellows in the booth at the back. They weren't interested in us at all. Or at least they pretended not to be. We were about to leave when Leonard turned and went back to the bar. I trailed after him. Leonard put money on the bar for our drinks.

"You know, I'm going to leave you a tip," Leonard said and leaned over the bar. "The tip is some advice."

"I can't spend that," the bartender said.

"It's worth having and possibly lifesaving. I wouldn't give you two cents more than the drinks," Leonard said, "but this advice is free and valuable. We ever come back in, don't fuck with us next time."

"Don't come back in."

Leonard pondered that idea.

"That's fair enough," Leonard said. "Where's your shit house? I need to pee."

"You can go somewhere else and pee," said the bartender.

Leonard leaned away from the bar, unzipped his pants, and got his dick out. He started peeing against the bar, splashing it on the floor.

"I have to pee now, not later," Leonard said. "All you had to do was tell me where the shitter was."

"You son of a bitch," the bartender said, and he reached down behind the bar.

"You've been warned," I said.

I eased up really close to the bar, leaned my face over it. I was maybe two feet from him. "Best be a bugle you pull out from behind there, and you better know how to play it."

The bartender stared into my face. He lifted his hand up. It was empty.

"Damn," Leonard said, shaking his dick, the nose-twitching smell of urine in the air. "That was refreshing. You're lucky I didn't need to shit."

One of the men in a booth at the back stood up, a heavy guy with a bit of a belly.

“Sit down,” Leonard said.

The man stretched and sat down.

Leonard zipped up, made a show of it, slow and tedious, like he was sacking up an anaconda.

The bartender glared at him. Leonard glared back. I tried to look pleasantly amused, which wasn’t that difficult.

“You know what, bartender,” Leonard said. “It smells like piss in here. You ought to clean up. Maybe spray some kind of de-stinker around.”

We went out, not too briskly, but quickly enough.

As we were climbing into our ride, I said, “Couldn’t help yourself, could you?”

“He was rude,” Leonard said.

“Thank goodness you showed him some etiquette,” I said.

Leonard nodded. “You never know what will stick with and educate a man. And if he didn’t learn anything, at least I got to pee.”

9

I drove us away from there and said to Leonard, “What do you think about Timpson?”

“Got a good story, but maybe too good. Sounded somewhat rehearsed to me, maybe mixed with some truth. I don’t know, I get weird vibes from that guy, like he’s trying to put his life in the middle of the road when he’s been whipping left and right for some time. Shit, I’m not sure he ain’t still whipping.”

“Sounded believable enough,” I said.

“Uh-huh, so do them people see Bigfoot now and then, but they ain’t yet convinced me there’s any Bigfoot, and that Timpson fellow ain’t yet convinced me that things went down like he said.”

“You are very hard to please.”

“Get the best out of life that way,” Leonard said.

* * *

Back at the office, I took Buffy for a walk, and when she finished with her business, me and her went upstairs and I washed up. I got a jar of peanut butter and a half loaf of bread from the cabinet, pulled out a jar of strawberry jelly from the minifridge, used a plastic knife to make a sandwich.

“Want one?” I asked Leonard.

“I do,” he said while washing his hands.

I made two.

I got a dog treat out of one of the drawers, a pig’s ear that was actually made of peanut butter, and gave it to Buffy. She loved those things, though they did make her fart.

I got Leonard a Dr Pepper out of the fridge and a small carton of milk for myself.

We sat at the desk, me in the client’s chair, Leonard in the other. We ate our meal.

“How was your date?” I asked.

"Dry. He didn't lubricate very well."

"Not what I meant. How was the date itself, without the details on your snake's journey down a dry well?"

"Feel stupid about it, going on one of those dating sites."

"Yeah. I didn't know they had those for gay folks."

"Yeah. We date too. Some of us own property."

"Not what I meant."

"It's new. They match you up. Me and this guy, Terrance, we have the same beliefs, similar background, though he's better educated—"

"An extra day in kindergarten and he's better educated."

"Fuck you very much. We fit just about everywhere, except in certain slots."

"Okay. Enough."

"I don't just mean those slots," Leonard said. "For once, I was being metaphorical. On paper, or onscreen, if you will, we are such a match it's a surprise we aren't long-lost twins separated at birth."

"That could be a messy dating situation if it's true," I said.

"He's as black as me, got the same politics, likes country music and even likes vanilla cookies of all denominations."

"Is he a fool for hats?"

"That I don't know. But we got together, and no chemistry. It was like a duck and a rat. They don't want to hang out. Nice-looking fellow, got a great ass, but dry, and me and him, we don't really have anything in common outside of what's on the dating site. I thought, damn, me and him can play country music while we fuck, have some vanilla cookies afterwards—"

"A hand wash will be in there someplace, right?"

"But I find him almost as interesting as a horseshoe tournament."

"Those can be tense," I said.

"Let's say almost as interesting as buttering toast, without the butter. Did I mention he's kind of dry?"

"I think it came up."

"He's like talking to a cardboard cutout, but with less expression. He has all the humor of a corpse after ten years in the ground."

"Maybe your humor sucks."

"He's like one of your jokes. You know the joke, but you don't know how to tell it. I told it, he thought it was hysterical. One about the big-mouth frog. You can't do the frog's small voice. That's what pulls it off. But that joke was his one laugh. I mean that, he laughed once."

"You said he thought it was hysterical."

"That was hysterical for him. You see, he knows what humans do, but he don't know what they're like. Mostly he's a mimic. He don't know how to play it so it ain't just an act. It's so obvious, he practically brings his scenery and sound track with him."

"Sociopath?"

"No. Just dull."

"I tell great jokes, by the way."

"No, you don't."

"So, you and him? No more dates?"

"Not sure. We definitely do not click. He's a juicy-looking thing, but there's no juice in him. He's like a plastic apple."

"Damn, this is interesting, but you know what? Let's talk about the case."

"I like to talk about me."

"Yeah, but let's don't. It always leads to a drilling expedition."

"You asked."

"My mistake."

"All right," Leonard said. "Here's what we got. Your lady Louise, she has a daughter, Charm, who got picked up by a shit-head cop and his shit-head partner. They treated her badly and a bad guy stuck a wet finger down her ass crack. A female cop let her go, and the cop got fired. Charm's brother decided to take care of her by harassing the cops who were harassing his sister. He aggravated the police who were following her around, and the cops killed him. We have an eyewitness who doesn't really want to talk about it, and who sounds fishy to me, and we got a dead kid. So thing is, or so it seems to me, we got to talk to those cops. Thing that bothers me, though, is how did the kid get to the projects? He had to have had a car. That hasn't come up, and Timpson said he didn't see one."

"Doesn't mean it wasn't there, and in the end, does it matter how Jamar got there?"

"It might. Was he dropped off? Was someone there with him that escaped a beating?"

"Or was he led to a beating?" I said.

"That crossed my mind. And how did he end up there with three cops beating him to death with old-style billy clubs. Who carries those these days? Timpson didn't see a police car either. Were they fucking beamed down by Scotty on the *Enterprise*?"

I took a moment to consider.

"Do you think Scotty would do such a thing?"

“No,” Leonard said. “Not really. He always seemed like one of the good guys to me…So the cops see Jamar, and they are sick of his shit, and here they have him buying dope—”

“You don’t know that,” I said.

“No, I don’t. I’m just fishing.”

“All right,” I said. “They were sick of him following them around, taking photos. They didn’t like the shoe on the other foot, saw their chance to get even. Maybe he wasn’t buying or selling shit, just like his mama said, but they might have wanted to pin dope-buying on him, or -selling. Make it look that way. Decided to have him resist arrest, even if he wasn’t. They gave him a good ass-reshuffling for annoying them, but they got too happy in their work, did the billy-club boogaloo on his head, and he died.”

Leonard nodded. “Could be. Still, something seems to be seriously missing in Timpson’s tale.”

“You keep coming back to that,” I said. “He sounded sincere.”

“And you keep coming back to *that.* Good liars sound sincere, which is why they’re good liars. He sees this cop killing, goes in the house, and the cops just forget him? They were willing to kill Jamar, why are they letting Timpson go? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Good point. But I get the feeling that’s his story and he’s sticking to it.”

10

I decided I'd talk to Marvin at the cop shop. He probably knew some of the coppers in Camp Rapture, could maybe give me a lead into who was dirty there and who wasn't, who might be a contact worth having, but when I phoned him, he was out. I left a message, and then me and Leonard left for the day. I'm sure there was plenty we could do to find out who did what, but to tell you the truth, I wasn't sure what it was or how to go about it. I wished right then I had Sam Spade's private number. Of course, he'd be really old by now, might be missing a step or two. McGruff the crime-fighting dog could be available, though. We damn sure needed someone's help on this.

Me and Leonard aren't so much detectives as we are persistent bumblers, though some detective skills were wearing off on us in spite of ourselves. Thing was, though, Leonard wasn't exactly on his best game. He was acting tough, as always, and frankly, it wasn't much of an act. He was the toughest son of a bitch I knew. But he was acting tough, not only in skin and bones, but in emotions as well. He was tough enough, all right, but no one is that tough. I knew he was hurting over John.

For a while John and his niece had moved in with Leonard, then John left again, and Leonard helped the niece, Felicity, set up her own apartment. She had a job at a Starbucks and it was a good start. Like her uncle John, she was gay, and catching hell from her father because he thought gay was like choosing a haircut and all you had to do was let it grow out or get another haircut. Unlike her uncle John, Felicity knew who she was and was proud of it, and Leonard was her hero. I could understand that. He was kind of mine sometimes.

Anyway, John left again, for the umpteenth time, and Felicity stayed in LaBorde. Her having only a part-time job gave her time off, which made her think she might could get some college in come next semester. She wanted to be a pharmacist.

Leonard had plans that night to take her to dinner and a movie, give her a pep talk or some such, so his head wasn't really into the business at hand. Honestly, we could take a bit of time. Jamar wasn't going to get any deader.

I put Buffy in the car and we went home, daring ourselves to catch what the ladies had, though I guess Buffy was immune. In spite of my telling Leonard how I was enjoying a bit of time away from home, I was starting to get lonely. I missed not only Brett, but Chance as well. Each day, I found myself bonding more closely with my daughter.

Daughter.

That was really hard for me to wrap my head around, but I liked the idea a lot.

It was quiet in the house, and Chance lay on the couch as if dead. Brett was in the kitchen heating water. Buffy went over and sniffed Chance, then lay down in front of the couch.

Brett spoke softly when she saw me.

"Cold medicine. It knocked her on her ass," she said. "I'm just now recovering from the same stuff."

Brett's face was pale and her nose was red and her eyes looked watery. She had her hair pulled up and tied at the back of her head. I thought she was beautiful.

"Feel better?"

"For the moment," she said. "I think it's actually more than a cold, some kind of flu. I do okay, and then I'm not okay. It's like constantly being run over by a train, revived, and run over again. You really should stay at the office. Let me assure you, you don't want this stuff."

"As a nurse, don't you know what this stuff is?"

"Former nurse."

"So you forget everything when you quit being a nurse?"

"I was never very good at diagnosing myself, because I so rarely get sick."

I moved closer to her. She stuck her palm against my chest.

"I'm not kidding. No kissing or hugging. This virus is a bitch with a hammer."

"Maybe a kiss would make it worthwhile," I said.

"Hey, I kiss like an ace, but even my wonderful wine-sweet kisses wouldn't be worth it."

"Actually, your lips do look dry."

"They are. I'm making hot tea. Want some?"

"Sure."

"Get the honey."

I prowled through the cabinets for the honey. It was in one of those plastic bears. I put it on the table, told Brett to sit, and finished making the tea. I found some animal crackers, something I liked and Chance loved, and put the box on the table.

"My stomach won't take it," Brett said.

"More for me," I said.

"You better save Chance some of those," she said.

"Do I have to?"

"She's your daughter. Do you want to become like Leonard, way he is about vanilla cookies?"

"I do not."

"You and her are a lot alike. Genetics isn't for nothing, you know."

"Love of animal crackers is no doubt a deeply embedded genetic trait. As for environment, I'm not sure we're offering her the best there is. That being my fault, of course, not yours."

"We are doing fine. You are doing fine."

Brett sipped her tea.

"All I can taste is hot," she said.

I tasted my tea. It was fine and sweet with honey, but then again, I wasn't sick. My taste buds were working. I had an animal cracker.

"Tell me what you have going?" Brett said.

I told her about Louise and our interview with Timpson Weed.

"Sounds like you've earned your sixty-five dollars, and then some."

"I suppose so," I said.

"But you want to keep digging?"

"You know I do."

"All right," Brett said. "Let's talk about it. So the kid was following the cops around, and the next thing you know, he's dead, and Weed says he saw him beat to death in a field by the project houses by some cops?"

"Yep."

"Know what bothers me about that?" Brett said.

"The fact that three cops in plain sight beat a kid to death? Leonard also brought up the part about them just letting Timpson Weed sail loose, and that no cars were seen by Timpson, or so he said. People live there, they notice things like that. They knew I was on-site before I actually got out of my car."

"What I'm thinking is, why were the cops that stupid? Why didn't they arrest him, take him in, or, if they really had a grudge, why didn't they take him somewhere else and kill him? That would have been smarter."

“Perhaps they didn’t intend to kill Jamar,” I said. “They were mad and it got out of hand. And maybe, simply put, it was a situation of opportunity, and they’re not that smart.”

“Could be,” Brett said, and sipped at the tea and made a face.

“Stupid people get jobs too,” I said. “Thing is, folks that get the badge a lot of time couldn’t get a merit badge from the Cub Scouts, but they want the job and are persistent, qualified or not. Next thing you know, they’re carrying a gun and an attitude and have a badge pinned on their chest.”

“There are good cops.”

“Of course. Marvin is the best. I know a few others. But there are still plenty that when they were kids they got a participation trophy for coming in dead last, and they’re still mad about it. What is a fact is the kid, Jamar, was following them around, pissing them off, filming them. They didn’t expect it, didn’t like it, and the kid ends up dead.”

“Uh. I’m feeling worse.”

Brett stood up with her cup of tea and poured it in the sink.

“Should I take you to the doctor?”

“Nope. I’m a nurse. Remember?”

“Were.”

“Hasn’t been that long.”

“Now suddenly you’re falling back on your nursing credentials.”

“I like to work it the way it works best for me.”

“You make a good nurse but a lousy patient.”

“That’s probably right,” she said. “Look, I got to go back to bed. Will you check on Chance, see that her fever is going down? Mine sort of comes and goes, so I guess she’s in the same boat.”

“You look pretty weak. Need help upstairs?”

“No. I got it.”

Brett headed up and I went over to the couch and gently touched Chance’s head. It was warm, but not on fire.

I went back to the table and finished my tea. I sat there and thought about what Brett had said, and the more I thought about it, the more I wondered. Maybe she and Leonard had the right kind of suspicions. Would the cops just beat the kid to death there in plain sight? They wanted to kill him, why not get him in the car and take him some place isolated and fix him so he’s fertilizing grass. Thing was, why were they following Charm in the first place, which was the business that led to them following the brother? Those thoughts ran around and around in my head like a mouse on a hot stove.

I finished up with the tea, put the cookies away, cups in the dishwasher, started for the hall bathroom. I stopped when I passed the couch. I looked at the young woman sleeping there, my daughter. She was covered in an old quilt Brett had inherited from some relative, and all that was visible was her head on a couch pillow, her black hair tumbling over it. She looked like her mother, or at least the way I remembered her. I could see parts of me there too. Not in a Frankenstein-monster stitch-up kind of way, but in a blend of two people.

Being a father had as much to do with being present as it did with genetics. More, actually. A lot of what we say is genetics is proximity, by my reckoning, and the way we learn to be human is by example. I wasn't sure how good my example was. I had killed people, and I had hurt people. All for good reasons, I told myself, but at three in the morning, and sometimes in moments like now, I wasn't so sure I was anything more than a thug who justified his actions. Leonard, at least, believed in himself and the choices he made. I was more shaky about those things.

Chance stirred a little. I went over and sat in a chair across from the couch. She opened her eyes and saw me.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey. You still have a fever. Brett said it was really high before. Not as much now. I felt your forehead."

"I dreamed a bird lit on my head. That was you."

"Most likely. Any better?"

"Just feel unbelievably tired. Hard to pick up my arms sometimes. Brett, she's been really sick."

"I know. She was up a bit, but now she's back in bed."

"It's more than a cold."

"Brett thinks the same. Flu is my guess."

"You're going to end up with it," she said.

"I hope not. You get better, you and me, maybe we could do something."

"Arm wrestle?"

"We could."

"Badminton? Perhaps a little polo, take part in a tractor pull?"

"You're kind of a smartass."

"From what I can tell, you and Leonard and Brett are all smartasses."

"It's not as positive a trait as you might think."

"But you stay a smartass."

“Some of us have looks and some of us have brains, and some of us are just smartasses. We embrace what we have.”

She sat up on the couch, pulled the blanket around her. She reached down and gave Buffy a pat on the head.

“Can I get you something?” I asked.

“Orange juice.”

I went into the kitchen, washed my hands, poured her a glass of orange juice, and gave it to her. “Can you eat anything?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t get quite as ill as I did thinking about food now, but my stomach is still not crazy about the idea.”

“Okay, then.”

“You know, you look all right.”

“Well, I’m not sick,” I said.

“Not what I mean. You said some got the looks and others got the brains. Mama thought you looked good. I think a lot of women might.”

“So you’re saying I didn’t get the brains?”

She laughed a little. “Brett likes you for some reason.”

“There are still desperate ones in the world,” I said, “and I think in Brett’s case, her eyesight might be failing, and she likes having someone less intelligent than her around.”

“You undercut yourself a lot, but I’m not even sure you believe it.”

“Oh, that’s where you would be wrong.”

“And you three, you, Leonard, Brett, you’re all bright. I like being here. I like talking about something besides what Mama’s boyfriends talked about. Guns. Jesus, which was funny, considering they were gun fanatics and drunks, and when they weren’t talking about Jesus, they were cursing black people, gays, and so on. A few of them had been in prison. None of them had read a page of the Bible, but to hear them tell it they were God’s right-hand men.” She paused a moment. “Leonard seems to really like guns, but he’s okay.”

“Leonard likes what they can accomplish, but he’s not someone who dresses them up and talks to them. He doesn’t talk about ammo and gun grips like he’s talking about beloved family members. Well, actually, he doesn’t have any family members.”

“There’s you and Brett. Me, I hope.”

“Yeah,” I said. “You’re right. He’s my brother. And, Chance, I want you to know, I’m not a perfect kind of guy. I have some skeletons in my closet. I need to be clear about that.”

“Brett’s told me some of it. I figure there’s a lot more to it than she’s told me, but I know this: you’re a good man.”

I actually blushed. “I’m not so sure,” I said.

“I am,” she said. “I know you are.”

“Who you want me to be.”

“I truly believe you are a good man.”

“We’ll give that some time to sort out,” I said.

Right then, one thing was for sure—I wanted to be a better man than I was. For Chance.

11

After sitting by myself in the kitchen, reading an old and not-too-good Western novel now and again, I answered a brief call from Marvin and took a moment to make myself another cup of tea, which I drank quickly.

Chance was asleep again on the couch, Brett was still asleep upstairs, both of them loaded to the gills with fresh flu medicine. I was bored. I called Leonard and he came by and picked me up. I brought Buffy out to the truck with me and let her hop in the backseat. It was one of those four-door truck jobs with a shortened truck bed so as to allow a backseat.

"Wasn't sure you'd want to leave your house," I said.

"Why not. Me and Felicity went to eat, then to the movie, and, well, I could tell she wanted to go home and look at Facebook or some such shit, so I took her. Only so much time a young person wants to spend with a middle-aged person."

"Middle-aged, huh? Double your age and tell me that you are truly middle-aged."

"I'd rather not," Leonard said. "I went home, sat around, and there's no one there but me. I played with my dick awhile, but the dick wasn't interested. Ever have that happen?"

"My pecker is always curious and up for adventure."

"I don't doubt that. I remember one time when we were on a fishing trip. We were up, let me see, Caddo Lake, I think, and we were coming back, and we stopped in that little town—"

"Dangerfield."

"Maybe."

"Pretty sure that was it. Pretty sure I see this coming."

"We found this café, stopped to get a bite, and you start chatting up the waitress."

"Hair black as a raven's wing. Lips like rose petals falling apart, to quote a Bob Wills song."

“Yep,” Leonard said, nodding. “So you start chatting, and the next thing I know the place is closing and we’re going to take her home, and she has you get in the backseat with her, and damn if you two aren’t going at it like a couple of goddamn jackrabbits back there, and there I was in the front seat, a few inches from all that business. Didn’t know where I was going, just driving around like an idiot because she never gave me her address, and if that wasn’t bad enough, you didn’t just screw her until her lights dimmed, you kept going, trying to put them out. She kept saying, ‘Oh, baby, I’ve come, can’t you come?’ And you’re just pounding her so loud that old wreck of mine is vibrating like an egg timer, and you say, ‘I’ll get there when I get there,’ and then she’s screaming and yelling, ‘I’m doing it again,’ and then you still didn’t quit.”

“I am virile,” I said.

“You are an animal. It went on and on. I had to stop for gas, and you two, you’re back there still pumping away while I get gas, and might I say the sight of your raw white ass riding up and down was not a pleasure.”

“Then why were you looking?”

“I wanted to see how it worked. Shit, what do I know about being heterosexual? Curiosity set in, you see.”

“I think you wanted to see my butt.”

“That was an accident, and frankly, it’s left me a little scarred. So I put in the gas, drove to a hill overlooking a park bench, and you two went at it for hours.”

“It wasn’t hours.”

“Well, it was a long time. The car was rocking so much I was getting seasick. I got out and sat on the bench and watched the car rock. When you finished back there, I thought, *Thank goodness.* But then the two of you were at it again. Had no shame.”

“We were young and passion made us stupid and immodest, and I think you are exaggerating a mite.”

“I kept sitting there, and the car kept rocking, and I know for a fact that was how you actually met Chance’s mother.”

“I know you know.”

“What I been thinking is how could a beautiful girl like Chance be made from you, and, if you’ll pardon me, I think her mother would have screwed anything with pants on and maybe a few others wearing short-shorts or a kilt?”

“Our urges have nothing to do with Chance.”

“Actually, they have everything to do with her,” Leonard said.

“Well, okay. But not that night. I don’t think.”

“What messes me around is Chance looks like you, but somehow on her it’s good. Hear what I’m saying? Her mother looked good too, the way I think heterosexual women are supposed to look if they look good, but Chance looks like you.”

“Is there a point to all this?”

“Yeah. Don’t ever tell Chance how you met her mother, outside of saying you met in a café. I know you have a way with the women sometimes, and I don’t get it, but then I wouldn’t. Still, that was cheap. The two of you making a sausage sandwich, and now I know what came of it.”

“She forgot to take the pill, or the pill didn’t work. I asked her if I should use protection, and she said she was on the pill. I’m no idiot.”

“You are an idiot, Hap. You took the word of some woman you had just met. But, considering the result was Chance, then or later, I guess that makes it kind of all right and makes me an uncle, but wow, you buy a hamburger, and the next thing I know you two are in the backseat doing the nasty.”

“We just clicked, man. I liked her.”

“You liked something. And I think she did a lot of clicking.”

“We dated awhile, and you need not be so judgmental. You’re dating off the Internet, and dry holes at that. That’s no better, you know?”

“You have a point. I think because I couldn’t get it up today, and you always can, or so you say, I was a little jealous. And the other thing, well, I didn’t like what you did that night. There wasn’t any courting going on. Just wham-bam-thank-you-ma’am.”

“I got her number. We spent time together after that.”

“Time is one thing to call it.”

“This coming from you. Once again, let me remind you: Internet. No courting. Quick fuck. Dry hole.”

“Yes, but I’ve come to expect more of you.”

I laughed. “You are a piece of work, Leonard. That was many years ago. I hadn’t been broken up with Trudy that long, and it was the one time in my life I was prone to drink. The only time I ever drank, to be exact. And I didn’t do anything she didn’t want to do. Why are we talking about this?”

“I’ll say it again. A bit of jealousy at your ability to perform at the drop of a hat, and for a lengthy period of time. And also, I thought about it today, and thought it might be an embarrassing memory, and that would be fun. But you don't look embarrassed."

"No reason to. So, having trouble with your pecker, huh?"

"I think it's psychological. It's all this stuff with John. Used to, I got up in the morning, had a cup of coffee, I'd start climbing the walls like a goddamn monkey, masturbating all over the place. Had John there, well, I'd bend him over and fuck him hard enough to drive him to town and send him through the car wash."

"You are such a romantic," I said.

"Now, my dick droops, looks like one of those things they used to sharpen knives on. A strop."

"But smaller. Listen, Leonard. Don't let it get to you. Jealousy of my sexual prowess has ruined many a man. And I'm sorry you got a look at my ass, because once my godlike body is revealed, no man or woman will ever suit you again."

"You are so full of shit. I have seen your charm fail you more than once. Even a blind squirrel finds an acorn now and then."

"First I was a hot sex machine, now I'm a blind squirrel."

He chuckled. It was all absolutely juvenile, but we had done it for years, and I think ribbing each other over everything from sex to hair loss was our way of connecting; verbal comfort food.

"Part of the problem is fucking and loving aren't always the same, Leonard. Romantic you're not, but I think the way you talk about John is bullshit. You love him."

"Yeah. Damn me…Hey, why are we riding around with Buffy? We dropping her off at the mall?"

"Because my family has the flu."

"And you're bringing flu germs into my ride, along with dog odor?"

"I'm not sick. Brett and Chance are asleep, so there's no one for me and Buffy to play with, so I called my bestest friend forever."

"And when he couldn't make it, you called me. Again. But why is Buffy in the backseat?"

"She likes your ribald stories," I said.

"We're going to get ice cream cones at Dairy Queen, aren't we?"

"Buffy likes a good cone."

"You really wanted me to take you to get your dog an ice cream, and that's why you called me, isn't it? You wanted to save gas and give Buffy a cone and not have Brett know about it. You heard her say the dog is getting fat."

"I left a note and said we were going riding with you. No secret. Brett will figure out where and why I went."

“Unless you get home before she wakes up.”

“Then I would have to remove the note, and me and Buffy would be silent conspirators together. And you will also be involved.”

“I’m your patsy.”

“That is correct.”

“You, Hap Collins, are a liar.”

“It’s a white lie. And look at it this way. You got to tell me about your dick problems, and you got to tell a true-as-shit story about my manly prowess.”

I looked back at Buffy. She was leaning over the seat with her nose pressed against my cheek.

“She knows we’re going for a cone,” Leonard said.

“Brett thinks I spoil her.”

“You do,” Leonard said.

“A princess deserves special things. Also, I thought we might do something else. Talk to the cop that got fired for letting Charm go.”

“Manuela. You know where she lives?”

“Right before I called you, Marvin called me. He says the cops in Camp Rapture are known as shit stains on the underwear of law enforcement. And that’s a quote. He did say he knew the deputy that got fired, though, and called her a ‘good egg.’”

“A good egg? He’s been watching old cop shows again, hasn’t he?”

“I think so. He gave me her address.”

“I underestimated you. I thought you were merely using Buffy to get yourself an ice cream cone, but you are after evidence.”

“We are detectives.”

“This fired cop’s place close to our Dairy Queen?”

“Not that close,” I said. “And besides, Buffy needs to go to the office.”

“She have paperwork?”

“No, but she does like to tidy up.”

“All right, then, after we have our cones and drop the Buffster off, we’ll drive a little faster on our way over.”

12

We went through the drive-through at Dairy Queen. I got a chocolate cone, and Buffy and Leonard had vanilla. Dogs aren't supposed to eat chocolate, and Leonard always prefers vanilla.

We didn't actually speed up, as Leonard had suggested, but drove around town slowly, eating, listening to Lightnin' Hopkins on the disc player, me holding Buffy's cone so she could lick it until she was down to the cone itself. Then I gave it to her. Her tongue turned blue from the ice cream, and when she was done she stretched out on the backseat and closed her eyes. I think her brain was frozen.

Finished up, we drove Buffy to the office. I took her for a short walk out in the grass beside the office, cleaned up her poo, put her inside, then we drove to the address I had for the deputy, Manuela Martinez.

It was solid dark when we got to Ms. Martinez's place. The CD in the player was now finishing up a Kasey Lansdale tune, "Can't Blame You for Trying." The house was a small house in a less expensive part of town, and it was on a street with similar houses on both sides. Nice houses, but nothing dramatic, middle class with a view to moving upwards. A little better house than mine and Brett's place, brick, with a yard lit by a porch light strong enough to make the moonlight wish for greater wattage. The flowers near the porch were wilting.

There were lights behind the windows, and there were lights on in most of the houses along the street. There was a black pickup truck and a white Ford under the open carport at the Martinez house. Leonard parked at the curb and we walked up the sidewalk that led to the porch and I pushed the doorbell.

We could hear it ding-dong inside, and then a small dog started yapping, and after a few moments we heard a female voice say, "Shut up, Trixie."

Trixie shut up briefly, but by the time Manuela came to the door and cracked it, the dog was barking again.

"Hush, Trixie," Manuela said. I could see the dog through the cracked door. It was a small, mixed mutt, and this time it went quiet and sat, looking at us with what I deduced was an angry-dog expression.

“Yes,” the lady said. She was petite with thick black hair and a fine face that was almost model material, but she had a long scar from her left ear to the tip of her chin. I liked it. It wasn’t deep, it was just a strong white line on a fine dark face. She wore a loose black T-shirt and yoga pants. She was barefoot.

“Sorry to bother you,” I said.

“Are you?” she said.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“My hand that’s behind the door,” she said. “It’s holding a Smith and Wesson.”

“Is that some kind of old-fashioned typewriter?” Leonard said, and grinned.

“No. But it does make a rat-a-tat sound if I pull the trigger just right.”

“We’re not here to bother you,” I said.

“Well, recently I have been bothered.”

“We are not whoever it was that bothered you.”

“Selling Jesus or sewing machines, you are still on my shit list.”

“Neither,” I said. “I don’t think they sell sewing machines door to door, so you can mark that off your list. Jesus has mostly moved to the Internet, I think.”

“It might be cool, though,” Leonard said, “if Jesus was selling sewing machines door to door.”

“You are Manuela Martinez?” I asked.

“I am.”

“We’re here to talk with you about a young lady named Charm. Her mother, Louise, asked us to. She claims her son was murdered by the law and that her daughter was harassed by them. She has us looking into it.”

“Private detectives?”

“Very private,” Leonard said.

“You carrying?”

“Just our handsome selves,” Leonard said.

She smiled a little. “All right, come in, but I’ll hold on to my gun for a while, if you don’t mind, and I’ll have to pat you down.”

“Really?” Leonard said.

“Really.”

“Would it matter if we minded about your gun?” Leonard said.

“It would not.”

“That’ll be just fine, then,” Leonard said.

13

The house was simple but nice inside. Through an alcove I could see into the living room. The couch in there was fat with colorful cushions. A painting on the wall of a great fish jumping appeared to have been stolen from a motel. On the left side of the room, mounted on the wall above the couch, was a very large game fish with a long snout, like the one in the painting. It was coated with dust.

Manuela patted us down, finding no weapons except our razor wit, which was much more self-contained than usual due to her holding that pistol.

She eventually invited us to sit on the couch. Manuela sat in a fat cushioned chair that matched the couch. Trixie jumped up and lay down across her knees. Manuela put one hand on the dog's head, and in the other she held her weapon.

"We have a few questions, just to verify what we were told," I said.

"Who actually sent you? I'm thinking you ought to talk to my lawyer. I have a lawyer on this business, the firing, so if you're sent from the department in any manner, shape, or form, you can fuck off."

"We're not trying to trick you," Leonard said.

"We work for Louise, really," I said. "She said her daughter, Charm, was picked up for drunk driving, but when she asked the cops for the Breathalyzer, they refused, chained her standing up with her pants slightly pulled down in back, left her that way until morning. You came along and let her loose. Is that accurate?"

"What are your names?"

We told her. We told her about the agency and mentioned Marvin Hanson.

"Marvin," she said. "Sure. I should have gone to work in LaBorde, but he wasn't chief there then. Still, would have been better off than Coldpoint and Camp Rapture."

"It's starting to sound as if going over Niagara Falls on a log would be better," Leonard said.

"That's the truth," she said. "All right. You know Marvin, and you used to work for him, so I'll talk. A little. I don't know about the Breathalyzer part, but she was cuffed, and her pants had been pulled down slightly in back, showing her butt crack, and no one would let her pull them up. Her hands were chained in front of her. The officers in charge were mad when I pulled them up for her, and they were madder yet when I uncuffed her and let her go."

"What made you decide to let her go?" I asked.

"It's a boys' club there, and I had a bad feeling about it, and then I looked at the arrest report, and it seemed dodgy. I mean, here's a girl not in a cell, but bound to a radiator, right where perps are brought in, and they're ogling her booty. I knew enough laws had been violated there wouldn't be a real case anyway. I figured Coldpoint was the main one who had violated them. He doesn't like it when people don't do exactly what he says, legal situation or not. He can talk calm and sound intelligent, because he is, but he is a narcissist of the first degree. You know he was in trouble for a shooting some years back, black teenager who got a warning shot in the back of the head, as we say."

"And you were fired over letting Charm go?" I said.

"They said I wasn't holding up my end, but that's not the real reason. Like I said, it's a boys' club of the worst kind, so I wasn't all that upset to leave. I was married for a while, and that job ruined my marriage. Wish they'd let me go a couple years ago. At least then I'd have my marriage and not just some trophy fish he caught mounted on my living-room wall. That really has to go, by the way."

"Yard sale," Leonard said. "Some bozo will buy it and claim he caught it."

"You know, maybe it is best my husband is gone. I never did understand all that trophy fishing and hunting. Had a lion's head somewhere. Maybe he took that with him. Might be in the garage attic. But damn, I did like my job, and I did take it home with me, so I can't blame Brian for becoming annoyed with that."

I waited a moment while she studied the fish on the wall, then turned her head to study us again.

"Did Charm say anything to you?" Leonard said.

"She was crying and she had a camera around her neck, and she said it was starting to wear on her, that it was heavy, and could I at least take that off of her, but I let her go. My guess is Coldpoint wanted to con her into sex, saying if she did that he'd let her go. I don't know that, but rumor is that's his brand and that it works more often than you might think."

"Lot of rumors," Leonard said.

"That's true, but that place stank like week-old fish, and there's things I know that aren't rumors. I've shared those with my lawyers. Charm wasn't playing the game the right way for him, so he decided to punish her. Like I said, he can't stand to lose. He was mad at me already because I wouldn't have sex with him. He said he could help me move up the ladder. I told him there was nothing at the top of any ladder he provided I wanted, and I didn't think my vagina was a ladder, or for that matter a basement."

"A camera?" Leonard said.

I was focused on the vagina part, but Leonard had been more practical.

"Yeah. It wasn't a big camera," Manuela said, "but with it hanging around her neck all night, and with her standing, it probably felt like a truck tire."

"Anything else you can tell us, Miss Martinez?" I asked.

"Not really. And everyone calls me Manny. I let Charm go. Because of that, I went to court, and Coldpoint lost the first round, though I still have more court dates ahead of me. That shit never ends. Main reason they lost on me letting that girl go was they didn't have any Breathalyzer results and the usual judge they have on their payroll wasn't presiding. He was on a fishing trip, so it didn't work out so well for them, and it not working out so well for them isn't something they're used to. Anyway, after the trial, that's when Coldpoint started harassing the brother for harassing them."

"You knew about that?" I asked.

"Yeah. It took them a while to drum me out, so I was around, and I picked up on what they were doing, heard them talk when they didn't know I was listening. As for me, they wanted to make my firing about something else so it wouldn't look suspicious, so it took about a month to get me fired. I kept having to go up for evaluation, this not being right, this being wrong. All bullshit. But I knew Coldpoint was following Charm around, and then when the brother started filming them in return, that damn sure put Jamar on their shit list. Heard the guys gripe about it. They are a sorry bunch, just about all of them. Couple okay fellows, but even they go along to get along. Thing was, Coldpoint wanted me out because I wasn't a team player. And another thing was, early on, he wanted me to lay down in the back of his cruiser and be initiated, same as some female prisoners, and I wouldn't do it. And there's more going on than that. I don't exactly know what, but there's something else, maybe a lot of elses. I think for one they resell the drugs they get from the druggies, make sweet deals with dealers. They use a bit of the product themselves from time to time. You been around that stuff for a while, brought in enough users, you recognize the signs."

"But that's speculation?" I said.

"In court it would be, but I'm more than certain that the sexual favors, drug use, and drug sells are going on. But I couldn't prove it in a court of law. Thing about Charm, though, seemed to be something else going on there. She wasn't your usual druggie, or prostitute, or even someone with a reputation as being the local poke. It seemed when they didn't get their way, they were out to humiliate her, couldn't stand that she and I wouldn't play their game. As for Jamar, can't say they did anything to him. I don't know. But if you had me guessing, I'd guess they had something to do with it. Quite a coincidence that she is harassed, and then her brother harasses them and is found dead."

"Anything more you can tell us?" I said.

"I may have talked too much, more than my lawyer would want, but I do dislike those guys. I'll just say this: You dig deep at the Camp Rapture department, you're going to find a well of rotten shit. And another thing: Be careful while digging. The whole damn town's high rollers are attached to them. They're all playing grab-ass with one another, and if you try and get in the middle of that, you might end up a Rusty Puppy."

"Rusty Puppy?" Leonard said.

"You know where the old sawmill used to be?"

"There are a lot of sawmills," Leonard said.

"I mean the really old one, one goes back to the thirties. On the hill at the edge of Camp Rapture. Closed down now."

"I know," I said.

"Yeah," Leonard said. "Had an older cousin worked there, right before it was shut down in the eighties. Dangerous place to work. Cousin had one finger missing on one hand, two on the other, and the tip of his thumb got sawed off too. Folks called him Lobster. We called him clumsy."

"There's a big pool of brackish water out there now," Manny said. "It used to be a pit where the sawdust gathered, but over the years it sunk in and got rained on enough to make a deep pond. They have dogfights out there, and dogs that die in the process, or if they fight badly, they shoot them in the head and dump them in the pond. All that old sawmill dust has mucked up in there, and when the dogs floated up, because sometimes they did, they looked like they were covered in rust. Humane society rightfully got up in arms. They told the police, and they went out and looked at the dead dogs, dubbed them Rusty Puppies. Probably half the dogs in there were owned by people on the force. They love dogfighting. Still fight them out there. Cops didn't do a thing about it because they were the ones doing it."

"Now I really do hate them," Leonard said.

"Wasn't just dogs showed up there; there were a few human bodies, which were also called Rusty Puppies. They lie in that sawdust long enough, it composts them. No telling how many were turned into compost. Sawdust, it eats a body up like acid, and it does it pretty quick. The others were found before that happened, but again, how many weren't? I'm going to bet there were plenty."

"Anyone know who the bodies in the sawdust were?"

"Oh, yeah. Local ne'er-do-wells. Beat to death and dumped there. A few prostitutes and drug dealers who maybe knew too much about how the folks on the force were operating. Sometimes folks fresh out of jail. Mixed bag, really. Now and again another body pops up out there. None of those murders are ever solved, nor will they be. I figure it's the cops who put them there."

"That's a strong accusation."

"I worked in that department, not you. Let me tell you, those boys answer to no one."

"Up until now," Leonard said.

14

As we drove away, I said, “Nice-looking woman.”

“I was waiting for that,” Leonard said.

“Just noting,” I said.

“You can’t fail to notice, can you?”

“Do you fail to notice attractive men?”

“I note them, but you are at heart a goddamn hound dog. A loyal hound dog, but a hound dog nonetheless.”

“As long as I don’t go into someone else’s yard and hump their dog or get the water hose turned on me, I think Brett is happy.”

Leonard grunted. “Know what I was thinking?”

“Another ice cream cone would be special?”

“No. We are not having another ice cream cone,” Leonard said. “I was thinking, why was Charm in Camp Rapture in the first place, and what was she doing with a camera, and what was on the camera, and where is that camera?”

“Whoa,” I said. “You are fucking Charlie Chan.”

“Yeah,” Leonard said. “I think I may have tripped over a clue.”

“Oh my God,” I said. “Sounds to me like you are doing some actual detective-type thinking.”

“What I thought,” Leonard said. He looked pleased enough with himself to be a parade-float captain.

“This means we got to talk to Charm.”

“What I was thinking,” Leonard said.

As we drove over to the house across from our office, Louise’s place, a car drifted along behind us for a while. It was a dark sedan, not a cop car, but I noticed it. Leonard turned the pickup where we didn’t need to turn, and it sailed on by, made a curve around Shawnee Street, and kept going.

“You saw it too,” Leonard said.

I nodded.

We may not be the world’s greatest detectives, but cars following us we generally noticed. Tonight it appeared to be merely paranoia. Leonard turned around in a driveway and headed back to our destination. No dark sedans were seen.

Not long ago we had dealt with another woman who spied out her window and ended up sending us down a dark rabbit hole with strange killers and stranger circumstances. It also nearly got me killed. Not long before that event, Leonard was almost killed. We liked to argue over who was the most dead for a few moments, but the thing was, I had this uncomfortable feeling that the current rabbit hole we were diving into was deeper and darker than it appeared.

We parked in our lot, near the bicycle shop, walked across to Louise's house. There was a dim light in the window. The house was older, and most of the street had upgraded to more modern styles, but her place was still small and made of wood and the roof needed a bit of work. You could tell that when you looked out the second floor of our office. I had stared at that roof a lot but never knew who lived there until she came to the office that day.

We knocked on the door.

After a long while, Louise answered. She was wearing a long nightgown. "Oh, you're the detective."

She said this directly to Leonard.

Then to me: "You're the white guy I hired, right?"

"Right."

"Wasn't sure. You people look so much alike."

"So you've said. Sorry about it being late. But we need to talk."

She invited us inside. I said, "We're really here to ask Charm a few questions. Is she home?"

"She is. I'll wake her."

We stood just inside the front door. The house was nice and tidy and there were shelves that had more knickknacks than a flea market. Leonard had his hands in his pockets. He said, "I'm actually, very carefully, fondling my balls."

"Oh, shut up."

"He studies the shot. Thinks he can make it. If he only had a smaller cue stick. The one he has is really too enormous for the job."

"Ha-ha."

"Here goes, one black-as-night ball in the side pocket."

"Stop it."

About that time, Louise came out from a room across from us and Charm came out behind her, dragging her feet, looking sleepy.

“Missed the shot,” Leonard said so only I could hear.

“I hate you,” I said.

Charm was short and petite and so pretty she’d make a monk’s back teeth ache.

“Hello, Charm,” I said.

“Hi,” she said.

Leonard nodded at her and smiled.

“I guess your mother has explained to you who we are and what we’re doing?”

She dipped her chin. “Yes.”

“Good. Louise, would it be okay if we speak to Charm in private?”

“I don’t know.” Louise was still holding Charm’s elbow.

I saw something move across Charm’s face, a shadow of teenage lies, perhaps.

“It’s all right, Mama. I don’t mind.”

“I mind a little,” Louise said.

“It’s up to you two,” I said.

“It’s really all right,” Charm said.

“Okay,” Louise said. “But I’m going to be down the hall there, and if you need me, call me.”

“I will,” Charm said.

“Sometimes it just works better if we talk in private, so no one feels the need to answer in a certain way,” I said.

“We tell each other everything,” Louise said, and she gave me a look that said she was certain of that statement, and if I didn’t like it, she was up for three rounds and no referee.

“I’m sure of that,” I said.

“Damn straight,” Louise said. She started down a short hall, threw back at us, “I’m just right here.”

“It’s okay, Mama,” Charm said.

Louise disappeared into a room and closed the door.

Me and Leonard ended up sitting on the couch, and Charm took a stuffed armchair. It was a kind of replay of our roles in Manny’s house.

“I want you to know we are very sorry about your brother,” I said.

“Thank you,” she said, and her chin quivered slightly.

“We want to get to the bottom of why what happened to him happened,” I said. “That’s why we’re asking you questions. Not to harass you or make you feel uncomfortable.”

“I understand,” she said.

“You going to be a journalist, huh?” Leonard said, and showed her his nice teeth.

“That’s the plan, though right now there’s not a lot of jobs in the field, newspapers disappearing and all. I thought maybe magazine work.”

“Hap’s daughter, she’s got a job in journalism.”

“Where does she work?”

“Right now, local newspaper,” I said. “But only proofreading for the moment. Part-time.”

I realized I was speaking very proudly of Chance, even though right then she was living in Leonard’s old room in mine and Brett’s house.

“Here’s a question,” I said. “Why were you in Camp Rapture in the first place? Before you say anything, we’ll keep your answers as private as possible, and remember, this is about your brother. We are trying our best to find out what happened to him. So as straight an answer as you can give us would be appreciated.”

“Mama said she didn’t have any real money to pay you. Will that make a difference in how much you do?”

“No,” Leonard said. “Hap here is privately rich and supports me. When this is over we’re opening a coffee bar in Tibet.”

Charm gave a wan, sleepy smile, one that said, You know, that’s not really that funny, but I’m going to go with it.

“I was there to take photos before sunset,” she said. “I was told when the sun went down it made the trees and the old mill and the water pit look interesting. It was a photojournalism piece I was doing on the lumber industry in the 1930s. It’s like a high school final.”

“Were you leaving the mill when you were pulled over?” Leonard asked.

“I was. I went there after the party.”

“And you took the photos, I assume?” I said.

“Correct.”

Leonard said, “So you were leaving the mill and were back out on the road, and were pulled over, and then what?”

“A big cop, him and his partner, got out and one of them—”

“Coldpoint?” I asked.

“Yes, sir. I didn’t know that was who he was then, but that’s him. He got out and claimed I was weaving, that I was drunk. I proved I wasn’t, but it didn’t make any difference. When he wouldn’t give me a Breathalyzer test, I knew it wouldn’t matter what I said, what test I performed. He said, ‘You want to blow, we can work it out so you blow, but not into a Breathalyzer.’ I didn’t take the bait. I think he was certain

I would.”

“Unfortunately for that asshole,” Leonard said, “he was working from experience. Probably his idea of a date.”

“What happened to the photographs you took?” I said.

“They took the memory card out of my camera at the station,” she said.

“Any idea why?”

“I just know when I came down the hill from the sawmill they were waiting. They followed me to the edge of town and turned on their lights and pulled me over.”

“This other cop,” Leonard said. “Know his name?”

“At the station, I think they called him Seerfault.”

“Could it have been Sheerfault?” Leonard said.

“It could.”

I glanced at Leonard. He looked as if he had just sucked on a shit-stained lemon.

“You sure he was a cop?” Leonard said. “He wearing a uniform?”

“I’m sure,” she said. “And he was.”

“Any idea why they were following you in the first place?” I said.

“No, sir. Really, I have no idea. They took the card out of my camera and hung it back over my neck and chained me to a radiator. I think you know the rest.”

I said, “May we have a peek in Jamar’s room?”

“I suppose that’s okay,” she said.

She led us to his room, which was down an opposite hall. We went inside, and Charm left us alone. There were photographs and posters of boxers, and there was a shelf near the bed with boxing trophies.

Leonard picked one up. “First place. A university boxing event.”

We looked around a bit more, then went out. Charm was waiting on the couch. We sat down across from her.

“Saw your brother was a boxer,” Leonard said.

“He was pretty good. One time there was talk of him going to the Olympics, but he didn’t want to. He had other interests. Boxing was more like a hobby, but he was very good.”

“You think of anything else, our office is across the street,” I said.

“I know,” she said.

“You were at the sawmill just for photos?” I said. “Nothing else? I wouldn’t ask, but it could be important.”

“I was supposed to meet a boy. Kevin Conners. He didn’t show.”

“But you didn’t want your mother to know that?” Leonard said.

"I didn't. Does she have to know?"

"I don't think so," I said. "You didn't see him anyway, so no need."

"I want ever see him now, at least not on purpose," she said.

"Thank you, and tell your mother we thank her for letting us into her home," I said.

As we stood up: "This Sheerfault," Leonard said. "Can you describe him?"

"Yes, sir. Rough white guy, looked like a professional fighter," she said. "You know, scars around the eyes. I know something about that because Jamar watched fights, was interested in boxers. One of Sheerfault's eyes sagged slightly. The right one. His nose had been broken. It had a knot on it, and it was a little out of line. He looked like he worked out. Not in a bodybuilder way. But he was in shape."

"You will make a fine observant journalist," Leonard said. "Sheerfault was a professional fighter. I know him."

We thanked Charm again and left.

15

We walked across the street to the office, and I took Buffy out for another walk. Afterward, I made sure she had fresh water, then I got me and Leonard bottled water out of the fridge.

“You know Sheerfault, do you? Never heard you mention him.”

“He’s a sore spot. Back when I was kickboxing he beat me in the ring. On points, I might add.”

“Counts in sport.”

“It does.”

“But you’re bitter about it?”

“I was beat on points a few times,” Leonard said. “I always fought like it was real. Up to a certain level, anyway. It’s the referee’s job not to let it get too real.”

“If I remember right, I out-pointed you once, back when we were first starting to know one another. I don’t mean touch points, I mean real points. I got a whole seventy-five dollars, a trophy that I threw away, and a really sore face for about two weeks.”

“Shit,” Leonard said. “We fought to fight, wasn’t no money in it then. We were testing our skills.”

“Now they get paid big-time, and some of them get paid more than big-time.”

“Those were the days,” he said. “Fighting for pretty much nothing in the way of payment and enjoying it. Sheerfault pointed me, quite a bit. He was quick. He hit pretty hard, but he didn’t land much that was solid.”

“You’re quick,” I said.

“Not like he was. He was quick like you’re quick. I hit harder than you, but he was bunny-fuck fast.”

“Why the grudge?”

“Something about the guy rubbed me the wrong way. We both had a tough background. I actually knew him a little from around LaBorde, and he was a bully. He liked to rough people up and take what little money they had. A street thug. He acted like that point win against me made him the toughest motherfucker in the badass basket.”

“You feel like you beat him? Don’t you?”

“I thought I hit him harder than he hit me, and I made him run a little. Losing on points to that asshole chapped my ass. Something about him. But he’s tough as a nickel steak, no doubt. I gave him some shots that would have made an elephant shit a stack of lawn chairs, and he kept dancing. He has a head like a block of stone. But had we been on the street, which is where I’d like to get that motherfucker, I would have beat his ass like a tom-tom. Hit hard, hit fast, go to the house, like they say in Shen Chuan. Sport is a sport. I get beat that way, normally it’s no harm, no foul, but Sheerfault, he’s got a way about him that sets my teeth on edge.”

“You’re both older now,” I said.

“I can still whip ass,” Leonard said.

“No doubt,” I said. “I meant maybe he’s matured, even if you haven’t.”

“Ha, ha.”

Buffy came over and laid her head on my leg and I scratched her behind the ears.

“Back to what’s important,” I said. “I think we need to find out what it was about Charm’s camera, about where she was taking pictures, that got the Camp Rapture cops nervous. How about tomorrow we go out to the old sawmill?”

“Yeah, and let’s bring our own camera,” Leonard said.

16

Leonard dropped me off at home. I tore up the note I had written Brett, since it was obvious neither she nor Chance had stirred. Buffy checked on Chance on the couch, sniffed her, then came over and lay at my feet. I sat at the table and wrote a new note about how I was sleeping at the agency, still avoiding flu, and then loaded Buffy in my car and drove back to the office.

Now that I was involved in this business with Charm and her mother, I damn sure didn't want the flu to slow me down. I wanted to be at my best. I figured we had a tiger by the dick, but I wasn't exactly sure if we could yank on it enough to cage him.

I drank a bit of cranberry juice I had in the refrigerator straight from the container. I was the only one who drank it, so I figured it didn't matter. I folded the couch out and got the rolled-up foam mattress from the closet and put it on the couch frame and made it up with sheets and blankets, a pillow. I turned out the light and climbed into bed, Buffy at my feet. I lay there trying to figure how Charm and her camera went together and how that fit with her brother being murdered. As I drifted off, I thought too about those poor dogs and people in that sawmill pool, crusted over with ancient sawdust, congealed into sticky flakes that made the dead look rusty.

17

Early the next day I drove me and Leonard out to the sawmill on the edge of Camp Rapture. The morning was fresh with cold air, and the sun was creeping over a horizon lined with trees and houses, turning the sky red as a ripe, polished apple.

Both of us had lived in this area once, between LaBorde and Camp Rapture. Terrible things had gone down with me and Leonard at his old house, back when he owned dogs and we both worked in the rose fields, back when my former wife, Trudy, came calling and messed us up. Or, to be more precise, I messed us up because she had me under her spell and I wanted it that way. That had been a turning point in our lives. It had changed us. Set us on a different and more brutal course. I always thought of Leonard as the naturally brutal one, but the truth was, my choices had led us into all this, and here we were, at the zenith of those choices and mistakes, two middle-aged men, tough of flesh, but tired. At least on my end. Leonard wasn't one to complain about it much. I didn't know if he had noticed he'd aged. I had noticed I had aged. I felt it in my bones on cold days like this one, and I thought about the avenues missed when I put my head on my pillow at night. But it wasn't all bad. There was Brett, and now Chance, and I had my brother Leonard with me. That's the kind of thing a lot of folks want and never get. But as Leonard has said, I'm hard to make happy.

As we drove, I remembered Leonard's old place, where Trudy had died. He no longer owned it. In fact, his old house was no longer there. It had caught fire and burned down after he moved, and a double-wide mobile home had been hauled in and blocked up in its place. There was a real lawn now and it was always mowed. The trees that had been along the edges of his property had been cut down and a series of shrubs had been planted. The shrubs were green for about a year after they first got ripe, as I liked to say, and then they became brown clutters that ran along either side of the property.

The worst part was that at one time, well behind Leonard's house, deep in the woods, there had been a massive oak. It was the last of the great oaks and came from an older time when trees grew for a long time without fear of the saw, grew fat and tall. The oak had thick limbs you could climb up on and stretch out on and sleep without fear of rolling off. I know. Both of us had done it, just because we loved it out there. We would lie in the tree in the spring with the canopy of leaves above us, shiny and green, and in the fall we were sometimes there too, when it was cool, before the nights turned truly cold. We would lie there on separate limbs and talk. We had some great discussions.

We called the tree the Robin Hood Tree, like the humongous tree where Robin and his merry band gathered to talk and feast. I also called it the Tarzan Tree, imagined how you could build a tree house on its wide limbs and have plenty of room to live with a lithe, blond Jane and do more than call elephants and swing on vines. I guess Leonard might have dreamed of having Tarzan as his mate, though no doubt, he would have made Tarzan his bitch.

Leonard and I would meet at the oak, me having to hike through the woods from my place, which wasn't all that far away if you came by wooded path and then broke off the path and took a deer trail and finally a winding trace through a series of tall, blackjack oaks until you arrived at Fisherman's Creek. Across the creek the trees thinned in number but not in magnificence. There were sweet gums and hickories and, of course, pines.

The Robin Hood Tree was the granddaddy of them all. The oak rose higher and spread its limbs wider than all the others. Its bark was healthy and dark, and in the spring the leaves were green as Ireland. To stand beneath it when it rained was amazing, because the limbs were so thick and the leaves so plush that during the spring and much of the summer, if not the fall, when the leaves were crisp and brown and yellow and dropping, you would hardly get wet. When it stormed, the limbs shook like angry Spartans rattling their weapons, but the limbs didn't break. The soil beneath the oak was thick and dark with many years of dropped and composted leaves. There were fat acorns on the ground, and sometimes when you came to the tree, squirrels were under it, rare black squirrels that made that part of the woods their home. They would be in the tree as well, chattering and fussing as you arrived.

Leonard and I met there many mornings, usually having a breakfast of boiled eggs that we brought in brown paper bags. We drank coffee from thermoses. We brought our fishing gear with us. We would sit beneath the tree and eat and talk and take our time drinking coffee.

Finally we would go away from there, carrying our gear and cooler, one of us with a bucket of dirt loaded with worms. We walked through the trees and along the narrow creek bed to where the pond was. It was a big pond, and at one time there had been a house near it. Now the house was a pile of gray lumber and rusty nails and a few bricks that showed where the fireplace had been. Beyond that was a clapboard barn that still stood, the wide doors gone, probably removed for lumber for someone's project. Trees crowded the barn, and one sweet gum had grown up and under the roof and was pushing it loose on one side.

The pond had been dug maybe fifty years before and filled with fish, and we were fishing their descendants. There was a small boat down there, one we had tediously carried along the creek bank, and we left it there for when we wanted to fish. No one bothered it, because no one besides us came there anymore. The land was owned by someone up north who had mostly forgotten about it. The pond was always muddy, but the fish were thick. We caught them and generally threw them back, unless they were good-size enough and fat. Then they went home with us and became our supper.

We fished with cane poles, not rods and reels. It wasn't a place for rods and reels. It was a place for fishing in an old and simple way. We put lines on the poles, sinkers, corks, hooks, and bait, usually worms. Out in the boat we would dangle lines and drift and watch the fish jump, the dragonflies dip down on the water, see the shadows of birds flying over. Now and again there was the sight of a leaping frog or a wiggling water moccasin. Turtle heads rose like periscopes, then fell beneath the water with a delicate splash and a ripple.

In the spring it was cool for a long time, and in the summer it grew hot, but with wide-brimmed hats on, we still fished, and we lazed, and sometimes we talked softly, fearing we might frighten the fish. We talked about all manner of things we believed in, same as when we were in the tree. We talked about how we differed from one another. I told Leonard about my women, and he told me about his men. We talked about brotherhood without speaking of it directly. I told bad jokes and Leonard grumbled. We were tight before those times, but that was when we bonded like glue.

When Leonard moved from the house next to the woods, and I later moved from where I lived, we lost that spot.

Some years later the people up north remembered the land. They brought in pulp crews and cut the woods down, even the great and ancient oak, which must have fought the saws valiantly with its old, hard wood. But the saws won. It tumbled down and was coated in gasoline and set on fire. They didn't even bother to make it into lumber. They wanted the pines. The land where the great oak stood was a black spot for a long time.

Eventually they filled in the pond. A company that raised chickens for a supermarket chain bought the land, and a series of long, commercial chicken houses took the place of the original pond and the woods that had surrounded it. Now there is a wide gravel road that leads out of where the trees once grew and on to the highway. It's odd, but looking out here now, it seems like such a short distance to where the pond once was. It seemed a long ways away when the trees were there.

As we drove by, Leonard refused to look in the direction where the chicken houses now stood. I looked, but I didn't like what I saw. The rain still falls and the wind still blows, but the oak and the pond and the rare black squirrels are gone.

18

We arrived at our destination. My memories had placed me in a melancholy mood, and somehow that ancient abandoned mill made it more so. It stood precariously outside of Camp Rapture, on a high hill, behind a thick swath of trees that covered most of the rise. The trees grew all around it as if to spite the developers who'd mauled many of their leafy clan into lumber on that very spot. One pine, very brave and defiant, was pushing up through a gap in the roof. The evergreen needles glistened as if with sweat.

There was a good-size pond to one side of the mill, and the morning sun gave it a bronze sheen, and the heat on the cold water made it mist over. It was an ugly pond, not like the one Leonard and I had loved, back where the chicken houses now stood. That one had been muddy, but it had been fine.

We parked as near as we could to the mill, where the road ran out, walked over, and looked at the pool of water. The mist was slowly evaporating as the sun rose, and we could see the pond was dark with caked sawdust. It looked like quicksand, and it was the reason for the water's bronze appearance.

Once upon a time a chute had projected from the sawmill and sawdust had been sent down it as the whirling blades inside milled the trees into lumber and progress ate up the East Texas forests. Rainwater had gathered in the pit beneath the chute and had made the stagnant pond. The pond gave off an acidic odor.

"So," Leonard said, "Charm took a few photos of an old sawmill. So what? Everyone knows bodies have been found here, so no news there. What could have been so important Charm got pushed around by angry cops and had her sim card taken and her brother killed? Seems to me, they were better off just letting her be."

"Could be it's not what she photographed but what they thought she photographed."

"And then she got set loose and they just gave up on her?" Leonard said. “Why?”

“They had a chance to look at the sim card. Nothing there bothered them. But what could Jamar have known that would be of any concern to them?”

“Again, he was annoying them.”

“Still, seems like a big jump from him being annoying to a bunch of cops punching and kicking him to death. Even these yo-yos in Camp Rapture couldn’t be that stupid.”

“As we have done noted many times, people who do stupid things are usually stupid. You and me come to mind.”

“You have a very good point,” I said. “Let’s look in the mill.”

We walked along a weed-coated drive. The weeds were bent down and brown, and you could see where cars had been driving over them, and recently. The gravel crunched beneath our feet like broken glass.

There was a large piece of plywood leaning against the side of the mill. I could see a strip of light between the edge of it and the building. I pushed the board aside. There was an opening into the mill where the wall had gone to rot. Inside, the morning sun dropped into the room through holes in the roof and lit up the floor and made the pine growing through the rip seem much greener. There was a large saw with a great rusty, dust-covered blade and dusty old belts attached to massive pulleys attached to a bulky engine.

When we walked, the floor beneath us felt like carpet where the sawdust had congealed. Mice darted across it and disappeared under split boards and into holes in the wall. There was a thick, wire fencing around the pine, probably about twenty feet out from the trunk. The fence made a complete circle around it. On our side there was a little open gate made of chicken wire and slats of wood and rusty hinges.

“Dogfighting,” Leonard said.

“Looks that way,” I said.

We went inside the circle of wire. The ground was covered in sawdust there as well, but it was kicked up, and you could see the dirt floor was scratched over by the struggling paws of unfortunate dogs, or so I presumed.

Maybe they thought Charm was secretly photographing the dogs fighting, and perhaps it was like Manny said, the cops were sponsoring it, a thing they called a sport, as if the dogs had volunteered. They might have thought she got photographs or video of a fight that could have been going on that night, feared that if she got images of the people who were there, and if the cops and prominent town officials were some of those people, it would blow back on them.

Leonard had brought a camera, and he took photographs of the place, and I used my phone to take more, and I mailed them to my computer at home.

We strolled outside, put the plywood back, and walked to the car. As we were about to get in, a blue sedan rolled up the drive behind our ride, blocking our exit. Two men got out and came around to stand in front of the car. One was dressed in jeans and a loose Hawaiian-style shirt. He was big and his head was shaved and the top of it was sunburned in contrast to how white his face was. His face looked as if it had been paddled by a two-by-four. The other man was shorter and stockier and ruddy-skinned, with a thick head of black hair and a bent nose and a walk like his balls were too heavy on one side. He stood with his mouth open, sucking air. I kept hoping a fly would land on his tongue.

"Well, well," Leonard said to the man in the Hawaiian shirt. "If it isn't Your Fault his own goddamn self."

I got it then. This was Sheerfault, the guy Leonard had fought and lost to and didn't like. He was a physically capable-looking guy.

"Leonard Pine, why, I haven't seen you in a coon's age," Sheerfault said. "No offense. I want you to know that wasn't a nigger joke…I think last time I saw you…Let me see. Didn't I whip your black ass?"

"Points," Leonard said.

"What losers say, but I had you dead to rights. I could have knocked you out if I had another round."

"I doubt you could have knocked me out with a hammer," Leonard said.

Sheerfault grinned. It was the kind of grin that made you want to feed him his teeth.

"I wanted a rematch," he said, "but as I recall, that's about when you retired."

"I didn't want to lose again on being tagged, not hit."

"Oh, you were hit, all right." Sheerfault's grin spread even wider, which seemed impossible, but he managed it.

"Who's your little friend?" Leonard asked. "He looks like he might need to be paper-trained."

"Bobo Townsend. He isn't what you'd call a thinker, are you, Bobo?"

"Ain't no thinker," Bobo said.

"He got hit by a train about five years ago, and he wasn't exactly a mental giant before," Sheerfault said. "Train hit his truck crossing the track, smashed the truck into a wad, and knocked some wires loose in Bobo's head. Bobo has a simple approach to life, don't you, Bobo?"

"I like to hit people," Bobo said.

"That sums it up," Sheerfault said. "He likes to hit people. Also, he hears a train whistle up close, he shits his pants."

"Can't help it," Bobo said.

"You should carry toilet paper with you," I said. "Change of underwear."

"I could hit you," Bobo said.

"No need for unpleasantness," I said.

"Go ahead," Leonard said. "Hit him. See how that works out for you, Banjo."

"Bobo," Bobo said.

"No need to prove anything," I said and tried to look calm and in my happy place.

"Go ahead, Banjo," Leonard said. "Hit him. We'll be sure you get a nice burial, and then when you're down deep, I'll pack what's left of your partner in the hole with you, take a big shit on top of both of you."

Damn you, Leonard. I thought Bobo looked pretty sturdy, and I would rather not start my morning with my nose broke and a tooth missing.

"I ain't gonna let you hurt my friend," Bobo said.

"That's sweet," Leonard said. "But Hap will sort your shit for you, and I'll sort your friend's."

Bobo stepped forward, dropped his chin. Sheerfault reached out and took him by the shoulder. "Not today, Bobo. The boy is just blowing."

"Not as much as you might think," Leonard said.

Bobo stopped, relaxed. He looked at me with his blank eyes. His face hung like an empty sack. Inside his head, a brain cell used a stepladder to find a high-shelved thought.

"Yeah," Bobo said. "That's all right. Another time."

"You cracker motherfuckers just out for a little sun?" Leonard said.

"All we come up here for is two things. First, Pine, I wanted to remind you how bad I beat your ass, and second, we wanted to tell you that you ought to stay away from Manny. She's kind of a liar. She's claiming cops wanted her body, and the thing was, no one did. It disappointed her to not be desired."

"So, a beautiful and smart woman like that wanted to hump you ugly bastards, but no, you turned her down because you are so fine and noble and stalwart," Leonard said.

"We ain't queers like you, Pine," Sheerfault said, "but sometimes, some nooky, well, it stinks, and you just don't want it. Manny, she stinks."

"Metaphorically, I assume."

"Maybe both ways," he said. "Never got the chance to get down there and sniff."

"She turned you down is what you're saying?" Leonard said. "Sounds like a woman with taste."

"Stay away from her," Sheerfault said. "It would be best for her and you."

"Or what?" Leonard said.

"I don't know," Sheerfault said. "Something might happen. I mean, I wouldn't want you breaking the law in Camp Rapture, on account of you could get arrested, and even in a sterling jail system like we have, sometimes folks get hurt. You know, by other prisoners. We got fellows there, they don't like being thrown in with a person of color. Isn't that what you people say? Persons of color? See how I'm avoiding the word nigger. I am, if nothing else, progressive."

"What about you, Sheerfault?" Leonard said. "You want to hurt me your own self, not leave it to some prisoners?"

"Already have."

"You only made me a little tired."

"I won. I got the money."

"Hope you invested that seventy-five dollars in some extra health insurance," Leonard said. "'Cause you want to kick my ass, which you have yet to do, you'll need it."

Sheerfault smiled. "Still a sore loser."

"Oh, I lost the match, but I didn't lose a fight," Leonard said. "I lost some bullshit dance contest."

"You keep thinking that, Shiny," Sheerfault said, went around to the side of the car, opened his car door, smiled, and slid in behind the steering wheel.

As Bobo started to climb in on the passenger side, I said, "You a cop too, Bobo?"

He paused at the open car door and put his arms on top of it, collected a couple of thoughts, said, "I ain't no cop."

"Good. I was afraid you carried a gun, you might shoot yourself in the foot."

Bobo thought that over, said, "Thank you."

He climbed into the car without closing the door, and then he climbed out. He had found another brain cell with that stepladder.

"Was that some kind of crack?" he said.

"Sleep on it," I said.

He studied me, slipped back into the car, and closed the door.

When they drove away, Leonard said, "I really hate that guy."

"I can see that."

"Don't think I care for Bobo either, fucking animated fireplug."

"Bet Bobo's mother wishes she had smothered him with his teddy bear when he was a child," I said.

"Maybe I'll do it for her."

"Oh, and thanks for trying to have him start a fight with me, brother. I owe you for that one."

"You'd have fucked him over. Way you move."

"You're a troublemaker."

"A little," Leonard said.

"Thing is, guys that want us not to think anything is going on are certainly doing stuff that makes me think some bad shit is in fact going on."

"Perhaps they really are stupid," Leonard said.

"Or nervous."

"We're good at making people nervous."

"Ain't we?" I said. "Hell, I make myself nervous."

19

On the way back to LaBorde, Leonard said, “That story Timpson Weed told. It still bothers me.”

“You keep coming back to that.”

“Because it still bothers me.”

“Shall we pay him a visit?”

“I think we should,” Leonard said.

We drove over to the projects, and, with Leonard wearing his fedora, we made our way across the wilted grass toward where Weed lived. The group of guys that were there before were there again. The one who had worn the red shower cap was now wearing a blue one. The big one, Laron, had on sagging pants with his underwear hanging out.

“Goddamn,” Leonard said as we walked along, “what’s this shit with the fucking shower cap?”

“Protecting the do, I guess.”

“Last time he had that red cap and no do. I bet he ain’t got one under there now. What the fuck he need to have a do for anyway?”

“Some folks are cosmopolitan, Leonard. Some are not. You are not.”

“Yeah, and a punk in a shower cap is?”

“Depends on how you define cosmopolitan.”

“Yeah, sure. And the guy with the sagging pants, don’t he know that little fashion statement comes from prison, showing you’re ready to take some thug’s dick, that you’re a jailhouse bitch?”

“I’m betting he doesn’t know. And frankly, Leonard, who gives a shit?”

“It’s just stupid,” Leonard said.

The guys stared at us, trying to look tough. Leonard shot them the finger. They didn’t shoot it back. No razors or pistols were produced, just sour faces. So good so far.

“Pull up your fucking pants,” Leonard yelled at Laron.

Laron didn’t pull up his pants, just continued to glare.

Since we weren’t there to give out freelance fashion tips, we went up the stairs and onto the landing and stood in front of Timpson Weed's door and knocked.

The sweet lady from before answered, bringing with the opening of the door a smell of fried fish and onions. She was wearing a large muumuu and shoes with her heels breaking them down in the backs. "What the fuck you want?"

"You talking to me?" Leonard said.

"I was talking to this peckerwood, but you can take a little of that if you want it."

"Can I now?" Leonard said.

"We just want to see Timpson for a minute," I said.

She came out then and closed the door.

"You want to see Timpson?"

"That's what he said," Leonard said.

"Yeah. 'Cause you such close friends?" she said.

"Because we have a bit of business with him," I said.

"Yeah, well, you want to see that nigger, you gonna have to go down to the fucking funeral home and see him."

"He works at a funeral home?" I said.

"Fuck no, he don't work at no funeral home, unless he gonna get up dead tonight and sweep out the goddamn place."

She was starting to cry a little now, tears running down her face. I had a little pack of tissues in my coat pocket. I took it out and pulled a tissue from it and handed it to her. She snatched it like a hawk grabbing a mouse, patted her eyes, then blew her nose on it, handed it back to me.

"You keep it," I said.

"Come up in here and me grieving and Timpson dead as a bag of nails, act like you all kinds of friends with him."

"We said we have business with him," Leonard said.

"That business gonna have to wait until you get to the Pearly Gates, I can tell that to you. He over at J. Greely's funeral parlor cooling out."

"What happened to him?" I said.

"What happened?" she said. "What didn't happen? They beat him, then run over him with something a whole lot bigger than a bicycle, and then he got his black ass thrown in a fucking ditch beside the road, or some such."

An East Texas classic. Killed and thrown in a ditch.

"Who did it?" I asked.

"How the fuck do I know? You care? Bullshit. You just the same as the cops, just another dead nigger."

"I happen to be of the black persuasion myself," Leonard said. "So it concerns me. It concerns my friend here. Shit, this motherfucker, Hap, he wears a shower cap around the house, and he once wrote a letter in Ebonics."

"I do not wear a shower cap in the house," I said. "And the letter was well meant."

The woman looked at Leonard and smiled a little.

"You got a woman?"

"I got a man," Leonard said. "Sort of."

"What?"

"I'm queer as a three-dollar bill."

"Naw you ain't."

"Am."

"Naw."

"Am."

"Damn, man. That's a fucking waste. Come over here some night and let me make dinner for you, and I can turn you."

"That's a sweet proposition, but you sure have moved on fast," Leonard said. "Snot in a tissue, and you're ready to bring in fresh meat."

"Timpson just stayed here when he wanted. He had him other women on the side. I think it was one of them he got the clap from. I come down with that shit, and let me tell you, that is some whole 'nother kind of experience. Had to get shots. He come home with crabs one time. Have to near set fire to yourself to get rid of them."

"That is a delicate situation, for sure," Leonard said.

"Telling you," she said.

"Any idea who killed Timpson, and why?" I asked.

"I ain't got no idea," she said. "He might have got hit crossing the road, for all I know. Somedays I'd have run over him. Hit me once, but I caught his ass a good one upside the head with a stool. One of them little wooden ones got four legs. They solid, I'm telling you, and it's like they was made for swinging. I knocked him plumb out. Nigger was sprawled on the floor like a throw rug. He woke up and got his shit and got out, but he come back around after a time. He done had a sniff and a taste of the good stuff I got, so he come back. He made me keep the stool in the closet from then on, though."

"I see," I said. "When was Timpson killed?"

"Other night. Said he was going to see someone at the Joint, which usually meant he was gonna get stagger-ass drunk and come home and puke in the sink. The fucking sink. Got a toilet, and he pukes in the sink. That shit don't wash down so easy in the sink, and he wasn't gonna clean it up. No, sir. He left that mess for me. He had it good here. Good cooking, cleaning up after him, and then he had this fine ass."

She slapped herself on the ass.

"Pleasant companionship," Leonard said.

"Damn right."

We thanked her and she went back inside with the fish and onions. We went downstairs.

I said, "Damn."

"Probably run over himself so he wouldn't have to fuck that bitch," Leonard said.

Walking across the lot, we saw the project boys were leaning on Leonard's truck. The four-hundred-year-old vampire girl, Reba, was with them.

Leonard picked up his pace.

We came to his ride, and he said, "Your nasty asses scratch my truck, I'm gonna rub out the scratches with your faces."

They moved off the truck immediately. Except the four-hundred-year-old vampire.

"You done come back asking about that boy, ain't you?" Reba said.

"That's right," I said.

"That's just a rumor run up through here. That boy wasn't killed here. We all know that."

"Ain't no rumor," Tuboy said. "It's a goddamn lie."

"Back that truck up," I said. I sort of liked that phrase and was just waiting to use it again.

"How come that's the story gets told, then?" Leonard said.

"That Weed telling that," Tuboy said. "Now his ass stretched out at the funeral home. Or in a box or some such. Put in a sack. Whatever they do."

"Why would Weed tell a lie like that?" I said. "Who asked him?"

"Ain't got no idea who asked him," Tuboy said, "but we know it's a lie. There was people all over the place that night. And he's the only one seen it. Bullshit."

"He said others saw it," I said.

"Figure he say that, you don't think to ask around, see if it's true," Tuboy said. "You ask around?"

"No," I said. "I didn't find the relationships here all that fascinating."

"That Egg Breaker Timpson was a motherfucker."

"Egg Breaker?" I said.

"Uh-huh," said Tuboy. "You know he go to jail once for fucking chickens?"

"I hope the chickens got compensation," I said.

"Naw. They was dead. He fucked them to death. Got drunk as a rat in a beer barrel, went out and found someone had some chickens, and fucked them."

"He fucked the chickens or the owners or both?" I said.

"I done told you who fucked what," Tuboy said. "Oh, you being funny, huh?"

"He tries," Leonard said.

"They brought him in on it," Tuboy said, "and he told the cops it was good for the eggs or some such. Tell you one thing, didn't do them chickens' asses no good."

"Guess not," Leonard said.

"Everyone round here call him Egg Breaker, not Weed."

"When did this chicken event take place?" I said.

"When he a teenager, before we was born. But it done followed him around like a dog."

"Shit," Leonard said. "Fuck a few chickens, and no one gets over it, but lie about a dead man, and everyone moves on. Why the fuck didn't someone around here say something?"

"We ain't got no reason to say," Reba the four-hundred-year-old vampire said. "We talk to the po-po, it never work out. Next thing we know we pulling time. Besides, he wasn't one of our niggers. That Egg Breaker, he been up in jail a lot for this and that. Last time he was up in there he come out with a head looked like a fucking pumpkin."

"They beat him, you mean?" I said.

"Yeah, they beat him. He didn't want no more pulling time, 'cause he thought he might not come out next time. I can feel his worries on that."

"You're a child, what the hell do you know about pulling time?" Leonard said.

"My daddy done up in that Huntsville," she said. "He got another twenty years to go, then they start another thirty on him. Consecutive bullshit, they call it. He ain't gonna finish that last one out. Which is good. He ought to be up in there. He killed a whole mess of people while he was fucked up on some shit."

"Who do you live with?" I asked.

"My uncle Chuck," Reba said. "Sometimes my grandma."

"I bet that is a treat for them," Leonard said. "I figure your daddy's doing time just for making you."

"Leonard," I said. "Shit, man. Cut it out."

"All right, all right."

"You are one shitty motherfucker," the little girl said.

"I just don't like you," Leonard said.

"Like you some kind of peach," she said.

"Let me pull this back to where we were," I said. "So there was no body found here? How did it get around there was?"

"Egg Breaker," Tuboy said. "We done told you. What the fuck, white man. You deaf?"

"I just like to be certain," I said. "Cops said he was found here, wasn't just Weed…Egg Breaker, Chicken Fucker, whatever."

"Uh-huh, and we ain't got nothing for that," Tuboy said. "Them cops probably took him out and killed him and said he was found here, on account of everyone knows we ain't nothing but a bunch of losers."

"I second that," Leonard said.

That comment didn't bring a smart remark from the project kids, just a momentary silence.

"Yeah, you right," Laron said. "Kill someone here, ain't like you losing a future Nobel Prize winner."

"Damn, boy," Leonard said. "I didn't know you could speak."

"When I got something to say."

I was more confused than ever. Why would Weed, aka Egg Breaker, tell that lie? Who would ask him? And worse yet, would it be smart to pin it on the cops if he didn't see them do it? Egg Breaker said the cops were the ones told him to shut up. What seemed like a simple truth had turned into a complex lie.

"So, no idea who killed Jamar?" Leonard said. "Jamar's the boy Weed said was killed here, by the way."

They shook their heads.

"He got a cool name, though," Tuboy said.

"Any idea who gave Weed his trip to the funeral home?"

"Coulda been anybody. Wasn't nobody but Tamara like him."

"Tamara?"

"Lady he lived with," said Reba. "One you just talking to. Tell you one thing, don't never eat nothing she cooks. It all tastes like onions. That woman can't boil a cup of coffee without putting an onion in it. She ain't no smart one neither. Can't sort socks right, even if they all the same color, but she know how to survive."

"Look here," I said. "I'm going to give you one of our cards. You hear anything, want to tell us anything, call us. Might be some money in it."

"How much money?" Reba asked.

"I don't know," I said. "You won't be buying a car with it. Besides, you don't even have a driver's license."

"I could sell that car," she said.

"There is no car," I said. "A bit of money."

"I don't get out of bed for five dollars," she said.

"Since you made ten from me last time," I said, "I know your price."

"To point to a door, yeah. Not for everything else."

"So you got something?" Leonard asked.

"No," she said. "Just asking. I can pay attention a lot better for enough money."

"We'll make it worth your while," I said.

"What I'd like to do is give you to some kind of clinic for experimentation," Leonard said. "Something to do with cutting off heads and packing them in ice."

"You can go fuck yourself," she said.

"Get back from my truck," Leonard said. "All of you. All the way away from it."

Everyone moved away, but Reba the four-hundred-year-old vampire took her time, strolling lazily away from it. She said to Leonard as he was getting in the truck, "They experiment on me, it's 'cause they want my essence."

"Essence?" Leonard said. "You ain't got no essence, girl, unless it's from lack of taking a bath."

Reba shot him the finger. "I'm up in that shower ever' morning, you wiseass motherfucker."

He shot her the finger back.

We left out of there.

As we tooled along, I said, "You have such a way with children."

"I got deep love for them little stinky-ass motherfuckers."

20

At the funeral home we spoke to a pleasant young black man in a black suit and white shirt with a black tie and black shoes with a shine so bright it hurt my eyes. He asked us to wait and went away.

Leonard stuffed his hand in his pants pocket, said, “And he shoots.”

“Shut up,” I said.

About five minutes later a very fine-looking black woman in a black dress that, though conservative, looked more than adequate on her and showed just enough of her sleek legs that no one could cry foul came out and shook hands with us.

“I’m Karen Wilson,” she said.

We introduced ourselves, then followed her into an office positioned off the chapel. When she was seated behind her desk, and we were sitting in comfortable chairs in front of it, the young man brought us all coffee on a silver tray, along with spoons and packs of sugar and sugar substitutes. The coffee was in nice china cups with flower designs. They were about the size of a thimble with a cup handle that I could barely get my little finger through. We prepared our coffee and sipped it and I tried not to spend too much time checking out the mortician, because she was certainly nice to look at, and my first impression had actually not done her justice. Forties, very dark-skinned, with thick shoulder-length hair and a smile that showed some very well-taken-care-of teeth.

The young man stood near the door while we sipped, his hands folded in front of him and over his crotch as if they were a fig leaf.

“This is my son Kevin,” Ms. Wilson said. “I don’t know what I’d do without him.”

We nodded at him, and she smiled at him, and that must have been his cue, because he went out.

“No one has even asked about Mr. Weed,” she said. “Well, there was one lady, but she was mostly interested in finding out if he had died with money in his pockets.”

“Why, that would be the lovely Tamara,” Leonard said. “That was quick."

"There's no one to pay for his funeral, but we're going to do as nice a job as we can."

"You're absorbing the price?" I said.

"Well, unless you're friends or family."

"No," I said. "I only talked to him a couple times. The cops have the body examined?"

Her lovely features soured. "They weren't even curious. Whoever did what they did to him rolled him out here. I think it was some sort of joke to them. We called the cops, they came by, said, 'Yeah, he's dead. Hit by a car.' I pointed out that he had taken a beating, had several bullet wounds, and that there weren't any cars I was aware of that fired bullets, and he had been run over several times, so, yes, a car was involved, but the bullets had been part of the equation. He had mud ground into his body along with the tire treads over his face. There won't be an open-casket service, and besides, who's coming? I know that sounds harsh, but that's the truth. I'm going to give him a simple coffin and a burial at what we call Potter's Field, which is the back end of the old black cemetery. I don't know his preference of religion, if any, but I am a minister as well as a mortician, so a few words will be said over him. Anyone deserves that much."

"What did the police say after you told them about the condition of the body?" Leonard asked. "Explained he wasn't just hit by a car?"

"They acted like they were writing things down, then left. I followed up this morning and they said the case was closed. I asked did they catch who did it, and they said they couldn't discuss it, and the next thing I know I'm listening to a dial tone."

"Interesting," I said.

"I thought so too," she said, and then paused. "You know, I really don't know who you two are."

I explained what we had been hired for but didn't give out any major information, because, frankly, we didn't really have any. I gave her a stripped-down version of events, leaving Charm and the sawmill out of it.

"I know about Jamar's death," Ms. Wilson said. "We prepared him for services. Most business of that sort for the black community ends up here."

"You mean you embalmed him?" Leonard said.

"Of course."

"Beat to death," Leonard said. "Maybe not as bad as Mr. Weed, but bad enough they both ended up in the same condition. Dead.”

“Correct,” she said.

“Let me get back to Mr. Weed,” I said. “We were thinking his death and our case might be connected.”

“They both had a lot of bruises and cuts, like they had been hit a lot,” she said, “but Mr. Weed had bullet wounds and was crushed by a car. Jamar was beat to death. Still, similar enough to make me curious. But then again, I’m not a detective.”

“So cops didn’t ask you about the condition of the bodies, didn’t have an autopsy done on them, didn’t see a connection?” Leonard said.

“The police seldom seem interested if someone is killed in this part of town,” Ms. Wilson said.

“Or dumped in this part of town,” Leonard said.

“Good point,” Ms. Wilson said. “And now that you mention it, I think Mr. Weed was killed up near the old abandoned sawmill. I hadn’t really thought that much about it, but it makes sense.”

“Why would you say that?” I asked.

“His shoes, knees of his pants, had sawdust mashed into them.”

“There’s a lot of sawmills in these parts,” Leonard said.

Karen Wilson nodded. “True enough. But that’s the nearest one, and if he was killed there, and whoever did it wanted to get rid of him, this is a close and ironic place to dump him.”

“So you think the murderers are into irony?” I asked.

“Actually, I have no idea,” she said, “I’m just winging it. I’ve read too many murder mysteries.”

“Maybe we should read more of them,” Leonard said.

“Another curious thing,” she said, “Jamar had sawdust on his body as well. I think that’s interesting, don’t you?”

“We do,” I said.

“I’ve probably said too much,” she said. “I don’t want any trouble. I’m a mortician, not a detective.”

“You said that,” I said, “but you are proving to me you’re pretty astute in the detecting area. That stuff about the sawdust, for one.”

“Well, I really don’t know much about anything,” she said.

I could see she immediately regretted what she had said earlier and was trying to patch it up a bit. I understood that. This was the community she had to work in, and the police in Camp Rapture seemed to pretty much do as they pleased, so it was best not to get on their bad side.

“Anything we’ve talked about here,” I said, “it won’t get back to the

Camp Rapture police. A lot of it we already know, and what we didn't know about Mr. Weed's body, what you told us, that's something the cops already know. They saw the body. They know what it looked like and they know how he died."

"And maybe who killed him," Leonard said.

"I'm sure they are doing the best they can," she said.

That sounded about as sincere as a nine-year-old boy's fart apology.

"No worries," I said, and stood up. I reached across the desk and shook her hand. Leonard did the same, and we left.

21

While Buffy licked the last of the food out of her bowl, I used a ladle to dip chicken soup out of a pot into deep blue bowls, then placed one in front of Brett and one in front Chance. They sat at the table with their heads in their hands, staring into their soup. They looked miserable. Red noses. Swollen eyes. Listless.

Finally Brett lifted her head and looked at me. “Crackers.”

I got a box of crackers and opened them and placed them on the table. I poured them each a glass of ice tea.

Brett sniffed and raised her head, showing me her Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer nose. “So, how’s the investigation going?”

“It sucks,” I said, and poured myself a bowl of soup. I gave them large spoons, took one for myself, then sat on the far side of the table away from their diseased bodies. There was hot sauce on the table and I poured a bit of it into my soup. It goes with all kinds of soup, not to mention just about everything but ice cream, and Leonard says it’s pretty good with that, you mix it right.

“Appreciate the soup, Dad,” Chance said. “I think I’m worse. I was doing better, but now I’m worse. It’s bad, and then it clears up a little, or seems to, but it’s just going out for reinforcements. What really peeves me is I had a flu shot.”

“This brand of flu wasn’t one they expected to be a real threat this year,” Brett said. “It wasn’t in the vaccine. They were wrong. I had a flu shot too, and I hate needles. I got needled for nothing.”

“You’re a nurse and you hate needles?” Chance said.

Brett nodded slightly. “I didn’t mind sticking someone else with one, and I don’t get sweaty when I need to have one stuck in me, but I don’t like it. I mean, who does?”

“I hear you,” Chance said. “Wow. This soup is hot. Face-of-the-sun hot.”

“Yep,” I said, “just burned all the hair off my tongue. Let it cool.”

“It’s like lava,” Brett said.

“You can cook for yourself next time,” I said.

“But it’s good lava,” Brett said. “Nice chicken lava.”

“That’s better,” I said. “I suppose you don’t want any hot sauce. it’s a different kind of hot, and it really spices the soup up.”

“No spices,” Chance said. “My belly won’t take it.”

“Do you have any guesses about the murders?” Brett said.

“They’re connected,” I said. “That’s my best guess, and not exactly a Holmes and Watson moment. But I don’t think I’m going too far out on a limb to say that. They were both beaten, though in Timpson Weed’s case, he was also shot and run over by a truck. The confusion is why did Timpson say he saw the cops beat Jamar to death, but no one else in the projects saw a thing?”

“Perhaps they’re all lying,” Brett said.

“I don’t think so. I think the four-hundred-year-old vampire can be trusted.”

“Who?” Chance said.

I explained about Reba.

“I’m not even sure Jamar’s body was found at the projects anymore,” I said.

Brett slurped her soup.

“Sorry,” she said. “It’s cooled enough to eat, and it’s good, and I sound like Oliver Twist sucking up his last drop.”

“You can have more,” I said.

“More please?” Brett said, and held the bowl toward me.

I took it and put more in the bowl, placed it in front of her, and sat back down.

Chance was staring off into space. She said, “What if Weed was telling the truth about what he saw, or telling the truth mostly, but wasn’t telling the truth about where it happened? Maybe he’s more involved than he wanted to let on, so he’s assuaging his conscience with a half-truth.”

I felt like a lightbulb turned on. It was low wattage, but the bulb was burning.

“Sorry,” Chance said. “I took a criminology course.”

“Let me think on it,” I said.

22

At the office, Leonard said, “So what we have here—besides this excellent bag of vanilla cookies that I have brought for myself, and none for you—is an idea Chance threw out that you grabbed onto? She is one smart young lady, but if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, and tastes like duck once you cook it right, it’s a duck. And I think this case looks like a duck.”

“I got lost somewhere,” I said.

“Yeah, I think I extended that metaphor too far.”

“I think Chance may be onto something,” I said. “I think what we were getting from Timpson Weed was guilt, but not the sort I thought it was. Originally, I thought he felt guilty because he had seen a murder and couldn’t get the cops to do anything about it. Could be more to it than that, because I was also thinking about what Reba said.”

“Oh, that little fountain of wisdom.”

“She said Timpson had done a lot of jail time.”

“Chicken fucking.”

“That was when he was a teenager, but remember she said last time he came out of the jail, he was beat up.”

“He is black and lives in Camp Rapture. That’s kind of the way it goes. Get arrested. Get beat up. Nice lunch on the county, shit on a shingle. Pay your fine, and after another ass-kicking, go home.”

“Guess I’m thinking we may be looking at the wrong duck,” I said.

“So you admit there is a duck?”

“I do. What if Timpson, the old chicken fucker, knew what happened to Jamar and lied about how, not what?”

“Because he had a conscience? I don’t know, Hap. He didn’t lose sleep over those chickens, I bet. Here’s a hole in your theory, and you’ve heard it before, and I keep coming back to it because it makes sense and you don’t. Why would he go to the cops if he saw the cops kill Jamar? That would be like climbing into a hot frying pan and asking for lard to be poured over you.”

“Perhaps we should find out who Timpson spoke to at the station. I say we go back to Manny.”

I reached for a cookie. Leonard pulled the bag away.

“Nope. You did me dirt with that old lady, giving her my sweets.”

“It was a joke.”

“My joke is you put your hand in my cookie bag, you draw back a bloody stump.”

“Man, you do not forgive, do you?”

“No, sir, I do not.”

23

We arranged to meet Manny at a dog park in LaBorde. She said she wouldn't meet in Camp Rapture.

It was a nice cool day. The dog park was a large fenced-in area down by a creek with a number of hardwood trees growing around it. Leonard had once punched a smartass college kid on the jogging trail there. A sweet memory.

Inside the dog park there was a concrete bench beneath a large pecan tree, and we all three sat there while Trixie ran about barking at larger dogs who seemed to be sizing her up for a sandwich.

"Those assholes drive by my house frequently," she said. "Not Coldpoint. He's the superior, so he sends Sheerfault. Sheerfault rides around with this guy that isn't even a cop. It's against regulations, but if we start talking about the regulations they break, you'll have to go buy a couple pens and half a dozen notebooks to list them."

"This guy with him," I said. "Bobo?"

"Ah," she said. "You've met."

"We have indeed," I said. "He wanted to dance, but I declined."

"He looks like a guy that might step on your feet a lot," Manny said.

"Yep, that's what I'm thinking," I said.

"We got a question you might can answer," Leonard said. "Timpson Weed."

"Chicken Fucker, or Egg Breaker, some people called him," she said.

"You know our man," Leonard said. "Question is this. According to what we heard, and keep in mind we got this from a four-hundred-year-old vampire midget—"

"Say what?" Manny said.

"Ignore him," I said.

"This midget said Weed was arrested quite a few times, and he came back and looked like he'd been beat on," Leonard said.

"There are rumors," she said. "Sorry I have to come back to rumors, but that's what I've got. That and suspicions. There are people they arrest on a regular basis, people on the margin, with little money and little recourse to real law, and they often end up beat up. There's always some excuse. The inmates were in a fight. One of them gave a jailer or an officer some trouble and they had to get rough with them. Mostly it's men, sometimes women."

"You see any of that happen?" I said.

"No. I knew it went on, though. A multitude of rumors of that nature is why I quit and am now living on savings. My bit of pension seems to be held up in a pit of legal quicksand. I'll get it, but they're making it difficult. They're claiming I sexually harassed them. Them being Coldpoint and Sheerfault. They're doing that because I have a suit against them for harassing me, and for other transgressions, as my lawyer puts it."

"Was Jamar ever arrested?" Leonard asked.

"I don't know. As for this Weed character, definitely he was arrested. Drunk driving. Drugs on him. About once a week for a year he got arrested, but he was always loose in short time, and then he kind of fell off the radar until the kid was killed."

"He reported Jamar's death to the police, right?"

"Now that I think about it, I believe he had a lawyer do it."

"That's new," Leonard said.

"He could afford a lawyer?" I said.

"It was Tom Barker. Ambulance chaser. Cruises hospitals and such, does a lot of work where if he wins, he takes a bite out of the settlement. I'm sure he saw some kind of money in it, eventually. Guy like Barker, he lives a lot on eventually. My guess is he thought the department might want to settle the case without accepting fault, and the settlement would give him a nice payday."

"Okay," Leonard said. "Lawyer thinks he might drum up some kind of suit and make some dough, that makes sense. But the thing still bothers me is why would Weed want to go to the police if the police were the ones responsible? Why would he think that would work out? It would put a target on his back with the Camp Rapture department."

"You got me there," Manny said. "But I can talk to the one or two people I'm still friendly with at the department. They aren't actually in cahoots with the rest of them. I can make a few phone calls. But no promises."

"Good enough," I said.

"Yeah," Leonard said, "but watch your ass. I don't think these dudes are playing around."

“I assure you,” Manny said, “they are not. But neither am I.”

24

On Monday we looked up Tom Barker and drove over to his office in Camp Rapture. It was off an alley and you had to go through a paint-peeling door to reach the hallway that led to his office. The hallway was dark enough to grow mushrooms.

Barker's pebbled-glass door was decorated with time-worn black stenciling that read TOM BARKER, ATTORNEY-AT-LAW. Underneath that was a list: SEMI-TRUCK INJURY, PHYSICIAN MALPRACTICE SUITS, DUIS, PERSONAL INJURY. I GOT YOU COVERED.

"He's got us covered," Leonard said.

"Seems like it."

"Might be a good idea. We have a lot of personal injury."

I opened the door and went in. The outer office was small and tight with a desk taking up much of it. A young girl behind the desk who looked like she still had two years to go before she was a high-school student glanced up at us.

"Excuse me," I said. "Is Mr. Barker in?"

"He's out," she said.

She was a little thing with shoulder-length brown hair, a bit of baby fat, and a cute face sprinkled with acne that had been covered over with makeup that appeared to have been designed for another skin tone.

"Do you know when he'll be back?" Leonard asked.

"Uh-uh. I don't work here, really. I'm his daughter, Connie. He doesn't have a receptionist right now. Last one quit a year ago. Hasn't hired anyone else. Sometimes, after school, I help out."

"Okay," I said. "Maybe I could give my name and a phone number—"

That's when the door opened and a man with a very similar face to the girl's, minus the acne and the makeup, came in. He was short and a little portly, but it wasn't baby fat. This was hard-earned marbling. He had thinning brown hair and wore a brown suit that fit him about as comfortably as a three-piece suit fits a groundhog. He gave us a practiced grin, letting us know he could get that settlement for us, though we might have to go around with neck braces for a couple weeks. There were a few bottom teeth missing on the left side of his mouth. Like the suit, he had seen better days.

“Gentlemen, what can I do you for?”

“Can I go now?” the girl said.

“Sure, honey, go on ahead. You go on.”

Connie started toward the door, was stopped by Barker. He got out his wallet and gave her a twenty and she went out and shut the door. When he’d opened his wallet I noticed there weren’t many other bills in it and they looked like ones.

“Kids,” he said. “They go to lunch, they got to have soup to nuts and a cookie to go. Kids.”

We smiled. We couldn’t think of anything else to do.

“Come in the office. Come on.”

He opened another pebbled-glass door, this one minus the stenciling, and in we went. There was a saggy leather couch in there, and there was a blanket on the couch, and a pillow. Barker picked up the blanket and folded it and took the pillow and carried all of it to an open closet and stuffed it inside and closed the door.

“Me and the wife,” he said. “We’re kind of taking a break. I been sleeping here.”

“Sure,” I said.

Barker sat behind his desk and we sat in hard wooden chairs in front of his desk. Thirty seconds later, my ass felt like it was broken.

“Oh.” He stood up suddenly. “I forgot to introduce myself.” He leaned over his desk. Leonard and I stood up and shook his hand in turn. “Tom Barker.”

“Yes,” Leonard said. “We know.”

“Of course you do. Of course.”

We all settled into our seats.

“I’d offer a beverage, some coffee, but you know, I’m plumb out. Need to make a store run. Been real busy. Plumb out of everything.”

He looked like the last time he’d been to the store you had to harvest your own coffee beans.

“Sure,” I said.

“We work for a private investigator, and we’re looking into the death of Jamar Elton,” Leonard said. “And while we’re at it, we might as well throw in Timpson Weed.”

“Oh…Oh…I see. Yeah. Well, I don’t know that I can help you with that. Just don’t know I can.”

"But you know about it," I said.

"A little. Very little. Just a tiny bit."

"You were the spokesperson for Timpson Weed, as I understand," I said. "You told the cops what he had seen."

"I did. I did. That I did."

He looked nervous, like his dick was in a sausage grinder and someone angry had a hand on the crank. The man's repetition of words and phrases was starting to crawl along my backbone.

"We just wanted to know what was said, and why Timpson had you speak to them about Jamar, and how that worked out."

"There's really nothing. Nothing. I was just doing a kind of favor."

"There were no money possibilities in it for you?" I said.

"Not really. Not really…Well, maybe. But it didn't come to anything. I like to make myself available, you know."

"Could you maybe tell us a little about what Mr. Weed had you do, and why?" I said. "Jamar's mother is our client and obviously it's all tied together. Here, let me show you who we work for."

I took out one of the cards Brett had made up for us and put it on his desk, then leaned back in my chair. The card lay on the desk in front of him. He leaned over and looked at it.

He read the card out loud, like we might not know what was on it. "'Brett Sawyer Investigations. Hap Collins, Leonard Pine.' That's you two?"

"Still is," Leonard said. I was hoping my man didn't get too testy and start pissing off Barker. Leonard is not patient with bullshit. Start laying that on him, Leonard goes negative and mean, and sometimes pretty damn funny pretty damn quick.

"Jamar's mother hired us," I said. "We're just trying to find out how he died."

"I see. I see."

Barker wasn't actually acting like he did see.

"I sort of hit a wall with that. Hit a wall."

"What kind of wall?" Leonard said. "A blue wall?"

"It's not really anything I can talk about," Barker said.

"Or won't talk about?" Leonard said.

"Now, there's no need to be smart, be smart, you see, no need."

"Would you rather us be dumb?" Leonard said. "You're treating us like we're dumb. We know you went to the station for Timpson Weed, and you told the cops he saw Jamar beat to death."

"I don't like your tone. I don't."

“We aren’t trying to be tuneful,” I said. “We are trying to find out what happened to a young man for his mother, and I guess, while we’re at it, we’d like to know what happened to Mr. Weed, and what this has to do with the Camp Rapture police force, and what was said by them when you told them what you told them. And just for icing, why does this all make you so nervous?”

“I have to leave, leave now,” he said. “You need to go first.”

“I guess so,” Leonard said. “You leave, we’d feel pretty silly sitting in your office by ourselves.”

“We could play checkers,” I said.

“Like you remembered to bring a game board and checkers,” Leonard said.

“We wouldn’t be drinking a cup of coffee, that’s for sure,” I said.

“I’m quite ready for you to go now, go on out,” Barker said.

“Who the hell is going to know what you tell us besides us?” Leonard said.

“All right. All right. It’s time for you two to go. Go on now. Go.”

We sat for a moment. Barker stood up, pushed his chair under his desk, put his hands on the back of it, and looked at us.

Taking our time, we got up and started out. When we got to his inner office door, I turned around and looked at him.

“What if it was your daughter, Barker? What if something happened to her and you thought someone might know something. Maybe just a piece of something, and they wouldn’t tell you? How would you feel?”

“That’s a low blow, bringing my daughter into it. A low blow.”

“Jamar’s mother suffered an even worse low blow,” I said. “Her child isn’t coming back.”

“Get out now, or I’ll…”

“Were you going to say ‘call the police’?” Leonard said. “I don’t think you’re going to call the police. I think maybe you’re afraid of them.”

“Go. Go now.”

We went through the outer office, down the dark hall, out to the alley, and back to our car. There was a flyer for a gun show under the windshield wiper.

25

As we sat in the car at the curb, Leonard said, “Okay, there is definitely a big turd in the soup somewhere.”

“Agreed, and on that note, how about lunch?”

“Just as long as we don’t have soup,” Leonard said.

We drove back to LaBorde and to a café downtown on the square. A diner. It was our first time there. We had been meaning to try it.

An older woman with silver hair so severely bound back it damn near pulled her cheeks over her ears showed us to a table. I asked her if they had crayons for Leonard, but she just stared at me.

“He likes to color,” I said.

“Oh,” she said and, without a hint of humor, said, “We do have crayons.”

“He’s messing with you,” Leonard said.

“Oh, I see. Long morning. I should have got that.”

“Bad joke,” I said.

She took our drink orders and went away.

“I can’t draw a direct line to what’s going on with all this Jamar business and the Timpson Weed aka Chicken Fucker business,” Leonard said.

“Maybe not a direct line, but you can draw a wavy line right through Charm, Jamar, Weed, and Barker. That’s enough for me, the connections. And I bet if we look real close, we’ll see that line runs right through Coldpoint, Sheerfault, and the train-fucked Bobo.”

“And there’s Manny too,” Leonard said.

“She’s just to one side of the line, at least as far as I can tell, but yeah, she’s in the vicinity.”

“She has too many rumors and not enough solid information,” Leonard said. “And I’m wondering about Timpson turning in information to that lawyer, and then the lawyer telling it to the cops, and suddenly the lawyer is frightened out of his skin.”

“He did look scared,” I said.

“Yeah. You’d have thought we were the Ebola virus.”

“‘Hey, how are you? We’re the Ebola virus, and we’ve come to kill you.’”

“Yep. That’s how he acted.”

“Barker looks like he scrapes by. He doesn’t seem like a mastermind, and doesn’t seem like someone cops would have on their payroll normally, but what if they paid him to keep his mouth shut?”

Leonard shook his head. “But he didn’t keep his mouth shut. He told them about Jamar being beat to death, told them what Weed told him to tell them. Since then he’s gotten nervous. Well, he was most likely always nervous, but now he’s like a pig that just saw the butcher pull up.”

“I think the money may have come after he said what he said to them. They told him, ‘That’s a nice story, but if we hear it again, we’re going to pull your asshole over your ears and drop you down an old well somewhere.’”

The waitress came back with our drinks and menus. We glanced at the menus, and before she could go away, I ordered a chicken salad and Leonard ordered a hamburger with fries. A hamburger and fries was what I wanted, but I forced myself to have a salad.

“So what we know is what we know,” I said, “but now we know what we know is more shadowy than we thought.”

My cell buzzed. I took it out and looked at the number. I didn’t recognize it. “Get me some more tea, will you?” I said to Leonard, having already sucked down the glass I had while we were talking. I’m a serious ice tea drinker.

I got up and went outside and answered the cell.

“Hey, this you? White man with the loudmouthed nigger?”

I recognized that voice. It was Reba, the four-hundred-year-old vampire.

“You got him,” I said. “But cut the nigger stuff, okay?”

“You paying good money?”

“For what?”

“Information, asshole. You was the one said it.”

“Depends on the information. But please, I had asshole legally dropped from my name.”

“That was a mistake.”

I walked along in front of the restaurant, glanced through the plate-glass window, and saw Leonard watching me. I walked on farther down the sidewalk and stopped in front of a shop that sold Texas souvenirs.

"That Timpson not only screw the ass out of chickens, he kill that boy himself."

"That boy?"

"Jamar. The dead fucker. You and me talked before, right? I ain't dialed the wrong number and got the wrong honky."

I let that sink in.

"I'm the right honky. How do you know?"

"I want to see some money first before I tell you squat."

"How much money?"

"I figure it's worth ten thousand dollars."

"Oh, really. I haven't got ten thousand dollars. What the hell, girl? Ten thousand dollars. You out of your mind. I look like Rockefeller?"

"Who?"

"Never mind."

"Okay, a hundred."

"A hundred thousand?" I said, just to mess with her.

"Yeah, I guess."

"Nope."

"All right, then," she said. "Hundred dollars."

"That sounds more like it, if you have something that's worth a hundred."

"I want to see that hundred dollars. Take a photo and text it to me."

"I haven't got a hundred dollars on me. I use my debit card mostly. I got a few bills, that's it."

"Well, then, you ain't gonna get no new information, is you?"

Leonard was right. This wasn't a little girl. This was indeed a four-hundred-year-old vampire.

"How about this? I get a hundred dollars out of the bank, text a photo of it to you, then you call me back with the information."

"Naw. You send that photo to me, then I'll call where we can meet, and then you feed me something good at McDonald's."

"They have something good at McDonald's?"

"Don't get snooty on me," she said. "I like me some McDonald's. And to me, you look like you'd get down on some supersize French fries in a New York minute."

"Like you'd know a New York minute."

"Yeah," Reba said. "I ain't got no idea what that means, but it sounds fast."

"When does this need to happen, this trip to McDonald's?"

"I got business now," she said, as if I would really think she had business. And as I thought about it, she just might’ve. She could have business terrorizing squirrels, shooting birds the finger, knocking streetlights out with a rock.

“When, then?”

“This afternoon, say five thirty. Meet me on Choctaw Street. It’s below the projects.”

“I know where it is,” I said.

“But we don’t got no business till you text me a picture of that hundred.”

“I could just show up with it,” I said. “Either way, you got to trust I’m going to give it to you.”

“You give it to me, and then I give you the information.”

“What if your information sucks?”

“It don’t.”

“Yeah, but what if it does?”

“Then you out a hundred, ain’t you, Mr. White Man.”

“I hate you,” I said.

“Hate me on up to five thirty, then show up with a hundred dollars in your hand.”

26

When I went back inside, Leonard was eating my salad.

"What the hell, man?"

"It came out first. I was hungry."

"So you're eating my salad?"

"Looks that way, don't it? And you know what I did? You're going to thank me for this, Hap. I ordered you a hamburger and fries, 'cause I know that's what you want."

"I'm trying to be healthier."

"Not today. This salad is damn good, though. Who was the call?"

"My broker."

"Yeah. I hope you fire him. I know your finances."

I told him all that Reba had said.

"You can't count on her doing nothing but working a deal," Leonard said.

"Crossed my mind," I said.

"Instead of a hundred dollars, you ought to bring a stake and a mallet, and drive it through her heart."

"I'm starting to think you might be right."

"Damn tootin', I'm right."

We ate and I paid the bill. Leonard seemed to have forgotten his wallet.

As we were getting in the car, my cell rang again.

It was Barker.

"Maybe we ought to talk," he said.

"All right."

"You got to understand I'm putting my neck on the chopping block, right on it."

"Not if they don't see you put it there," I said.

"That's the problem, they just might, they just might."

"When?" I said.

"How about you come by the office, say five thirty?"

"Can't. I have another meeting with someone about this case."

"Who?"

"Client confidentiality."

"You know there's nothing legal about a private investigator and their client having confidentiality."

"Nothing legal, but I gave my word."

"You might give all you know up if the wrong people get hold of you," he said.

"I don't doubt that," I said. "I think I would cave right away if they brought out a pair of pliers and a ball-peen hammer. But right now I'm sitting pretty in my car with my best friend and I have a bellyful of hamburger and nobody is threatening me."

"Six thirty, then?"

I considered. I looked at Leonard as I muted the phone.

"Barker. He wants to meet at six thirty."

"We can make it work," Leonard said.

"Seven," I said.

Leonard shrugged.

I pushed the mute button off, said, "Seven p.m. Your office."

"Oh, hell no. How about we meet at the old Camp Rapture High School, out by the tennis courts. No one goes there anymore, not since they built the new school."

"Seven p.m. Old Camp Rapture High School tennis courts."

I hung up and Leonard said, "Now, if someone would call and say you've won a million dollars, this could be a real good day."

"When it rains it pours."

"Someone did call with some money like that, you'd split it with your dear friend and brother, wouldn't you?"

"Not likely," I said. "Remember the cookies?"

27

The four-hundred-year-old vampire had quite an appetite.

"Be careful there," Leonard said, "you nearly ate the paper napkin."

"Go fuck yourself," Reba said.

"You've just about had the left side of the menu," I said, "so is there a point where you actually give me some information about how it was Timpson Weed killed Jamar? Or did you just con us into a free meal?"

"I'm going to need a couple fried apple pies."

"Are you?"

"Don't know I got a thing to say I don't get a couple pies."

"Would you like a cup of coffee with that?" Leonard said. "Maybe a silver sugar bowl and a matching spoon, and when you finish I can wipe your mouth for you?"

"Naw, but I'll take a glass of milk."

"Eat any more, you're going to blow up," Leonard said.

"I can eat a lot," she said.

"We've seen that," Leonard said.

"I ain't eat nothing all day, so thought might as well get my fill, but I ain't there yet. Still got an appetite."

I went to get the fried pies and the milk.

When I came back, Reba was licking her fingers.

"I hope you washed good or that ain't your wiping hand," Leonard said.

"You a funny nigger," Reba said, but she didn't actually look amused.

I gave her the pies and the milk.

"That milk ain't as cold as I like," she said.

"Well, shit, Hap," Leonard said. "You go back there and tell them to ice that milk. The princess likes it real cold."

"Enough of this," I said. "I texted the photo of the hundred. We've bought you a week's worth of groceries, and so far we only know you like milk with your fried pies."

She sipped the milk and it gave her a frothy mustache.

I pulled the hundred-dollar bill from my wallet and put it on the table. I carefully put my wallet back in my pocket and pressed the bill out with both hands.

"It's a crisp, fresh one hundred right out of the bank. Probably flown in from the mint this morning."

"How pretty it is don't impress me none," she said. "It's how it spends."

"For Christ sakes," Leonard said. "It spends like a hundred-dollar bill. That's how it spends."

"Can't buy as much with a hundred as you used to," Reba said.

"Used to," Leonard said. "You hardly been alive long enough to know when the price of gas last went up."

"Our deal was a hundred," I said.

"I'm thinking now you could maybe add a twenty to that to sweeten it on up to serious sugar," she said.

"They're fixing to find you in a ditch tomorrow with a goddamn McDonald's sack over your head," Leonard said. "Get on and tell us what you brought us here for."

She didn't say anything.

I sighed. I got my wallet out and removed a twenty, which was all I had left, and put it on top of the hundred.

"That's it," I said. "You either got information or you don't. Tell it, or we walk, and with the cash."

She reached over for the money.

Leonard slapped his hand down on the bills.

"That ole dog ain't going to hunt," he said. "You got to at least give us a taste of this big information you got. We don't get a taste, you don't get a taste."

Reba leaned back in her chair. She took her carton of milk and sipped it like it was fine bourbon.

"Timpson was the cause Jamar got killed, and he was upset about it."

"And you know this how?" I asked.

"I heard him and this fat white fella talking about it, out in the parking lot. I was in a tree."

"There's one fucking tree in the projects, except for those down on the creek, and you were in it?" Leonard said. "Lying on a limb like a constrictor snake at just the right time to overhear a conversation between Timpson and a fat guy? That's some rich shit, girl."

"I climb up there all the time. There's a hollow up there I keep stuff in. Here come this fat white fellow and he pulls up right under where I am. Sits in his car. Could see him through the window glass. Calls on his phone, and here comes Weed out of the projects, coming down to the parking lot. Fat man gets out of the car and he and Weed lean on the car door and they talk."

"And you heard all this from a tree?" Leonard said.

"They right under me, so, yeah, I did."

"Could've told us this before," I said.

"Wasn't nothing in it for me until you made that offer, and I wasn't gonna talk in front of them niggers out there, or they'd come down on me when I got the money."

"All right, then," I said. "What did they say?"

"When they start talking, I got quiet and still, 'cause I figured this wasn't something I was supposed to know, way they was meeting and all. My mama may have been a drug addict, but she didn't raise no fool for a daughter."

"Go on," I said.

"So Weed, he tells this fat man he wants him to do something for him, 'cause on the back end there might be some money. He says he wants him to tell the cops he gonna go to another bunch of law and tell them that they made him fight Jamar, and that he near beat him to death, and then they finished him off. Told him to say the body was in the projects. But it wasn't."

"You're sure you heard right?" I said.

"I ain't old enough to be deaf yet," she said. "Said if the law didn't pay him some real money, he was gonna say they did it, and he was gonna say they did it up in the projects, 'cause there was gonna be a whole lot of politicians could say it was police brutality, up there where all the black folks were."

"He was going to blackmail the police force?" I said.

"If that means he was gonna tell what really happened and say he didn't have no choice but to do what he did, yeah, then he was gonna do that, and he was gonna be quiet, they give him some money."

"Not exactly feeling his conscience," Leonard said.

"Maybe a bit of column A, a bit of column B," I said. "So, you're certain Jamar was killed somewhere else?"

"I never seen nothing, and them niggers run the lot from daylight to dark didn't see nothing either."

"How would you know if anyone else in the projects saw something or didn't?" I said.

"Please. Them fuckers can't keep they mouths shut if you glued they lips together with superglue.”

“Really doesn’t matter where he was killed,” Leonard said. “He was killed, and that’s what matters.”

I nodded at Leonard, then turned my attention to Reba. “Any idea how Weed knew the fat man?”

“I ain’t never seen him before,” she said. “I don’t even know what he do.”

I looked at Leonard.

We had a real good idea what it was he do, and who he was.

28

We dropped Reba off on Choctaw Street with a to-go order in a bag. Four hamburgers and four fries and four apple pies. She didn't say *Thank you, Kiss my ass,* or *Hope you get hit by a car.*

She got out, slammed the back door, and started walking toward the projects.

"I miss that little bitch already," Leonard said.

We sat parked at the top of Choctaw and waited until we thought Reba had gone into the projects, added time for her to get to her place, then I coasted us down and past the projects. There was one great oak at the edge of the lot. It was big and the limbs were wide. A little girl like Reba, she could have been up there, and if no one looked up, they might not have seen her. Past the oak and the projects were more trees, and then there was a creek. I drove over a short concrete bridge, found a place to turn around, and drove past the projects again, on up Choctaw Street.

We still had time before seven p.m., so we went to a coffee shop Cason Statler had taken us to once, sat there with strong cups of coffee, and watched the clock.

"What do you think about Reba's information?" I said.

"I got to think she got a nice crisp hundred-dollar bill, and about a century's worth of greasy food she'll be shitting out about the time we take our old-age pension."

"You don't believe her?"

"I guess I do, but I keep thinking, okay, she just happens to be in a tree in the parking lot. The only tree, and Barker, 'cause that's who it sounds like it is, pulls up and Weed comes out and she hears their conversation?"

"I believe her," I said. "Not that I don't think the sweet Reba might tell a little lie, she took a notion. But I think she's telling the truth. That description fits Barker to a T. It's such an odd story it strikes me as true. Even she couldn't pull a story like that out of thin air."

“I have more faith in her lying, conniving self than you do,” Leonard said.

We waited until six forty and drove over to the old high school. I don’t know exactly when it was abandoned and the new one was built, but the old one was a lot better constructed than the new one that was off the edge of the main highway. The new one looked like a prison.

The old one had been built by the WPA during the thirties. There were some additions in the fifties. There was a football stadium within walking distance. Out back were tennis courts. Somehow it was decided a new location was better for the students, and the new school was built. One day, I presumed, they would knock this one down, along with the stone memories of all those men Roosevelt put to work.

The side road at the back of the school was dark. The few streetlights had been rocked out or shot out some time back. I parked by the old gym. I got a flashlight out of the glove box. Leonard put his fedora on the seat between us, and we got out and started walking along a narrow street behind the school, near the tennis courts. I turned on the light and flashed it along the gym. It was covered in graffiti, most of it instructional of a sort and anatomically impossible.

“What the hell is Barker?” Leonard said. “A bat?”

I turned off the flashlight.

“I’m not liking this,” I said.

That’s when we saw headlights and a car turning off the main street and into the little avenue that split the gym and the tennis courts. The stadium loomed in the distance, reminiscent of a small Roman Colosseum.

After a moment the car stopped and the driver’s door opened and we could see someone get out. It was Barker. We could tell by his shape.

I flicked on the flashlight and we walked over there.

When we were past the tennis court, almost to the little, dark avenue, lights came on at one end of it, and then another car came the way Barker had come and pulled up near Barker’s car. The car on the other end pulled up close and kept the lights on. The lights were harshly bright and we were pinned between them.

I looked at Barker. He was standing by his car, his hands having no place to rest comfortably; they fluttered against the sides of his legs.

“You fucked us over, didn’t you?” I said.

“I had to,” he said. “My daughter.”

“We live through this, she may still be fatherless,” Leonard said.

Doors slammed at both ends of the street, and we could see shapes coming toward us. In front of the bright headlights they looked like dark cutouts.

"Hey, if isn't my colored friend," a voice said.

"Sheerfault," Leonard said. "Of course. I only dreamed you were dead."

A shape moved closer to us, and now we could make out Sheerfault. Behind him trailed his pet gargoyle, Bobo.

"Bobo," I said, "how's the ole cucumber hanging?"

"Shut up," Bobo said.

Now from the other end another man came toward us. He was well tailored in a nice blue suit and had perfectly combed blond hair. He had a face that looked as if it belonged on the front of a men's fashion magazine, not somewhere in the shadows behind an abandoned school. When he was close I could smell his cologne.

I said, "I'm going to guess you're Coldpoint."

"That's a good guess," he said. I noted now another part of his wardrobe that I had overlooked at first. He had a handgun held down close to his leg.

"It's nice you invited us out here," I said to Barker, "but I think maybe we'll head out now. "

"No," said Coldpoint. "You won't be leaving until I say you're leaving."

He and Bobo and Sheerfault were all close to us now, and no one looked particularly friendly. Coldpoint continued to let the gun hang by his side.

"I guess we could stay awhile," I said.

Coldpoint smiled. "Of course you can. What we got here is just a friendly chat."

"Gun makes it less friendly," Leonard said.

"This is merely a room monitor of sorts," Coldpoint said. "We're not in a room, but you get the idea. Barker here told us you were meddling in police business."

"Monkey business," Leonard said.

"Hell," Sheerfault said. "You should know, them monkeys being your kin and all."

"No need for racial invective," Coldpoint said.

"Sorry," Sheerfault said. "Just don't like niggers, and this one in particular."

"'Cause you know you didn't really whip my ass, and can't," Leonard said.

“I got the trophy,” Sheerfault said, and gave us his shit-eating grin. “I got the money.”

“I’m going to ask everyone to shut up, and I want you boys to get in the car,” Coldpoint said.

“I take it you don’t mean our car,” I said.

“You take it right.”

He pointed to the car he, Sheerfault, and Bobo had climbed out of.

We didn’t move.

He lifted his gun but didn’t point it at us, merely held it in such a way as to be a persistent reminder. “Afraid I got to insist.”

Barker, still standing where he had been, lifted his head, said, “It isn’t personal. Really. It isn’t personal.”

“Go fuck yourself,” Leonard said.

“Go away,” Coldpoint said to Barker.

Barker got in his car and started it up, backed down the little avenue and onto the street, turned it into place, and drove away.

At gunpoint, me and Leonard got in the car. Sheerfault and Bobo rode in the backseat with us. Like magicians, they had produced handguns. They poked them against our ribs. I had Bobo on my side, and I figured I got the worst of that deal. He had breath that stank like a dead skunk’s ass.

“I bet you get a lot of grooming products for Christmas,” I said.

“What?” he said.

Coldpoint climbed in behind the wheel, turned on the engine and the lights.

“Can we go through a drive-through?” Bobo said. “I’m hungry.”

“Later, Bobo,” Coldpoint said.

“I could use a sandwich too,” Leonard said.

No response. Coldpoint eased the car between the stadium and the gym, and gunned it along the dark and silent street.

“I guess yelling for the police isn’t going to help much, is it?” I said.

They didn’t bother to respond to that.

Coldpoint drove on.

“You two, you think you’re helping out people that are downtrodden, don’t you.”

“Our client paid us.”

“I researched you two, and what I get out of it is, you are do-gooders.”

“That how you see it?” Leonard said.

Coldpoint nodded. “You got to understand, this is a dog-eat-dog world. My mother, she was a party animal, never saw her. Dad liked to drink with friends. Drop us off outside a bar, and he'd go inside and drink. Us being me and my sister. We got food out of the dumpster out back of the bar. A piece of this, a piece of that. Sometimes something nasty was on it, but you know what, we ate it."

"I don't give a shit," Leonard said.

"I figured right then and there you had to get yours, and you had to get it the way you wanted to get it. My sister, she didn't think that way. She became a public defender."

"Still don't give a shit," Leonard said.

"And she was good at it. One of her clients, he ended up knifing her. Guy she was trying to get off. People, they're shit, fellows. Me, I do some good things for the community, but I do it in a way that gets things done, not in a way where I beg for control or power to do something that protects citizens."

"Damn," Leonard said. "I am getting teary-eyed."

"Shut the fuck up, nigger," Sheerfault said.

"Ease off of that," Coldpoint said. "So, I made myself what I am today."

"I don't doubt that," Leonard said.

Sheerfault poked him in the side with his gun.

"My sister, Jewel, she was trying to live her life right, help people, but the people she was helping, they didn't deserve it. Criminals all of them, and one of them killed her. You think life is about doing the right thing, but I say the right thing as the law sees it isn't always the right thing. The end truly does justify the means."

"We agree on that, to some extent," Leonard said.

"And you, Mr. Collins. What do you think?"

"I'm sorry. Did you say something?"

"Doesn't matter," Coldpoint said. "I just thought you should know my philosophy a little better. Maybe you can understand my choices."

"Nope," Leonard said. "Not getting it."

29

We took a little ride in the country. The moon had been sacked by some ambitious black clouds and it had started to rain. I thought, Oh hell, I've seen this movie, and it doesn't have a happy ending. The shadowy trees on either side of the road looked like mountain ranges in the night. The headlights were foggy with mist.

Coldpoint tooled us out to where the old sawmill road was, drove up it. All I could think about was that sawmill sludge in the pit out front and how flesh and bones dissolved in it like snowflakes on a hot skillet.

There were other cars parked up there, and I could see a light seeping out from where the plywood covering was, and there was more light leaking out of the hole in the roof where the brave pine grew.

"Get out," Sheerfault said.

They walked us to the plywood barrier. We could hear hooting and hollering inside, the sounds of something smacking something else.

Bobo slid the board back, and we all went inside.

A generator was humming, and a crowd was gathered around the fence with the pine in the middle. The generator was near where the great saw was. The generator was one of those boxy things you roll in on wheels. It was the source of the lights and had a long cable coming out of it that fit into another box with a lot of long, thick extension cords running out of it. The extension cords led to where lights were arranged on high racks that looked like old-fashioned TV antennas. They were placed primarily around the fencing.

"Get up closer," Coldpoint said.

We did.

"Give some room," Coldpoint said to the crowd, and they moved aside. I noticed the handguns had gone back under their coats.

When we could see what was going on, we saw two young men, teenagers, in the middle of the circle. They were wearing gloves, boxing shorts, and boxing shoes. They had on T-shirts that had a logo for the Camp Rapture Boxing Club. There was a solid-looking older man in the middle serving as a referee. He looked like he had gone a few rounds in his life.

Across the way, standing behind the fence, were four sets of boxers, all dressed the same way. All of the young men were stout-looking and fresh-faced and nervous.

“Camp Rapture Boxing Club,” Coldpoint said.

Coldpoint seemed relaxed, not menacing at all. “That’s what we do here. They haven’t got enough money to train at the actual club all the time. Place shares with gymnastics and children’s tae kwon do. It’s not really an official club, that place. It costs to be there. Not much, but for most of these boys if they had to pay a quarter to fart, they’d have to burp. They train there, but the club is mostly T-shirts and a place to gather, so they train here too. We don’t charge. Two of these boys, ones in there now, they’re training for the Olympics. Fellow in the middle, that’s their coach. Maxwell Landing. He won a few titles in his time, nothing big, but he’s a good coach.”

“I’ve heard of him,” Leonard said.

I watched the two boys move around, and they were pretty good, though one kid had a habit of dragging his back foot; keeping it in the bucket, we used to say. He also had a habit of going too wide when he punched. The other kid was fast and circled, and had the most potential, but the bucket-foot kid could really hit.

“So, you brought us at gunpoint to see the Camp Rapture Boxing Club?” Leonard said.

“I didn’t think you would have come otherwise,” Coldpoint said. “You got it all wrong, fellows. We’re trying to do something for the community. Sometimes we got to step on a few toes to do it, bend a few laws, but we get it done.”

“Does this include killing a young man for taking photos and threatening his sister with your brand of law if she didn’t put out?” I said.

“There are human failings in the mix,” Coldpoint said. He nodded at the boys in the ring. “We let them train here. We raise money for the club. In time, maybe we can get them someplace to train more regularly, not just a couple hours on Wednesday over at the recreation center, trying to find spots and time between the girls’ gymnastics lessons and the like. Get the poorer kids free admission to the club, get money off their minds and put boxing on it full-time for a while.”

“You are such fucking humanitarians,” Leonard said. “And here we thought you were just assholes. Oh yeah, there was the gun thing, and threats from Bobo and the dancer. That doesn't make things seem nearly as polite as you make out."

"Again, you might not have come," Coldpoint said. "I wanted to nip this all in the bud before you got too worked up and started trying to pin that kid Jamar's death on us."

"I'm no dancer," Sheerfault said.

"Hush," Coldpoint said to him. "You see what's going on here. This place, it's not supposed to be used for anything. Supposed to be dangerous. But it's what we got for free, so it's where we come. Yeah, it's illegal and I'm a cop. Building code, safety regulations, and all that. But they need a place to train for those who can't go to the club, and for those who can, they only get two nights a week. We add to that."

"You're just some sweet fellas helping some sweet kids," Leonard said.

"Exactly," Coldpoint said, and gave me his magazine-model smile.

We stood and watched the kids finish up. When they came out, two others went in, smiling at each other, lifting their gloves to touch, the referee giving them the signal.

That fight was a good one, better than the two kids that were supposed to be up for the Olympics. Both had game and skill, both were fast and hit hard for their age and size.

"And who are all these people?" I said.

"Investors," Coldpoint said.

"In what exactly?" I said.

"These boys. Their futures. We're trying to get them to sponsor buying this old place, turn it into a boxing club. Some repairs would be needed. But in this crowd, there's some real money, and a few people who work as carpenters and the like are part of it, and they could make it better with free labor, if we get them to believe in what we're doing."

When the fights were all done, the boys filed out, and then the crowd followed. In time it was just me and Leonard and the three humanitarians. Bobo appeared to have gone to sleep on his feet, his mouth hanging open, his eyes glazed over.

"Sheerfuck," Leonard said. "We got a ring, and we got the time, how about you and me do it again? You dance the Charleston, and I'll fight."

"I already proved what I have to prove," Sheerfault said.

"In a dance contest," Leonard said.

"Shit, burr-head, you don't want me on your ass again."

"You afraid I'll show you up? I was you, and it was me you had to fight, I'd worry too. Name-calling don't break a bone, motherfucker. But fists and feet do. No pointing rules. None of the referee stuff."

"Seems like a good idea to me," I said. "Sheerfault is so certain, here's his chance for a repeat performance, but not on points."

"What do you think?" Coldpoint said, looking at Sheerfault.

Leonard had Sheerfault where he wanted him, and in front of his asshole friends.

"Sure," Sheerfault said. "We can do that. But I'll tell you, Leonard, we go in, when it's over, you wake up at all, it will be in the hospital with a tube up your nose."

"Done got me trembling all over," Leonard said.

"No eye-gouging and no throat strikes," Coldpoint said. "I'm going to insist on some rules. Gets too bad for one of you, I'm breaking it up."

"Don't think it's too bad before it is," Leonard said.

"For the record," I said, "you got nothing to prove, Leonard. I know you can whip him, and you know you can whip him."

"Yeah, but he don't know it yet," Leonard said.

Sheerfault said, "You know that's right."

"And another thing, no gloves," Leonard said.

Coldpoint glanced at Sheerfault.

"Sure," Sheerfault said.

"I get through, Hap here will punch Bobo's lights out," Leonard said. "All two watts."

"Leave me out of this," I said. "Bobo can keep his lights on."

"Lights?" Bobo said.

"It's an expression," Sheerfault said. "I'll explain it to you later."

"All right," Coldpoint said. "You called it, Pine. What do you two need to do to get ready?"

"I'm always ready," Leonard said. "They pulled me out of my mama, I was ready for lunch and a fistfight."

30

They stripped off their coats and shirts, and Sheerfault took off his ring and watch and handed it to me along with his coat and shirt because I was the closest to the edge of the fence. Leonard came over and gave me his stuff.

"Leonard, you are a dumbass."

"Yeah, but I can fight."

Leonard went to the center. I folded the ring and watch up in Sheerfault's shirt. The ring was a peculiar thing, a hefty silver skull on a thick silver band. I placed the shirts and coats on an apple box by the edge of the fence.

In the center of the wire enclosure they stood ready. Sheerfault was a little heavy, but not fat. Just a guy with a light winter coating of meat. Leonard was not at his peak, but when he's out of shape he's in better shape than most.

Leonard and Sheerfault began to move, circling at first, looking for a hole, meaning a spot where they could slip a punch through. Leonard held his hands a little low. It was a ploy of his, get you to think you could come in and find a spot to hit, and then up came the hands and he hit you. Also, higher you held your hands, more tired you got. Sheerfault had a more classic style, hands high. They both held their chins up; didn't put them to their chests like boxers of old.

Sheerfault faked high with his right hand and brought a round kick around to Leonard's thigh, but Leonard turned his leg and slid off most of the attack. They circled some more, and then Sheerfault tried a similar trick on the other side, and that's when Leonard closed.

He hit Sheerfault two quick ones in the head with a motion so swift the blows sounded almost like one. Sheerfault ducked enough to take them on his forehead. That can be hard on bare knuckles. It can be hard on your head, for that matter. Neither seemed fazed.

Sheerfault was swift and his hands came quickly, like flesh missiles. Leonard dodged a few, but the others hit, and that worried me at first, but then I realized what Leonard knew. Those hits, though fast, were arm hits, meaning Sheerfault didn't put his body behind them, didn't turn his hips in a way that generated power. This was what Leonard meant about Sheerfault winning on points. The touches would count in a ring fight, a controlled fight, but in a real fight, not so much.

Sheerfault flicked again, and this time Leonard slipped inside and body-punched Sheerfault twice with the same hand, once in the solar plexus, once in the kidney. Sheerfault let out some air and tried to disengage, but Leonard wouldn't let him, kept on coming, throwing his punches hard, hitting Sheerfault with most of them. Sheerfault couldn't seem to get it together. Leonard had stolen his balance and every time Sheerfault tried to regain it, Leonard was there to steal it again.

Sheerfault finally disengaged by managing to hit Leonard with a jab in the face that was a pretty good punch. It stunned Leonard a little, and that gave Sheerfault some room.

Sheerfault dove in for a tackle, but as he grabbed Leonard's front leg, Leonard threw his reverse leg back and dropped down on his belly, driving Sheerfault to the ground as he went. Then he hit Sheerfault in the nape of the neck with an elbow. Sheerfault lost his grip on Leonard's front positioned leg, and Leonard swiveled like a trick rider and was on Sheerfault's back.

Sheerfault tried to roll out of it, but he wasn't rolling anywhere. Leonard had his weight distributed just right, and then he had his arm around Sheerfault's neck, positioning it in such a way that he didn't have his forearm in Sheerfault's throat, just his bent elbow. He was going for the constriction choke, what my dad used to call the Japanese stranglehold.

Sheerfault thought he was finally managing to rise a bit, pushing up with his arms, but that was Leonard's ploy. He was making himself lighter by lifting up on the balls of his feet, giving Sheerfault a false feeling of accomplishment. As Sheerfault rose, Leonard clamped his legs around Sheerfault's body and rolled on his back with a movement so quick it took us all by surprise. Now Sheerfault was facing the ceiling, his body in Leonard's clamps. Leonard lay comfortably on his back, choking Sheerfault by squeezing his arms together and expanding his chest.

Leonard didn't cross his ankles around Sheerfault's abdomen. He did that, Sheerfault could push down on Leonard's ankles with his hands, even throw his own leg over them, and cause excruciating pain. Leonard dug his heels into Sheerfault's thighs.

Sheerfault tried to twist loose. He managed to slide Leonard a short pace across the sawdust flooring, but he couldn't pull Leonard's hands off. Sheerfault tugged to dislodge Leonard's arms, without results. It was as if he were making a polite suggestion to a hungry python to loosen its coils, but pythons and Leonard didn't play that way.

I saw Sheerfault's eyes roll up, and his feet wiggled desperately, as if pedaling a bicycle, and then Sheerfault's arms dropped to his sides, as useless as a dead man's dick. Leonard didn't quit squeezing.

"Let him go," Coldpoint said.

But Leonard didn't let him go.

"Bobo," Coldpoint said.

Bobo started for the gate. I put a hand on his shoulder, said, "Hey, look, she's naked," and pointed.

Bobo looked where I was pointing, and I hit him in the jaw. I really brought that one by express train, but it merely made Bobo's head nod.

I stuck my heel into his thigh, way you would use it to push a shovel into the dirt. His leg went out from under him. I got my knee in his face a couple of times, jammed an elbow into the back of his neck. He went facedown in a scattering of dirt and sawdust.

I walked around Bobo, through the gate, and into the ring. I bent close to Leonard.

"You showed him," I said. "Let him go."

"I don't like him," Leonard said, and squeezed harder, pushing in with his chest, his chin in the top of Sheerfault's head.

"I know," I said. "But you want it so he remembers it."

"I want that?"

"Sure you do."

"Silly me," Leonard said. "I thought I wanted to kill the son of a bitch."

"If you get everything you want for Christmas, there's nothing to look forward to."

"That's true," Leonard said, let go and pushed Sheerfault off him. Sheerfault lay still in the sawdust. Coldpoint came through the gate and inside the fence.

"You better not have killed him," Coldpoint said.

"He'll come around," Leonard said.

Bobo was up now, staggering a little, starting through the gate toward me.

"That's enough, Bobo," Coldpoint said. "Get out of there."

Bobo let that command move around inside his head like a blindfolded man in a new house. Finally he stopped and stood by the fence. He looked at Sheerfault, said, “Is he dead?”

Sheerfault certainly didn’t look as if he were merely taking a nap. Maybe Leonard was wrong about him coming around.

I sighed, grabbed Sheerfault under his arms, and pulled him up a little. I stuck my knee in his back, rubbed at the sides of his throat, rubbed down on his chest with my palms, bent him forward, hammered him a few times in the small of the back. He coughed and spat up a wad of blood and fell over onto his side in the sawdust, breathing heavily. His eyes came open, fluttered, closed again.

Leonard stood over Sheerfault.

“I was wrong,” Leonard said. “You don’t even dance that well, Sheerfuck.”

I took Leonard by the elbow and we started toward the gate.

“You took me by surprise,” Bobo said as me and Leonard went past him.

“That was the idea,” I said. “Me and Leonard call it the elephant of surprise.”

31

They dropped us off by our car at the high school and drove away. Leonard had his coat under his arm. He was still heated up from having fought Sheerfault.

“I don’t know about you,” he said, “but I don’t believe any of that shit about helping the poor kids have a place to train.”

“They’re doing that, all right,” I said, “but that’s not all they’re doing. The idea that Jamar was murdered and Charm was sexually harassed just bounces off of him. He’s one of those guys think their misery in life makes them special. Allows them to justify anything they do and say it’s the best for the people. Jesus.”

“Really think they believe we’ll buy that line of shit?”

“No. I think Coldpoint thinks we just can’t see the bigger picture, but I doubt he honestly thinks we’ll toe the line. But if we push it, and someone says, hey, what did you see out there, and we tell them, there isn’t much that nails anyone to the wall for a crime. And they are cops. It’s something’s being done progressive for the neighborhood, and it’s only a little bit illegal. No one is going to give them too much shit for that. They’re showing us how unconnected we are in Camp Rapture, showing us that we have our ass hanging out over here, and if we keep showing it, someone is going to drive a spike up it. They were trying to scare us.”

“That didn’t work.”

“Did for me,” I said. “It scared me plenty. I was envisioning us being in that sawmill pond by night’s end, if not sooner.”

“But you weren’t scared enough to quit, I figure.”

“Of course not. I was scared, but I’m also stupid.”

“There you go. That’s the Hap I know and love.”

I unlocked the car. Leonard tossed his coat in, picked his fedora off the seat, and put it on as he slid inside the car.

“I want to drive by Barker’s office,” Leonard said.

“Suits me,” I said. “I find myself a little put out with that bastard.

Hey, know what?”

“What?” Leonard said.

“You tenderized Sheerfault like a hamburger steak.”

“Choked him out and threw him away,” Leonard said. “And you, my brother. You knocked Boo-Boo on his ass.”

“Bobo,” I said.

“Whatever.”

32

I parked us behind Barker's office. Leonard checked himself in the mirror on the sun visor, adjusted his hat.

"Yeah, I be looking good," he said.

We got out and Leonard put on his coat and adjusted his fedora again, and we tried the outside door. It was locked. Leonard took the key from me and went to the car and got a tire tool out of the trunk, came back and stuck it into the edge of the door and heaved.

There was a cracking sound and the door came loose and swung open.

"They call that breaking and entering," I said.

"They do indeed," Leonard said.

We went down the hallway like before and came to Barker's office. The door was locked. Leonard, without hesitation, knocked the pebbled glass out with the tire tool, reached in, and flicked the lock. A moment later we were inside.

Barker, wearing only a T-shirt and boxer shorts, opened his inner office door with something in his hand, but it was too late. We were already standing there. Leonard whacked his hand lightly with the tire tool, and Barker dropped what he was holding. A little silver automatic.

I picked it up and put it in my coat pocket. Leonard pushed him into the office and turned on the light. Barker said, "Okay. You got me. Cut the light, though. Cut it. We can talk in the dark."

"I don't like what you might have in the dark," I said. "In more ways than one."

"I got nothing. What I had, you got. I got nothing."

"All right," I said, "but don't try to get cute. As you might expect, we are not in the best of moods."

I turned off the light. It might have been a paranoid move, but no use advertising we were all upstairs, not after what had gone on tonight. For all we knew, Coldpoint and his band of merry assholes might decide they wanted to take us out.

“They let you go,” he said, rubbing the hand Leonard had hit with the tire iron.

“They did at that.”

“Why?”

“Personality,” Leonard said.

There was light coming in through the window behind the desk. It was from a streetlight. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to see around the room after my eyes adjusted.

Barker sat on the couch and dipped his head.

“I had to do it, boys. I had to.”

“Did you now?” Leonard said.

“I tell you I had to, had to.”

“Tell us why? And then tell us why you’re surprised to see us.”

“Make it good,” Leonard said, “’cause I’m thinking of hitting you with this tire tool so many times they’ll have to build a wing on the hospital just to take care of your ass.”

“I didn’t know what they were going to do, but they threatened me, and my family. They can have my wife, the coldhearted bitch. But my daughter, that’s different.”

“They said they’d hurt her?” I said.

“Indicated it. Sheerfault and Bobo, they’re the muscle, and Coldpoint, he calls the shots, though I get the impression Sheerfault is getting tired of him. Coldpoint’s kind of a politician, crooked as a dog’s leg, but clever. He knows piling up bodies isn’t the best thing to do. He’s piled up a few, I feel certain, but he’s got cautious over time. He gets the police chief job, connections he’s got, he’s got a license to steal. Doesn’t see any reason to rock the boat when they’re giving him the ocean. Those other two would just as soon wear your ass for a hat. I admit I’m surprised to see you here, surprised. But you got to understand, what I did, it wasn’t personal, wasn’t personal.”

“You said that before,” Leonard said. “Don’t say it again. I don’t like it. And for the record, the muscle got their asses handed to them.”

Barker smiled a little. “I’m glad that’s how it worked out. I’m glad. Really. I didn’t want you hurt, but I didn’t know what else to do, didn’t know what else.”

“What you’re going to do now is you’re going to straighten some things out, answer some questions,” I said.

“Yeah,” Leonard said patting the tire tool against his open palm. “That’s what you’re going to do, and you’re going to be clear about it and it’s going to sound pretty to us. Everything is going to fall right in place."

"I know what I know," Barker said, "but I don't know it's all you need to know."

"Start with this," I said. "Timpson Weed. Did he or did he not ask you to tell the police he saw Jamar beat to death by cops?"

"Not exactly."

"And what, pray tell, did he have you say?" Leonard said.

"Timpson…Well, you need some background. He spent a lot of time in jail, and it got so when they wanted him at the jail, they picked him up on some charge or another, real or otherwise. They took him in when they had someone they wanted to put him with."

"What does that mean?" I said.

"They run fights with the prisoners. Pick some guy up for dope or some misdemeanor, whatever they like to call it, and they set him up to fight. Provided they got someone in there can fight back. Weed, he could fight, could fight good. He made a lot of money and made the gamblers more money until he got so good no one would bet on him losing, not bet on him at all. When he was younger, I think he boxed professionally. Way I heard it anyway, way I heard it."

"That's not quite in focus," I said.

"First time he goes in, he gets in a fight with a cell mate, and he cleans his clock, and Bobo, who's a jailer, sees it and tells Sheerfault."

"So that little bastard has gainful employment," Leonard said.

"Instead of giving Timpson more time for fighting, they ask him to do it again, say they can drop any charges he's in on, make it go away like it never happened, never happened at all. Thing is, he's got to fight, and so does the other guy."

"And all this happens at the mill," I said.

"That's right, the mill, at the mill."

"But not on Sunday nights," Leonard said.

Barker nodded. "That's the boys' fight club night. That's kind of the way they beard themselves. Weed, he was whipping all comers, and there was a lot of money made until no one would bet against him. It's not just some of the people on the force come there to bet, it's people around town. The fighter's black, that's even more a part of it. They have a thing about black people, a thing, want to see them hurt."

"Just like the good old days," Leonard said.

"How long has this been going on?" I asked.

"Some time now. You see, Jamar, he was a boxer who was fighting at the club, and they seen him, and he was good. He was smoking the

Olympic kids, but he didn't have any interest in that, wouldn't go to the sawmill for fight training. They pushed at him to do it, but he wouldn't. That's why they stopped his sister. They were messing with him. Showing him they could do what they wanted when they wanted to. See, they wanted him to win a few amateur fights, push him into being a pro. They wanted the money he could make them. Even if it was just at the sawmill."

"Typical white-man shit," Leonard said. "No offense, Hap."

"None taken."

"Only Jamar didn't play along," Leonard said. "Started filming them. Didn't like them bothering sis."

"Right. That's right. Filmed them, had a scanner, followed them around, followed them when he could and made it hard for them to do anything he wasn't putting on film. They got mad and one night they decided they'd had enough, grabbed him, put him in the ring up there, made him fight. It wasn't a public fight. They had him fight until he couldn't, and they beat him to death. See, it was Timpson, it was him. He was brought in to fight because they wanted to teach the kid a lesson, a permanent one. No betting on that fight, they just paid Timpson good, brought him in, and since no one bet on him anymore, he wasn't making that good fight money. I don't know Timpson meant to beat him bad as he did, but he did, and then when the kid went down and couldn't get up, the rest of them, Sheerfault, Bobo, and Coldpoint—though I doubt he got his hands dirty—finished the kid off, finished him off."

"And you know all this through Timpson?" I said.

Barker nodded. "You see, it kind of got to him, doing what he did. But what got to him more was the idea he could have me go in and tell the cops he was going to go to other authorities, they didn't pay him off not to tell what happened up there. He thought he could work a regular payday out of it."

"Blackmail," Leonard said.

"That's right, that's right."

"And you would take a cut," I said.

"Yep, you're right there, right as rain. They didn't care though, didn't care. They own the town, everyone in it, or at least they know the people own the town and work for them, that's more it, more it. That's when Timpson got mad and started telling his story, putting it out in the projects. He didn't use common sense, not at all. He got vengeful, way they used him, used him up. And he wanted to make it hard on them, force them to give him some money, and then he'd recant his story if it ever got so he was actually brought in for it, but if they didn't pay him he'd rant and rave."

"So they killed him," Leonard said.

"They sort of asked me to have him meet with me, say I had some money for him from the cops, some money."

"You set him up like you set us up," I said.

"And told them Timpson might have a loose lip?" Leonard said.

"I needed the money, needed it, real bad."

"You sleazy little shit-greased weasel. You gave up Timpson for a buck, and he was your client, and you gave us up. You knew they'd kill him and figured they'd kill us too."

"I didn't really think about it," Barker said.

"Oh," Leonard said, "well, that makes it all right."

Leonard moved toward Barker. I put my hand against his chest.

"Easy," I said.

"Come on, let me hit fat boy once?" Leonard said.

"Maybe come Christmas," I said.

"How much was Timpson's life worth, dick cheese? How much?"

"Three hundred dollars," Barker said.

"Goddamn it," Leonard said. "Timpson was a bastard, but you're ten times worse, you money-grubbing asshole. Come on, Hap, just a couple punches to his head. That ain't nothing compared to what he done."

"No," I said. "We are the good guys."

"I don't know why they didn't kill you two," Barker said. "I'm glad they didn't, I am, glad, really."

"I think you'd have spent your money, jacked off, and slept just fine," Leonard said. "Did I mention I might break your neck?"

"It came up," Barker said. "Or something in that range."

Leonard took a step toward him. I pressed my hand against his chest again. I could feel him vibrate.

"And why the fuck do you repeat yourself?" Leonard asked.

"Childhood habit," Barker said. "Habit. Insecurity, insecure, that's it, insecure."

"My guess is Jamar and Timpson ain't the only ones died at the sawmill," I said.

"I have heard rumors there are others, others," Barker said.

"Rumors," Leonard said. "I got a little rumor for you. You know too much now, so I was you—and if I was, I'd have someone saw my head off—but I was you, I'd be special careful."

"Will you protect me, will you?" Barker said. He seemed small then, and as sad as anyone I had ever seen.

"Nope," Leonard said. "You made your bed of nails, now lie down on it. Hap, hold this tire tool while I hit him some."

"No, Leonard. That won't change things."

"But it would brighten my night," Leonard said.

"Oh, all right. Give me the tire tool."

I took it.

"Stand up," Leonard said to Barker.

Barker looked at me. I shrugged.

"You're going to let him bully me," he said.

"Considering you nearly got us killed," I said, "just this once. One shot, Leonard."

Barker stood up slowly. Leonard stepped close and gave him an uppercut in the stomach. He didn't really put a lot into it. Barker's knees bent and he fell back on the couch in a sitting position, dropped his head, gasped for air.

"That's to let you know we got a sour streak," Leonard said. "That's to let you know you tell them any more shit on us, have anything to do with them making a run at us again, that's just a sample of what I'm going to do to you. Wasn't messing with you about them having to build that wing on the hospital, and next time Hap may not be with me, may not be here to hold me back and talk me down. You listening?"

Barker lifted his head a little and nodded but didn't say anything. He couldn't. Didn't have the breath for it.

"We're going to go now," Leonard said. "Think of something we ought to know, get back to us. Think of something you think they ought to know, keep your mouth shut. Here's another thing. As soon as you get your breath, arrange for your daughter to leave town. Do not pass go. Do not stop to jerk off or take a piss, do it now. Oh, and you might want to take your own self out of here too. But that's up to you. Your well-being is not a big thing with me. Good night, and fuck you very much."

33

Sitting in the car, Leonard said, “They came after Timpson, and then us. Who’s next?”

“Mrs. Elton and Charm.”

“Could be that way, or fat ass in there, but he’s not my concern.”

“Ought to be,” I said. “He has the word from Timpson on how things went down.”

It was late when we arrived at Mrs. Elton’s house. I knocked on the door and pushed the doorbell. To the right of the door a curtain slid back at a window. The curtain closed; a moment later the door opened.

It was Mrs. Elton.

“You got news?”

“We got to move you.”

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“We’ll tell you about it,” I said.

“Come in,” she said.

She was wearing a heavy robe and house shoes; her hair was under a scarf. She sat on the couch, said, “It’s bad news, isn’t it?”

“Bad information. You already know the news. We just have more details, but the bottom line is this: We may have stirred the pot a little too much, and they may be more dangerous than we thought. It’s a simple thing, but it’s a bad thing, and it has deep roots.”

“Tell me,” she said.

Leonard broke it down for her. When he finished she was trembling and crying.

“Thing is,” I said, “you got to get some stuff together, wake Charm, have her get her stuff together. We’ll take you someplace safe until we can sort this all out, get those bastards behind bars.”

“Or somewhere in a ditch,” Leonard said.

Always a ditch, I thought. Always a ditch.

“Charm isn’t here,” she said. “She’s out. She went to a party. Said she’d be in late.”

"How late?" Leonard asked.

"Late. That's all."

"All right, no big deal. If they don't know she went to a party, it's all good. Here's what we're going to do, just to be sure you're safe. Get some things together for you and Charm, go with Leonard. I'll stay here and wait for her. She have a cell phone?"

"Of course she does," Mrs. Elton said.

"Let's start there," I said.

She went away, came back with her own cell. She called.

"She's not answering," she said.

"Send her a text," I said. "Young people answer texts better than phone calls."

"I don't know how," she said.

"May I see it," I said.

She handed me the phone. I wrote as if I was Mrs. Elton, typed in: *Really need for you to come home right now, please. Not an emergency, but important. I won't be here. Hap Collins, the private investigator, will be here to pick you up. Call me if you have questions.*

I gave her back the phone, said, "Take a phone charger with you. Keep it charged, and keep calling or texting or both. Leonard will help you text. Want to make sure she gets the message."

"They call me Mr. Technology," Leonard said.

"I know of no one who calls him that," I said.

"But why do I have to move from here?"

"We can explain the why later," Leonard said. "Get some possibles together."

She hustled off to do that. When she was gone, Leonard said, "So, what's the plan?"

"Across the street to our office. That way we're close together, but you're also up high with a good view. The office is a pretty good Alamo."

"Folks at the Alamo lost," Leonard said.

"I'll take that under advisement. They may not show up anyway, but it's as safe a place as one can expect until we can do some serious thinking. Shit. What if they decide to take a run at Brett and Chance? I hadn't considered that."

"Brett will shoot them," Leonard said.

"She will, won't she?"

"Goddamn right. Should I call Marvin?"

"Yeah. I'll call Brett and give her a heads-up, see if she wants to move her and Chance to a safer place.”

Mrs. Elton came back with two small bags. Leonard took them and they went out to the car. Leonard drove it across the street and behind our office. I watched him do it through the front window, the one where Mrs. Elton had seen Leonard and Marvin come and go.

The car wasn’t exactly hidden, but it seemed good enough for the moment.

I called Brett. The phone rang, went to voice mail. I had an uncomfortable five minutes thinking about how knocked out she might be due to the flu medicine she was taking. I could call Chance, but I didn’t want to frighten her. She wasn’t entirely indoctrinated into our way of life, not yet, and I wasn’t sure I wanted her to be.

I called again. This time, on the third ring Brett answered.

“Brett, sorry, baby, but you and Chance and Buffy have to leave the house.”

“Oh, shit, what now?” she said.

“The usual mayhem, and I should add this is just a precaution. Take a gun with you. Might as well be straight with Chance, though you can boil it down to the bone if you want. Bottom line is our investigation may have stirred up some bad men who might want to take things out on me and Leonard and anyone around us.”

“I feel like shit still, and so does Chance,” she said.

“All the more reason to get out of the house.”

“I can handle myself.”

“I know, but it’s not necessary.”

“Give me the scoop, Hap.”

I told her more details but boiled it pretty much to the bone.

“I wasn’t sick, I wouldn’t go,” Brett said. “I’d send Chance away, but I wouldn’t go. But since we are both sick, I’m going.”

“All I’m asking, go because you’re sick and take Chance with you.”

“Duh,” Brett said. “Of course she goes with me.”

“Don’t forget your flu medicine. And remember, text me when you find someplace safe.”

After that I called Manny.

She answered on the first ring.

“This better be good, whoever you are,” she said.

“Define good,” I said.

“Who is this?”

I told her.

“Oh. I hope you didn’t call me in the middle of the night because you decided I would be a swell date. Though tomorrow might work. I need a nice dinner and a movie. If you're calling about those contacts I said I'd make, I tried, but they didn't call back."

"Nothing like that," I said. I gave her the stripped-down version, finished with "I need you to watch yourself. I got a feeling they may be planning to clean house."

"You think this why?"

"Gut reaction."

"What do you need from me?"

"Just warning you."

"I'm a big and capable girl. Let me state it again, so you hear me: What do you need from me?"

She sounded like Brett. But she wasn't sick.

"Backup."

"Where are you?"

I told her, said, "You might bring something to eat as well."

"Would you like some little initialed dinner napkins?"

"That would be swell."

"I'll wear a nice little maid outfit and bring them to you on a silver tray and later we can make whoopee."

"That really would be nice, but alas, my girlfriend doesn't let me date."

"Ah, then I'm bringing a friend, my nine-mil," she said.

34

I was sitting there thinking what do I do if they show up, call them bad names and declare king's X? I didn't have a gun. I didn't like guns, but I was in a business where guns mattered. What I had was some pocket lint and a headful of empty dreams.

Maybe if they showed up, I could just keep the door locked and tell them no one was home. Or like the bandit who hid in the henhouse, I could say when the bad guys came, "Nobody in here but us chickens."

Then I remembered the gun I had taken from Barker and put in my coat pocket with the lint. I reached in my pocket and pulled it out. It was shiny and it was small. A .22. That will kill you good as any firearm, but it might not be the best gun in a shoot-out, considering the kinds of weapons the other team might have.

Then again, there was no reason for them to know I was here. None. However, they might come for Mrs. Elton and Charm, and if they found me, I'd do just as well. Way I figured it, me and Leonard were on their list.

Lights flashed through the curtains. Holding the .22 automatic in my hand, I eased to the hallway where there were a row of windows, gently slipped a curtain aside, and looked out.

Someone got out of a car. It wasn't Sheerfault or Bobo, unless they had taken to wearing a short dress and high heels.

The door unlocked; a voice said, "Mr. Collins?"

"Charm," I said. "Step inside and close the door."

She did.

"You are supposed to go across the street to our office," I said.

"Got a text saying to come home. Nothing after that. My phone went dead."

"That was an error on my part," I said. "Your mother is there with Leonard. He'll watch after you. Safer there than here. Leave your car, and I'll walk you over. Your mom gathered you up some things. Give me your house key."

We locked up and walked across the street. I escorted her upstairs, called out gently to Leonard. He opened the door and let her in. He had a shotgun from the closet. It was the only one there at the moment, so nothing extra for me. But at least both of us were armed now.

Leaving Charm in Leonard's care, I started back down the stairs.

"Maybe you should stay here," he said, standing in the doorway, looking down at me. "Not divide our forces."

"I think it's better I'm over there. Should they show up, I'll call you."

"That's a good idea because?"

"We got them on both sides."

"So the two of us have them surrounded?"

"Manny is coming."

"We don't know Manny. Not really."

"Beggars can't be choosers, buddy. I figure she hates the department enough, she'll do all right. Marvin? You call him?"

"Didn't want anyone else to know what was going on at the station, because it's pretty complicated and not easy to digest unless you're a part of it, so I left a message for him to call me. Called his home too. Went to voice mail."

"Stay observant."

"The fucking Invisible Man couldn't get past me."

"Nice to know," I said, and went down the stairs.

Back at Mrs. Elton's house, I wandered around and found some sodas in the refrigerator. I took one and made a mental note: Owe one diet soda. I went back to the window and looked out. Nope. Nothing. I sat in a chair and tapped my fingers. That didn't make anything happen. Good. My magic was working.

Some dogs barked down the way. I strained to listen, but the barking stopped. I finished the soda, went back to the kitchen, and put the can in the trash, as I didn't see any recycling business like at our house. I got another soda out of the fridge. I owed two now.

I sat down in my chair, soda in my left hand, .22 on my knee, tapping my fingers on the arm of the chair. So far that had brought me good luck, so why stop now?

Time limped by on a walker.

Lights shone through the curtains as cars drove by on the street. None of the cars stopped. I put the empty soda can beside the chair. I was feeling a little sleepy.

No naps, I told myself. That would be bad. Ever vigilant. Ever alert. Frosty as hell and ready to go.

Actually, I nodded a little.

That's when I sensed someone was behind me. Sensed may be too strong a word. Maybe I heard something, felt a faint change in the temperature of the room due to another presence. I quit tapping my fingers and put my hand on the .22 on my knee. I was about to hit the floor and roll from a possible shot when a voice said, "You are not a ninja."

It was Manny.

"Damn, girl," I said.

"Came through the back. Picked the lock. Had I been a bad guy, they'd find your head in the yard with a turd in your mouth."

Manny was dressed in black and was wearing a holster with her sidearm in it, had her hair tied back. "I parked down the street, three blocks, walked over. No one saw me but some dogs."

I had heard them bark and hadn't suspected a thing. Hap Collins, ever ready.

"So you'll feel better about it, I'm a really good sneak. What is that you have in your hand? A cap gun?"

I let it rest in my palm and held it out to her.

She picked it up and looked at it. The streetlight outside gave us enough light to see by.

"You might as well throw this at them and hope it hits a vital spot."

"Not the way I shoot," I said.

"Let's hope you're a better shot than you are a sentinel."

"Thankfully, I am."

"If they should come here," Manny said, "my guess is they'll do what I did. One of them, anyway, and when the one out front thinks the sneak has had enough time to pick the lock and slip in the back door, the other one will come through the front door, guns blazing. You know, of course, this can all go south even if we put them down. It's police you're dealing with. They can make up any story they like."

"If they don't act like police, they're not police."

"If you can prove they aren't acting like police, then you will be in good shape."

"I'm very optimistic."

"I suspect that's a great comfort. Got any more sodas?"

"Aren't mine, but yes. In the fridge."

She went to get one. I told myself, Okay, now I owe three sodas.

When she came back she was carrying a chair from the kitchen table. She placed it against the wall to the left of my chair, sat down, pulled the tab on the soda.

“Any more information I need to know?” she said.

“I sometimes stay up past my bedtime. I try not to snack after six, but right now I could eat the ass out of a dead pig.”

“I’m a little snacky myself,” she said. “Speaking of a dead pig’s ass, I like pork skins. You like those?”

“I do.”

“Good. We like pork skins. I think this is like a bonding moment.”

“Could be. We always called them pork rinds, though.”

“Did you now?”

“We did.”

“Hap, you are one hell of a conversationalist.”

We sat silent after that. I considered another soda but figured I’d have to pee at the wrong time if things started to go down. Actually, I needed to pee then and I went to do it.

When I came back, Manny met me in the hallway. She had her pistol in her hand. She was moving and speaking softly.

“There’s someone fucking with the back door,” she said.

35

Manny went to one side of the door and I went to the other. A voice said, “Hap. It’s me. You got a gun, don’t shoot.”

“Who is me?” Manny said.

“Marvin Hanson,” I said, and opened the door.

Marvin came in and closed the door.

“Hey, Manny,” he said.

“Hey,” she said.

I forgot they knew one another.

“What the hell, man?” I said. “Shaking a door could get you shot.”

“I wanted to stir things a little, just in case someone had already got to you. Figured someone other than you was here, they weren’t going to say anything if I called out your name. If you answered, well, I been hearing your voice a lot longer than I’ve wanted to, so I’d recognize it.”

“It’s a nice voice,” Manny said. “Kind of baritone.”

“He just uses that to impress the girls,” Marvin said.

“Or when I have sinus,” I said.

“Didn’t know you were here, Manny. Wasn’t in the message. Hope hanging with this guy doesn’t become a habit.”

“We both like pork skins.”

“That’s something. I think a friendship could be formed around that,” Marvin said.

“What I said. Hap and I consider it a bonding moment. He calls skins pork rinds, though.”

“He’s out of touch,” Marvin said. He looked at me. “Got Leonard’s message.”

“Well, that part’s easy to figure,” I said.

“You are such a detective.”

“Cops coming too?”

“I am the cops.”

“The rest of them?”

“Not exactly. You know, one town, one ranger.”

"You're not a Texas Ranger."

"Don't remind me. I wanted to be. Thing is, I got your message right after I got another one about some guy named Barker, ambulance chaser. Well, he caught one. Though, to be more accurate, he caught a hearse."

"What?"

"Dead. Beat to death."

"Son of a bitch," I said.

"Yeah, son of a bitch," he said. "Thing was, he had Brett's agency card in his coat pocket."

"Leonard gave it to him."

"And then I got Leonard's message, this address. He said the Camp Rapture police department might want you and him dead. I can absolutely understand that."

"We have trouble making friends. I blame Leonard."

"I got Leonard's call, and I'm starting out, and I get a phone call from a dispatcher I know in Camp Rapture. He knows I know you guys. Who doesn't? A blessing and mostly a curse. He says there's a dead guy that's been found behind the old high school, and the unknown someone called it in got your license number, saw your car over there, Hap."

"Uh-oh," I said.

"Yeah," Marvin said. "Uh-oh. And that's not all. This dead body, he's got Brett's agency's card in his pocket."

"And the dead guy is a sleazy lawyer named Barker," I said.

"Bingo," Marvin said.

"Shit."

"Yeah," Marvin said. "Shit."

"We got set up. The boys who gave the license plates to the cops were the cops. They got it when they met us there tonight. We went by and saw Barker on account of he set us up."

"And how's that?" Marvin asked.

I explained, left out the part about Leonard punching Barker in his office, then said, "We gave him a card so he could call us. We told him his life was probably in danger and he ought to get the hell out of town. Maybe he was on his way when they got him. Maybe he was still sitting there thinking things over. I think the Camp Rapture cops, at least two of them, and a jailer named Bobo, decided he might talk too much. He may have, before he bit the big one, squealed on how he talked to me and Leonard, gave us the scoop."

"Leonard gave me a little of it on the phone," Marvin said.

“Here’s the rest of it,” I said, and told him what Barker had told us.

“So you’re sitting here thinking they might come for Mrs. Elton and Charm or you and Leonard?”

“Yep.”

“And Manny, you just happened to drop by for a cup of coffee?”

“Actually, I had a soda and talked about pig skins,” she said.

Marvin shook his head. “You admit to me you were at the old school, and at his office, and I believe you didn’t kill him, but that story and your license plate number doesn’t do you and Leonard any good.”

“I know,” I said.

“Look, I’m the fucking police chief. I can’t show favoritism. I got this information from the dispatcher over there, in a friendly way, and I got to take you and Leonard down to the station.”

“Are we going to have a movie night?” I said.

“Nope.”

“Since you’re taking me and Leonard in, can you have someone watch after Mrs. Elton and Charm?”

“We can arrange that.”

“Can I come to the station too?” Manny asked. “I’m up. I got nothing to do. Maybe I could put an application in for a job.”

“Good. Manny gets a job and me and Leonard get the shaft,” I said.

“I’m not hired yet,” Manny said.

“And there’s the whole business about you being here with a murder suspect,” Marvin said.

“Oh yeah. That could be an impediment,” she said.

Marvin studied me carefully, said, “And there’s just a little more information I got for you.”

“Ah, shit,” I said. “The hits keep on coming.”

“An officer named Sheerfault pressed charges against Leonard for attempted assault and battery, but he said in self-defense he had to hand Leonard his ass.”

“Bullshit. Sheerfault voluntarily climbed into the ring with Leonard, and Leonard beat him like a redheaded stepchild with a harelip, choked him out.”

“And they say you hit Bobo with a board when he wasn’t looking,” Marvin said.

“I am not above that, and I did distract him, but I didn’t hit him with a board, and he was actually about to hit me. I used the elephant of surprise.”

“What?” Manny said.

“Ignore him,” Marvin said. “Look, I got to take you and Leonard in.”

“You have had a big night,” Manny said, and she clapped me on the shoulder.

“What is that you’re holding there, Hap?” Marvin said. “A cap gun?”

“This is going to complicate things,” I said, handing him the gun. “It belongs to Barker.”

36

Me and Leonard were in the main interrogation room at the newly renovated police station. The room was larger than the old room and the table had yet to be carved on with keys and pens and stout fingernails. Things got serious, you'd end up in one of the smaller rooms at closer quarters with your interviewer, your hands cuffed to a rail in the table that was fastened to a ring in the floor. So far, we were getting the luxury treatment, the guest suite, not the galley-slave quarters.

Marvin said, "Don't mention Barker's gun unless somehow they bring it up. Don't mention Manny being there with you either."

Manny was in the main office filling out an application. Mrs. Elton and Charm were somewhere under protection. I had called Brett and let her know what was happening, told her to be alert. She pretty much said fuck it, bad guys or no bad guys, she was going to sleep. She had Buffy to protect her and was too tired and sick to come down to the station.

I was not that confident in Buffy's protective abilities.

"And another thing," Marvin said. "Going to say you guys turned yourselves in."

"How did we know we were supposed to turn ourselves in?" I said. "Figure that one, smart guy?"

"Right now we don't have to explain it. I can look cool and enigmatic. Later on, we got to tell them something, we will. Things don't add up right, I got to throw you under the bus, and I'll probably be sliding under there with you. I might quit being police chief, and you two might go over to Huntsville for a little stay and a cocktail party that involves a very sharp needle and a long nap."

"That's not nice," Leonard said.

"Judging by our arrangements, I get the impression we'll be having visitors soon," I said.

"Yep," Marvin said. "Coldpoint, Sheerfault, and Bobo are coming over. They want to play pin the tail on the donkeys."

“I presume we are the donkeys,” Leonard said.

“Bingo,” Marvin said, and he went out.

We sat and waited.

Leonard said, “Right now, that cocktail and a nap sounds pretty good.”

Finally, Marvin came back. He had Coldpoint, Sheerfault, and Bobo with him. Sheerfault looked like he had been in a car wreck. Black eyes and cuts on his cheeks and forehead, one ear mashed and swollen. Bobo wasn’t bruised or injured in any way. Damn. I hit him pretty hard.

Marvin said to us, “Although you aren’t under arrest, I want to warn you that you have the right not to say shit and all that, and you can have a shyster if you want one.”

“We don’t need a goddamn lawyer,” Leonard said. “We ain’t done shit.”

“After tonight,” Coldpoint said, “you’re going to need a magician to get you out of this.”

“Everyone shut up,” Marvin said. “I’ll ask the questions. This is being recorded, by the way.”

“Recorded?” I said.

“Upscale shit is going on here,” Marvin said. “This room records sound and sight, and we got a doohickey that freshens the air.”

“Good,” Leonard said. “Let me go on record saying these three motherfuckers are liars and assholes. I beat Sheerfault’s ass like a dead goat, and Hap knocked Bobo’s dick in the dirt.”

“Noted,” Marvin said.

“We’re fellow cops,” Coldpoint said. “You can’t let him talk to us like that.”

“He was going on record,” Marvin said.

“What the hell?” Sheerfault said.

“You’re in my jurisdiction now,” Marvin said, “so put away the high hat.”

“This is our case,” Coldpoint said. “Happened in Camp Rapture. Our jurisdiction.”

“And they were picked up in my jurisdiction,” Marvin said, “and right now, there’s no real evidence of them committing a crime.”

“Sure there is,” said Coldpoint. “There’s an eyewitness says Hap’s car was at the old school.”

“Anonymous witness,” Marvin said.

“Still, we got to take them back on account of them attacking an officer,” Coldpoint said.

“And a monkey,” Leonard said. “Don’t forget the monkey took a beating too.”

Bobo swelled his chest, looked as if he might leap at Leonard.

“Hope you took your vitamins,” Leonard said to Bobo.

“Everyone, calm down,” Marvin said. “You fuckers are in my station now.”

“We go with them, let me tell you how it works out,” Leonard said. “They’ll say we tried to escape and they had to fire a few warning shots into the back of our heads. That would be a treat for you, wouldn’t it, Coldpoint? One dead nigger and a white-trash motherfucker stacked at the curb.”

“Thank you for including me,” I said.

“What I’m going to need for these two to go anywhere with anyone is some real facts,” Marvin said.

“Just told you some real facts,” Coldpoint said.

“No,” Marvin said. “You gave me some opinions and some stories I don’t believe. Leonard got in a fight with Sheerfault, but he didn’t get his ass whipped, for one.” Marvin nodded at Sheerfault. “Look at you, boy. Looks like someone climbed your ass with cleats, set you on fire, then shit on you until the flames went out. You won that fight, you must have taken a little extra time afterward to beat yourself up.”

“Whose side are you on?” Coldpoint said, glaring at Marvin.

“I haven’t picked a side yet,” Marvin said.

“We know you guys are friends,” Coldpoint said to Marvin. “You may find your time as police chief brief, you keep this friendship up. And you two. I’ve heard about you. You’re the kind that ends up in prison bending over a toilet bowl with a dick in your ass.”

“Been there,” Leonard said. “But not a prison, and the bending was by consent.”

“Shut up, all of you,” Marvin said. “I’m not kidding. Hap. Leonard. You want to spend the night in the jail on general principle, keep it up.”

Leonard drew a zipper motion over his mouth.

Marvin looked at me. I did the same.

Marvin turned to Sheerfault, said, “Have Barker’s death photos sent over to me.”

“We can get them for you tomorrow,” Coldpoint said.

“You can get them for me now,” Marvin said. “Give me your body cutter’s number, and I’ll call him. We got all kinds of technology these days, and those photos, which I’m sure were taken at the crime scene, can be here within seconds, faster than you can get a delivery pizza.”

“You have always been an asshole,” Coldpoint said.

“Yeah,” Marvin said. “I have. And I remember when you worked here, both of us cops together, and you have always been a scum-sucking bottom-feeder trying to look sharp and cool and well dressed. In final evaluation, you’re just a cheap hood with a badge. Maybe once you did something right and lawful, but I can’t prove it.”

“This is all recorded, remember?” Coldpoint said.

“For posterity, I hope,” Marvin said.

37

Marvin sent everyone out of the room but us. We were brought some coffee by Officer Carroll, a cop we had recently met. He was new to the force. A stout, nice-looking guy with a shaved head.

"Where have you guys shit this time?" he said.

"You might say we missed the toilet," Leonard said.

"Never mind, I'll read the reports," he said.

"Good," Leonard said. "I've told it about as much as I want to."

"Just have your coffee," Officer Carroll said.

The station had been renovated, but the coffee was still the same crap as before. Acid with a touch of colored water and caffeine and the slight aroma of mouse droppings.

"All right," the officer said. "I got to ask this. Bobo, what's up with him?"

"Got hit by a train," Leonard said. "Did you know it raised his IQ?"

"Damn," Carroll said, and went out. Leonard carefully watched him go.

"I kind of like the way he looks," Leonard said.

"He looks like a large-caliber bullet," I said.

"I know."

A short time later Officer Carroll came back.

"Hey, guys. Chief wants to see you. You can bring your coffee with you."

Leonard looked into his cup, said, "Do we have to?"

38

Marvin was behind his office desk, leaning back in his chair. He had his heels on the desk. He had a cup of coffee from Starbucks.

"Hey," I said, "we have to drink the cop-shop shit and you had Starbucks brought in for you."

"Yep."

We sat down and Officer Carroll leaned against the wall.

I said, "What happened to Manny?"

"Filled out an application and I sent a patrol to drop her off at her vehicle."

"She got off easy," I said.

"Yes, she did," Marvin said. "Got the photos of Barker's body."

"Already?" Leonard said.

"Told you, faster than a pizza. Take a look. See anything interesting?"

Leonard took them from where they lay in front of Marvin and spread them on the desk in front of us. They were nude shots of Barker stretched out on a table. It made me long for him to be wearing his cheap suit.

"Very small dick, for one," Leonard said. "Ugly feet."

"The wounds," Marvin said. "The beating."

There were standard shots, and there were close-up shots. Marvin opened his desk drawer and took out a magnifying glass.

"Look at you," Leonard said to Marvin. "Sherlock Homey."

Marvin handed me the glass.

"Why him?" Leonard said.

"More responsible," Marvin said.

I put the magnifying glass against the photo, roamed it over the close-up off Barker's head. At the back of his ear I saw something. A bloody imprint.

I put my finger on what I saw, looked up at Marvin.

Marvin swung his feet off the desk, pulled the photo away from me, held it up to us with his thumb next to the spot I had indicated.

"That wound right there, it's an odd mark," Marvin said.

He put that photo down and snatched up another.

"Visible in most of the shots, but this one is really good. I don't think Coldpoint had any idea what was there, wasn't looking for it. Had his folks send it over because he felt he didn't have to worry. They weren't investigating anything because they had you two framed for it."

Marvin tapped the photo with a finger. "Look close."

Leonard leaned forward. "A little skull?"

"Yep," Marvin said. "It is not a mark that naturally appears in nature. Barker did not have a case of the skulls, nor do fist and feet have skulls on them."

"But rings can have skulls on them," I said. "I noticed that ring when Sheerfault took it off to fight with Leonard."

"Damn, look at you," Leonard said. "You're like Ellery Queen."

"Who?" Carroll said.

"My opinion of you just went slightly downhill," Leonard said, and he and Carroll grinned at one another.

I hadn't gotten it until right then. He and Leonard were flirting.

"And I saw that ring on his finger tonight in the interrogation room," Marvin said.

"I didn't notice," Leonard said. "I was thinking about how bad the coffee was."

"That is why you will never be the keen detectives that Marvin and I are," I said.

"Way I figure it," Marvin said, "Bobo probably helped Sheerfault beat Barker to death. Maybe Coldpoint too, but I doubt it."

"Manny said he didn't do his own dirty work," I said.

"And she'd be right," Marvin said. "I've known him for a long time, and I've disliked him just as long."

"I assume this helps our situation?" Leonard said.

"It does. Another thing will help is there was no gun taken from Barker. Right?"

"None at all," I said.

"And I'm going to give the gun that was not taken back to you to get rid of so that it is not in my possession. You get caught with it before you get rid of it, then the gun will exist, and your balls will be in a vise. A gun I didn't know about will have turned up, and it will complicate matters."

"I didn't shoot him with it," I said.

"Yes, but it is probably registered to him, and if you were to have beat him to death, you might have taken it off his body. Dig? No use giving them any kind of ammunition for a defense."

"Dig, daddy-o," I said.

"Get rid of this nonexistent gun and go home."

"Are you going to arrest Sheerfault?" Leonard said.

"That's the plan, but I'm going to lay this case out really good. We're checking for someone else's DNA on Barker's body. Beat a guy to death wearing a ring like that, it might have cut into you, might have caused you to bleed and leave some DNA. Maybe Sheerfault or Bobo slobbered on the body while it was being kicked and punched. We get that, well, they can't say that anyone could have had a skull ring. We find DNA and we got the ring too, we got those motherfuckers by the short hairs."

"Charm and Mrs. Elton?" I asked.

"We'll take care of them," he said. "Might want to watch yourselves as well as keep a close eye on Brett and Chance."

"So we can go?" I said.

"You can go. And remember, the gun that doesn't exist needs to not exist at all. Least not on your person or in any location near you, and keep your fingerprints off of it."

"Gotcha," I said.

Marvin reached in the drawer again and took out Barker's cheap pistol. It was wrapped in a handkerchief. He handed it and the handkerchief to me.

"Get rid of it," he said. "I've wiped it clean."

39

Officer Carroll drove us over to our office.

"You look like you work out regularly," Leonard said to Carroll when we stopped. "Maybe you could use a partner? We could work out together."

"I might could do that," Carroll said. "I'll consider it, sure will."

"Good," Leonard said, and he got out of the car and closed the door and watched Carroll drive away.

"Okay, you're both gay, right?"

"Wow," Leonard said. "You are so tuned in."

"And you are interested in him?"

"And him in me."

"How do you know?"

"We have hidden gay impulses that tell us things that you heteros don't know about. We had an entire conversation telepathically."

"What was the subject?"

"Quantum physics, of course," Leonard said.

We went upstairs and locked the door. I said, "This isn't exactly a safe house. I mean, hell, we work here. Even Buffy could track us here, and she is the worst dog ever when it comes to dog stuff."

"Let's have a Dr Pepper and then figure it out," Leonard said.

"I still need to get rid of the gun."

"I want a Dr Pepper first."

"Will you kick and scream if you don't have one?"

"Probably."

"All right, Dr Pepper, then we get rid of the gun, and then I'm going to check on Brett and Chance and the ever-vigilant Buffy."

Leonard pulled a Dr Pepper from the fridge and I got a bottled water. We sat at the desk with our chairs turned so we could look out the window through the gauzy curtains. We had the lights off. We could see out, but as long as the light was off, no one could see in.

"You know what would be nice?" Leonard said.

“Winning the lottery?” I said.

“That’s good too. But I was thinking of cookies.”

“People in hell want ice water.”

“I don’t know about that, but I could sure use a cookie.”

“Sounds like a personal problem,” I said.

I pulled out my cell and called Brett.

She answered on the first ring, sounding less sick.

“So,” I said, “you’re healing?”

“Both of us are doing pretty good,” Brett said. “And just so you know, we’re not home anymore. I decided to take your advice. We were too sick to wrestle a paper bag and win. Anyone had come for us, most likely we would have been asleep.”

“What about the ferocious Buffy?”

“Most likely she too would have been asleep.”

“So where are you?”

“Safe house where you and Leonard stayed,” she said. “I called Marvin and told him I didn’t want to worry you two, but way I was feeling, I ought to go somewhere safe and take Chance and our hound with us. He set it up.”

“He didn’t mention it to me,” I said.

“Probably thought I told you.”

“Whatever,” I said. “Glad you and Chance and Buffy are there.”

“There’s a pretty big yard, and Buffy likes that.”

“And there’s a barn across the road from the house?”

“There is,” she said.

“Yep,” I said, “that’s the one where we stayed a while back, along with Jim Bob, Vanilla, and the cosmopolitan Booger.”

“One other thing.”

“Shoot,” I said.

“Chance lost her job at the paper. Since she was part-time, she doesn’t have sick leave, and with her out as long as she’s been with the flu, they let her go.”

“Ah, shit.”

“She says she wants to work for us,” Brett said.

“Hell,” I said. “I don’t want to work for us.”

“She thinks it might be exciting.”

“It might be,” I said, “which is why I don’t want her to do it.”

“What say we kind of go at it on a trial basis? I can give her donkey work to do, and if she holds up to that, she can maybe move into other areas. She could make a bit of money that way.”

“We barely make a bit of money,” I said. “But sure. I don’t want her not to have a job. She’ll most likely bore of it anyway.”

“So it’s a go?”

“Yep. But for right now, you two just get well.”

I heard Chance squeal in the background.

“She’s been listening, hasn’t she?”

“Maybe,” Brett said. “Good-bye.”

While Leonard slowly sucked on his Dr Pepper and enjoyed his cookies, which he had replaced at some point without telling me, I told him about the safe house, about Chance wanting to come on board.

“I like it,” Leonard said. “She’s a lot smarter than you, and that would certainly help. You know what would make a great sign? ‘Brett Sawyer Investigations, along with Leonard Pine, Hap Collins, and Baby Daughter.’”

“Hurry up,” I said. “Let’s dump this gun.”

40

We went downstairs and out to the car.

The light that was supposed to be shining in the parking light was not shining. It had been shining moments ago. I looked at the post. The light had been knocked out, maybe with a rock.

“Shit,” Leonard said.

He caught on to the sudden absence of light about when I did.

Two black men were waiting in the dark near a line of shrubs that connected to a house on the side of our business and the bicycle shop. They came out into the open and joined us where we stood next to our car. One of them had a limp, the other wore a baseball cap with DAIRY BOB on it, an East Texas hamburger and hot-dog chain ran by a guy named, you guessed it, Bob. His father before him and his grandfather before that were named Bob. I just thought you might want to know.

The guy with the baseball cap moved as if itchy.

They were very large men with very ugly faces and they had some huge black pistols that were equally unattractive. One was holding a flat, black automatic on us; the other held his similar weapon to the side of his leg. I thought they looked familiar.

“There they are, Mr. and Mrs. Fucked-Up America,” said the one with a limp. “King White Trash and King Black-Ass Nigger.”

“Which is which?” Leonard said. “And do we get both awards?”

“We got the guns, and you’re running your mouth,” said the limping man.

“It’s not like I figure we cooperate, things are going to turn out well,” Leonard said. “Might as well go for it. And what the fuck is your beef? We don’t know you.”

“But we know you,” said Limp. “We know you just fine. We also know a lot about you.”

“Nice stuff, I hope,” Leonard said.

“Not a word of it,” said Itchy, and he scratched at his chest with his free hand. He kept moving and scratching like his skin was full of fleas.

“Couple of smart-mouths that need taking care of, and we can do that.”

“Lice?” I said, as Itchy scratched again.

“Scabies,” he said.

“What we’re gonna need you to do,” said Limp, “is get in your car. One of you drive. We sit in the back with guns and you do what we say.”

“Why would we do that?” I said.

“We have guns.”

“I’ve had enough of that shit,” Leonard said. “I’m at the point where you got to shoot me right here. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Me too,” I said. “This would be our second abduction tonight.”

Limp and Itchy looked at each other.

Limp said, “We want you to get in the car.”

“Nope,” Leonard said. “Shoot us right here.”

“We ain’t supposed to do that,” said Itchy.

“Life is just full of little disappointments,” I said. “We’re not going anywhere with you two. You can make noise and a mess here in the neighborhood, but we’re not getting in a car with you.”

You could almost see and hear the machinery working in their heads. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. They weren’t supposed to make a mess here, not where they could be heard firing guns and be seen.

I put my hand in my coat pocket. Barker’s little pistol was there. I casually took hold of it, still wrapped in the handkerchief, and shifted it a little and pointed it at Limp, who was closest, and pulled the trigger.

The little gun made a snapping sound, not too loud, not the way their guns would have, and Limp made a face. Neither he nor Itchy seemed to understand what was happening.

Limp’s gun sagged in his hand. “That’s some shit,” he said, and went to his knees.

Limp was so surprised he dropped his gun. I kicked it away, and by that time Leonard had moved, surprising a distracted Itchy. He had hold of Itchy’s hand. He pushed Itchy’s gun aside and hit him on the jaw with his free hand. Itchy went back against my car. Leonard hit him again. Blood ran out of his nose and over his mouth.

Itchy moved as if to fight back, and Leonard hit him again.

Itchy sat on the ground and Leonard took the pistol from him about the same time I picked the other one up. Leonard looked at the pistol.

“The safety was on,” Leonard said.

41

My shot had hit Limp in his gimp leg, in the upper thigh, and he was bleeding, but not as much as I had feared. The bullet had gone into him and stopped. It was a bad load, and I was glad for that. I wasn't going to have another man's death on my head. Leonard wanted to shoot both of them and call it in as a random shooting in our parking lot.

I doubted anyone would believe that. I pulled Limp over so his back was against my car, his butt against the rear tire. He was about four feet from Itchy, who hadn't tried to get up. Itchy sat where he was, shaking a little, scratching.

"All right," I said. "You are going to have to spill it."

Limp said nothing. Itchy said, "We gave our word not to rat."

Leonard put the gun he had taken from Itchy against Itchy's head.

"I got the safety off," Leonard said. "I don't like you."

"We don't even know you," said Itchy.

"What I was thinking," Leonard said. "So why kill us?"

"Money," said Limp.

"How much?" Leonard said.

"Five hundred," Limp said.

"That's it?" said Leonard. "That hurts, man. That hurts."

"Who was it hired you?" I said. "Best talk. Leonard there, he's got a short fuse and you two have lit it."

"Roscoe."

I looked at Leonard, and Leonard looked at me.

"Roscoe?" Leonard said.

"Who's Roscoe?" I asked.

"Roscoe Washington," Limp said.

"All right," I said. "Let's go at this a different way. Who's Roscoe Washington?"

"Bartender at the Joint," Itchy said.

"No shit?" I said.

Itchy nodded at Leonard. "He didn't like this one peed on his floor."

“In my defense,” Leonard said, “I did ask where the restroom was.”

“That’s right,” I said. “He did.

“Ah, hell,” I said. “I remember you two in a back booth.”

“He found out who you guys were, and he sent us,” Itchy said.

“Roscoe might as well have hired a couple of squirrels and given them guns,” I said.

“We had our own guns,” Itchy said.

“How nice,” Leonard said.

Leonard held the gun on them and I pulled out my cell phone and called Marvin. I didn’t call 911. I called Marvin’s private cell.

He actually answered.

“We got a little something for you,” I said.

“Shit,” Marvin said. “I hate it when you have that tone. It’s never anything good.”

“This one is kind of fifty-fifty,” I said, “but I done a bad thing.”

“Of course you did,” Marvin said. It sounded on the other end as if his life force had left him. “Okay, Hap. Tell Daddy what you done.”

“I shot a guy with a limp with Barker’s .22 pistol. He limps worse now.”

“No, you didn’t?”

“Yep. I did.”

“I want to express my complete hatred for you,” he said. “I told you to get rid of that goddamn gun.”

“Was on my way to do it, and, well, these two guys came up and they had guns and they wanted to make us get in my car and were going to drive us off somewhere and shoot us.”

“If only,” Marvin said.

“Hey,” I said.

Leonard said, “Tell him how much we were worth.”

“They were going to shoot us for five hundred dollars,” I said. “Wait.” I turned my attention to Limp. “Was that apiece?”

“To split,” Limp said.

“Really?” I said.

Limp nodded.

“We got some raccoons out of an attic for the same price,” Itchy said.

“They were going to kill us and then split five hundred dollars, the same they got for getting raccoons out of an attic.”

“Raccoons are underrated,” Marvin said. “They are tough little buggers. You know, they can pick locks, and once they do it, they can remember how to do it easily for up to three years, case they need to come back.”

“That’s some fascinating shit, Marvin.”

“Where are you?”

I told him, and he said, “I’m coming. You are going to really love seeing me.”

“Not as much as you might think,” I said.

42

Everybody hates us," I said.

We were back at the cop shop, but this time in the smaller interrogation room.

Officer Carroll came in. He looked at Leonard, said, "We may have to put those workouts off for a while."

"I hear that," Leonard said.

Marvin opened the door and came into the room.

"You make it so hard," he said. "If I let you go up for a few things sometimes, that would make my life easier. Actually, you might do better in prison."

"Been there," I said. "Didn't love the food."

"It was self-defense," Leonard said. "We didn't start it."

Marvin collapsed into a chair like a discarded ventriloquist's dummy. "I know, but I still hate both of you."

"We are on a lot of people's lists," I said.

"Sometimes at the very top of them," Leonard said.

"Those two idiots said what they did," Marvin said, "and why, and even said you shot in self-defense."

"That's nice of them," Leonard said.

"They are dumb as two bricks in a sack of shit," Marvin said. "Problem here is you shot that gun. You know the one. One I told you to get rid of. Small. Twenty-two-caliber that didn't used to exist but might exist now. Was in your coat pocket wrapped in a handkerchief. Ring any bells?"

"I know just the one," I said. "But here's one thing. The handkerchief was wrapped around it, so my fingerprints aren't on it."

"True," Marvin said, "but it was in your coat pocket, and there's a hole in your coat pocket that the bullet from the gun came out of, and the bullet, when ballistics gets through, will be from the same gun that belonged to Barker."

"But he wasn't shot with a twenty-two," I said.

"No, but since that's his twenty-two, even Laurel and Hardy in there could figure out that with you having it in your pocket, you might have taken it from Barker."

"That is a problem," I said.

"So are your fingerprints on Laurel and Hardy's weapons?"

"We disarmed them," Leonard said. "Course our prints are on their guns."

"What we got here is what we call a detective's dilemma," Marvin said.

"They call it that?" I said.

"Of course not, donkey dick," Marvin said.

He sighed and sat still for a long time. Finally he said, "Give me your coat."

I stood up and pulled it off and gave it to him.

Marvin took it and went out of the room and a moment later Officer Carroll came in.

"He said for me to drive you two home," Officer Carroll said. "And he said too that you two shouldn't think you're going to slide out of this one. But between you and me, I think you will. We want the bad guys, not you guys. We'll get around the twenty-two slug somehow."

43

Officer Carroll drove me back to my car in the office lot and let me out, said, “I’ll drive Leonard home. I’m supposed to make sure he gets there. Chief thinks you two do better when you’re not together.”

“What about me?” I said. “I am a known desperado.”

“You’ll be all right,” he said.

He drove away with Leonard sitting on the front passenger side.

He hadn’t even said good-bye.

I drove home then, and it wasn’t until I was in the house that I realized Brett and Chance were in the safe house still nursing the flu. I felt weak and tired and lonely and disappointed and small and worthless right then. I got a blanket out of the hall closet, and a pillow, and put them on the couch. I went upstairs and got my revolver from the nightstand and brought it down and laid it on the floor beside the couch. I went into the kitchen and poured a glass of milk and made myself a cheese sandwich, but after three or four bites, I put it in the garbage.

I checked to make sure all the doors were locked and no windows were open, and then I turned out the lights and stretched out on the couch, nestled my head into the pillow, and pulled the blanket over me.

I lay there and the ceiling got close, and then the walls got close. I had experienced something like this before, and right then I knew I had been too cocky about my recovery.

Reality was coming down on me now that I had had time to relax and let it all soak into me. I’d been abducted twice in one night and held at gunpoint, and the feelings I had missed out on after coming back from the dead had been jump-started. I trembled for a while. I had faced worse than those two goons a number of times, but right then it all came down on me, them and everything else I had ever done that I shouldn’t have.

I wondered about Leonard. But I knew the answer to that. He was fine. And if he wasn’t fine, I might never know, even as close as we were. There were some bridges he didn't cross even with me, at least not yet. I lay there and trembled for a long time, and then I told myself, *It's over. I'm fine.* No use feeling this kind of fear when there was nothing to fear.

Then why do you have a revolver lying by the couch if you're doing so good, tough guy? Why's that?

Just because, I told myself, but then, as fast as it had come over me, the trembling stopped and I found my center and started to relax. I thought of Brett. I thought of Chance, and of course I thought of my brother, Leonard.

He was probably in his apartment with Officer Carroll doing what a client of ours had once called the dirty dog.

You're all right, I told myself. *You're good. Don't worry now. You didn't die and you're fine and you'll be okay. Everything will work out. You know what happened to Jamar now, and all that remains is to tell his mother, sad and horrible as that will be.* Figuring out who killed him was solved too, though not proved. That was the next step, and we had given the information we had to Marvin, so it was in his court now.

Eventually, I slept.

44

The next day I woke up and made coffee and had a granola bar for breakfast. I called Brett to make sure everything was okay, and it was. She and Chance were almost well and planned to come home later that day.

When we finished talking I poured myself another cup of coffee and called Leonard.

"And how are you this morning?" I asked.

"Better than I been in a long time."

"I got the impression that you and Officer Carroll may have gone home together."

"His name is Curt. I call him Pookie."

"To me he will always be Officer Carroll."

"Well, he is very official. I had to work hard not to let him take charge in bed. You know I don't like that."

"Actually, I didn't know that, and now that I do, I wish I didn't. How is he?"

"Very firm."

"Generally."

"Very firm."

"Leonard, come on, man."

"I like him. Quite a bit."

"I thought way it worked is you wanted someone softer than you, more feminine. Two tough gays, I don't know. That might throw the universe out of whack."

"Since I know you're trying to be funny, I'll let that pass," Leonard said.

"He still there?"

"Nope. Had to go to work. By the way, I now have an inside track, and when I was listening to Pookie talking to Marvin this morning, I learned they arrested Roscoe. He admitted it all. He says he was only going to have us beat up good, take us out in the woods and have those two knuckleheads pound on us awhile, tell us why he did it, and leave us out there to make our way home. Not only was the one gun on safety, it and the other one were unloaded."

"Maybe they were just stupid."

"They were that, okay, but I'm not sure I believe Roscoe. I think he picked a couple of turnips. He may have given them the guns and they were too stupid to check the safety and the loads."

"They said those were their guns."

"Turned out they lied. Changed their story. Said Roscoe gave them the guns."

"That Roscoe," I said. "What a kidder."

"Thing is, they got him," Leonard said. "I'm going to take a shower and have a big cup of coffee, some ham and eggs and a side of grits, all cooked by me."

"So, a nasty meal, way you cook."

"You offering to take me to breakfast?"

"I had a granola bar and coffee," I said. "I'm done."

"Cheap man."

"You ate my salad. I have not forgotten."

"Yeah, well, I'll check up on you later."

"Officer Carroll, huh?"

"Good-bye, Hap."

45

Brett and Chance and Buffy came home about lunchtime. The flu had finally faded and they were feeling spry, even if they looked a little watery-eyed and tired.

“Don’t kiss me,” Brett said. “I’m over it, but who knows, I might still be contagious.”

“Yeah, we better not hug either,” Chance said.

Buffy sniffed my pants cuff. Her I could pat and hug, and I did.

We decided to go out for lunch, as none of us were in a cooking mood, and we ended up at a Mexican restaurant. We all had tortilla soup. I might add that Buffy did not have tortilla soup. She stayed home, most likely asleep on the couch. She always climbed up there when we left. When we touched the doorknob she dropped to the floor with a thud and lay on the rug in front of the couch. She thought she was sneaky.

On the way back to the house, my phone rang. It was Marvin. He said, “You know a black girl kid with all the personality of a water moccasin?”

“The four-hundred-year-old vampire?”

“What?”

“What Leonard calls her. It’s a long story.”

“And I’d love to hear it, but do you know her real name?”

“Reba. Don’t know her last.”

“We picked her up under an overpass, or rather near it, in some bushes.”

I was pulling into the driveway then, and both Brett and Chance were silent, letting me finish the call.

“She okay?”

“In the larger scheme of things she’s all right, just beat to hell. A cruiser come across her coming out of the woods, right on the edge of LaBorde, out where the woods get thick on the east side. She tried to run from the cops, but her leg was broke and she was using a stick to get around. She fought like a tiger, but she was in bad shape by then. Good thing. Officer Thompson, a nice lady who once beat up two male thugs using her fists, said it was a hell of a fight. Said she got hit with the stick a couple of times, but finally got Reba in the car. Had to handcuff her. Drove her to the hospital. Girl tried to leave twice since she's been there, and she can't actually walk. Caught her opening a window to get out, and she's on the second floor. I got Officer Carroll outside her room. She won't tell us what happened; not all of it, anyway. She won't talk to anyone but you or Leonard, preferably both. Come to the hospital. I'll call Leonard."

When I clicked off, Brett said, "Everything okay?"

"Not sure yet. I have to go to the hospital."

"Should I go with you?" Brett asked.

"I don't know," I said.

I explained about Reba and how she was fastened to the case we were looking into, and when I finished, Brett said, "Sounds to me you boys just need to do it. Me and Chance don't know her, and you appear to have a special relationship."

"Yeah, she blackmailed us into buying her a giant un–Happy Meal at McDonald's and she talks mean to both of us and Leonard hates her. Special relationship? I don't think so."

"She wants to talk to you two for a reason, and I think that reason is she trusts you," Brett said.

"The relationship may be more special than you think," Chance said.

"And maybe she just wants a lunch from McDonald's," I said.

46

I have never liked hospitals, and as of recent I have liked them less, it only being a few months ago when I was in this very one. Leonard was already there when I arrived, waiting at the front of the emergency room. He had a large sack in his hand.

"I kind of understand the impulse to beat up the four-hundred-year-old vampire," Leonard said as I walked up, "but I don't like that it got done."

"I hear you," I said.

Inside we asked about Reba. We got the information and rode the elevator up and started down the hall. I hadn't mentioned to Leonard that Officer Carroll, aka Curt, aka Pookie, was the cop on duty.

When Leonard saw Curt, his face lit up, and so did Curt's. As we neared the room, Curt opened the door and I went through. I glanced back and saw Curt and Leonard bump fists. That must have been some night.

In the room, Leonard closed the door and we went over to the bed. The bed seemed huge, like a white cloud, and there was a black dot at the top of it, Reba's head. She looked so small there on that cloud. Her face was swollen and one eye was closed and the lid was a mound of inflammation and her lips were cracked and bloody. One arm was in a cast and lay outside the sheets like a large piece of plumbing pipe.

Leonard took one side of the bed, I took the other.

Reba had her eyes closed. We stood there, not knowing exactly what to do, but in a few moments she felt our presence and opened her eyes, looked first at Leonard.

"Damn, that there a thing to open my eyes to," she said.

"Yeah, well, you ain't looking so good neither," Leonard said. "You try to bite an oncoming train?"

"Two niggers beat me up," she said.

"Black men," I said.

"Whatever," she said.

“It’s best not to call people that,” I said.

“He does,” she said.

“Him, I can do nothing about, and you, most likely nothing as well, but I got to try.”

“Quit trying,” she said.

“But you haven’t told the cops about these two men?” Leonard said.

“I don’t like cops.”

“Marvin, the police chief, he’s a good man,” I said.

“I don’t like cops. You got stopped-up ears.”

“Okay,” I said. “You asked to see us.”

“I guess.”

“Did you or didn’t you?” Leonard said, and placed the sack on the sliding table beside the bed.

“What’s that?” Reba said.

“You know what it is,” Leonard said. “It says ‘McDonald’s’ on the side of the sack. There’s two hamburgers in there, giant batch of fries, and two fried pies. I didn’t get you a drink. I can go down the hall and get one. Better yet, Hap can do it. I ain’t your slave.”

“Ain’t nobody do much for me,” she said.

“We’re here for you,” I said.

“He is, anyway,” Leonard said. “Me, I’m just here on account of I ain’t got nothing else to do today.”

“Tell us about the men who beat you up,” I said.

“They come looking for me,” she said. “I was out in my tree, and they knew right where to look for me, and one of them picked up a rock and threw and hit me. I tried to move fast then, and I fell. That’s how I broke my arm. My leg done broke too. They did that when I fell. One of them kicked me there. Then they dragged me off and put me in their car and drove me out to the river bottoms, pulled me down in them woods. They done stuff to me then. You know.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“Ain’t the first time. You live up there in them projects, things happen.”

“I’m really sorry,” I said.

“Not as much as me,” she said, and this time she shed a tear. I thought for a moment she was going to break out crying, but she got a hold of herself. She was too tough for that, and she was so tough it made me tear up.

“I bit one of them niggers good,” she said. “I stomped one of them’s foot good, and then he got real mad and they started beating me. They beat me bad."

"We can see that," Leonard said.

"Yeah, my modeling career done out the window. They dragged me off deeper in them woods and started whaling on me. I had me some beatings before, from some of Mama's boyfriends, but none like that. They done knocked me out a bit, but I come to. They thought I couldn't get away, 'cause my leg was broke. I fooled them and started crawling, going like a crippled dog. I fell down a hill, onto the edge of the river, and they couldn't get down to me on account of it was steep and there was lots of briars and such. I got a bunch of stickers in my ass. I lay there like I was dead, and they figured I was, or close enough to it, 'cause they went on. I crawled awhile, got me a stick for a crutch, and work on up to the highway. That's where I see a cop car. I tried to get away from it, go back in the woods, but I couldn't move fast enough, and this white lady cop got me and brought me to the hospital, then other cops come in. That big nigger, the chief, he interviewed me and here I am."

"Why didn't you tell Chief Hanson what happened?" I said.

"Yeah, your ears done stopped up for sure," she said. "I told you. I don't like cops."

"Bet you don't like those two thugs either," I said. "Want to get them, you need to tell the cops."

"I want you two to get them," she said.

"Why would we do that?" Leonard said.

"'Cause we done worked together."

"Have we?" Leonard said. "In some quarters, how you and us worked together is called extortion."

"Is that like working together?" she said.

"Not exactly," Leonard said.

"Listen, I think I got a little Easter egg for you," I said.

"Easter egg?" she said.

"A surprise. Describe those two grabbed you."

She did.

I said, "One of them still has the limp you gave him, and the two of them are in custody."

"You sure?" she said.

"Pretty sure," I said. "They fit the description."

"You got to be sure," she said.

"Why did they want to hurt you, Reba?"

"Hurt? They was trying to kill my ass."

“Why?”

“I don’t know exactly. I seen them around before, though. They come to see Chicken Fucker a few times. He used to thug a little, beat on anyone didn’t pay for their drugs, and they was the same.”

“Timpson sold drugs?” Leonard said.

“No. He was one of them collector types.”

“Who did Timpson thug for?” Leonard said.

“He work for the same one them two big niggers worked for, Roscoe Washington.”

I looked at Leonard. He said, “Click.”

47

What upset me more than what had happened to Reba was how she took it. She had been raped and beaten, and there was a part of her that seemed to accept it, as if she had been there before and expected nothing better. By the time we went out of the room I was sick to my stomach.

I told Leonard I needed a bathroom trip. He paused to talk with Curt while I found the men's room. I splashed water on my face and used a paper towel to dry off with. My eyes were full of tears. I washed my face again and got it together and went out to the car with Leonard.

"You're upset, ain't you?" Leonard said.

"Yeah."

"Me too, but the way we do good for that girl is to put this right."

"How can we? They're already in custody and Reba says she won't talk to the cops."

"She'll come around. But before she does, we need to go on over to the projects."

We left Leonard's pickup in the lot, and I drove us over to the projects. When we got out of the car, the thug gang, about five this time, including Tuboy and Laron, were standing out by the drive leaning on a car, trying to look cool. Way they really looked was scared. They hadn't forgotten Leonard.

Leonard stopped near Tuboy, and when he did, Tuboy unconsciously licked his lips in a snakelike fashion. I figured they had suddenly gone dry.

"You ain't gonna hit us again, are you?" Tuboy asked.

"That depends," Leonard said, standing close to Tuboy.

"On what?" Tuboy said. He was trying to sound like a tough guy, but his voice had gone up an octave.

"Watch our car for us," Leonard said, "'cause I know you wouldn't let anything happen to it."

"Your car ain't our problem," Tuboy said.

“Is now,” Leonard said. “I’m assigning it to you.”

“I don’t want nothing to do with it,” Tuboy said.

“Me neither,” Laron said.

The others grumbled in agreement.

“You don’t get to choose,” Leonard said. “All you got to do is make sure it ain’t touched. A bird shits on it, I hold you responsible.”

“Man, that’s cold,” said Laron.

“Is indeed. Let me ask all of you something. You know about Reba getting beat up?”

“Shit, she gets beat up a lot. She’s got an uncle, Uncle Chuck, who beats her up when he gets drunk and can catch her. I think he gets an arm workout like that. Soon as he’s drunk, he’s looking for something to hit, and she’s it, he can catch her. She’s gotten faster.”

“Last night, smartass,” Leonard said. “Any of you know anything about that shit happening last night? Good information is worth a twenty.”

“A twenty,” Tuboy said. “You can’t get a hand job for less than fifty.”

“Oh, I bet you’d give me one for a lot less, I insisted,” Leonard said.

Tuboy stepped back without really thinking about it. He studied Leonard. The others looked first at Leonard, then at Tuboy, as if at any moment Leonard might hang his wang out and have Tuboy go to work on it.

“They say she was knocked out of a tree, put in a car, and hauled off,” Tuboy said.

“They say?” Leonard said. “What kind of shit is that?”

“I guess I might have seen it.”

“Did you call the cops?”

“Not my business.”

“What if it had been you,” I said.

“Then it would have been my business,” Tuboy said.

One of the group laughed.

“You know how I’ve made that car your business?” Leonard said. “Now I’m making information about Reba your business, ’cause I find out you knew something and didn’t tell me, after I get through sticking your head in a hole in the ground so I can kick your ass for entertainment, I’m going to call the cops and have them come down on you so hard you’ll think the sky done fell on you.”

“We ain’t doing nothing.” Tuboy said.

“That’s right,” Leonard said. “You ain’t, with your life, anyway. But I know your kind.”

“Can’t judge a book by its cover,” Laron said.

“Yeah, but you ain’t no book, and you smell like lying shit, and if you’re giving me shit, handing me a pile of lies, I’m going to rub your noses in it. Don’t think I won’t. Now, that little girl may not mean anything to you, but she means something to Hap here, and Hap means something to me, and none of you mean a goddamn thing to me. You starting to get where I’m coming from?”

“You don’t like us,” Tuboy said.

“I don’t like what you want to be,” Leonard said. “I don’t like what you are now, and what you are now is pretty much what you want to be, and I call that fucking stupid. Now, why would anyone want to hurt Reba, besides her uncle, and by the way, we get through with this other question, I got one more question for you. But let’s take these quizzes one at a time.”

Tuboy and Laron looked at one another, and then all the gang looked at one another and back to Leonard. Tuboy cleared his throat.

“You got to understand, we could end up way Reba did, or worse,” Tuboy said.

“And worse could start in less than a minute,” Leonard said.

“I seen them two that was here,” Tuboy said. “They hang out at the Joint. I done been up in there a couple of times, but the bartender, he don’t like me.”

“I don’t like you either,” Leonard said, “but I like the bartender less. Let me give you a jump start. We know those two thugs grabbed Reba, and we know the bartender, Roscoe, put them up to it. But I’m thinking there’s a bigger picture here. You give us something, hear?”

One of the boys who had not spoken before, a thin fellow with a wool knit hat on, stepped up to the front of the group.

“I get the twenty?” said the boy.

“Maybe,” Leonard said. “What’s your name?”

“David.”

“Tell us something worth twenty,” Leonard said.

“Everyone knows the cops run the game. Take drugs from buyers and dealers, but you don’t hear about no drug busts. They just run it back through the community.”

“Timpson helped them sell drugs?” I said.

“He helped, but he don’t sell,” David said. “Just collects. It’s his old lady runs the show for the cops. She gets paid for making sure things go smooth, and if they ain’t smooth, she makes sure things get smoothed out.”

"You mean Tamara?" I said. "She runs things?"

"That's the one," Tuboy said.

"Hey, this is my twenty I'm trying to get," David said.

"Yeah, and when you do, you gonna buy us all something with it," Tuboy said.

"No," I said. "He gets to keep it, but if we get the real stuff, there's a twenty for each of you."

"I ain't having shit to do with this," said one of the boys, and then walked off.

"Anyone else walking?" Leonard said.

"Tamara be the one," David said. "Everyone knows that. She tell Timpson what to do when he was around to do it. He say something, it come from her, you can bet on that."

"Do you know her contacts?" Leonard said.

"Just like I done said," David said, "the police."

"Cops here, they run things like they see them, like they want them," Tuboy said. "They ain't no more cops than we are, 'cept they got rides and shooters. Well, I got a pistol."

"Look in Tamara's apartment, you'll find enough meth and other shit to fill up a dump truck," David said. "I know, I buy me a little taste of this and that from time to time."

"Good to see your life's right on track," Leonard said.

"I ain't gonna stay up in here forever," David said. He had gotten a lot braver now, taking the head-dog position away from Tuboy, at least for a few moments.

"Naw," Leonard said. "You ain't never coming out of the projects, except carried out. You're too stupid."

"Does this mean I don't get the twenty?"

"It means you get the twenty," Leonard said.

"You said we all get twenties," said Tuboy.

"Hap, give them twenties," Leonard said.

"What?" I said.

"Give them twenties."

"I don't have that kind of money."

"What you got?"

I opened up my wallet. "Forty dollars."

"Give it to me."

I gave it to Leonard. "All right, he's got forty and I got thirty-five," Leonard said.

"That ain't twenty apiece," said Tuboy.

“At least you can count. First grade wasn’t a waste after all. But we’re going to give you what we got and put the rest of it on the installment plan.”

“The fuck?” Tuboy said.

“And you’re going to like it,” Leonard said. “Now I got that second question. Where’s that uncle of Reba’s?”

48

Leonard got the apartment number from one of the boys, went and knocked on the door. When a big man with more muscles than Charles Atlas opened it, Leonard asked if he was Reba's uncle. The man eyed Leonard, said he was and that if he was wanting to buy him a piece of her ass, that was all right, but it cost extra for white guys. He meant me, of course.

"Naw, we ain't here for that kind of thing. What we're here for is because of that kind of thing."

"There's a difference?" the uncle said.

"Oh yeah," Leonard said. "Mighty big difference."

"You're starting to rub me the wrong way," the uncle said.

"You have no idea," Leonard said, then turned to me and said, "Hold my hat."

I took it from him, and that's when Leonard wheeled and hit Chuck the first time. It was like a missile landing on an aircraft carrier. The uncle dropped hard on his ass. Leonard dragged him out of the doorway by his ankles and let him get up, and then he hit him a couple of sharp blows that made the man bleed. I knew the ass-whup boogie had really begun. He hated Sheerfault, but this was beyond hatred. Leonard knocked the uncle against the building where he couldn't get away, and then he went to work; a surgeon couldn't have been more precise. The man tried to hit back, but he might as well been trying to fight a tiger with a toothpick.

A couple of people came out of doors, saw what was going on, and went back inside. I kept watch in case the uncle had any defenders, and by doing that, I didn't always have my eyes on Leonard, but I could sure hear him at work. Rhythmic, without hesitation between blows. Leonard certainly seemed to have his wind that day. When the uncle was on the ground unconscious, Leonard started kicking him in the head. I let him do that a few times, then I went over and got Leonard by the shoulder, and then by the waist, and pulled him back.

“Murder doesn’t help any of us,” I said.

“That motherfucker dies, that helps the universe,” Leonard said.

“Come on, I don’t want to visit you in Huntsville.”

“You stay away from that little girl,” Leonard said as I dragged him off. “You hear me, asshole?”

“He’s not hearing anything at the moment,” I said.

“Then he better get him some telepathy,” Leonard said.

I eventually got Leonard away from there, got him walking toward the car. As we went, the gang of boys stood there with their mouths open.

“Damn, Chuck was someone Timpson was afraid of, and he bad,” Tuboy said.

“Think I was bad today, you ought to see me on a Wednesday after breakfast,” Leonard said.

In the car Leonard took a deep breath as I backed out.

“And I don’t even like the four-hundred-year-old vampire,” Leonard said.

“Of course you don’t,” I said.

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We didn’t talk to Tamara, and we didn’t call Marvin. We had other ideas and they weren’t necessarily good ones, but they were what we had.

First, though, we drove back to my house to give some attention to Leonard’s shoulder. He had pulled the rotator cuff a little from hitting Uncle Chuck so often, nothing that wouldn’t be okay, and not so bad he was out of commission. He was just pained.

Back at my place, Brett had him take off his shirt. She got a bag of peas out of the freezer and laid those on his shoulder and had him hold it there.

“That’s cold,” Leonard said.

“No shit,” Brett said. “Hold it, and don’t be such a big baby.”

Chance came out of the back room then, looked at Leonard. “What happened to you?”

“Tennis injury,” Leonard said.

“Yeah, I bet,” Chance said.

Brett gave some ibuprofen to Leonard, and then we ended up in the living room. Chance made us coffee, and we sat there sipping, Leonard balancing a bag of frozen peas on his naked shoulder.

When we were relaxed, I said, “Coldpoint and his minions, Sheerfault and Bobo the Clown, have been using the projects to run drugs. They are feeding that stuff right back to the kids there, as well as branching out. They hide behind being cops and being respectful, helping kids make it to the Olympics in boxing.”

“They got a little girl beat up and raped and tried to kill her on account of she talked to us,” Leonard said. “Someone told that she did, and I figure that someone is one of the assholes we talked to today, and there will be hell to pay. Shit, I’m not through with her uncle.”

“It could have been anybody in the projects,” I said. “That place has a thousand eyes and ears. Thing is, we got connections to Coldpoint and his crew all over the place,” I said, “but we don’t have the hard stuff on them. Timpson was their bitch, but he was also his girlfriend's bitch. He helped kill Jamar, and then he tried to make money off of it with the cops, and they gave him a permanent attitude adjustment. Figure Roscoe was in on all this too, and he wasn't going to have us beat up or killed because his feelings got hurt and Leonard peed on his barroom floor."

I had to stop and explain about that part, catch Chance and Brett up some more.

"I got my suspicions," I said. "And it's if you're going to sell product, you got to have someplace to do it, and the projects and the bar are part of it. Timpson had us meet him there, and my guess is it was a way for Roscoe to tag us, which is why Timpson made a point of introducing us. Roscoe tagged us, and so did the two dumbasses at the back of the bar. Lucky for us, him using them was like trying to get a couple of Chihuahuas to take down a grizzly. Me and Leonard, collectively, are the grizzly bear."

"You know that's right," Leonard said.

"So Timpson set you up, had you identified by meeting you at the bar," Brett said.

"He thought he'd get rid of us, keep us out of his and Tamara's hair, out of the way of their drug business, not to mention his plan to blackmail the cops. Stupid plan."

"That all makes sense," Leonard said. "I hate to say it, but I think you got it figured."

"What about Charm and Jamar?" Chance said.

"Charm was merely taking pictures for a class, and the cops thought she was taking pictures of their illegal fights, had some clue what was going on up there. They gave her shit, tried to throw a scare into her, and her brother tried to protect her. He had a bit of a rep as a boxer, and they thought, Well, he's going to give us shit, we won't kill him outright, we'll get some sport out of it. That's when Timpson killed him, or beat him bad enough the others finished him off. That part may be hard to know."

"But we know Reba heard what she shouldn't have heard," Leonard said, "and then she told us stuff that Tamara didn't want told, and somehow it got back to Tamara what Reba did. Maybe Reba ran her mouth. She strikes me as someone might do that. I don't know, but it got found out, and that's when Tamara and Timpson got Roscoe and the goons involved. Had I known they'd done to her what they did, I'd have killed them right then and there. Wouldn't have been no jail for them."

“Did you tell the cops all this?” Chance said.

“No,” I said.

“I thought cops were good,” Chance said.

“They are people,” I said, “and therein lies the problem. Some are good, some aren’t. Marvin certainly is. But the cops in Camp Rapture, not so much. They’re like thugs with a license to steal and murder and pretty much do what they want. It goes all through the city officials. You get rotten apples at the top, it spoils the apples all the way down, or, rather, a head rotten apple attracts others of its kind by design.”

“Those are some crafty apples,” Brett said.

“What are you going to do about it?” Chance asked.

“Me and Leonard came up with something of a plan on the way over here.”

“How about you give us the working parts,” Brett said, “and I bet me and Chance can make it less stupid.”

50

It was a cold night and it was colder for us because we weren’t at home or in the car. Brett and Chance were parked near the police station in Camp Rapture. Before they’d dropped us off, we described Coldpoint, Bobo, and Sheerfault for them and determined Coldpoint was at the station. We had spotted his car in the lot. The four of us even saw him come outside once, smoke a cigarette, and go back in.

“He’s kind of good-looking,” Chance had said.

“Yes, and he is kind of a devil as well,” I said.

“Easy, tiger,” Brett said.

After that, Brett and Chance let us out on the hill near the sawmill and drove back into position, which took about twenty minutes, the hill being on the edge of town. Chance called and said Coldpoint’s car was still there. As far as they could tell, so was he.

The lot where Brett and Chance parked was for a country-music nightclub. It was partially filled with cars. It was across the street from the police station. They found a position near the front facing the street, behind one car.

Through their windshield and the back and front windshields of the car in front of them, they had a good view of the cop shop and the parking lot with Coldpoint’s car in it. They were calling themselves the Sneaky Bitches, and even signed off together on the phone with “Sneaky Bitches rule.”

“They may have to be sedated at some point,” Leonard said.

We were hiding among the trees above the sawmill, wearing heavy coats and wrapped in blankets. We had a couple large thermoses of coffee, sandwiches, and a bag of vanilla wafers. Since I knew Leonard was not big on sharing those, and so did Chance, she had bought me a box of animal crackers and packed them for me. We had brought raincoats. It looked like wet weather might be coming. We had backpacks to store everything in. Leonard had a pistol. I had decided not to bring one; they had their place, but I hated the damn things. I had a golf club I had found buried in the grass of our side lawn, must've been left there about the time Arnold Palmer took his first swing on a golf course. Some kid probably dragged out his father's club one day, then lost interest, dropped it, and forgot about it. I had racked a mower blade on it last summer, but I'd kept the club, leaned it against the side of the carport, meaning to throw it away. It was rusted but surprisingly sturdy. I was glad to have it.

Where we sat was on a rise above the sawmill. We weren't that high above it, but it was a pretty good-size hill, and from where we crouched we could see the mill, the worn-out drive, and the pond. The pond was dark, as the moon was mostly behind a cloud. It looked like a tar pit. We had cell phones with us, on vibrate, and the plan was simple and slightly refined by Brett to include cell-phone contact.

We reasoned tonight might be when things happened, if any of our information was correct, and then again, it might merely be a cold night and we'd go home with frozen asses and nothing solved. But I doubted that. There was money to be made on betting. For the better-positioned folks in the community, dogfights, chicken fights, or human fights, it was all the same; it wasn't their pain or their blood that was in those matches, only their dollars. With everyone from city officials and law enforcement in cahoots, they felt protected.

About midnight, I began to think my speculation wasn't good enough. I was starting to miss Brett and my warm bed. We had drank about half our coffee and had eaten our sandwiches. I had also consumed an entire box of animal crackers, and Leonard was well into his bag of wafers. Why he didn't weigh three hundred pounds, I couldn't figure.

It had grown colder, and now there was a light rain, more of a mist, really. We put on our raincoats and pulled up the hoods and sat there in misery.

"It comes two in the morning, we're taking our asses home," Leonard said. "I'm cold as a sled dog's nut sack."

"Agreed," I said.

About thirty minutes later we saw several sets of car lights hazing through the rain, coming up the hillside road. A second later my phone buzzed.

"Coldpoint has left," Brett said.

"Someone is already here," I said.

"Can't be Coldpoint. He just this minute left."

"We'll see who pretty soon," I said.

"You going to be okay?"

"Have I ever not been okay?"

"Lots of times," Brett said.

"I'm going to text you when to call Marvin. He doesn't know you're calling, so you don't get him, get Officer Carroll, and be sure and call him Pookie."

"Fuck you very much," Leonard said.

I gave her Curt Carroll's number, said, "If what we think is going on is in fact going on, we're going to need a Texas Ranger, some Highway Patrol, someone not bound by jurisdiction. Marvin has friends everywhere, so he'll know who to send. The Camp Rapture sheriff's department might be in on it, so not them. If Batman is available, send him."

"Got you."

"If I don't text in thirty minutes, get someone starting this way. Make that twenty."

"Be careful," Brett said, and we ended our call. The crowd below wasn't near enough to hear me on the phone, but in a few more minutes they would be walking under us. I could hear car doors slamming and people talking as they came.

Glancing downhill, I saw Sheerfault and Bobo get out of a car, which Sheerfault had parked up close to the mill. Others had left their cars, which were parked in the line farther away, and were making their way toward the mill. There were about twelve people, not counting Sheerfault and Bobo. Everyone was wearing a raincoat or carrying an umbrella.

Bobo pulled back the plywood barrier and slid inside the mill with Sheerfault. A moment later you could see a crack of golden light through the slit in the wall and a beam of the same rising up under the pine tree that poked through the roof. Confident as they were, they weren't exactly in sneaky mode; who was going to punish them? Well, I had an idea.

Everyone outside filed in.

Headlights bounced up the drive. They belonged to a white jailhouse bus, the sort they use for transporting prisoners. The bus slipped to the side of the parked cars, and the hydraulic door hissed open. A brief moment later a man came out. It was someone I had never seen before. I could tell from the back glow of the headlights that he was wearing a sheriff's deputy shirt, jeans, tennis shoes, and a jailer's jacket and a ball cap. He had a holstered gun on his hip. A moment passed and out of the bus came four men in handcuffs, followed by a fat man with a shotgun slung over his shoulder. They were followed by some of the men I had seen there before, some of the town's bigwigs. They came off the bus and walked behind the criminals like Roman soldiers lazily making their way to a crucifixion. They went inside the mill.

More car lights cruised up the drive, and then cars began to spread out and park in a row behind the bus. Car lights were turned off and six men came out of the cars and so did one dark-haired woman, opening an umbrella as she did. I knew her from newspapers. She was a judge. Jill something or another. I think she was running for mayor next election. Her politics had been described as being to the right of Attila the Hun's. Tonight, that would most likely be confirmed.

"I don't think them convicts are having a field trip to see how the old sawmill worked," Leonard said.

"Nope," I said.

We sat and waited for some time to pass. No more cars came along. We could hear voices rising inside the mill, and then there were shouts, and even from where we sat, we could hear the sound of fists smacking.

"No gloves," Leonard said.

"Nope," I said.

We left our goods, except for our phones, Leonard's gun, and my golf club, and slipped from the hill. At the bottom of it, we crouched behind Sheerfault's car.

"I'm going to see I can get a phone video and sound recording of what's going on," Leonard said. "I'll send it to Brett as insurance."

"Video and sound recording," I said. "You sound so cute trying to be technological."

"Fuck you."

"Watch your ass."

"You'll be watching it. Try not to get a boner."

With that Leonard slipped away and began a soft trot toward the mill.

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The voices in the sawmill rose up and fell down, yelled out, moaned and hissed, and then became a conversational hum. A moment later, the voices were loud again.

I kept an eye on Leonard. He was the near the slit in the mill, lifting his phone to film through the opening. After a few seconds, he stopped filming, looked back at me, and began to text.

TOO MANY PEOPLE. CAN'T GIT CLEAR VIEW. THEY ARE BUSY. WALKIN UP BEHIND EM TO FILM.

I sent a text quickly: THAT'S NUTS.

His return text popped up. YEP.

Leonard grinned at me, then turned back to the mill. I watched him pull the rain hood tighter around his head and slip through the crack in the door.

What a dumbass, I thought.

I should have sent Brett a text, but I didn't take time for it. I was already easing out from behind the car. I ran as softly as I could across the worn drive and to the gap that led into the mill. I leaned the golf club against the wall, peeled off my rain slicker, and tossed it aside. I picked up the club and took a peek in the mill.

Leonard was walking casually toward the back of the crowd. No one noticed him. They had their minds on what was going on inside the wire enclosure. There were some beer coolers on the ground, and a man I recognized as a councilman had a beer in his hand and was walking away from the crowd gathered at the fencing. Had he turned his head slightly, he would have seen Leonard.

Leonard stood at the back of the crowd near where they had piled their rain gear and umbrellas, raised his phone, and began to film between a split in the spectators. Through that split I glimpsed Coldpoint, Sheerfault, and Bobo close to the fence. Beyond them I caught a sight of two ragged-looking men swinging wildly at each other. There was no skill or plan to it. It was wild arm hurling. Both of them looked as if they might keel over at any moment from exhaustion. If something bad happened and one keeled over for good, there was the sawmill pool waiting.

"I think maybe we ought to bring you inside." I turned, and there was Coldpoint behind me with his handgun drawn. Our impulsiveness had caused us to lose focus, not wait until the man we knew was coming arrived.

Now he had arrived.

He was standing about five feet from me and he had the gun in one hand and an umbrella in the other hand, cocked against his shoulder. Rain ran off the umbrella and off my rain hood.

"Know you're pretty good with your hands and feet, you get up close, so let's keep the distance the way it is. And the golf club, drop it. Go inside, and don't give me shit. I want to shoot you anyway."

"The boys you hired failed you," I said. "You ought to let it go at that."

"Maybe we can get some good out of you yet."

"I don't do anal," I said.

"Go inside. I'm out of patience and I don't have a sense of humor."

I went inside and there was Leonard, behind the crowd, filming with his cell phone. You couldn't see the boxers, just the backs of people.

Leonard glanced at me and Coldpoint.

"Motherfucker," he said.

The crowd was so loud and involved they had yet to notice us.

"Hey," Coldpoint called out. "Back here."

What that led to was part of the crowd turning toward us, and coming out of it was Sheerfault. When he saw that Coldpoint had me at gunpoint, he smiled and showed his teeth wide as a piano row.

Coldpoint pushed me until I was near Leonard. Now the crowd had moved toward us. They gathered about us and forgot the two fighters in the ring of wire, and the fighters were still at it, not having noticed they'd lost their audience.

The crowd was tight around us now.

Leonard touched his phone and then dropped his arm and held the phone against his leg. Sheerfault came over and took it without a struggle. Bobo shouldered his way through the onlookers and came to stand by Sheerfault.

I glanced through a gap in the gathering, saw the two fighters had sat down in the ring, arms around one another to keep from toppling over.

"What we have here," Coldpoint said, "is a predicament."

"What you have here," I said to the crowd, "is a crime in progress. You folks don't want to be part of it, you ought to hike out, get away from this asshole and his ass hairs."

No one moved.

Sheerfault said, "That little speech wasn't very persuasive, was it." He turned toward Leonard. "What's with you, nigger, all out of smartass remarks?"

"Reached my monthly quota," Leonard said. "Next month I'll start up again."

"Always a clown, even to the last," Sheerfault said.

"You got clown-ass-whipped, is what you got," Leonard said. "I made you my bitch."

Sheerfault stepped toward Leonard. Coldpoint said, "Stop right there. Enough of this shit."

Sheerfault paused.

"Naw, let him come on," Leonard said. "He does best when there's a gun involved. He needs an edge."

"You shut up too or I'll drill Hap's spine," Coldpoint said. He sounded amazingly like a child on the playground who had just responded to being called a stupid-head.

Leonard went quiet. I could tell from the look on his face it was painful to do so.

"Just so you know," Coldpoint said, "the cop outside that little girl's room, I think he's going to come out poorly."

He let that comment hang in the air.

"What the hell does that mean?" Leonard said.

"It means I got some folks going to pay him and the girl a visit. It means he probably won't be around when morning comes, and neither will the girl. Anyone gets in the way, I've sent two of the best to surprise them. The two Roscoe sent were not so good."

"All niggers," Sheerfault said.

"Shut up," Coldpoint said.

"Don't get all sophisticated now," Leonard said. "Stick to what you really are. And let me tell you, that cop and that girl, anything happens to them, I'll skin you, starting with your dick. If you have one."

"But I haven't given my pair the word yet," Coldpoint said. "I'm waiting until a little later. I can move things forward, I have to. Make it happen sooner. My men, they are very good at what they do. These two"—he nodded at Sheerfault and Bobo—"not so much."

"Hey," Sheerfault said.

The man with the shotgun snickered.

"You best get hold of yourself," Sheerfault said to him. "I know where your big ass lives."

Shotgun man went silent, turned red-faced.

The lady judge, well dressed and out of place, said, "Wait a minute. Are we talking about killing someone?"

"Like it hasn't happened before," Coldpoint said. "Don't get self-righteous now, Jill. None of you. You all are part of this, and we got enough stuff on all of you, you say a word, we all go down. Way down."

The judge maybe wasn't as far to the right of Attila as some suggested, but she was far enough to know when to go along to get along. She swallowed heavily, dipped her head so that her brown teased hair caught the light and bounced off her hairspray. Then she sort of faded like the Invisible Woman. It was as if her personality had been pulled out of the top of her head and cast to the wind.

"Might go easier on you if you did speak up," I said. But that judge wasn't hearing me. Her mind was drifting along somewhere on the River Styx.

"Better wake up," I said to her.

Coldpoint hit me in the back of the head with the gun barrel. It dropped me to my knees and made me see double for a moment.

"Here's what we're going to do," Coldpoint said. "All you people. All of you. You have gotten your hands dirty, and you're going to get them dirty tonight, and for some of you it'll be dirtier than before. But you think I don't have your asses in my pocket, just try and rat on us. And here's another thing, we may get some fine entertainment out of it."

"Will there be a pony?" Leonard said.

He was ignored.

"I like ponies."

I struggled to my feet.

"You like ponies, Hap?"

"Fuck the pony," I said.

"You two, get in that ring and fight," Coldpoint said.

"Not likely," I said.

"I think it'll make for a good match," Coldpoint said, "and here's the thing: you don't, the two at the hospital get dead."

"We do, they'll get dead," Leonard said.

"I can let them live," Coldpoint said. "I can work things out, I make that choice. It’s easier they die, but I can spare them. But not if you two don’t get in that ring.”

“Bullshit,” Leonard said. “I’m not fighting Hap.”

“Sure you are,” Coldpoint said.

“Like we can trust your word,” Leonard said.

“We ought to do,” I said.

“What the fuck, Hap. He ain’t gonna spare nobody.”

“I might,” Coldpoint said. “I will.”

“I tell you this, I come out of here with arms and legs and my nuts swing, and either one of them people are dead, I’m coming after you,” Leonard said.

“You said that already.”

“I didn’t say I’m coming after all of you, though.”

“Now you’ve said it. Get in the ring.”

Leonard looked at me. I said, “It’s okay. Got to do what we got to do.”

I could tell he got it then. No one else would have noted the subtle shift in his features, but I had. Brett had reinforcements coming. All we had to do was fight and stall.

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They pulled the two fighters sitting on the ground out of there, and the big guy with the shotgun who had helped get them off the bus took them away. After a few moments he came back.

"They're on the bus," he said to Coldpoint.

Coldpoint nodded.

Sheerfault had opened the wire gate and was grinning at us. I really hated him. Bobo stood nearby, his mouth hanging open. I don't know why, but in that moment, I felt sorry for the poor chucklehead. He was like a dog that belonged to bad people.

Once we were inside the fencing, Sheerfault closed the gate. Coldpoint held up his hand. His phone was in it.

"I get the sense you're slacking, I call," he said. "I only have to call. I don't have to wait for anyone to answer. I call, and they go. You got that."

"We got it," I said.

"I better see some serious movement in there, and some hard hits," Coldpoint said. "You can do anything you want to do, but you got to do it for real."

"Shit, Hap," Leonard said.

"I know," I said.

Leonard took off my slicker and hung it on the fence. I remembered he had a gun in the pocket of the slicker, but right then didn't call for trying to shoot it out. Coldpoint and Sheerfault also had guns. And then there were the ones who got off the bus, brought the fighters in. What we had to do was steal some time.

I took off my shirt, and Leonard took off his.

"You boys been working out," Coldpoint said.

"Why, thank you," I said. "Personally, I feel a little fat."

"Do it," Coldpoint said. "Do it now. And be all in about it."

I let out my breath and took a deep one in. I said, "Watch for the low ones, Leonard. I cheat."

"Me too."

"Same alike," I said.

And now the world outside of the ring went away. We had to fight, and we had to keep at it until Brett hooked up Marvin and the others. As far as Coldpoint knew, there weren't any cops about to be involved. Marvin had bearded them in his own den, made them feel foolish, but I was pretty sure that the way it looked to Coldpoint was two lone rogues had slipped up here to get proof of what was going on, and had fucked up and were going to pay for it.

He was right about that last part, of course.

Leonard and I sparred frequently, and we opened up a bit now and then, but not since many years ago, when we'd fought in a kickboxing tournament, but we had never truly gone for broke.

So now we began to circle, and then I began to dance, skipping a little. Leonard grinned at me. He knew I was best when the other guy started, that I was a counterfighter in the ring, though less so on the street. We skipped around each other.

Coldpoint said, "Get to it."

"Don't cramp our styles," Leonard said.

And now Leonard moved, came fast, punched for my head. I nodded to the side and slipped the punch; another came, and I slipped that. He kicked out to my thigh with his right leg, the lead leg, and I lifted my leg and sloughed it off and came at him with a push off my back leg. He was ready for that, knowing I can get off the line faster than him, and knowing my hands were faster, and me knowing he was deceptive and could hit like a mule kicks if a mule was turbo-powered. We clashed a bit, and I grabbed him around the neck and we came in close, him hitting me in the stomach a couple of light shots. I leaned my head in, said, "Make it look real. Lives are on the line."

He butted me. My nose sprayed blood. I tried to move back. He gave me a front kick to the midsection and then dove at me to grapple, but I rolled out of the way. He hit the ground and tumbled and came up and turned and I hooked him to the ribs and skipped back, more hurt than I was letting on. My head rocked and I couldn't breathe. I could hardly hold my body upright, that midsection kick having taken my wind and polished the inside of my backbone.

He gave me a concerned look. He knew that had been pretty damn real, but I gave a gentle nod, not only to let him know I was okay but that what he did was fine. We had to keep it moving, had to keep it real, had to buy Brett and Marvin time.

Now we came together again and Leonard darted a jab, but I double-palmed his arm, kind of climbed it on the outside, and hit him with a ridge hand in the jaw. It was a damn good shot and sent him flying backward. He hit on his back, and damn if he didn't do a back roll and come up on his feet. He looked at me, grinned, and spat a wad of blood in the dirt.

The crowd was going now, cheering, and I was thinking how weird that was. They were loving what we were doing, and when we were done we'd take shots to the head and be slipped into the sawdust pool, and the ones we were trying to protect at the hospital would be dead, but for now they loved us, two pit bulls in the ring, fighting.

I bobbed and weaved, mostly just to give some show, and me and Leonard eased together. He faked a right and caught me with that goddamn cannon-hot hook in the ribs again. I felt something move inside of me that wasn't my last meal. I grabbed at Leonard, trying to pin his arms, and then in that moment, years of training, years of having been in sport battles and real battles linked together, and I just became a man in a ring with another man, not my brother but a fighter. Punches and low kicks were thrown, and one of those low kicks caught me inside the thigh, and without even knowing it was about to happen, I collapsed to one knee. Leonard leaped on me like a giant angry toad, knocking me onto my back. He straddled me and I bumped him. It rolled him on his side. I tried to slip away, but he was on top of me again, straddling me, raining blows on my head. I deflected them with my hands, caught one of his arms, pulled it to me, and tried to throw a leg up and around his neck, going for a triangle hold, but this wasn't Leonard's first rodeo either. He leaned into me and that gave him room to bend his arm a little, and I couldn't hold him. He grabbed my neck with one hand and used his other hand to shove a thumb into the notch in my throat and pressed down.

I lost my grip on his arm, and he grabbed my arm in turn. He swung his body and threw himself back into a lying arm bar, and if he was holding back any I couldn't tell it. Like me he was caught up in the moment. But his grasp wasn't firm. I wiggled free, got to my feet, and so did he.

We threw fist and hammer fist, and close in I palmed him under the chin, and I was sick when it hit, because it was a solid strike, and I could see I had him staggered, and now I knew he was mine, and if I stopped, the phone call would be made, so I started in, threw some solid punches, but not too solid. Had to make it last. But then I realized Leonard was playing possum. He dropped suddenly and spun around close to the ground with an extended leg and swept my feet out from under me.

I came up immediately, but let me tell you, the lights seemed fuzzy and my heart seemed weak, and every move I made was no less trouble than trying to climb a greased pole.

Leonard kicked again; I slid past the kick and grabbed him around the waist, shifted my body, and threw him over my hip. He hit the ground hard. I heard the air go out of him. But as was his manner, he came back from it quickly. He probably couldn't breathe, but he could still move. He rolled and came up and then we exchanged kicks. I couldn't tell you if I hit him or if he hit me because I was out of it. I was beyond pain. I felt myself going numb all over, and then I heard something I thought was familiar, but in my state I couldn't identify it.

"The law," Leonard said.

And then I knew. It was sirens.

There was a mad rush toward the door. The crowd had panicked.

I put my hands on my knees and bent over. I felt faint. Leonard stepped in and got hold of me and straightened me up. All of a sudden, things switched and it was me holding him up.

He said, "I take it back, what I said once about you being fast but not able to hit hard. You hit hard."

"And you're faster than you look."

"We aren't going to do that again under any circumstances," Leonard said.

"I hear that," I said.

Coldpoint, Sheerfault, and Bobo were trotting toward the front of the building, the last ones out, but then Coldpoint turned and came back toward us with his gun held forward. I guess he figured he was going to go ahead and take us out.

Leonard had gotten hold of his jacket now, and he brought out his gun. Coldpoint stared a moment, made a sour face, turned and ran out of the door and into the rain, stood in the opening holding his phone. He pressed it, gave us a shit-eating grin, and ran out of sight.

"Chickenshit," Leonard yelled after him.

53

Me and Leonard got our shit together enough to head out of the fencing, across the mill, and out of the door. The crowd broke and was running in every which direction. Some of them were trying to climb the hill Leonard and I had come down.

I picked up the golf club I had been forced to drop, and soon after one of the guards came running by, heading for the back of the mill, hoping for a way out. He was the one with the shotgun, and he still had it, but he tossed it into the weeds as he passed. Or almost passed. I swung the club as he came near, caught him alongside the jaw and sent teeth flying.

“Fore,” I said as the big man hit the dirt.

The rain had grown more fierce and was cold on my head and neck and was soaking through my clothes. I don’t know how Aquaman takes it. I saw Coldpoint running toward his car. What was his plan now? Drive to Mexico? Go home and shoot himself?

No plan he could come up with would be any good.

“I’m going to see I can find Sheerfault,” Leonard said.

“Good. I got Coldpoint.”

I splashed along through puddles after him. He was running toward the line of parked cars, but there was no help there. Cruiser lights strobed through the wet night. At the bottom of the road, cruisers were blocking the way out. Highway Patrol and all manner of law were out of their cars and coming up the drive in a herd of law enforcement cloaked in black slickers, their pistols drawn. I could see them nabbing runners left and right, throwing them on the ground and yelling for them to stay put.

I was twenty feet away from Coldpoint when he realized he had no way to go forward, turned and came back in my direction, saw me. He decided in that instant he was going to at least shoot me before all was said and done. His lifted the pistol. I swung the club hard and let it go. It sailed across the distance between us, almost invisible in the rain and the night, caught Coldpoint somewhere in the face. I heard him grunt like a constipated man trying to pass a football, and the pistol went up in the air, and he fell onto the ground and rolled up against one of the parked cars.

By the time I reached him, he was trying to use his butt to push away from the car, but that hit had been a good one. His jaw was hanging down on one side.

He tried to say something but couldn't, just held up his hands in an *I quit* position.

"Reba or Officer Carroll are hurt, I'll kill you, Coldpoint."

He smiled, closed his eyes, and leaned against the car. I could see cops coming toward us; within moments they'd have Coldpoint and, if I stood around, me as well.

I turned and looked toward the mill. The crowd had gathered again and were flowing toward me. They had charged to the rear of the property only to discover there was a sharp drop-off with the highway thirty feet below. They had the drop-off on one end, the law on the other, a hill on one side, and a pond full of toxic water and sawdust on the other.

The crowd started running back in my direction. I could see Leonard at the rear of it all, on slightly higher ground, which made him easily visible for a moment. I saw Sheerfault too, running with all his might. Bobo was to the side, mixed into the crowd of runners. Leonard was trying to get to Sheerfault, but the crowd's motion was not working in his favor. I tried rushing to cut Sheerfault off, but he had too much of a lead.

Sheerfault reached the edge of the mill, dashed toward his car. Bobo yelled out to him, "Sheer," and held his hand up, as if he were trying to get the teacher's attention.

Sheerfault ignored him, jumped in his car, hit the wrong gear, backed into the jail bus, whipped it into the correct gear, and whirled the car around with ease. A stuntman couldn't have done it any better. He raced his car down the drive, the lights off, almost hitting me, causing officers to leap aside. But then he hit the brakes as he realized the exit was blocked by cop cars. He jerked it into reverse, hit the gas, went backward up the drive, came to a wide spot, wheeled the car around with another incredible brake stomp and spin, came racing onward. He turned on his lights like he was really going to need them, but there was nowhere he could go that way either, no farther than the end of the drive, anyway. The mill was in front of him, the side of the hill on his right, and the dark sawdust pond to his left. Maybe he thought if he drove fast enough, the car would levitate.

A couple of men from the crowd had gotten into his path as they scrambled for their cars. He didn't slow for them, hit them and knocked them winding. He wheeled left and tried to brake, maybe planning to jump out and make a run for it. There was a way he might go on foot down there, around the pond and down the hill below it and on out to the highway. But the car didn't stop. It began to skid at the edge of the pond in the wet earth. The headlights punched at the water. Sheerfault got the door open, had one leg out. His foot hit the ground and I heard a faint snapping sound as the crowd ran past me and right into the waiting arms of a lot of law.

I wasn't watching the crowd closely, however. I had my eyes on that car and Sheerfault. He couldn't get out and his foot was dragging and the car was sliding. It went over the lip of the dark pond and down into it. I heard Sheerfault scream, then I saw Bobo running that way, yelling, "Sheer, Sheer."

Bobo dove into the pond after the car, only the taillights visible now, like two red primordial reptile eyes.

I ran down there. I hated both those guys, but not so much I wanted to see them drown in that mess. By the time I got to the bank of the pond, the car was gone, gobbled up by the goo.

Bobo was trying to swim in that muck. He was strong. He dove down twice and came up twice, spitting that horrid yuck out of his mouth, but the sawdust water was heavy. It grabbed at him and held him and washed over him. He yelled out for Sheerfault once more, dove down again, and didn't come back up.

There was nothing I could do.

I turned and looked toward the driveway, saw Highway Patrol officers with guns drawn. They were loading the whole gang of them into the jail bus. I saw the two guys who had been the original entertainment looking out of the windows of the bus.

It was all happening fast and smooth by then. I saw a tall black man in a white shirt, white hat, and cowboy boots standing in the middle of it all, lighting a cigar. Texas Ranger, no doubt.

Leonard had slipped down by me by then.

"I didn't get to shoot nobody," he said.

"I'm sorry."

He looked out at the water.

"I seen Bobo go in," he said.

“He won’t be coming up. Shitty way to end up, even for those two. Turned into Rusty Puppies.”

“Deserved way to go,” he said, and casually flipped the pistol he was holding into the muck.

“Had it been me, would you have tried to pull my ass out of that mess?” I said.

“Of course not. I’d hire a backhoe to get your body later.”

We turned with our hands raised and walked toward the Texas Ranger.

54

When we were standing by the Ranger, we saw Marvin walking past the bus. “I got these two,” he said. “They were our inside men.”

The Ranger said, “You’re out of your jurisdiction.”

“Yep,” Marvin said. “But without me and these two knuckleheads, you’d still be at home watching *Gunsmoke* reruns.”

The Ranger grinned. “I like *Gunsmoke*.”

“What’s not to like,” Marvin said.

The Ranger went down the hill.

“Reba and Curt?” Leonard said.

“Two men tried to kill them,” Marvin said. “Officer Carroll killed both of them. One shot apiece.”

“Is Curt all right?” Leonard said.

“Actually, he said he sprained a finger reaching for his pistol fast as he did.”

“You know this for sure how?” I asked.

“We have a thing called radios, and we talk on them,” Marvin said. “We’re thinking about getting phones we can carry in our pockets so we talk on those too. Oh, wait. I got one.”

He pulled his cell out of his coat pocket and held it up.

“Of course,” I said. “I knew that. And they can make moving pictures with sound now too, can’t they?”

55

The Ranger used LaBorde as his command center. We told our story to him with Marvin present. We were in the very nice interrogation room. Now that some time had passed, I was really hurting from mine and Leonard's bout. We had found out Coldpoint was in custody but not talking. Wise move, since his two main coconspirators were dead. But then there was the judge and the other bozos who had been at the mill. One of them would talk, that was for sure.

"You two look terrible," the Ranger said. "Like you got hit by a truck and dragged a few miles."

"You think it looks bad, ought to be on this end looking out," I said.

"Yeah," Leonard said. "I think I shit one of my lungs out in the jailhouse toilet."

"You're friends, but you beat on each other like that?" the Ranger said.

"Had to make it look real and kill some time while y'all were fucking around at the doughnut shop."

"I saw you throw a pistol in the pond," the Ranger said to Leonard.

"Did you now?" Leonard said.

"Yep," said the Ranger.

Leonard nodded. "Picked it up inside the sawmill where someone dropped it. I panicked and tossed it in the pond."

"Why would you panic?"

"They call it panic for a reason," Leonard said. "It isn't supposed to make sense."

"Was the gun registered to you?" the Ranger asked.

"Nope. I got it in the sawmill."

It was in fact a cold piece, part of Leonard's stash, and he had brought it with him, but he didn't want to admit that. If he did, some shit might follow.

"We could drag the pond for it," the Ranger said.

"You could," Leonard said. "And you'd find it, but it isn't registered to me."

"And you didn't bring it with you."

"An unregistered gun? Not hardly. That would be unlawful. I just wouldn't do that."

The Ranger looked at me.

"That would be wrong," I said. "Leonard, like myself, is an upstanding citizen."

The Ranger didn't seem to be a man that enjoyed bullshit, but unfortunately for him that night, we were full of it. We had been helpful at the sawmill, but he had an accurate suspicion maybe we had been too helpful, out of line for citizens.

Marvin said to the Ranger, "Could you and me talk outside a moment?"

The Ranger nodded and they went out. They were out there for a long time. Leonard and I sat politely, waiting.

"I think a different coat of paint would be nice in here," Leonard said.

"Looks all right," I said.

"Don't you think it's too dark? I mean, you come in, you're already being interrogated, which is a drag. So something more festive could make life a little better, at least for a few moments."

"Maybe a mobile hanging over the table."

"What I'm talking about. Something shiny."

Finally they came back. The Ranger looked at us.

"You're upstanding fucking citizens that were just there to record bad things on your phone, and the bad things got out of hand, and you got in the middle of them. They made you fight, the cops that you had alerted earlier showed up later than you expected, and there you were. Though for some reason, why you were there still doesn't set right with me."

"We want to be newspaper stringers," Leonard said. "We thought that would be a good place to start."

"Don't push it," the Ranger said. "You can go. I advise you to go. But don't go far away, we might need to talk again, and thanks for the video."

"Thank you, Mr. Ranger," Leonard said.

As I went by Marvin, I whispered, "Thanks."

"Eat shit," he said, and didn't whisper.

56

My car was in the parking lot where Brett and Chance had dropped it. She and Brett had gone home from there, optimistic that we wouldn't be spending our lives in jail.

We had also been optimistic, but not as much. Now, we felt pretty good. We climbed in the car, me behind the wheel. I had the spare key in my pocket, and since it was a Prius, I didn't even have to take the key out of my pocket. That always made me feel like a big dog. Magic.

"You know," Leonard said, "I wouldn't want to fight you again, you being a brother and all, but I think had we not been stalling for time, and if a few other factors had not been in play, I could have licked you."

"Nope."

"Could too."

"Nope, nope, nope."

"Yep, yep, yep."

"Nope," I said, "and don't say anything else, or you walk home."

"My ribs hurt."

"You can say that. I don't feel so good either."

I eased the car out of the lot.

"Can I stay at your place, Hap?"

"The couch."

"Sure, since Chance has my room."

"It *was* your room."

"Couch is fine. Buffy can keep me company."

"She sleeps with Chance."

"Oh."

I drove along the streets slowly, as if my car felt as bad as I did. As the moments moved by I felt worse and worse from that beating I had taken from Leonard. Good thing he loved me or I'd have been dead.

"We are seriously a couple of badasses," Leonard said.

"Look up *badass* in the dictionary, and our fucking picture is right under the word."

“Got that right,” Leonard said. “But I’m a badass might need to rest for a few days, shit some blood, and get my ribs looked after. Maybe get some bionic parts.”

“I got my own health problems.”

“Man, you getting out of my lying arm bar,” Leonard said. “That was some shit.”

“Wasn’t it?” I said.

“You’re supposed to compliment me on something now,” Leonard said.

“You fall down good,” I said.

57

A few days later when Marvin decided he didn't hate us so much after all, he told us they'd picked up Tamara at the projects and she squealed like a pig. She wasn't so tough. She confirmed what we knew and added a few things, mostly that Timpson had helped beat Jamar to death and that his having me meet him at the Joint was merely so Roscoe could put an eyeball on us and the two dumbasses in the back could see us too. I really hated those bastards, hurting Reba like that, trying to kill her. Marvin promised to make sure when they went away word got spread at the prison that they raped and beat a kid. Even the worst of the worst in prison generally hated anyone who did that kind of stuff, and it often led to a shiv party in the shower.

Couldn't happen to two nicer guys.

They dragged Sheerfault's car out of the muck. He was still in it. Bobo had beat the glass out of the driver's-side window with his fist, which is no easy feat on land and would have been even harder under dark, mucky water. Fact was, I would have thought it impossible.

Bobo had an arm cocked inside the window and had died that way, clutching at the door frame, trying to pull Sheerfault out. I kind of admired him for that.

On a Sunday afternoon, Leonard and Officer Carroll, as I preferred to call him, picked up Reba at the projects and brought her to the house where we were having an indoor cookout. It was raining that day and had been raining all week. Reba still had her arm and leg in a cast and was precariously on crutches.

As they came through the door, Leonard said, "Found the four-hundred-year-old vampire. She's forgoing blood today and having a grilled burger."

"You ain't got no French fries?" she said, crutching her way toward the table.

"We do," Brett said, "they're frying."

Brett and Chance introduced themselves to her.

“Before we picked her up, we got her some fried pies at McDonald’s,” Officer Carroll said. “Leonard said she’d want them.”

“Course I do,” Reba said. “You got something against pie?”

“Not a thing,” Officer Carroll said. He was wearing off-duty clothes. I thought he looked odd out of uniform. He had a finger taped up, the one he had sprung, and he looked as happy and alert as always. I wondered how he was dealing with having shot two people. I had a larger number of dead folks on my head, and there were times at night when it was as if all their bodies were stacked on my chest.

“You and Leonard sure do look like hell,” Officer Carroll said.

“Gives me character,” Leonard said.

“No, it makes you move kind of slow,” Officer Carroll said, and they passed a smile between them.

Leonard, moving stiffly, got Reba positioned in a chair, her broken leg and cast stuck out under the table.

“You done blown up the projects,” Reba said, “and you fucked over them bad po-pos, but they gonna be someone else selling that sugar pop sometime soon. Some other cops gonna run things.”

“I’m a cop,” Officer Carroll said.

“I got my eye on you,” she said. “Even if you did keep me from getting killed.”

“Well, we’re hoping for the best,” Officer Carroll said.

“Hope ain’t nothing but shit misspelled,” Reba said.

“My, you have a mouth on you,” Brett said.

“Shit, you ought to have heard my mama. And on them hamburgers. Like mine well done, and don’t put no goddamn sweet pickles on it, but you got a little mustard, I could take that, you spread it thin.”

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About the Author

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Joe R. Lansdale is the author of nearly four dozen novels, including *Paradise Sky,* the Edgar Award–winning *The Bottoms, Sunset and Sawdust,* and *Leather Maiden.* He has received eleven Bram Stoker Awards, the British Fantasy Award, the Raymond Chandler Award, the Spur Award, the Grinzane Cavour Prize, and others. He lives with his family in Nacogdoches, Texas.

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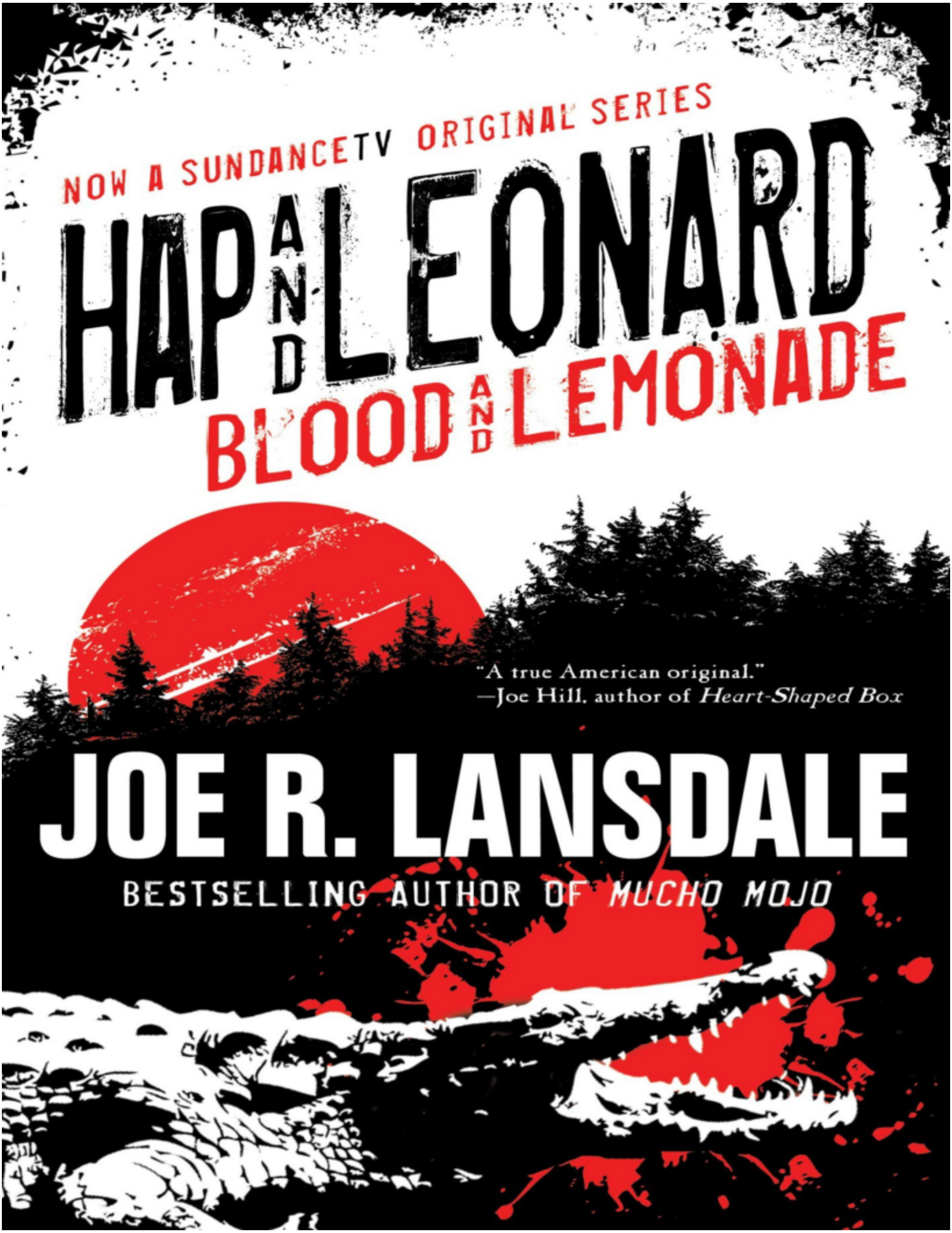

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Hap and Leonard: Blood and Lemonade

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About the Author

1.
Parable of the Stick

Leonard looked up from the newspaper he was reading, a little rag that was all that was left of our town paper, the bulk of it now being on line, and glanced at me.

"So I'm reading in the paper here about how the high school, hell, grade school, all the grades, they got a no fighting policy, no matter who starts it. Some guy jumps you on the playground, lunch break, or some such, and you whack him in the nose so he'll leave you alone, you both go to detention."

"Can't have kids fighting. You and me, we fought too much. Maybe it's not a good thing to learn, all that fighting. We met at a fight, remember?"

"Horse shit," Leonard said, and put the paper down. "Look here, I know a thing about you, and I know how it was for me at school, with integration and all, and I don't think it works like that, and shouldn't. This whole thing about fighting to protect yourself, and getting the same punishment as the one who picks on you, how's that teaching common sense?"

"How's it work, Leonard?"

"Think on it. There's this thing I know about you, let's call it the parable of the stick."

I knew exactly what he was talking about.

I said, "Okay, let's call it that."

"You moved here from a smaller school, and I know you had some problems. We've talked about it. I wasn't there, but I know the drill. Try being black in a formerly all-white school sometime."

"I could try being black," I said, "but I'd still be white."

"You came to school from some little town to Marvel Creek. And there was this bully, a real asshole, bigger than you, and you were small then, right?"

"Not that I'm a behemoth now."

"No, you lack my manly physique, but you've grown into something solid. Then, though, you were a skinny little kid with hay fever and a plan to do something with your life. Which, of course, you failed to do. What were you going to be, by the way?"

"I don't know. A writer I thought."

"Ah, that's right. Hell, I knew that. It's been so long since you mentioned it, I forgot. Yeah, a writer. So you move here, a poor country kid with shabby clothes and his nose in a book, and this guy, this big kid, he picks on you. He does it every day. Calls you book worm or some such, maybe pencil dick. So what do you do? You do the right thing. You go to the principal and tell him the kid's fucking with you, and the principal says, okay, and he pulls the mean kid in and talks to him. So what's the mean little shit do the very next day?"

"Double beats the shit out of me."

"There you have it, but you're not fighting back, right?"

"Oh, I fought back. I just wasn't any good at it then. Probably why I learned martial arts."

"Sure it is. I did the same thing. I wasn't so little and didn't lose too much, but, like I said, I was a black kid in a formerly all-white school, and then there was my extraordinary beauty they were jealous of."

"Don't forget the massive dick."

"Oh yeah, the black anaconda that knows no friends. So this happens a few days in a row, this mean kid ignoring the principal, him not giving a greased dog turd what the principal said. You go home, and your dad, he sees you got a black eye and busted lip, and what does he do?"

"He tells you if he's bigger than me, bring him down to size."

"Right. He says, 'Hap, go out there and get yourself a good stick, 'cause there's plenty of them lying around on the edge of the playground by the woods. You get that big stick, and you lay for him, and when he don't expect it none, you bring that stick down on him so hard it will cause you to come up off the ground. Don't put his eye out with it, and don't hit him in the head, unless you have to, but use that stick with all your force, and if something breaks on him, well, it breaks. You get a licking every day and you don't do something back, taking that licking and being licked is gonna turn into a lifetime business.' He told you that, right?"

"Right."

"And you got you a stick next day at playground break, laid it up by the edge of the concrete wall on one side of the steps that led out of the school, and when the bell rang for the day to end, you got out there as quick as you could, ahead of the mean kid, and you picked up that stick."

"I did at that."

"And waited."

"Like a fucking hawk watching for a rat."

"Down the stairs he came, and you—"

"Swung that stick," I said. "Jesus. To this day I can still hear that fucking stick whistling in the wind, and I can still hear the way it met his leg just above the knee, right as he came down the last step. I remember even better that shit-eating, asshole-sucking grin he had on his face as he came down and saw me, before he realized about the stick. And better than that, I remember the way his face changed when he saw I had that stick. But it was too late for that motherfucker."

"What I'm saying."

"I caught him as he put his weight on his left leg. Smack of that stick on his hide was like a choir of angels had let out with one clean note, and down he went, right on his face."

"And when he started to get up?"

"I brought that stick down on his goddamn back with all I had in the tank, and oh my god, did that feel good. Then I couldn't stop, Leonard. I swear I couldn't."

"Tell it, brother. Tell it like it was. I never get tired of it."

"I started crying and swinging that stick, and I just couldn't fucking stop. Finally a teacher, a coach I think, he came out and got me and pulled me off that bastard, and that bastard was bawling like a baby and screaming, 'Don't hit me no more. Please don't hit me no more.'"

"I actually started to feel bad about it, sorry for him— "

"As you always do," Leonard said.

"—and they carried me to the principal's office, and they brought the asshole in with me, and they put us in chairs beside one another, where we both sat crying, me mostly with happiness, and him because I had just beaten the living hell out of him with a stick and he had a fucking limp. He hurt so bad he could hardly walk."

"What did the principal do?"

"You know what he did."

"Yeah, but now that you're worked up and starting to sweat, let's not spoil it by you not getting it all out, 'cause I can tell right now, for you, the whole thing is as raw as if it happened yesterday."

"It is. The principal said, 'Hap, did you hit him with a stick?' and I say to him, 'Hard as I could.' The principal looks at the mean kid, says, 'And what did you do?' 'I didn't do nothing,' he says. 'No,' the principal said, 'what did you do the day before, and the day before that, and what were you told?' And the kid said, 'I was told to leave Hap alone.'"

"And what did the principal say," Leonard said. "Keep on telling it."

"You're nuts, Leonard. You know what he said."

"Like I said, I never tire of hearing this one."

"He said to the kid, 'But you went back and did it again anyway, didn't you? You went back and did it because you wanted to pick on someone who you thought wouldn't fight back, or couldn't, but today, he was waiting for you. You didn't start it today, but you started it ever other day, and you got just what you deserve, you little bully. You picked on a nice kid that didn't want to fight and really just wanted to get along, and I know for a fact, he asked you to quit, and he came to me, and I came to you, and still you did it. Why?' 'I don't know,' he said. 'There you are,' said the principal, 'the mantra of the ignorant and the doomed.'"

I took a deep breath.

"I remember him saying just that. The ignorant and the doomed. Then the principal said to me, 'Hap. He picks on you again, you have my permission to pick up a stick and just whack the good ole horse hockey out of him. I catch you lying in wait for him again, or doing it because you can, then that's different. That makes you just like him, a low-life bully. He had this one coming, but he's only got it coming now if he starts it. But he picks on you, you give it to him back, and I won't do a thing. I won't say a word.'"

"There you have it," Leonard said. "That's the way we should have kept it. Self-defense is permissible."

"A stick was a little much," I said.

"Yeah, but these kids in school now, they're being taught to accept being victims. Why there's so many goddamn whiners, I think."

"That right?"

"You don't learn justice by taking it like the French. That's not how it works. Someone doesn't give you justice, you got to get your own."

"Or get out of the way of the problem."

"Alright, there's that. But then the motherfucker just moves down the road a little, and picks a new victim."

"I think you're trying to justify what we do sometimes."

"I don't need to justify it. Here's the thing, you get more shit from the meanies because the good folks don't stand up, don't know how, and don't learn how. And they're taught to just take it these days, and do it with a smile. Principal then, he knew what was up. You have any more trouble from the bully after that?"

"Not an inch worth," I said. "We became friends later, well, friendly enough. I think in his case it cured him across the board."

"So he didn't pick someone else to whip on?"

"No, but that doesn't mean it doesn't happen that way. I think he wasn't really a bad guy, just needed some adjustment, and I gave it to him. I think he had problems at home."

"Fuck him and his home," Leonard said. "Everyone now, they don't have an idea what's just, what's right, because they punish everyone the same. Ones that did it, and ones that didn't. I can see that if no one knows what went down, but now, even when they know who the culprit is, one who started it, it comes out the same for both. The good and the bad."

“Could have gone really bad. I could have killed that kid with that stick.”

“That would have been too much, I guess,” Leonard said.

“You guess?”

“Alright, maybe too much, but there’s still something to learn there, still something your dad taught you that matters and has guided you ever since. Don’t treat the just and righteous the same as the bad and the willfully evil, or you breed a tribe of victims and a tribe of evil bastards. Learning to be a coward is the same as learning to be brave. It takes practice. And that, my good brother, is the parable of the stick.”

2.
Tire Fire

We went to the dojo where we trained and had a session in self-defense with the Shen Chuan instructor, and when that was over we had some free mat time. We sparred and did ground work and practiced throws until we were exhausted. We sat down on the mat with our backs against the wall, sweating and breathing hard. Everyone else had gone home, and since we had keys, we just sat there with the lights out and talked.

"Neither of us ever cross the line," Leonard said.

"I beg your pardon?" I said. "I think we have crossed a few lines."

"I mean in here, anywhere we train. We spar, and we go at it pretty hard, but we always hold back."

"We should. Someone might lose an eye."

"I mean we don't quite take the big step."

"That's because I don't hate you, Leonard. And, of course, I wouldn't want to embarrass you."

"It's like that, is it?"

"Pretty much . . . No, it's exactly like that."

"We could find out whose best, you know," Leonard said.

"There was that one time," I said.

"That was almost the real thing. I mean it hurt, and we came close to some damage, but we stalled most of it."

"I don't remember that much stalling," I said. "I thought you might be trying to prove something to yourself."

"Haven't you wondered which of us is the best?"

"Nope."

"Liar."

"I'll be honest," I said. "I don't want to find out."

"You got a point there," Leonard said.

"We might not like how we feel about one another afterwards."

"And your point sharpens."

"And, again, I wouldn't want to embarrass you."

"Oh, you are an asshole," Leonard said.

"You know, I will say this, first time I saw you, at that tire fire fight, I thought you were better than me then."

"Then and now," Leonard said.

"You're not going to give that up, are you? I've gotten a lot better."

"Yeah, but you're lazy. I train harder."

"Probably," I said. "That night, I think you might could have whipped anyone in the world, and I include one of my heroes, Muhammad Ali."

"Greatest fucking boxer that ever lived."

"But he was a boxer. We cheat a lot more. Boxing, maybe he does get you, but the whole enchilada, not so much."

"Kick, bite, head-butt, lock, throw, do ground work, and pick up a stick if it's available," Leonard said.

"What I'm saying."

"It was a hell of a night."

"You know that's right."

It was a night hunt, and I was sick of the whole thing already. I didn't want to shoot any coons or possums, or much of anything. I was ready to get home and shower and pick the ticks off my balls. Sure, coon can be eaten, and I knew families who did, mostly black families, but I didn't want none of it, and unlike my uncle, I didn't sell the skins.

A lot of people ate possum, our family included, if there was nothing else. To me it tasted like greasy pork, and the best way to eat possum was catch it and put it up and feed it some corn for a week or two, and then kill and eat it. But I didn't like to do that anymore, on account of I got attached to the damn things. I was still sick over the hogs we had butchered. I had got to know them. There was a thing Winston Churchill said in a book I read, about how dogs looked up to you, cats down on you, but hogs treated you as equals. This was true, and on that account I was through butchering hogs myself, and from then on my parents, to placate me, bought our pork chops and bacon wrapped in cellophane and found in the freezer section at the store. I preferred being a hypocrite, eating meat someone else killed.

It was finding an animal in a trap that was still alive, seeing my uncle dispatch it with a shotgun butt, that had put me off the idea of trapping and hunting, that and me shooting a bird for no good reason other than to see it fall, and finding it lying on the ground, its beak open, trying desperately to draw in air, its eyes glazing over like a sugar donut. It got to me. One dead bird and thousands of bird songs unsung for no goddamn good reason other than I wanted to see a bird fall.

So there we were out in the woods at night, and I was thinking this was my last hunt, though it wouldn't be, but it would be for a long while. There was a can of Wolf Brand Chili at home, and that was good enough for me. Me and Roger had been hunting and fishing together for years, and on this night we had gone into the woods to spotlight critters, shoot them out of trees, bag them and take them home to be dressed and cooked, but as I said, I knew that night I had completely lost my interest in hunting unless I was actually hungry. Girls were far more interesting. Some of the boys called chasing girls hunting squirrel, which came from the idea that their pubic hair was a pelt. It wasn't exactly forward thinking, but there you have it. Everything in East Texas was compared to hunting.

Our trek had brought us down by the riverside, using our head band lights to travel by. Down close to the river I could smell fish, and then a smell that took me a moment to figure out. It was burning rubber.

We could see the fire after a moment, and it was pretty big. There was an old abandoned, tumbling-down sawmill on the other side of the river where the fire was, and there was a clearing in front of the mill, and it wasn't unusual for kids to drive down there to smoke dope, drink and screw, throw rocks in the water and fire off guns.

The fire was really big, and we could see the silhouettes of people cast off by the firelight. Two of the shadows were moving quickly, and the rest were still, forming what looked like a dark tree line, or the craggy shapes of a mountain. We could hear voices too, some of them yelling. As we neared, moving along the tree line on our side, the voices rose up and rolled over the river like a tide, and came to us in excited cries and yells. There was the sound of grunting, and a slapping sound, as if someone were beating a car seat from time to time with a belt.

Finally we could see the people making the shadows, but we couldn't figure out who was who or what was what. We turned off our headlamps and took them off our heads, and from what I could tell it didn't matter. No one had noticed us when our lights were on.

Roger said, "You want to go see what's happening?"

I didn't, but I was seventeen and didn't want Roger to think my balls hadn't dropped, so I said, "Yeah, let's go see."

We had to go down a pretty good distance before we came to the Swinging Bridge. It was a bridge that had been put across the river by some oil company so they could get down there and drill for oil. It had been built back in the thirties during the oil boom that had engulfed that region. Whole towns had been created by the oil boom overnight. The oil was pulled up and out, and then it was gone, and so was the bulk of the towns. Some survived, like Marvel Creek, made up of a handful of folks rich from the oil boom, and about three or four thousand others, oil field trash, whores, white trash, and poor blacks, a few you might call middle class.

Roger and I went over the bridge, but when we were about halfway over, Roger caught my arm, said, “I changed my mind. I don’t want to see what’s over there. I can see enough already. Lots of white boys down there, and in case you haven’t noticed, I’m black.”

“Hard to miss that,” I said.

Where we were on the bridge it was dark, and there were trees that ran alongside the river, and where there was a gap in them. Through the gap we could see a heap of tires stacked on top of one another, all of them set ablaze, most likely by a nice coating of gasoline and a tossed match. In the light of the fire two young men were fighting. There were two other men lying on the ground. The others were standing or sitting on a rise above them, watching. There was no one along the river’s edge, and the firelight licked out and sent burnt orange light against the shoreline and fell into the water and wavered with its movement. The fighters’ shadows hopped about.

“It’s a money fight,” Roger said.

I knew about them. I had been told I ought to fight in them myself, as I was good with my hands and feet and the money was alright. You could also get bad hurt. Some of the folks involved were school kids, but the fighters came from all around, and could range from eighteen to thirty. It was said a young man from over Mineola had been killed somewhere out here, and that his body had been dumped in the river.

I don’t know if it was true or not, probably not, but it was a story that went around like the flu. I knew a lot of the kids in the group, and I knew one of the fighters, the white guy, Charlie. He was an asshole and a bully at school. We had words now and again, but hadn’t exchanged blows; it was close a few times. I knew I was tough, but he scared me a little. He carried a knife and had pulled it at school a couple times.

The young man he was fighting was black. Firelight flickered over his skin like a fevered tongue licking chocolate. He moved smooth and quick, up on his toes, his right side forward, his right hand flicking out and jabbing Charlie as fast as a hungry chicken pecking corn.

Roger said, “I ain’t going down there after all. There’s enough white boys down there to make a surfing movie, and them white girls being there too, they’re bound to show out, and they might show out on me. I can’t believe that nigger is down there. What the fuck?”

“He’s got balls, alright,” I said.

“What he ain’t got is brains,” Roger said. “I do. I don’t want to go down there.”

“I’m going over,” I said. “You got to go on, go. I won’t hold it against you.”

“Hap, them other boys, they don’t see things like you. They haven’t been listening to Dr. King on the TV. They ain’t never read *Uncle*

Tom's Cabin."

"That book's a slow go, by the way," I said. "But you know what, Roger?"

"What?'

"You got a rifle and I got a shotgun."

"Nothing says they ain't got cannons of their own."

"I hear you," I said. "Go on back you want. Wait for me up by the truck."

"It'll take me two hours or so to get back, and then I got to wait on you?"

"Then wait on the bridge for me."

"Damn, Hap. I can't let you go down there by yourself."

"Yeah you can."

"Shit, but I ain't. Goddamn me."

We crossed the bridge and went walking along the riverbank, toward the fighters, past where all their cars were parked. We came first to the two white guys, shirtless, laying out on the ground near the river unconscious. When the fire flicked just right I could see how badly their faces were bruised and cut up. The black fighter was still moving catlike, and Charlie was taking his beating like he was tied to a post. When Charlie moved at all, he dragged one leg behind him as if it was in a bucket full of concrete. If he'd ever had any spring in his step it was well sprung.

The black fighter was smiling, and I thought I could hear him laughing, a kind of deep gurgle that came up from his chest. When we got closer I saw that Charlie's face looked as if someone had been to work on it with a razor. It was cut and bleeding all over.

"Call me a nigger again, you shit-cracker. Go on, call me one."

Charlie wasn't saying anything, and in fact, he seemed to have trouble breathing. But I had a good idea that the word "nigger" had left his mouth earlier during the fight. It had come out of Roger's mouth too, but that was different. Roger owned it, but people like Charlie used it like a knife. It was like poor folks calling themselves white trash. It was alright for them to say it, but unless you wanted to wake up in a ditch with a fence post up your ass, might be best you didn't call them that unless you were meaner or had a bigger gun.

Finally Charlie went down on one knee and held out a hand, palm forward.

The black fighter quit dancing, smiled with blood-coated teeth.

"Get up, peckerwood. I'm not through with you. Get up and let me knock some of those teeth down your throat. Come on, man. Call me nigger again."

I saw then that Charlie's buddy Kilgore, another of my least favorite people, was coming down the slight rise toward them, carrying an axe handle in his hand. Three other big boys came down from the crowd then, and a kind of cheer went up from the folks gathered there, as if lions had just been released into the arena. I heard Kilgore say, “I’m gonna sort you out, nigger.”

“Bring it,” said the black fighter. “And I hope you brought a sack lunch, motherfucker, ’cause you’re gonna be here all night.”

I checked the two guys knocked out and on the ground, to see how things with them were. Same as before. I hadn’t seen either of them move a muscle since I came up. For all I knew they were dead.

I walked over then, and the black fighter wheeled toward me, saw that I had a shotgun. There was only a moment of hesitation, and then he gave me a look like: Go on and shoot me, and watch the goddamn buckshot bounce off.

I yelled out to the boys coming down the hill.

“This looked to be a fair fight to me. You fuckers ought to go on back up the hill and put your hands back up the dresses of the whores you came with.”

“Hey,” I heard one of the girls say.

I saw it was a girl I knew. I said, “Sorry. Juliet. I’m assuming you’re an independent.”

Kilgore said, “Hap Collins, you cocksucker. You taking up for a nigger?”

I said to the fighter, “You a nigger?”

“In some circles,” he said. “But I like to think of myself as well-tanned.”

“In the circles that count,” I said loud enough the crowd of about twenty could hear me, “this fellow thinks of himself as well-tanned.”

“Oh fuck you,” Kilgore said.

“Nigger lover,” someone in the group yelled down.

“Told you,” Roger said.

I walked around on the other side of the black fighter and looked up the rise at Kilgore, the crowd behind him, the old, tumbling-down saw mill behind all of them.

I said, “Why don’t you come down and see if you can spread my legs for that fucking.”

Kilgore didn’t move, and the others with him had sort of drifted off to the sides, like maybe they just realized they had left something in their cars that they badly needed.

“You’re a big man with a fucking shotgun,” Kilgore said.

“Yeah,” I said. “What if I let Roger here hold it, and then you and me step up to the plate and see who’s the best batter?”

“Nothing would please me more. I’d take great pleasure in that, Collins.”

“He’s pretty big,” the black fighter said, and grinned at me. I could see me and him were about the same age.

"He is, isn't he?" I said.

"Yeah, he is," Roger said.

"If I lose, Roger, you can shoot him with your rifle."

"Oh, nice," Roger said. "Be a nigger lynching come morning. If it takes that long."

"Give me your shotgun," said the black fighter. "I'll hold it for you."

I gave it to him without hesitation and he held it cradled in his arms. He was comfortable with it. I had an idea he knew how to use it quite well.

I took off my shirt and threw it on the ground and stepped up where the two had been fighting. Charlie had half crawled, half stumbled off, and fell down not too far from the tire fire, near the other two. The black fighter was starting a collection.

Kilgore tossed the axe handle aside, and started pulling his tee-shirt over his head. He came down and stood across from me and smiled. He figured it was going to be easy. I figured he might be right. I have been known to shoot off my mouth and regret it later.

"I know you're gonna take him, white boy," the black fighter said. "I know you will."

I didn't say it aloud, but I thought: That makes one of us.

Roger gave me a bit of advice. "Keep your left up, Hap."

"Thanks," I said. But like the black fighter, I fought power side out. I had learned that from my dad who not only taught me boxing and wrestling fundamentals, but had taught me some self-defense. The rest of what I had learned so far came from the Judo and Hapkido I had learned at the Tyler, Texas YMCA.

"You ain't got to fight him for me," the black fighter said. "I just wanted to see you'd do it or not. I can whip him same as the others."

"You've fought three," I said, "I think it's only fair you have a little break between."

"That's awfully white of you . . . What is it? Happy?"

"Hap," I said. "Hap Collins. My friends just call me He Who Has A Massive Dick."

He laughed a little, then said, "I'm Leonard. Leonard Pine."

"Shut up, you fuckers" said Kilgore. "Let's get on with it."

"He's crowing for you to give him his ass beating," Leonard said.

I was glad Leonard was confident.

Leonard moved back and Kilgore moved down, and the crowd above eased down closer, and I saw that one of the boys who had walked away earlier was walking back with a revolver. Leonard yelled up at him, "Put that on the ground right now, or I shoot your kneecap off and piss down your throat. I mean it, motherfucker."

Leonard lifted the shotgun. I feared he might mean it.

The fellow bent over and gently laid the gun down.

Leonard said, “Now walk away, chief.”

Chief walked away. He joined the others and sat at the top of the rise and looked embarrassed.

Me and Kilgore started to move then. And there was something I couldn’t explain. Something in me that was always there, a kind of fire, a burning anger, the source of which I had no idea. It was always there in the background, and though I didn’t hunt because I didn’t want to kill, the primal urge was there, but it had shifted from animals to bullies and assholes and no goods. I could feel that anger warming my muscles.

Kilgore said, “I’m going to kick your ass, and then you, nigger, you’re next. I’m gonna knock the black off of you.”

Leonard pointed at himself. “Okay, which nigger? Me or the other one?”

“I put Collins down, then it’s you two darkies. One at a time, or both together. Count on it.”

Leonard laughed. “Shit, you couldn’t roll me over if I was dead, let alone whip my ass.”

Roger didn’t say anything. He just held tight to his rifle.

Me and Kilgore moved in a circle, and then we moved together, and then Kilgore threw a haymaker from the pits of hell. It brought with it fire and brimstone and lots of power, but it was slow. It was like watching a big truck with no gas being pushed up hill by weak men with hernias.

I leaned back. The punch passed. I stepped in and made a short, front right-handed hook to the side of his jaw. I heard a terrible sound that made me wince. I knew it was bone cracking. Kilgore went down in the dirt and the dirt flew up and made a little cloud that drifted quickly back to earth.

Kilgore didn’t get up.

“Son-of-a-bitch,” Leonard said. “You are the man, goddamnit.”

“Took me a little longer than I anticipated,” I said. “But I been sick.”

Leonard laughed out loud. “You are something, white boy, something.”

“I know,” I said, trying not to show how surprised I was that I had been so successful so quickly. My hand hurt though.

“Anyone else want some of my boy here?” Leonard yelled up. “Anyone. I got money. I’ll lay that money out right now.”

No one wanted any of his boy.

Leonard said, “Alright then. I’m gonna expect all the debts to be paid up. I put down three of your fuckers, and you put down none of me.”

“I forgot to bet on myself,” I said.

"You did," Roger said. "You just hurt your knuckles for nothing."

I sucked on the blood across my knuckles.

"Shit, it was worth it," I said.

Leonard had gone up the hill with my shotgun to collect the bets. He stopped and picked up the revolver that had been dropped and brought it back with him and tossed it in the Sabine.

"Shit, man," said the boy who had dropped it. "That's my old man's."

"He's gets it back," Leonard said, "he's gonna have to be Aquaman."

"Now everybody go home," I said. "Oh, and come down here and get your guys, or we'll dump them in the river."

A few of the guys came down and picked up the two Leonard had knocked out, and one guy helped Charlie stagger up the hill. I looked over at Kilgore. Leonard was standing over him pissing in his face.

"The white don't wash off," Leonard said.

"You know it don't," I heard Roger say.

"That's a surprise to me," Leonard said. "I always thought it was paint."

In a few minutes the fighters were loaded up, including piss-face Kilgore, and at the top of the hill, the guy whose gun Leonard had thrown in the water, said, "I'll get you at school, Collins."

"Sure. Meet you on the playground."

He went over to his car and got inside with a girl, drove away, following a procession of cars, on up and out of the bottoms.

Leonard came over and stuck out his hand. I shook it.

"That was some punch," he said. "Took me longer with these guys."

"I watched you move," I said. "You did alright. Hell, you put down three."

"I did, didn't I?"

"I held my rifle and looked confident," Roger said.

"You did indeed." I said.

"That white boy threatened you," Roger said. "That's Robbie Wayne. He's supposed to be bad."

"He didn't offer to fight," I said. "He's not so bad. He could have had his moment now, but he decided to save it for later. He's a blow hard. He won't bother me."

"I wasn't worried about you," Roger said. "I was thinking about me."

"Shit. Call on Hap here, he'll hit so hard he won't wake up until next July. You know you broke that boy's jaw, don't you?"

"I hope so," I said.

"Man," Leonard said. "You're alright."

"Thanks," I said, buttoning up my shirt.

Leonard gave me my shotgun. He said, "Hey, take some of this money I won. You ought to."

"I don't want it," I said. "You keep it."

"They have fights here regularly," Leonard said. "I had a bunch of black guys coming, but they all faded out at the last minute. I should have gone home, I guess. But I sure wanted to hit somebody. You know the Klan used to whip blacks out here in front of the saw mill? I heard they hung one or two out here by the river. Guy named Mose for one, but there might have been others."

"I've heard that," I said.

"I got my car hid back a piece, off a little road," Leonard said. "I was afraid what they might do to it after I knocked them around."

"Confident, aren't you?" Roger said.

"Hell, yeah," Leonard said. "So long you two. And a special so long to you Hap Collins. I hope we cross paths again."

"It could happen," I said.

Leonard started up and over the rise. He didn't show any sign of exhaustion. Way he moved you would have thought he'd just gotten out of bed after a long night's good rest.

"He was a cat, wasn't he?" Roger said.

"I'll say," I said.

"You two seem a lot alike."

"I know," I said. "I knew that right off."

I looked to see where Leonard was going. He walked along the edge of the saw mill and melted into the woods.

3.
Not Our Kind

We got up and turned on the lights and sparred a little more, but we were pretty worn by then, so we didn't last long.

"Want to get an ice cream cone," I said. "We could go through the drive through at Dairy Queen."

"You and the goddamn ice cream," Leonard said. "You could drop a few pounds, you know?"

"I could also enjoy a very nice chocolate cone, and you, a vanilla."

"Damn," Leonard said. "Vanilla is my kryptonite. They made vanilla pussy I could quit being queer."

"No you couldn't."

We locked up and I drove us to Dairy Queen. It was full dark now and there were quite a few cars on the LaBorde streets. More than usual, I thought, but the ebb and flow of traffic in a small city, or a big town, is sometimes hard to figure. I was beginning to think it was getting too big for me. Everywhere you looked there were people. Our house was on a nice lot, but there were still close neighbors and the traffic on our division street had increased of late. Brett and I had talked about it, but the house we had now we had almost paid off and the idea of moving was a chore.

Leonard said, "I remember when us just being together, a black guy and white guy in East Texas, was a big deal."

"Yeah, everyone would do a double take."

"I used to see black and white couples together, I'd do a double take," Leonard said. "It was so unusual then."

"Especially if there appeared to be anything romantic about it."

"Yeah, interracial couples didn't show up in public much," Leonard said. "Mostly because they didn't want to get their asses beat, or maybe even killed."

"Sometimes I think things are bad, and then I realize how much progress has been made."

"Not enough."

"Nope," I said. "Not enough."

"I'll say this for you, Hap. You hung with me back then, and me being queer didn't help either."

"Gay, Leonard. Gay. That's the term. You see, queer is for the homophobes."

"Gay, queer, bent, what have you," he said. "Besides, we people, as some refer to us, often use the word too. We've claimed it. Can I say nigger?"

"I hate you," I said.

Leonard snickered.

"We are going to need to have you go see someone about how to talk in the modern world," I said.

"Too much bullshit as it is," Leonard said.

"Can't fault that sentiment."

As we pulled up to the drive-through, Leonard said, "Hey, let's go inside. I'd like a burger before that cone."

"Talk about me," I said.

"Yeah, but I'm not fat."

We parked at the Dairy Queen, went inside. We ordered and went to the back and sat at a booth. It was an oddly empty place considering all the traffic, just me and Leonard and the staff.

"You know," I said. "One time I was sitting in the back of another Dairy Queen, one in Marvel Creek, and some fellows came to talk to me about you, and they didn't have anything nice to say about you."

"Few do . . . Oh, wait. That was around the time you and me had our first showdown with someone. Together, I mean."

"That would be it."

When I got out of school that day, I drove over to the Dairy Queen to get a hamburger before I had to go to work at the aluminum chair plant. I had a work permit, so I got off early, and I usually grabbed a burger, and then I drove out to the plant and worked until midnight. A lot of us from high school worked there, making fifty-six dollars and fourteen cents a week, which wasn't even good for 1968.

I was sitting at the back of the Dairy Queen, eating quickly, and was about halfway through the burger when four boys from school came in. I knew one of them pretty well, and the others a little. We all knew each other's names, anyway. I can't say any of them were friends of mine. We ran in different circles.

They saw me and came over. Two of them sat down in my booth, across from me, and the other two sat out to the side at a table and leaned on their elbows and looked at me. I didn't like their attitude.

"What's going on?" I said.

"You're seeing it," the one I knew best said. His name was David. Last time I saw him was at the Swinging Bridge, and there had been a fight there for money. My new friend Leonard was there. He won the fight. It was a friend of David's he fought, and he beat the guy's ass like a tambourine and made some money.

Actually, that fight, lit by a huge tire fire, was the first time I met Leonard, and we hit it off, and we saw each other again in Marvel Creek, running into one another accidentally at first, and then finally on purpose. He lived over in LaBorde with his uncle, but they came to the general store in Marvel Creek to shop, which I didn't understand. Everyone in Marvel Creek goes to the larger city of LaBorde to shop, but his uncle had a store in Marvel Creek he liked, place where he had been buying shoes for a long time. He liked it, Leonard said, because the owner never told him to come around back, even before laws were passed that said he didn't have to.

David said, "We were talking about you the other day."

"Were you?" I said.

"Yeah. Some. We been seeing you around with that nigger."

"Leonard?"

"One name is as good as another for a nigger. 'Boy' will work. We'll call him 'Boy.'"

"I won't. And if I was you, I wouldn't call him that. You might find yourself turned inside out and made into a change purse."

"You think he's tough, don't you?"

"Don't you? You seen him whip some ass at the Swinging Bridge, same as me."

"We seen you whip some too," another of the boys said, "but that don't scare us none, about you or the nigger."

The big guy's real name was Colbert, but everyone called him Dinosaur on account of he was big and not that smart. He was a football player and he thought he was as cool as an igloo. He was said to be the toughest guy in school. That might have been true. He hadn't been at the bridge that night. I didn't know if he'd seen me and Leonard together or not, but he was riled about it, thanks to David.

I didn't like where this was going. I kept eating, but I didn't taste the rest of the burger.

"Way we see it," David said, and bobbed his head a little so as to indicate the others, "you aren't doing yourself any good."

"Oh, how's that?"

"Ought not have to spell it out for you, Hap. Hell, you know. Hanging with a nigger."

"You mean Leonard."

"Yeah. Okay. Leonard the nigger."

I nodded. I didn't realize until that moment that I really liked Leonard, and these guys I had known all my life, if only a little, I didn't care for that much at all.

"Word's getting around you're a nigger-lover," Dinosaur said.

"Is it?"

"Yeah. You don't want that," David said.

"I don't?"

"Are you trying to be a smartass?" Dinosaur said.

"I don't think so," I said. I put one foot out of the booth so I could move if I had to, could get a position to fight or run.

"There's talk, and it could reflect on you," David said.

"In what way?"

"You think girls want to date a nigger-lover? And way we hear it, this guy's queer as a three-dollar bill, and proud of it. A nigger queer, come on, man. You got to be kidding me."

"But he has such a nice personality," I said.

"You aren't going to listen, are you?" David said. "Girls don't want to date no nigger-lover."

"You said that."

"Because it's true."

"So, you have come here to spare me being viewed in a bad way, and to make sure I don't lose my pussy quota? That's what's up?"

"You're making light of something you shouldn't," David said. "We got a way of doing things, and you know it."

"We got to keep it protected," Dinosaur said.

"We?" I said.

"White people," David said. "Now that niggers can vote and eat with us, they think they can act like us."

I nodded, glanced at the two that hadn't spoken. "You guys, you thinking the same?"

They all nodded.

"Civil rights may change how the Yankees live," David said, "but it won't change us."

"That's why I don't like you guys."

This landed on their heads like a rock.

"You don't have to like us, but we can't have one of our own hanging about with niggers. He's not our kind. He's not one of us."

"You know, it's really been nice, but I have to go to work now, so I'll see you."

I got up and eased past Dinosaur, keeping an eye on him, but trying to look like I wasn't concerned.

They all stood up. I was about halfway to the door when they came up behind me. David grabbed at my arm. I popped it free.

"You better take in what we're saying," David said.

"I could throw you through that window glass right now," Dinosaur said.

"You might need yourself a nap and a sack lunch before you're able to throw me through that glass, or anywhere else for that matter," I said.

I was bluffing. I was a badass, and I knew it. But four guys, badass or not, are four guys. And one of them was a fucking freak of nature. I was reminded of how freakish he was with him standing almost as close to me as a coat of paint. He was looking down at me with a head like a bowling ball, shoulders wide enough to set a refrigerator on one side, a stove on the other.

About that time, the manager, Bob came out from behind the counter. An older guy, red-haired, slightly gone to fat, not as big as Dinosaur, but I'd seen him throw out a couple of oil workers once for throwing ketchup-soaked fries against the Dairy Queen glass to see who could make theirs stick and not slide off. They didn't get very far in that game.

What I remember best was one of those guys, after Bob had tossed them out like they were dirty laundry, pulled a knife and held it on Bob when he came outside to make sure they were leaving.

Bob laughed, said to that guy, "Should have brought yourself a peppermint stick, you oil field trash. They're a hell of a lot easier to eat."

This with the tip of the knife pressed to his stomach. The guy with the knife and his buddy believed Bob. Believed him sincerely. They were out of there so fast they practically left a vapor trail. It seemed they were standing there outside the Dairy Queen one moment, and the next their car's taillights were shining red in the distant night.

Bob said to David and the others, "Alright, boys. Take it outside."

I thought, shit. Outside isn't going to be all that better for me.

We all started outside. Even Dinosaur didn't want a piece of Bob.

As we were going, Bob put his hand on my shoulder. "You stay with me."

The others turned and looked at Bob. "Unless I've developed a stutter, you know what I said."

They hesitated about as long as it takes to blink, and went out.

Bob waited until they were outside and looking through the glass. He made a shooing movement with his hand, and they went away. After a moment I saw their car drive by the window and on out to the highway.

"They'll be watching for you, son."

"I know."

"Hanging with niggers is frowned on. I got some nigger friends, but you got to know how to keep them at a distance. I go fishing with a couple of them, but I don't have them around at my house, sitting in my chairs and eating at my table."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll remember that."

"Still, no cause to pick on someone. You or the nigger. They don't get to choose to be niggers. And you can get along with most anyone, and learn from most anyone, even a nigger. I learned how to catch catfish good from one."

Well, Bob was better than the other four.

I bought a bag of chips and a Coca-Cola on ice to go, went out to my car, and drove to work. I was about halfway to the aluminum chair plant when Dinosaur, driving a Ford Mustang, pulled up behind me. The other three guys were in the car with him. They followed me to work. I parked close to the door and got out with my chips and Coca-Cola. I slurped at the Coca-Cola through a straw as I walked. I was saving the chips for dinner break. It was a light dinner, but I'd been trying to drop a few pounds. I was always prone to picking up weight, and I had to watch it.

I turned at the door into the plant and looked at them.

Dinosaur shot me the finger.

I shot him the finger back.

We had really showed each other. Funny how that can make people so mad. It's their finger in the air, and that's it. It has about as much actual effect as a leaf falling from a cherry tree in Japan.

They drove way, screeching tires as they left, and I went to work.

Next few days in school I'd see them in the hall, and I never once avoided them or tried to get out of the way. They were not always together, though sometimes they were, and Dinosaur bumped me a couple of times as he went by. I kept my cool. Once David said to me as he passed, "We'll get you, nigger-lover."

This went on for a while, and now and then they'd follow me to work, but they never did anything. I had a ball bat in my car, and they knew that, because I let them see it by holding it up once while driving, knowing they could see it from their Mustang, as they were so close on my ass. What I feared is they'd hold up a gun or guns in response, but that didn't happen. Everyone wasn't shooting everybody back then.

This went on through the semester, and then the spring came, and one day I went downtown to buy some blue jeans and a union shirt. The old white union shirts had become popular. Everyone was dying them, or tie-dying them, and I guess I didn't want to be left out. What we had there in Marvel Creek was a kind of general store named Jack Woolens, and that's where I went to buy the shirt, couple pairs of jeans, and maybe what we called desert boots, which were tan, low-cut, comfortable shoes. I thought I had enough to afford it all. I was thinking on that, figuring I could skip one pair of pants if I had to, and I'd have enough for sure that way to get the shirt, shoes, and one pair of Lee Riders.

My hair had grown longer, and I had to comb it behind my ears at school and push it up off my forehead into a pompadour so I didn't get sent home. A bunch of us were wearing our hair longer, and there was even talk of a sit-in to protest how we were hassled by the principal, but I was the only one that showed up for the event. I ended up wandering around in the hall for a few minutes and went back to the lunchroom and had some Jell-O before going to math class. I had it washed and combed out this day, and it was bouncing loosely as I walked. I thought I was as cool as a razor edge in winter time.

I parked my junker and was walking along the sidewalk, almost to Jack Woolens. I could see the wooden barrels setting out front—one had walking canes in it and brooms, the other had axe and hoe handles.

As I came along the sidewalk, I saw Leonard coming toward me. He saw me and smiled. We hadn't seen each other in a while, but when I saw him I knew I had missed him. He was like a stray dog that wandered in and out of my life, and I felt like when we were together that something missing was fulfilled. It was an odd combo, him being a homo and me being straight, him being black and me being white, and him being more redneck than I was. He didn't like my long hair and had told me, and I didn't like that he thought we needed a conservative president. He was a stray dog I liked, and I decided right then and there I wanted to keep him, even if he might bite. He probably thought I was the stray dog. I doubt he worried about my bite, however. He came down the sidewalk with one hand in his pants pocket, the other swinging by his side.

That's when David and Dinosaur, and the other two thugs, got out of the Mustang parked across the street, having spotted me and caught me without my ball bat. They came across the street, almost skipping.

They got to me before Leonard.

They came up on the curb and managed their way around me in a half circle. The door to Jack Woolens was at my back. It was open. It was a cool day and air-conditioning wasn't as common then, so it was left that way to let in the breeze as well as too many flies.

"Gotcha now," David said.

"Gotcha what?" Leonard said, as he came up the sidewalk, both hands swinging by his sides now.

"You're the other one we want to see," said Dinosaur. "You and the girl, here."

"Wow," I said. "That bites. You see, Leonard, they're calling me a girl because my hair is long."

"It is too long," Leonard said.

"They are really pushing the wit, calling me a girl, noticing I have long hair. These guys, they ought to be on Johnny Carson."

"Fuck you," Dinosaur said.

"You're looking for us, well, you done found us," Leonard said.

"That's right," I said. "You have."

"We don't like what we see," David said.

"That's because you are a blind motherfucker and don't know a couple pretty fellas when you see them," Leonard said. "I could be on a fucking magazine, I'm so pretty. Shit. You could hang my goddamn dick in the museum of fucking modern art. Damn, Big Pile, you know you want to kiss my black ass, right where the tunnel goes down into the sweet dark depths."

"You gag me," David said.

"Fuck you," Dinosaur said.

"The big man is consistent with those two words," I said.

I didn't know what it was about Leonard, but he brought out the double smartass in me. I figured if I was going to die, I might as well go out with a few good remarks. And with Leonard there, well, I felt I had a chance. That we had a chance.

Leonard looked at me. "Yeah. He repeats himself because it's wishful thinking that slips out. Some of that Freudian stuff. Big white boy wants a piece of my fine, shiny, black ass I tell you, but his little ole dick dropped down there would be like tossing a noodle into a volcano."

"Now I'm starting to get gagged," I said.

"Ah, you'll get over it, Hap," Leonard said.

David said to Leonard, "You're a goddamn dicksucking nigger and he's a nigger-lover."

"Nah," Leonard said. "I mean, yeah. I'm a dicksucker, but me and Hap, we ain't fucking, just hanging. Oh, I should also add, I don't like being called a nigger, you cracker motherfucker."

"You got some sand," David said.

"I'm a whole goddamn beach," Leonard said.

"What we're thinking," David said, "is we're going to knock you two around until your shit mixes, until you get it through your head how things are supposed to be."

"That a fact?" I said.

"Oh yeah," Dinosaur said, "we're gonna do that."

Leonard grinned, said, "I guess you boys ought to get started. It's already midday."

"But the sun stays up for quite a while," I said.

"Yeah, there's that," Leonard said. "We got plenty of time to whip their asses."

"Smartass nigger," David said, and glanced at Dinosaur, who moved forward.

That's when an older black man stepped out of Jack Woolens and reached in one of the barrels and pulled out an axe handle.

"I hear you peckerwoods calling my nephew a nigger?" the man said.

David bowed up a little. "We ain't got a thing against hitting an old nigger, or a lady nigger, or kicking around a dead nigger, which is what you're gonna be, you ancient watermelon fart."

That's when the old man swung the axe handle and clipped David across the jaw and made him stagger. I almost felt sorry for David. Even more so when the handle whistled again and caught him behind the neck and laid him out flat on his face on the cement.

The other three thugs froze, then seemed to come unstuck and started toward the three of us. Me and Leonard took fighting stances. That's when Jack Woolens came out behind us, a slightly paunchy old man with thinning dark hair.

"Stop it, goddamn it," Jack said.

They stopped, but when Dinosaur saw who it was, he said, "You old Jew bastard."

"Old Jew bastard fought Nazis, so he isn't afraid of your kind. You aren't a pimple on a Nazi's ass, but you're made of the same kind of pus."

This stopped them. I don't know why, but they hesitated.

The old Jew bastard pulled an axe handle from the barrel and stepped up beside the black man. "Way I see it," he said, "is we have axe handles, and for now, you have teeth. You see it that way, Chester?"

Chester said, "Yeah. They got some teeth right now."

Dinosaur looked a little nervous. "We ain't even eighteen, and that nigger hit David with an axe handle."

"Hard as he could," Leonard said.

"That's against the law," Dinosaur said. "We're underage. Minors."

"Sometimes, you have extenuating circumstances," Jack Woolens said. "I once strangled a Nazi when I was in the OSS. Look it up, you never heard of it. It wasn't a social group. I strangled him and went back to the farmhouse where I was hiding in Austria, and slept tight. I knocked me off a piece the next day. Young German girl who thought I was German. I can speak it. I had the chance, I'd have strangled another fucking Nazi."

"No shit?" Chester said. "You speak German?"

It was like they forgot the thugs were there.

"Yeah, I was born in Germany."

"No shit?"

"Yeah. I did get a little scratch when I was strangling that Nazi by the way. I don't want to sound like I come out clean. That would be lying."

Jack Woolens put the axe handle back in the barrel, and showed Chester a cut across his elbow by nodding at it. It was a long white line.

"Knife," Jack said. "I had to wear a bandage for a few days."

"That ain't shit," Chester said. "Cracker tried to castrate me once. I got a scar on my thigh I can show you makes that look like hen scratch. I had twenty-five stitches and had to stand when I fucked for a while and reach under and hold my balls up so it didn't slap my stitches. Want to see?"

"You win," Jack said. "Keep your pants on."

"I was moving when the cracker did that, cut me I mean," Chester said. "Cracker didn't turn out so well. They found his lily-white ass in the river, and there wasn't no way of knowing how he got there. Some kind of accident like being beat to death and thrown in the river is my guess. You know, said the wrong thing to someone, tried to cut their balls off, something like that. I ain't saying I know that to be a fact, him being dead in the Sabine River, but I'm going to start a real hard rumor about it right now."

Jack turned back to the barrel and retrieved the axe handle, casual as if he were picking out a toothpick.

The thugs continued to stand there. As if just remembering the thugs were there, Chester thumped Dinosaur's chest with the axe handle. "Pick up this sack of dog shit, and carry him off. Do it now, 'cause you don't, it'll be hard to do with broke legs. You boys carry him now, you won't have to scoot and pull him away with your teeth, ones you got left. Gumming him might be difficult. One way or another, though, it ain't gonna turn out spiffy for you fellows."

Dinosaur looked at me, then Leonard, then the older men. He looked at his friends. Nobody bowed up. No smart remarks were made. Dinosaur seemed small right then. They picked up David like he was a dropped puppet, tried to get him to stand, but they might as well have been trying to teach a fish how to ride a tricycle. They had to drag him across the street and into their car.

When they got David inside, the others got in, and Dinosaur went around to the driver's side. He shot us the finger. He said, "This ain't over."

"Better be," Jack Woolens said.

Dinosaur drove his friends out of there.

"We could have handled it," Leonard said.

"Maybe," I said.

“Shit,” Leonard said. “We could.”

“Now they’re tough guys,” Jack said to Chester. “It’s all over, and now they’re tough.”

“We were tough enough,” Leonard said, “and we could have got tougher.”

“Leonard,” Chester said, pulling car keys out of his pocket. “Bring the car around, and don’t squeal the goddamn tires.”

“Like he can’t walk a few feet,” Jack said. “Like he’s got a lot to carry. A pair of shoes on lay-a-way he bought. He can walk.”

I looked at Leonard and he grinned at me. I loved that grin.

Chester said. “I got the lumbago.”

“Lumbago,” Jack said. “Now the lumbago he gets.”

Chester grunted, said to Leonard, “Get the car, kid.”

Leonard looked at me, smiled, and went away to get it.

4.
Down by the Riverside

We left the Dairy Queen, but neither of us wanted to go home. My gal Brett and my daughter Chance, along with our dog, Buffy, had gone out of town for a weekend, a drive to Houston to see Vince White and Kasey Lansdale perform in a small venue there. Dogs were allowed if they were well behaved and wore a muzzle, so that was part of the draw. They would be home tonight, but not right away, so we didn't feel any urge to rush home.

Me and Leonard wanted to go as well. Kasey Lansdale is one of Leonard's special favorites. We had this deal we were doing at the agency, but then after our girls left for the gig it fell through, the job we were supposed to have following this guy, and so we ended up with nothing special to occupy us. Sometimes, though, that's the best thing in the world there is to do. Nothing.

We needed and liked time to ourselves now and again. It was like old times when it was only the two of us.

As we drove about talking, we left LaBorde, and I guess it was instinct that drove me to my old home town of Marvel Creek. A little burg of four thousand or so, the place where I grew up and where I had a few adventures before graduating high school and leaving. Actually, I came back once and had what I guess you could call an adventure. The end of it was back at Leonard's place outside of LaBorde, and some people died. Badly. Leonard and I almost got a ticket too.

I didn't like thinking about that, because then I thought about my ex-wife, Trudy, and that depressed me. I loved Brett dearly, more than any other woman in my life, but Trudy, she was the first, and though I realized in time (too slow a time actually) she was a manipulative shit, she had a place in my heart, deeply buried there like some kind of inoperable tumor.

Yet, here I was in Marvel Creek, thinking back on things, back on East Texas, back on the rough kind of life that was below the surface, the stuff that the people with money didn't know about, or didn't want to talk about. There were people back in the sixties, during the civil rights era, who said, "Oh, we all just got along fine. Black and white. They stayed over there, and we stayed right here. But I had nigger friends. We waved at each other in town."

We crossed the long Sabine bridge that led into Marvel Creek. The moon was on the water.

I said, "I've had a few experiences on that river. You and me have had a few experiences."

"Oh, yeah," Leonard said.

"I quit a friend one day on the Sabine," I said.

"What's that mean, quit a friend?"

We were coming back from fishing in the river with cane poles, and we were carrying the poles back to our car. We had parked it up away from the river, because down close it was muddy, and we didn't want to bog. We were sixteen, me and my friend Davis, though on that very day I decided I didn't want to be his friend anymore.

When we finished putting minnows on our hooks and stopped trying to catch fish, it was the fisherman's custom to pour the surviving minnows out of the bucket and into the river. I was about to do that when Davis came over and took hold of the handle of the foam bucket, pulled it from me, and poured the minnows on the ground, and then with a kind of savage delight, he stomped the little fish into the mud. I suppose it sounds odd to be sad about fish I would have put on my hook had the day not ran out and the fish been biting, but it always seemed to me that if you weren't going to use something for bait to catch something to eat, then you let it go. That was the way Dad did it and everyone I knew that fished.

But Davis didn't see it that way. He was laughing while he did it, his eyes wide and wet-looking. He even tossed the foam bucket up and kicked it into the river like a football.

"Why the hell did you do that?" I said.

"I don't know," he said. "Fuck those minnows."

In that instant when he looked at me and his eyes latched on mine, I think he knew what I knew right then. We were done. Our friendship was over. I suppose it wasn't that one thing that ended it, but it was the one thing that capped it. I picked up my pole and started walking back to the car, and he carried his and we walked in silence up the trail through the woods and on out to where there were fewer trees.

There was a black car parked where the land rose up, and when we got there we saw two men, and then we could see there was another car, a white one, a little farther up on the hill. The men were standing out by the black car and there was a woman in the backseat and she sat there quietly with the windows open and the daylight fading. She was crying.

The men were hard looking, a little fat, and both had their hair heavily greased with hair oil; they looked a lot alike.

I said to the men, “Is she alright?”

“She’s fine,” one of them said. “Go on and mind your own business.”

“I didn’t mean nothing, mister,” I said.

“Sure you didn’t. It’s okay. Just go on now.”

I stopped and kept looking, feeling uncomfortable about the whole thing, but Davis said, “Come on, man. Let’s go.”

The woman turned and looked at us. She was dark-haired and pretty and her face was streaked with eye make-up and her lips trembled.

“Go on now,” said the man again.

We went on up the hill and to my car which was farther up than the white car. It was parked off the path and under some trees near the long bridge that went over the Sabine. The men probably hadn’t seen it. We had come there with our fishing poles stuck out the right back window and down by the sides of the passenger seat in the front, but when we got ready to go, we decided to toss the poles. They had lines and sinkers and hooks on them, and we had forgotten a small, plastic box of fishing gear down by the river. I thought about going back to get it, but knew I would have to pass by the car again, and the idea of it bothered me, so we just left everything.

“You think that woman’s alright?” I said.

“They’re out here fucking, Hap. Don’t you know a damn thing?”

“Two of them?”

“Could have been ten of them, and they would still be out here fucking. She probably wanted it and then she got it and she didn’t want it anymore. She might be making some money.”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“You go on back down there you want, but I’m staying up here. It’s just some woman that changed her mind too late. If it was me and I brought her all the way out here and she was okay with it and then changed her mind, she’d be in trouble, because if she got me this far with the idea of doing it, and she didn’t, well, she’s going to do it.”

I thought about that, and there was no reason for me to think of it any other way than how Davis said about the men, though I didn’t like what he said he’d do if it had been him and the woman didn’t want to do what he wanted. We got in the car and I drove us out of there.

I dropped Davis off at his house, and though I saw him in school from time to time, we only spoke in a passing manner, and never went anywhere together again, and when I was in a place where he was I was uncomfortable.

I didn’t think any more about the car and the men and the woman until some ten years later when I was home visiting my parents, and in the little town paper was an article about how an old black car had been fished out of the Sabine River the day before, and there was what was left of a body, bone fragments and a skull, in the car and no one knew who it was.

I didn’t know her name. But I knew who it was.

5.
Short Night

In Marvel Creek, in search of another ice cream cone, I drove us out to the Dairy Queen where I used to go, where all us kids used to go, not to eat, but just to have something to do. It was gone. There was a ragged used car lot there now.

"It's gone," I said.

"Just think," Leonard said, "those used cars are leaking oil right where you used to eat burgers."

"I guess it wasn't any kind of shrine," I said. "But it hurts that it's gone. Come back, I sort of think it ought to be there, but it isn't."

"You don't need another ice cream anyway."

I turned alongside where the Dairy Queen use to be and drove a back road. Once upon a time it had been nothing more than a black top and there weren't all the houses then. There were woods and there was swamp, and then you came to the river. The river was still there, but there were houses all along the shore. Most of the trees were gone. Where once their roots went deep concrete covered the earth in shallow slabs. It was hard to realize that the place had been so thick with trees at one time that it was always in shadow, and the mosquitoes were thick in the summer time. You could go down there and hide out, or die, and never be found, and someone standing right next to you might not see you if you didn't want to be seen. Now, you had no place to hide.

"There used to be a place out here, above where we are now, where there used to be a hill with trees on it, and a clearing at the very top of the hill. They called it Humper's Hill. Drive out here on Friday, Saturday night, there'd be a half-dozen cars parked, all of them rocking. Now the trees are gone, and so is the hill. They leveled it. The energy it must have taken to level it, to cut all those trees, and just to put up all these boxes that look just alike."

"I was never part of that culture," Leonard said. "We queers . . . gays, humped in greater privacy because we didn't want straight, religious crackers, god-fearing assholes, to cut our dicks off. Mainly, I figured I'd have ended up killing someone. So the few interludes I had with others of my needs were in motels, or homes, now and again some place we could park, but not a community fuck park."

"It wasn't always dates, your best girl. Sometimes it was just plain old nasty, hormonal driven stuff. Guys would bring some girl, or woman, wanted to make a few bucks and they'd pull the train. Demeaning stuff all around."

"You are so sensitive."

"I guess I am. Even though the lady was doing it of her own free will, it was all so tawdry, someone you didn't know spreading their legs in the back of a car and a bunch of guys standing around in line, waiting their turn."

"You must have been out here to know about it," Leonard said.

"You could know without being here, but yeah, I was here once when that was happening. For some guys it was a weekly thing."

"So tell me about the time you were here."

"Alright, and there's more to this one than just being out here on Humper's Hill. Fact is you're kind of included in this story."

"Alright, it's your turn," Ed said, and lit a cigarette.

"I don't think so," I said.

"Everyone else has done her."

"I can see that."

The back passenger door of the car opened and Jack climbed out pulling up his pants, swinging his dong like the pendulum inside a grandfather clock. He took his time to tuck it into place behind his jeans and fasten his belt. He was pretty proud of his dick, and had the nick name Horse.

"I'm all done," Jack said.

"You was done before you got started," a female voice from inside the car said.

"I did alright," Jack said.

"Sure you did," she said.

Jack coughed and sidled off to the back of the car and leaned on the trunk and looked at the moon as if it were his job to study the arrangement of craters.

Ed put his arm around my shoulders and walked me to the car and the open door.

"You might as well knock some off," Ed said. He was kind of the co-coordinator of the event.

"It's alright, hon," Billie Sue said from inside the car. "I don't mind."

"I can see that," I said.

"Oh come on," she said. "I said I could fuck you all, and you're the last one left."

"Fuck Jack twice," I said.

"Ah come on," she said. "He barely managed it the first time."

"To hell with you, you old whore," Jack said.

"Flattery will get you nowhere," she said.

Jack walked away from the car to the edge of the woods and took his horse dick out again and took a piss.

I looked in the car.

Billie Sue was big and fat and her belly heaved. Her legs were spread and what I could see was less inviting than a leap into the bayou at night. You couldn't be sure what was down there. I looked away and felt ashamed of myself for being out there in the first place.

Billie Sue was married to a Baptist preacher, and she liked to take a break from gospel singing and collecting the Lottie Moon offering to come out in the woods and fuck the senior class. Lottie Moon was a missionary who bothered the Chinese by trying to convert them. She was a kind of Baptist hero, but for me she was a long dead busy body. Billie Sue had been doing her own form of missionary work amongst each year's seniors for some four to five years. It was well known around town that she liked to bump with the boys, but her husband was said to give one damn fine sermon. The Baptists didn't want to lose him. And the knowledge of what his wife did made everyone in the congregation feel good about themselves. A little adultery and hypocrisy was easier to accept in one's self if the preacher's wife was considerably more wicked than they were. I thought that was nice. The Church of Christ had fired their preacher because he got caught dancing at a honky-tonk.

"Come on, kid, hop on," Billie Sue said. "I've got my second wind."

"No disrespect to you," I said. "Know you're trying to break a record, but I just came out here to see the stars."

"The stars?" Billie Sue said, and laughed.

"Well, I didn't come for this," I said.

"Shit," Ed said. "You come for something, and it wasn't any stars. I think you ain't got the wood in your pencil to do it."

"Now that I've seen what I'm supposed to do, and who's gone before me, I'll admit there might be a severe lack of wood."

"You queer?" Billie Sue said, sat up and rested her back against the door on the far side.

"No."

"Free pussy and you ain't taking any?" Jack said. He had wandered back over. "That sounds queer to me."

"Jack's trying to get back on my good side," Billie Sue said.

Mike, a guy I knew a little, moved away from the other boys who were drinking beer near the back of the car, came over to me, said to Jack and Ed, "Leave him be. It wasn't any good anyway."

"Fuck you," Billie Sue said.

"I've had better when I didn't have any," Mike said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Billie Sue said.

"It means it stunk."

"Well hell," she said, "by the time you was there, there had been eight others."

"That explains it then," Mike said. "Come on, Hap. Let's go."

"I didn't bring a car," I said.

"He came with me," Ed said. "I knew he was going to embarrass me like this, I wouldn't have brought him."

"It's alright," Billie Sue said. "I don't expect to be universally admired."

"You deserve respect," Ed said. "He can walk home, all I care."

"I got a car," Mike said.

I went with Mike and he drove us out of there in his '62 Impala.

We rode down off the hill, out of the night, into the glowing lights of the houses along the way, and then into the brighter lights of the Dairy Queen by the highway. Mike parked in the Dairy Queen lot and we went inside, ordered hamburgers and Cokes. Mike went to the bathroom while the burgers were cooking. I picked us a table at the rear of the place and sat down. There was no one else there but us and the cook and the fellow at the register. Mike came back, sat, and said, "I really needed to wash up. I touched her a little. Not on purpose, but trying to guide it in, you know?"

"Okay," I said.

"I'm not trying to make you feel bad about not doing it," he said.

"I don't feel bad."

"She's okay with it," Mike said. "She likes it fine. It's a hobby."

"I know."

"She did ten guys last year, and this year she was going for twelve. She did eleven."

"Guess I messed up her record."

"She really had her heart set on twelve."

"Life is full of little disappointments," I said.

The burgers and drinks were called. We went up and got them and brought them back to the table.

"That stuff they said, about you being queer out there," Mike said, and turned his head a little when he spoke again. "You know, you're like that, it's okay with me. I've known a few. My uncle Bill was that way. One time I caught him sucking a school teacher's dick in our living room. He thought I was out, but I was in the bedroom reading. My uncle was a teacher too. He taught art. The guy's dick he was sucking, I don't remember what he taught. Speech or something."

"No. I'm not like that," I said.

"You know that colored fella you hang with?"

"Leonard?"

"He's queer."

"I know."

"It bother you?" Mike asked. "Not him being colored, but the queer part."

"Some at first. I guess I didn't know what to make of it. He seems like everyone else to me, except for the dick-sucking part. He doesn't hide it any. I figure he'll get killed on account of it. Hell, I might get killed on account of it, I keep hanging around with him. I like him though. He's one tough sucker. He can be funny."

"I don't think of him as funny."

"He can be."

"I think it would take one tough customer to kill that nigger," Mike said.

"I don't think he likes being called a nigger. I'd stick with colored."

"That's something, ain't it. Don't call him nigger, but queer is alright."

"I think he does say he's queer. Says it plain and simple. I think he wouldn't want someone else to call him that, though. I know I wouldn't advise it."

"About the queer stuff, don't misunderstand me. I don't mind he is. Shit, right circumstances, I'd try it."

"What?"

"Sucking a dick."

"Oh."

"You?" he asked, and buried his face in his hamburger.

"Not on your life," I said. "I'm okay Leonard wants to do it. He's my friend. But I don't want no snapshots of it, diagrams and such. I like pussy just fine. Just didn't like that one tonight. I'm ashamed I went out there. I don't know what the hell I was thinking. I sure wouldn't want my girlfriend to know I went out there."

"You have a girlfriend?"

"Not right now. But if I had one, I wouldn't want her to know."

"Course not," Mike said, and nodded his head. "Understand, I was just posing a possible situation. A what if. I wasn't suggesting you and me might do such a thing. Suck each other's dick, I mean."

I got it then. I said, "But you fucked her."

He cleared his throat a little and took a sip of Coke.

"Yeah," he said. "Sure. It was fine. She was fat and a little sticky, but it was fine. I didn't mean what you think I meant. That wasn't what I was talking about. Not really. I was just talking."

"Sure," I said.

"Don't say anything to anybody," he said. "They might get the wrong idea.”

“No problem.”

“Hey, I’ll drop you off.”

“Thanks,” I said.

We finished our burgers without talking and went out to his car.

He drove us away. He knew where I lived.

“How about the team this year?” he said. “I think we’re going to stomp shit out of Mineola.”

“It could happen,” I said, as if I knew the first thing about football. I’d been to one game and that was so I could watch a girl I liked lead the cheers. She left with a football player and I left with some popcorn.

When Mike pulled up in my yard he cut the headlights so they didn’t shine in the house windows and stir my parents. I opened my door, and that turned on the overhead light. I said, “Thanks for the ride. See you later.”

“Hey, just to be clear,” he said, “I was just kidding earlier, but it might have sounded like, you know—”

“No,” I said. “It’s good. I get it.”

He looked at me there in the glow of the overhead light. He knew I got it alright.

I wanted to say something else to him, but I couldn’t come up with anything. I closed the door and he drove away. It was for a weekend, a short night.

I saw him at school after that. He always smiled and said hi, but he never sat with me at lunch, and he didn’t spend any time with me when we crossed paths. After a while I didn’t see him around anymore and I heard later from Leonard that he moved off to some place up north with his family.

6.

The Boy Who Became Invisible

By the time I finished telling Leonard all about it, I had turned us around and was driving back through town. We passed the old high school. It had been built during the Great Depression by the WPA. It was still solid, with a tall tower. I couldn't remember what was in the tower anymore. Maybe I never knew. It sure wasn't a classroom. Offices maybe.

They had built a new school farther out on the edge of town, but I wasn't sure why. The way this one had been built it was sturdy and could have gone on forever. Maybe the plumbing was bad. It was empty now. I stopped in front of it and we rolled the windows down. A wind was blowing and it blew against the building and made a whistling sound up high around the tower and rattled the leaves on a large hickory tree that still grew out front. I had my picture taken there when I was in high school, something or another for the yearbook.

I started us up again, and we edged around the high school, back to where there used to be a tennis court. There was now a house, and a not a very good one. Poor people house. I had lived in many of them, leaky roofs, slow-flush toilets, interruptions in electrical service due to payment being slow.

"Right back there, under that walk, at the door you see coming out of the old school, something terrible happened. Something I sometimes feel I had a part in."

I pulled over to the curb where we could see the place I was talking about, between the house and an empty space where the phys-ed building once stood. Now it was an empty lot thick with weeds.

"You're all memory lane tonight, aren't you?" Leonard said.

"Sorry."

"Hard to believe there are things you haven't told me about, long as we've known each other."

"Some I haven't mentioned to anyone in years. Some I guess I kind of forgot. Tonight, I remember all kinds of stuff, or maybe I'm letting myself remember."

"I doubt you ever really forgot it," Leonard said. "I know I got a few things tucked away."

"You're right. It's always there."

"I know you want to tell me what happened," Leonard said. "So why don't you?"

The place where I grew up was a little town called Marvel Creek. Not much happened there that is well remembered by anyone outside of the town. But things went on, and what I'm aware of now is how much things really don't change. We just know more than we used to because there are more of us, and we have easier ways to communicate excitement and misery than in the old days.

Marvel Creek was nestled along the edge of the Sabine River, which is not a wide river, and as rivers go, not that deep, except in rare spots, but it is a long river, and it winds all through East Texas. Back then there were more trees than now, and where wild animals ran, concrete and houses shine bright in the sunlight.

Our little school wasn't much, and I hated going. I liked staying home and reading books I wanted to read, and running the then-considerable woods and fishing the creeks for crawdads. Summers and afternoons and weekends I did that with my friend Jesse. I knew Jesse's parents lived differently than we did, and though we didn't have money, and would probably have been called poor by the standards of the early sixties, Jesse's family still lived out on a farm where they used an outhouse and plowed with mules, raised most of the food they ate, drew water from a well, but, curiously, had electricity and a big tall TV antenna that sprouted beside their house and could be adjusted for better reception by reaching through the living room window and turning it with a twist of the hands. Jesse's dad was quick to use the razor strop on Jesse's butt and back for things my parents would have thought unimportant, or at worst an offense that required words, not blows.

Jesse and I liked to play Tarzan, and we took turns at it until we finally both decided to be Tarzan, and ended up being Tarzan twins. It was a great mythology we created and we ran the woods and climbed trees, and on Saturday we watched *Jungle Theater* at my house, which showed, if we were lucky, Tarzan or Jungle Jim movies, and if not so lucky, Bomba movies.

About fifth grade there was a shift in dynamics. Jesse's poverty began to be an issue for some of the kids at school. He brought his lunch in a sack, since he couldn't afford the cafeteria, and all his clothes came from the Salvation Army. He arrived at history class one morning wearing socks with big S's on them, which stood for nothing related to him, and they immediately became the target of James Willeford and Ronnie Kenn. They made a remark about how the S stood for Sardines, which would account for how Jesse smelled, and sadly, I remember thinking at that age that was a pretty funny crack until I looked at Jesse's slack, white face and saw him tremble beneath that patched Salvation Army shirt.

Our teacher came in then, Mr. Waters, and he caught part of the conversation. He said, "Those are nice socks, you got there, Jesse. Not many people can have monogrammed socks. It's a sign of sophistication, something a few around here lack."

It was a nice try, but I think it only made Jesse feel all the more miserable, and he put his head down on his desk and didn't lift it the entire class, and Mr. Waters didn't say a word to him. When class was over, Jesse was up and out, and as I was leaving, Mr. Waters caught me by the arm. "I saw you laughing when I came in. You been that boy's friend since the two of you were knee-high to a legless grasshopper."

"I didn't mean to," I said. "I didn't think."

"Yeah, well, you ought to."

That hit me pretty hard, but I'm ashamed to say not hard enough.

I don't know when it happened, but it got so when Jesse came over I found things to do. Homework, or some chore around the house, which was silly, because unlike Jesse, I didn't really have any chores. In time he quit stopping by, and I would see him in the halls at school, and we'd nod at each other, but seldom speak.

The relentless picking and nagging from James and Ronnie continued, and as they became interested in girls, it increased. And Marilyn Townsend didn't help either. She was a lovely young thing and as cruel as they were.

One day, Jesse surprised us by coming to the cafeteria with his sack lunch. He usually ate outside on one of the stoops, but he came in this day and sat at a table by himself, and when Marilyn went by he watched her, and when she came back with her tray, he stood up and smiled, politely asked if she would like to sit with him.

She laughed. I remember that laugh to this day. It was as cold as a knife blade in the back and easily as sharp. I saw Jesse's face drain until it was white, and she went on by laughing, not even saying a word, just laughing, and pretty soon everyone in the place was laughing, and Marilyn came by me, and she looked at me, and heaven help me, I saw those eyes of hers and those lips, and whatever made all the other boys jump did the same to me . . . and I laughed.

Jesse gathered up his sack and went out.

It was at this point that James and Ronnie came up with a new approach. They decided to treat Jesse as if he were a ghost, as if he were invisible. We were expected to do the same. So as not to be mean to Jesse, but being careful not to burn my bridges with the in-crowd, I avoided him altogether. But there were times, here and there, when I would see him walking down the hall, and on the rare occasions when he spoke, students pretended not to hear him, or James would respond with some remark like, “Do you hear a duck quacking?”

When Jesse spoke to me, if no one was looking, I would nod.

This went on into the ninth grade, and it became such a habit, it was as if Jesse didn’t exist, as if he really were invisible. I almost forgot about him, though I did note in math class one day there were stripes of blood across his back, seeping through his old worn shirt. His father and the razor strop. Jesse had nowhere to turn.

One afternoon I was in the cafeteria, just about to get in line, when Jesse came in carrying his sack. It was the first time he’d been there since the incident with Marilyn some years before. I saw him come in, his head slightly down, walking as if on a mission. As he came near me, for the first time in a long time, for no reason I can explain, I said, “Hi, Jesse.”

He looked up at me surprised, and nodded, the way I did to him in the hall, and kept walking.

There was a table in the center of the cafeteria, and that was the table James and Ronnie and Marilyn had claimed, and as Jesse came closer, for the first time in a long time, they really saw him. Maybe it was because they were surprised to see him and his paper sack in a place he hadn’t been in ages. Or maybe they sensed something. Jesse pulled a small revolver from his sack and before anyone knew what was happening, he fired three times, knocking all three of them to the floor. The place went nuts, people running in all directions. Me, I froze.

Then, like a soldier, he wheeled and marched back my way. As he passed me, he turned his head, smiled, said, “Hey, Hap,” then he was out the door. I wasn’t thinking clearly, because I turned and went out in the hall behind him, and the history teacher, Mr. Waters, saw him with the gun, said something, and the gun snapped again, and Waters went down. Jesse walked all the way to the double front door, which was flung wide open at that time of day, stepped out into the light, and lifted the revolver. I heard it pop and saw his head jump and he went down. My knees went out from under me and I sat down right there in the hall, unable to move.

When they went out to tell his parents what had happened to him, that Marilyn was disfigured, Ronnie wounded, and James and Mr. Waters were dead, they discovered them in bed where Jesse had shot them in their sleep.

The razor strop lay across them like a dead snake.

7.
Blood and Lemonade

While we drove through Marvel Creek, I thought of my family living here, scraping out a living, my father working long hours, and my mother working part-time, and sometimes full-time, but when I was growing up she was at home with me, turning what might have been a dreary existence into something special. On rainy weekend days she made me glue with flour and water so I could paste my projects, she walked me in the woods and showed me what plants were edible. When there was very little to eat in the house, she could turn having a bowl of corn mush, a pot of pinto beans, a fried squirrel, or even a mayonnaise sandwich into what seemed like a culinary event.

And she was smart, a woman ahead of time, brought up in a sexist environment, a time when if women were disagreeable or hardworking they were bitches, or they were having their period, or it was all about hormones; they were being emotional, hysterical.

She was special.

I was nine years old when this happened, and I had gone to see some kind of monster movie followed by a couple of cowboy shows.

We got there early, me and my mother, and there was already a line of snot-nosed kids yakking it up and chewing gum, ready to give the lady at the ticket window their quarter for Saturday admission. The teenagers were having to drag out a whole thirty-five cents, ’cause you turned thirteen, the cost jumped a dime.

You got there on Saturday for what was called the Kid’s Show, you got to see cartoons and a few old serials, not to mention a kid’s show, usually some kind of monster movie or sword and sandal thing, and when that was over, you wanted to stay, and I always did, you could watch the double feature, and then keep your seat and watch both again. One would be the main feature, and the other a shorter running B-movie.

My mother had dropped me off at the library that morning, and I wandered the stacks and read until she picked me up at eleven-thirty, and I carried my four books I was allowed to check out from the library out to the car and we pretty much drove across the street and parked in front of the drugstore next to the theater. Back then, the drugstore served hamburger and soda drinks, and you could buy a hamburger for fifteen cents, a bag of chips for a nickel, a soft drink for the same—we called all soft drinks Cokes or Coca-Cola then. We'd say, "What kind of Coke do you want?" and you might choose an orange pop or a chocolate drink. It's how we talked.

My mother would buy me a hamburger, chips and soda pop, and then when that was done, she'd walk me next door to the movies. I was getting old enough I preferred to do it myself, but she always insisted, as if by taking me she could slow down my growing up. Or maybe she just wanted to make sure I got safely inside, though where we lived there wasn't exactly a crime wave going on.

Next to the line where we were standing there was another line at the same ticket booth, but at another ticket slot. This was for the black people, who at that time were referred to as colored, when being polite. Now and again, after helping several white kids, or sometimes helping them until the line of whites was down to nearly nothing, the lady in the ticket booth would turn to the other slot and take money and give tickets to the black people.

When they got their ticket they went up a shaky wooden staircase that led to the balcony, what I had been heard called the nigger's nest. I had seen this before, but for some reason, that day, it registered that they were always in the balcony, but never down in the floor seats. I of course knew there was a separation of races and that black people were not looked upon with fondness by alot of white people, but on that day, I suddenly wondered why it was such a big deal.

I remember clearly turning to my mother and saying, "Why are those people going up there?"

It was a totally innocent remark, and when I made it, I saw my mother pause, as if she had realized one of her shoes had been nailed to the floor. A lump was in her throat. She said, "I can't explain it to you, son. But it's not right, and it won't always be that way."

That's all the discussion we had on the matter, because now I had my ticket. I went into the show, as we called it, and had probably forgotten all about it by the time I got to the concession counter. A hamburger, chips and drink hadn't stopped me from wanting popcorn and another soda pop, and maybe some candy. Mom had given me enough money for that, and though I was supposed to wait until during the previews between the kid show and the first movie, the B feature, I bought my stuff right away. Unlike some of the other kids, I really loved movies and I loved previews and going to the show was akin to visiting a religious shrine. I even enjoyed watching the advertisements that encouraged a trip to the concession stand.

The theater was pleasantly air-conditioned and had a sticky aisle carpet that sucked at your shoes, and many of the seats were missing the arm rest, and therefore sometimes your arms rested on bolts. But that air-conditioning made it a great place to be during the summer even if the movie was some kind of love story.

The screen was stained in spots and there was a stage in front of it where sometimes magicians performed kid shows, and occasionally there were jugglers and dog acts.

I made it all the way through the kid show monster movie, the double feature, and was there when it started over, when my mother came down the aisle and tapped me on the shoulder.

I wanted to see the shows again, because back then you didn't have to leave during showings, but she insisted I had to go, and so we went out to the curb where our car was parked. It was dark by then, but the theater lights were bright behind us, and there were lights along the walk, in front of the drugstore and other businesses, so it was easy to see a little black boy, crying in the drugstore doorway. I guess he was about my age.

Mom went over to him, said, "Are you okay, little boy?"

He looked up at her and sucked snot up in his nose, said, "I'm alright."

"You don't sound alright," Mom said.

"I got beat up."

"Who would do a thing like that?"

He shook his head. She bent down and looked at him.

"You're bleeding."

Mama opened her purse and took out a Kleenex and dabbed at the blood on his face. "Who would do such a thing?"

"White boy done it," he said.

"A white boy beat you up?"

He nodded.

"Why would he do that?"

The boy looked at her in a puzzled way, as if she had just parachuted in from Venus.

"'Cause I'm a nigger."

"Don't call yourself that."

"He did."

"Yes. But that isn't right."

"He still called me one."

"Can we take you home?" Mom said.

"No. My mama lives out of town. Supposed to stay with my cousin, but he went off with a girl."

"How old is your cousin?"

"Eighteen."

"And he left you by yourself."

"He don't keep up with time so good."

"I can't believe he left you."

"I can, that's how he do."

"So there's no place we can take you?"

"Cousin's house is all locked up. I'd have to break a window."

"Aren't his parents home."

He shook his head. "They don't live there no more, just him."

"Alright, alright," Mama said. "Well, look, we can't just leave you here in a doorway. Tell you what. Come home with us, and we'll call your mama and have her come get you."

"She ain't got no phone. Got a sister has one."

"Then we'll call her."

"She lives in another town, Overton."

"And your mother lives where?"

"Tyler, but she's gone to Dallas. That's why I was to stay with my cousin."

"Come on, then," Mama said. "You come with us and we'll call someone, figure something out."

Mama got his name out of him, Nathan, and with reluctance he climbed into the backseat of the car and sat there with his hands in his lap. He looked scared and confused, like a dog that had been left beside the road and wasn't sure of those who had found and taken him in.

I sat on the passenger side of the front seat, and tried not to stare over the backseat. When I did glance back, he always seemed to be looking at me, wild-eyed and nervous. In our old black Ford we clattered home. My dad was a mechanic, and a good one, but our car was always on the verge of falling apart. He had time to work on other cars, but when he had time off he wanted to lay down in front of the TV and relax. The car he drove to work was worse than the one Mama drove.

At home our guest came nervously through the front door between Mama and me as if expecting a surprise attack, and when Mama hit the light switch, he jumped a little.

“Why don’t you go to the bathroom and wash up, and I’ll fix you something to eat. Would you like that?”

Nathan didn’t answer, just looked around. Our house wasn’t much, and my mother was not a great housekeeper, but she painted, and she had several of her paintings on the walls. She was a pretty amazing hobby painter, but I didn’t know it at the time. It’s just what she did when she was on a kind of manic high. The high was followed by a lull, and then a drop into a depressed place where the walls around it were for a time too steep for her to climb.

“Those are pretty,” Nathan said, pointing toward the paintings.

“Thank you,” Mama said. “I painted those.”

“You did?” Nathan said.

“I did.”

“I ain’t never known someone could do that. I wish I could.”

“Practice,” Mama said, and she went into the kitchen and left us standing there in the middle of the living room.

“Let me show you where the bathroom is,” I said. “You can get that blood off your face.”

I headed in that direction, and when I turned around in the hall, he wasn’t there. I had to go back to the living room and say, “Nathan. Right here.”

Nathan came unstuck from looking at the paintings, went to the bathroom and closed the door. I stood out in the hall like a hall monitor at school. I didn’t know what else to do. I could hear the water running in there. After a moment the door opened. Nathan said, “Are there any towels for me? I can wipe on my pants.”

I found this curious, not knowing quite yet that anything a black person touched was supposedly contaminated, so I said, “Use the one hanging on the rack.”

“Ain’t that your towel?”

“It’s a towel,” I said.

“I got blood on me.”

“It’s alright,” Mama called from the kitchen. “It’ll wash.”

“Okay,” he said, went back inside and closed the door. After a few moments he came out again.

“You find the towel?”

He nodded, looked down the hallway. We could see my mama in the kitchen at the end, hustling around at the edge of the stove. She turned from it and came down the hall. She took Nathan’s chin in her hand and gently turned his head from side to side.

“You might ought to have a band aid.”

She got a box of them out of the bathroom cabinet and pulled one out, came out into the hall, and applied it to the small cut on Nathan’s head.

"There now," she said. She went back to the bathroom, washed her hands, dried on a fresh towel, and went back to the kitchen.

"Your mama's nice," Nathan said.

"Yeah, she is. You like funny books?

He looked at me and nodded.

I started for my bedroom. Nathan followed after me, still cautious.

We weren't well off, poor actually, but at this short time in my early life we had it pretty good. My dad was a mechanic. He worked for a butane company repairing their trucks, chasing them when they broke down in other parts of Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana. He might go to work in the morning and not be back until late at night, or even the next morning, having gone over to Manny Louisiana, some place in Oklahoma or almost any place in Eastern Texas. Wherever a company truck might break down. Within a year of the time I'm talking about, Daddy would be worn out working for someone other than himself, and would end up opening his own shop. We never had much money after that, but he was happier, and to be honest, I didn't realize the difference much until I was grown and could look back on it. I didn't know we were poor. We always thought of ourselves as broke, but at that moment in time, we were doing as well as we ever did. There were so many others around us doing worse. Black families especially.

Nathan came into my bedroom, leaving the door open as if he might need to beat a hasty retreat. I opened my closet, and there were several large boxes there with comics stacked inside. I pulled one out, opened the box, and dug in. I grabbed a stack of funny books and we sat down on the floor. Nathan and I looked through them, and out of nowhere, he said, "I want to be the Flash. I could run off anywhere and no one would know I was gone, and then I'd be back, and they wouldn't even had known I'd run across the ocean, gone over to some place there, and come back."

"I like that he can run across the water," I said.

"Me too," Nathan said, "but I get to thinking about what if I was him, and I slowed down? I'd be wet all over and a shark might get me."

"Flash runs too fast to get bit," I said, "and he won't slow down, and you was him, you wouldn't either."

"Yeah, but I ain't him. He's white."

I realized I had never seen a black superhero, or for that matter, any black characters in comics. It had never occurred to me a black superhero was possible. I thought of most blacks as maids and short-order cooks, farmers and janitors. That's what they did in Marvel Creek. Those were their jobs.

"You boys come eat," Mama called from the kitchen. Through the open door we could see down the hall and into the kitchen. Mama was wearing an apron and hustling plates of food onto the table.

We went into the kitchen. I sat down immediately, but Nathan remained standing.

“Sit down,” Mama said. “This isn’t at the Dairy Queen or such. You don’t have a special place where you have to be.”

I got it a little more then. Nathan was not only unaccustomed to being with white folks, he was unaccustomed at being allowed to sit at their tables, instead of some designated spot for colored. I was starting to absorb the idea that being colored meant you always had to be on your toes.

Nathan sat down and Mama put a plate in front of him. There were some fried hamburger patties, slices of tomato, some broken up lettuce in bowls. We had plain light bread, as we used to call it, and she had busted open a loaf and laid the bread on a platter. There was a big pitcher of ice tea, a bottle of ketchup, and a jar of mustard.

Mama started making herself a sandwich with the bread, meat and vegetables, and I followed suit. Nathan still hadn’t moved.

“We got mustard and ketchup, you want it,” Mama said.

“No, ma’am,” Nathan said. “Dry is fine.”

Then Nathan came unstuck and poured himself some ice tea, and made a sandwich. He would have gladly eaten in silence, I’m sure, but Mama didn’t play that way.

“You finish eating, Nathan, maybe you got someone we can call?”

Nathan didn’t respond to that.

I should add we had recently gotten a telephone, and for us that was a big deal. It was a party line, which meant we shared it with two others, had our own ring, and that meant, of course, that someone on the party line could listen into your conversations if they took a mind to. Now and again you could hear them breathing on their end. I remember Mama saying, “Mildred, get off the line. This is a private call.”

Still, we had a phone, and it was a step up from where we had been. We also had a new TV, a larger set than the one before, and with two cars, ragged as they were, my parents probably felt they had stepped up in the world. It was a step that would become slippery in short time.

“We ain’t got a phone, and my cousin don’t neither, and I don’t want to go where he stay anyway,” Nathan said. “I’d be by myself if I could get in.”

“I can understand that perfectly,” Mama said. “I get by myself, I turn lonely. I like to at least be able to open a window, look out and see a bird, listen to it sing. Birds singing is a joy to me.”

“Not many out at night,” Nathan said.

Mama laughed. “Well, I don’t mean now.”

“Oh,” Nathan said. “I get it. Some other time.”

“Just something pleasant to see and think about,” Mama said.

I glanced across the table at her, because when she said that, I saw something shift in her face. I had seen it before. She called it feeling blue. That meant a memory, or maybe just a feeling, had come up from some place deep and floated onto her face, wrinkling her brow, accentuating the crow’s feet at the corners of her eyes.

“Sometimes I feel like I don’t fit,” she said.

“I know that,” Nathan said. “I get that same way.”

Mama looked at him, said, “I don’t have anything on you, do I?”

“No ma’am,” Nathan said. He sounded like an old man then, weighted down by memories and a touch of arthritis.

We finished eating, and Mama said, “Surely, you have someone I can call?”

“Mama ain’t got no phone.”

“Your cousin?”

“He don’t got one neither.”

“Surely there’s someone? Didn’t you say you had an aunt in Overton?”

Nathan considered for a long moment.

“She ain’t never home,” he said. “I got an aunt in Baton Rouge.”

“Oh, that’s a long ways,” Mama said. “Still, I think I ought to call her.”

Mama wrangled the aunt’s number out of him and picked up the phone, which was on the kitchen counter under the light switch. She dialed the number and called the aunt.

No one answered. She put the phone down.

“You said your mama was in Dallas?”

“She ought to be back by now,” Nathan said.

I glanced at the clock. It was nearly midnight.

“I’m thinking maybe I could drive you home, then,” Mama said.

“I ain’t sure how to get there,” Nathan said.

“You got an address, something that could help me find her.”

He did have an address. Getting it out of him was like trying to lift a car, but Mama finally managed and wrote it down.

“Tell you what,” she said. “You boys go look at funny books. I’m going to get a Tyler map and see if I can figure out where this address is.”

Back in my bedroom we went back to looking at funny books. Nathan had loosened up. We sat on the floor and talked about funny-book characters, and the movie we had seen that day. He liked the monster movie, and that led us to talking about other monster movies we had seen. It was great to have someone that cared about that stuff as much as me.

After a time, Mama came into the bedroom and said, "I think I got it figured out. We might have to pull over some and have me study the map, but I think we can go now."

"I could stay here tonight," Nathan said.

"I don't know, hon," Mama said.

"Oh, yeah," Nathan said. "I forgot."

"No," Mama said. "It's not that. You should be home. Your mama will be worried."

"She thinks I'm at my cousins."

"But you're not, and she thinks you are," Mama said. "I don't think that's good."

There was an uncomfortable moment, and then Nathan said, "Yeah. I better go home."

"I'm going to pull the car out of the carport, you boys come out and we'll go."

I got up and prowled around in my closet and came up with a stack of comic books, doubles of comics I already had. I gave them to Nathan.

"These for me?"

"Sure. I got some more."

"Thanks," he said. "You been real nice."

We went out to the car, not bothering to turn off the light or lock the door. We didn't lock doors much in those days. They used to say locks were for keeping honest people out, and lights make the bad folks think you're at home.

I sat in the backseat with Nathan. Mama looked back at me when I sat down back there, seemed as if she might say something, then didn't.

We drove out of Marvel Creek, over the Sabine River bridge. We drove past what was then called Hell's Half Mile, a series of honky-tonks. I remember driving by there with Dad at the wheel, and he said, "You see that tree out back of that beer joint? They hung a nigger there once, back in the forties. Reckon he wasn't but twelve years old. Raped some white girl. I used to have a postcard they made from a picture they took."

It was then that I was glad Dad was still at work, on the road somewhere. I couldn't imagine him being mean to Nathan. I had seen him do too many kind things for colored, and I would see more when he opened his own garage, working on their cars for free when they couldn't pay him, giving black kids money when we didn't have any. But still, it was then that I realized my mama and daddy lived in different worlds. When Dad had talked about that hanging, it sounded as if there was a bit of pride in his voice. Mama told me later, when she put me to bed that night, "His bark is worse than his bite. Your daddy's father used to tell your daddy when he went to bed at night, 'You do something wrong, a nigger's going to come get you and chop you up.' I'm just using the word they used, but I don't mean for you to say it. I want you to know how it was."

It was these sorts of things that gradually allowed me to understand how things were different between us and the colored. Mama was of her time, but not in the same way as everyone else. She could see a crack in the cloud cover, a ray of light, when all the others could see was an eternal black night.

That night we were driving Nathan home, we stopped along the way a few times, and Mama sat behind the wheel with the map and a flashlight on it, studying it. I don't know how long we drove, but it was longer than it would have taken had Nathan known how to get there, instead of just knowing the address.

Nathan and I both nodded off in the back seat, it was so comfortable, and when I awoke we had come to a dark part of town where there were no street lights and the houses seemed to tumble out of the dark beside the road.

"I don't see any street numbers," Mama said. "Maybe you ought to wake Nathan."

I touched his shoulder and he came awake quickly.

Mama, who was looking over the backseat, said, "Nathan, honey. I've got this far, but don't see street numbers or signs. Do you recognize this place?"

Nathan sat up and leaned over the seat and looked around. "Yes, ma'am, we about there."

He gave Mama some instructions then, and we proceeded down the street and turned on a narrow dirt street and pulled up at the edge of a dead, brown yard with a graying little house in it. There was a white Ford parked up on the grass near the front door.

Mama got out, and me and Nathan did too, Nathan with the funny books under his arm. He ran ahead of us and knocked on the door. Nothing happened, so he knocked again, louder.

Finally a heavy colored woman came to the door, opened it, stepped out onto the concrete steps. She looked out at us, then down to Nathan.

"What you doing here?" the woman said to Nathan. "You supposed to be at your cousin's house."

"He left me and some white kids beat me up," Nathan said.

"What. Come tomorrow, I'm going to drive over there to your cousin's house and tear his ass up. Who's this white lady?"

"I been at her house. Me and him read comics and she gave me dinner, drove me over here."

"That right?" said the woman.

"It was no trouble," my mama said.

"Ain't no one asking you to do it," Nathan's mother said.

This stunned Mama.

"I know. We were glad to do it."

"He don't need some white folks helping him out, showing him how kind you is. What's that under your arm, boy?"

"Funny books," Nathan said.

"Where you get them?"

"He gave them to me."

"Let me see those."

Nathan slowly handed the stack to her.

"Come here white boy. Take these back."

"I gave them to him," I said.

"I don't care you did or didn't, come take them, or I'll tear them up."

I went over and took the stack from her and went back quickly to stand by Mama. We were still back a ways from the steps, and I was starting to feel really uncomfortable.

A colored man came to the door. He was big and stout and didn't have on a shirt.

"What's going on here?" he said.

"These white folks done brought Nathan home and was trying to give him some funny books."

"Johnny left me," Nathan said.

"He did," said the man. Then he looked out at us. "This is nice of you folks."

"No," said Nathan's mother. "It's just them showing us they got good ways. I tell you about y'all's good ways. Why don't you come on up in here tonight, spend the night with us, not drive back. Tomorrow, we can all go down to the sto' and shop for some groceries. We could then go to your house and have a tea party. You think that would be good? We can go to your church together this Sunday, and then you can come over here and we'll sit on the couch and watch TV. Maybe we'll go to the picture show, and you can sit up in the balcony with us."

Mama said, "We better go."

"Yeah, you better," the woman said.

"Now don't talk like that," the man said to the woman.

"I talk like I talk," she said.

"Thank y'all for bringing him home," he said to us.

"Yeah, y'all such do-gooders," said the woman. Then to Nathan. "Get your ass up in that house."

"Come on, son," Mama said, touched my shoulder, and headed to the car, walking fast.

"You come on back when you want that tea party," said the woman.

We got in the car. I sat in the front this time.

As we drove off, Mama started crying.

"Damn niggers," I said.

"Don't say that," she said, and pulled the car over. "Don't say that ever again. Never use that word about colored people. Colored or Negro. Don't you never say that."

"Daddy does," I said.

Mama was heaving a little, still crying. "Listen here. I've told you about that. Your daddy don't know any better, but you do. Hear me?"

"But she was mean."

"You walk a mile in her shoes, then you can judge. You got to see it from her side."

I didn't understand that at all.

"She was mean," I said again.

"She's got her burden," Mama said.

She pulled the car back onto the street. It was a long time before she spoke. When we got to Hell's Half Mile, Mama said, "When I was a girl my mama made me some lemonade, put it in a big pitcher, put it on a table out under a tree. She said I should sit there and enjoy it, listen to the birds. So I did. I sat there in a chair in front of the little table and drank my lemonade. I drank it fast. It was sweet. It had so much sugar in it, you had to stir it between glasses, 'cause you didn't, it all settled to the bottom of the pitcher, like sand under water. I drank that pitcher of lemonade so fast because it was so sweet and so good, and then when I got up to go in the house, I was dizzy. It was drinking all that lemonade so fast and it being so sweet. I got real dizzy. I fell when I got to the porch and hit my head on the steps. I still got the scar, just under my hairline. It knocked me out.

"When I come to, Mama had me in the house, stretched out on the couch, and she had bandaged my head. I sat up on the couch when I felt I could, and Mama came in, said, 'You got to learn to take your pleasures slowly, girl. Enjoy them, 'cause there's a lot that isn't pleasurable. And if something is good, and then things go wrong, don't blame the good part if you didn't spend the right kind of time enjoying it."

She stopped talking. I thought that was an odd story, considering what had happened that night. As we drove across the Sabine bridge, into Marvel Creek, Mama said, "You see, son, life has got its good and its bad. It's got its lemonade, and it's got blood. Tonight, we had a bit of both. And you can't let the good we did, the lemonade, get outweighed by something that went bad. You got to think slowly on the good, not get caught up in the bad. Got to see the whole picture."

I wasn’t sure back then what she was talking about, and by the time we arrived at the house, I had fallen asleep against the car door and had to be shook awake.

8.
In the River of the Dead

As we crossed the long Sabine River bridge going out of Marvel Creek, we both turned our heads toward the river, the left side of the bridge. Even from that side we could see the river way out and winding.

I heard Leonard sigh.

I knew what he was remembering. We couldn't drive over the bridge without thinking about it. It was of our first moments together that wasn't just threatening and dangerous, it was deadly.

"That was something," Leonard said, not even bothering to explain what he meant.

"Yeah," I said.

"That's when we were really getting to know each other," he said.

"That's right."

"You did something for me that was damn foolish."

"I did, and I wouldn't do it again."

"Yes, you would. I still have it."

"I know that. By the way, I think it makes a lousy key fob."

"It reminds me of a lot of things, not all of them good," he said. "Sometimes you got to remember the ugly, look it in the eye."

We were across the bridge and out of there, but my memory of what happened wasn't gone, and we sat in silence for a while, both of us remembering it our own way, I guess.

We were seventeen when this happened, out fishing on the Sabine River.

What we learned was if we went fishing, sat in a boat and dragged some lines in the water, we might catch dinner for our night camp, but mostly we found out about each other. That's how I learned about Leonard's family, his feelings about being black and gay, and he learned about my family and me.

We drifted all day, had our camping supplies in the boat, and the plan was we would find a place to stop before nightfall. The boat was pretty good sized, an open boat. The outboard motor wasn't strong on horse power, but it puttered us along as fast as we needed to go.

The river smelled sour because the day was warm. After we motored down a ways, we killed the engine and let the boat drift beneath the shade of the overhanging trees in the narrow part of the river. It was cooler there. The wind finally picked up, which was nice, because it blew the stink and the mosquitoes away from us.

It wasn't quite dark when Leonard snagged his line. Where we were, the Sabine was surprisingly clear. The water ran fast enough we had to drop anchor to keep from floating away. The deep water was so clear, that when Leonard looked to see what his line was snagged on, he saw all the way to the bottom.

"Take a look," he said.

I learned over the side and looked. There was a boat on the bottom.

It wasn't a boat with an outboard. It was one those boats with a top and front and side glasses in the cabin, and it had a real engine. Except for being on the bottom of the river, it looked like a nice boat. Leonard's line had caught up in a side rail, and we could see it clearly. Leonard pulled at the line, but it wouldn't come loose.

"I could swim down there and get it," he said.

"That's deeper than it looks," I said.

"I can swim good," he said. "I'm like fucking Aquaman."

"Just cut the line and go on. Re-rig your tackle."

"I want that sinker," he said.

"A goddamn lead sinker, that's your worry? Shit, I got lead sinkers in my tackle box. Help yourself, and when we get back to shore I'll buy you some more, maybe get you an anvil to tie on your line."

"My uncle gave it to me," he said. "It's made out of lead. It's a little figurine, an old black mammy from some kind of advertisement."

I hadn't noticed he had it. I said, "And you want that?"

"You might not understand it, Hap, but it belongs to my uncle, or did. He gave it to me. It's what we call a keep-sake."

"A humiliating little statue made of lead that's a black mammy, and you won't be able to sleep nights if you don't get it? You're jerking my dick?"

"He took it off a man once. A man tried to fight him, made fun of him, and waved that thing under his nose."

"Some guy was carrying it around in his pocket?" I said.

"Story is, my uncle whipped his ass and took that thing and made it his own. Then he gave it to me."

"Try shaking it loose again."

"I've tried," Leonard said. "The hook is under the railing somehow. I'm going to swim down and get it."

"I'll be right here," I said.

Leonard pulled his shirt over his head, slipped off his shoes and pants until he was in his boxer shorts.

Leonard, who had probably seen the same episodes of *Sea Hunt* I had, sat on the edge of the boat and back-flipped into the water. I moved from where I sat and took his former spot, and looked down.

Leonard swam with hard strokes. My guess was right, it was deeper than it looked. I saw him reach the deck and land on it and pull himself along the railing to where his hook was hung, and I saw his head turn toward the open back door of the boat's cabin. Leonard froze there. He stood there on the deck underwater for a few seconds, and then he forgot the sinker, let go of the railing, and came swimming up hard. I watched him surface like a porpoise and grab the side of the boat. I helped him inside the boat.

"What the fuck?" I said. "You forgot the sinker."

For a black guy he looked a little pale.

"There are bodies down there. Naked bodies."

"What?"

"Bodies."

"What do you mean, bodies?"

"What the fuck do you think I mean, a squirrel and a moose? Fucking bodies. People. I saw a woman and a man floating in there, and they ain't testing the temperature of the water."

"Jesus," I said.

"Yeah, Jesus."

"What do you think happened?"

"They fucking drowned, I guess. God, Hap. I don't know."

I thought about it for a moment, stripped off my clothes, and went over the side. The water was cold. When I swam to the deck, I looked through the open door and saw what Leonard had seen. Two bodies. I looked in there, and when I did a child's corpse brushed up against me, made me shoot up to our boat and clamor over the side, almost tipping it.

"There's a child too," I said.

"Shit," Leonard said.

"Yeah. I panicked."

"Me too," Leonard said. "Maybe we should learn not to panic."

"I guess the boat sank fast and they drowned, but damn, couldn't they swim up from that depth? It's deep, but it's not that deep, and the mother or the father could have brought the child up."

"Not if it was so quick they were down there and full of water before they knew it."

"It would have to have had a real blow out to sink that fast," I said. "I didn't see any rips, so it has to be a hole in the cabin."

"We ought to get someone down here to get them out," Leonard said.

"Yeah," I said. "We got to do that. Look, I'm going down one more time to get your sinker."

"Oh, the hell with it," he said.

"It was everything a few minutes ago, and now it's to hell with it?"

"I hadn't found three dead bodies in a boat then."

I didn't say anything. I was still in my shorts, so I got my pocket knife out of my jeans, opened the knife, and went over the side and swam down. I cut the fishing line loose and got the little lead statue Leonard was using for a sinker and clutched it in my fist. The water was starting to stir and grow dirty, and the sun was going down, laying a strange rust-colored sheen over the water.

I made myself go into the cabin again. It was creepy to see them floating in there, and there was blood too, but it was in odd little strings that floated in the water inside the cabin like odd party confetti.

That kid must have been about four or five years old, and that was a hard thing to see, because when he rolled in the water, which was becoming agitated, I could see there was a hole in his head right over his ear, and when he rolled over, I could see the other side, and there was a larger hole there, one that pretty much replaced that side of his head.

The man and woman were young, and I could see there were burns on their body, and something was stuck up their asses and broken off. Liquor bottles, I thought. There were dark bruises on their necks, and the man's penis had been split down the middle like a banana, and the woman's breasts had burn marks on them. River mud stirred by something washed in and everything turned dark. I panicked and lost my pocket knife and swam up with the lead statue in my fist.

When I topped out of the water darkness had fallen on the river like a curtain, and it was raining. You couldn't see very far down the river, but you could see a line of rain crossing it and coming in our direction, a rain more fierce than the current one. It was coming in waves and the next wave was going to be rough. The moon wasn't up yet and the stars weren't visible, and with the rain like that, and the clouds, you might not be able to see them anyway.

Leonard pulled me into the boat, and then he got a flashlight and turned it on me. I held out my hand with the statue in it.

"You didn't need to do that, Hap."

"Hell, I know that. Those people, they've been murdered. It's not just a boat drowning."

I told him what I saw.

"Jesus. Well, one thing's for sure. They didn't come out here and do that to themselves, drown their kid and stick bottles up their asses and break them off."

"What I'm saying."

Leonard had already slipped into his clothes, and now I slipped back into mine. They were damp from the rain.

I went to crank the motor, and it wouldn't crank.

Leonard said, "Let me give that a pull."

Any other time I would have turned that line into a joke, but right then I didn't feel too humorous.

He came over and took the rope, and jerked real hard. The rope broke.

"Nice work," I said. "We got to paddle back."

"Tonight? It would take hours. With this rain we won't even be able to see where we're going, and we'll spend all night bailing out the boat."

"But those people," I said.

"Listen, Hap. We got to get the boat on shore, maybe I can screw off the casing on the outboard and figure how to get it going without the rope, or maybe I can tie the rope back together and start it, but it will still be dark and wet as shit. We can dock the boat, spend the night with our camping gear, like we planned to do, and in the morning we can paddle the boat, provided it's not raining like a son-of-a-bitch. And speaking of that."

The rain really hit then. It was heavy and cold and it splattered into the boat and within instants water was starting to rise inside of it.

"So," Leonard said. "A better idea?"

"Let's paddle for shore."

We took the paddles from the bottom of the boat and did just that.

On shore we pulled our supplies from the boat. Our stuff was wrapped in water proof material inside our packs, so we had that going for us. We placed the packs under a large willow tree that was grouped up with some smaller struggling willows. We tipped the boat to get what water was in it out, and then Leonard used a spare shirt from his pack to rub the boat as dry as he could while I stood over him with a ground cloth stretched over our heads. He didn't completely get out the water, but it helped. I pulled the ground cloth over the top of the boat and tied it around the edges with some fishing line, running the line through gaps in the edges of the boat. The plan was we would sleep in the boat. The idea of sleeping on the ground with water moccasins was highly unappealing.

We needed to eat first, though. We had rain slickers, so we put those on and got up under the willow and used Leonard's ground cloth to stretch above us and tie off to limbs to make a kind of rough canopy. Under that we sat against the tree and broke out a can opener and some canned Vienna sausages and Beanie Weenies and ate them with the utensils we had brought, a fork and knife a piece.

"What do you think happened?" I said.

"Well, someone was mad at them for something."

"What could the child have done?"

"Not a thing, I'm sure."

"Maybe the cops can figure it out," I said.

"Maybe they can."

We talked for a long while about it, and then about other things, and then about the boat again. We drank from our canteens. I had some apples in my pack, and got one for both of us. We sat under the tree eating the apples, the rain running off of the ground cloth we had rigged. It was hard to stay dry. It wasn't really a cold night, but with the rain there was a chill, and I wished we had a fire, but the dead wood lying about would be wet, and we decided it wasn't worth gathering it and decided to keep a cold camp.

Our plan was to get under the canopy in the boat, and with our flashlights, read. We had brought books for just that plan, but the truth was neither of us felt like reading or going to sleep. Every time we stopped talking, I saw in my head that poor child and those people, brutalized, down there in the water with fish swimming amongst them, not to mention snakes and what have you. It wasn't a good image.

"What about our motor?" I said.

"In the morning. I can't see shit in this rain."

"Those poor people," I said.

"They won't get any deader," Leonard said. "We'll head back in the morning."

"Sure," I said.

"We ought to go to bed."

"Yeah."

But we didn't.

"In the morning, we'll find enough dry wood to make some coffee," Leonard said.

"If you brought coffee. I got a pot we can cook it in, strain the grounds through something, but I don't have any coffee."

"I thought you said you would bring the coffee?"

"No. I said we needed coffee."

"You said that, I thought you meant you better get some."

"Nope. I just wanted some. I thought you were going to bring it."

"Perfect."

That's when we heard a motor on the river and saw a boat with a strong forward light coming up river. We sat silent and watched it slow down, then go by where we were. A little later we heard it turning back and saw the light again as the boat came back in our direction.

"I think they're looking for the boat?" Leonard said.

"You think they know where it is?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"A guess."

The boat passed our camp again, but didn't go far before it turned around and they brought the boat alongside the bank and not far from the tree where we were. Leonard took out his pocket knife and opened it. I had lost my knife. I sat there with wishful thinking and no weapon.

The boat on the water was not too unlike the boat on the bottom of the river, and there were at least three men on it. I could hear them talking, though I couldn't hear what they were saying. They were still inside the cabin, but the door to the cabin was open, and their voices came out along with some light. In a little while they walked out on deck.

They had on hooded rain slickers. They were on the far side of their boat, away from shore, leaning over with their lights pointed at the water.

"Can't see a damn thing," one of the men said. He was the largest of the three.

"This is the place," said another, who was a shorter version of the biggest man.

"You sure?" said the big man.

"Pretty sure."

The third man, a thin guy, said, "You better be sure. That water is going to be cold, and it's going to be you going in."

The shorter stocky man at the side of the boat, leaning over the railing, stood up, said, "I'm not the only one going in, not in this dark water. I go, we all go, or we wait until morning."

There was a silence on the boat, and then the biggest of the three, a fellow who seemed in charge, said, "Alright. We stay until morning, then we go in. Maybe the rain will be done."

"It will be," said the thinner man.

"How the hell would you know?" said the short stocky one.

"You get so you know one kind of rain from another. This one is hard for a while, and then it'll move on. Might be some light rain later, but when this is gone, it'll gradually start to clear."

"Listen to Farmer Brown," said the short stocky man. "We grew up with him, but he's got some special skills given to him by the angels or some such."

"We'll stay in the cabin until daylight," said the big man, "then we go in."

They were all standing together now, looking at the shore line. The one that knew about farming said, "There's a boat on shore."

"So what," said the big man. "People leave them here all the time to go fishing. Lots of niggers live on this stretch, back beyond the tree stand. Probably one of their boats."

Without saying a thing to one another, me and Leonard both stretched out and lay flat on the ground behind the big willow and the scrubs. We tried to make ourselves as small as possible.

The head man studied where we were for a while, then shined his light on us. He could pick up on Leonard real good.

He said, "There's a nigger lying down there."

"Run for it, to the left. I'll go right," Leonard said, lying in the pool of light. "They ain't seen you yet."

By this time the short stocky man had slipped into the cabin, and he came out with a rifle. He pointed it at the shore where Leonard lay. He had it lined in the big man's flashlight beam.

"Better come out of there, nigger, or I'm gonna pop you," said the short stocky man. "You can't run faster than a bullet."

Leonard stood up and dropped his knife on the ground. "I'm just out here fishing."

"Are you now?"

The thinner's man's flashlight came on and the beam fell on me. "There's another one on the other side. White boy."

I stood up slowly. I thought I probably could make a run for it, as the grass and brush was high on my side, and there were some trees a little farther down, and it would be hard for them to get a clear shot. But I couldn't leave Leonard.

Since their boat was close to shore, the man with the rifle jumped down and came over. He walked on the edge of the flashlight beam that was shining on Leonard. The other man kept his light on me. It was a strong light. I felt like I was part of a floor show.

When they were all three on shore, the big man said, "Fishing, huh?"

"That's right," I said. "Our motor broke down, and there came a rain storm, so we put in for the night."

"Cheap ass motor is my guess," said the one with the gun.

"I reckon that's true," Leonard said.

"You seen us looking over the side of our boat, didn't you?" said the head man.

"Sure, we seen you," Leonard said. "What you looking for?"

"Nothing that concerns you, nigger. Both of you, come down here closer on the bank."

Leonard led the way and I followed up. I was starting to regret the both of us not trying to make a break for it.

The big man put his light in our faces, stared at us while we blinked.

"You know what's down there, don't you?" he said. "I can tell when someone has a secret, and I can guess at it damn good, know what that secret is. Been able to do that all my life."

"Another one of us with special powers," said the man with the rifle.

"What are you talking about?" I said.

"The boat," the big man said.

"Shit, August, don't tell him?" said the man with the gun.

"Hell, they already know. I can tell by looking at them. They know why we're here."

"Haven't a clue," Leonard said.

"I know a liar when I hear one," the big man said, the one called August.

"We'll have to kill them," said the one with the rifle. "They didn't know, they know now, way you've run your mouth."

The big man glanced at the one with the rifle, and the rifle man went silent. I think he knew there was a line he shouldn't cross with the big man.

I thought: Shit, this is it. I'm going to die on the banks of the Sabine River, and here I was close to graduation and hoping I was going out into a wider world away from all these crackers, but instead I was going to die at their hands.

Typical.

"Can you boys swim?" August said.

"Like a goddamn eel," Leonard said.

"You?" he said, indicating me, of course.

"Yes."

August contemplated for a few moments, said, "What I'm thinking, is we have them swim down for us, have them get it, and we don't have to get cold and wet and take a chance down there. Just the thought of my balls in that cold water makes me ill."

"Only need one of them," the man with the rifle said. "We could pop the nigger."

"Naw, it's heavy," August said. "We need them both."

I knew another sentence had stayed inside his head.

And it went like this: "And then we pop them both."

They brought us on the boat and had us sit down on the deck. The deck was wet and I could feel it through my pants. It made my ass cold. Now that they weren't shining the lights right on us, I could actually see them better. August was the biggest, and I took him for the planner. He had a way of leaning forward all the time, as if he was about to take off in a sprint. He was too big a man to get far that way, I judged, but he was certainly the right size for twisting your head off. The man with the rifle, the leanest of the three, had a nervousness that made me nervous. I didn't like the way he handled the gun. His hair was cut short like the other two, so short I figured they might as well just go on and shave their heads. All three looked kin. Brothers or cousins perhaps, the thin one being the most different in size, but not in facial features.

"There's some dead people down there in a boat," said August, "but you know that. I can tell by looking at you. But what you might not know is they're there for a reason. They been hauling off stuff that isn't theirs."

"Yeah," said the one with the rifle. "They fucked up."

"What kind of stuff?" I asked.

"They don't need to know shit," said the one with the rifle.

"It's alright, Tom. I want to tell them. Besides, they knew the bodies were there, I promise you. Come on, admit, you knew they were there."

We said nothing.

"That's alright," August said. "I'm going to tell you all about it."

"Why the hell should you?" Tom said.

"Know what they're looking for, that's why."

"You don't have to tell them why, just what it looks like," Tom said.

"I know that," August said.

I could tell August was the kind of guy that wanted to brag on himself, thought he was a real top cat and wanted everyone to know it. I thought of a line Tony Curtis had in movie, a line about wanting to be Charlie Potatoes, meaning the big man. That was this guy. He knew too it didn't matter what he told us. Later on we'd be in the river with the other three.

"What do you think it is down there?" August asked us.

"Your mother's china," Leonard said.

"Oh, nigger, you are not in a position to crack wise," August said.

"Just making a guess," Leonard said.

I had learned that Leonard, under the direst of times, couldn't help himself with the smart remark. I'm not much better. I think it was the way we coped with intense stress, and maybe in Leonard's case he just didn't give a shit. I, on the other hand, gave a big shit, and didn't want to end up with a bullet in my head with my body absorbing river water.

“That isn’t any guess. Them three down there, that’s the Smiths. What they called themselves anyway. You can call them dead now. Thought they were going to be clever. Said they’d buy some smack from us, that they’d come to our place by boat, on account of we live on the river.”

“Best reason to come by boat,” Leonard said.

“What?” said August.

“If you didn’t live on the river, then they’d come by car, maybe airplane.”

“Keep it up, coon. Keep it up.”

“Shut up,” Tom said. “They don’t need to know any of this shit.”

“I like telling it,” August said.

August picked up where he left off. It was easy to see that telling us what a smart and bad motherfucker he was gave him great pleasure. The other two could care less, and we were a new audience. It gave him a reason to hear himself talk.

“Smiths had it in their mind they were going to rob us and take the dope, sell it to hippies some place. Dallas. Austin. Shit, I don’t know, San Francisco. They talked like Yankees, so I don’t know. But they been in this area for a while, and they been buying, a bit here and there, and I guess they were storing it up, going to resell it up north, and they heard about us. We met them at the feed store, and they said they had the money and we said we had the dope. So we made a deal.

“Know what they did?”

“You already told us,” Leonard said. “They robbed you.”

This didn’t deter August.

“They came down the river in their boat. They had guns. We did too, but they surprised us. Nice looking couple, and they had that kid with them. Quiet kid. Either trained to keep his mouth shut or quiet by nature.”

“Would have been nice had you been that way,” Tom said.

August ignored him.

“I figure they thought it made them look normal going down the road in a van pulling a boat loaded with dope, ’cause no one would think to look at them for such a thing. Shit, we were going to rob them and they outfoxed us and got the jump on us. So they got our stash. It’s wrapped in plastic and duct taped and in a cooler that’s taped, and they took off with it. They had us open it up, show what was in it while they held guns on us, then they had us tape and fasten it all up, load it on their boat, but, you see, they fucked up. They should have wrecked our boat, ’cause soon as they left we went after them. We got a better and faster boat. We caught up with them back river a ways. You know what we did to really hurt them. We shot that fucking kid right in the head. First thing. *Bam.* That made them scream, it truly did, didn't it, Tom?"

Tom nodded, said, "They shouldn't have put us in that position."

"That's right," August said. "They put us there. Then we had some fun with the woman and we gave them a bit of a lesson with fire and such, shot them in the head. But you know what happened? I don't even think they knew it. They had gone over some shallows and hit some rocks, and it took the bottom of their boat out, and it sunk with them on it, and us having to swim back to our boat right when we were about to bring the dope out. When it started going down, it went down fast as a fucking torpedo."

"It was already going down," said Tom, "but no one noticed. We were all busy."

"That's right," August said. "But then we're done with them and there's water on our feet, and down the boat goes, and by this time it's night, and we decided we'd wait until the morning. You see, we got their money back, but they had our dope. We figured going down in that water at night . . . Well, we didn't know how deep it was, but we knew that boat sunk like a fucking stone. We knew too, come the next day we could check it out. We marked the place and went on home. Next day the sheriff, who I might add is running for election, which means he needs a good drug bust or catching someone peddling pussy to raise his profile, came around. We got a kind of rep for things the cops don't like, so he chooses us, comes sniffing around our place with a warrant, having heard something from somebody about this or that. Thin evidence."

"But they were right," said Tom. "We were selling dope. It's bigger money than pussy. Guy gets dope, likes it, pretty soon he can't think about pussy anymore. He thinks about dope. And women, they like that dope just fine too. Like it good as anybody."

"Tom, shut up, I'm telling this. So there we were all day while the county turned over row boats, looked through this boat, searched our house and the sheds. They looked everywhere but up the dog's ass. It took them some time to do it, but they didn't find anything. All our dope was in that boat at the bottom of the river. Our family business with that goddamn family, and in a way they done us a favor. They took with them what would have gotten our dicks in a crack. We had just put it out for show, to get their money, and then they took it, and it worked out fine.

"So here were are, come to get the dope, and guess the fuck what? After all that shit with the cops, us waiting until they had their hands out of our pants, well, it's night again. We brought some good lights, some underwater lights, and we thought we might go down and get it, but decided to just stay here until morning. Then we found you two.

You're like an answer to a fucking prayer, that's what you are. You know what I'm thinking?"

"Yeah," Leonard said. "With us here, why wait until daybreak?"

"Now you got it. You know, you're a pretty smart nigger."

"I'll tell my teachers," Leonard said.

"What's it look like, Jaret?" August asked, and now we knew the other guy's name.

"Like water," Jaret said.

"Come on, goddamnit," August said.

"It ain't as muddy as a bit ago," Jaret said. "It ain't clear, but it ain't all that muddy either."

"So you're going to send us down there to get something out of a boat we can't even see?" Leonard said.

Tom looked out at the water. "It's stopped raining and the water is running fast. My guess is it'll clear up some more in an hour or so."

August studied us. "Well, boys, you got some time to sit there and think. You want to pulls your dicks, or one another's dick, then now's the time."

He laughed at his own joke.

I studied the man with the gun. He was our main worry, but those other two were big guys, especially August, and from the looks of them, they'd been in a few brawls.

We kept sitting, and August kept talking. He was like a chatter box on speed. He just wouldn't shut up. And then I got it. He was on speed.

August talked about himself. He talked about his family, and during the conversation it was made certain that those two guys were his brothers. He talked about his old man, and how he was working under a car on a creeper, just his legs sticking out, and how he had gotten killed when the jack holding up the car slipped and the car dropped and crushed him. Tom laughed when August told that story. It got funnier for Tom when August talked about the reason the jack slipped. August said he kicked the jack loose holding up the car and when it fell on his father it made a squishing sound and shit ran out of his father's pants leg. Then there was a pool of piss and blood that oozed out from under the car along with the shit.

"Ah hell, we don't know you actually kicked that jack," Jaret said. "It could have slipped."

"I kicked it," said August.

"If you say so," said Jaret. "I don't think you have the balls for that."

"You think what you want," August said.

This bothered August enough for him to go quiet for a while, but alas, it didn't last. He started talking again.

"Old man disrespected our mother once too often," August said. "I had to take him out. Also, he beat our asses all the time. Mine especially. I think he liked how that belt sounded against my back or upside my head. I got a scar over my right ear where he hit me with the buckle. Had more light, I'd show it to you."

"I don't care to see your scars," Leonard said.

August by now was ignoring Leonard. He had stories to tell and he was going to tell them if we were interested or not. He told us about a calf he used to get behind, climb up on a stump, and fuck. He talked about that calf like it was a long lost girlfriend. I kept thinking a prom story would come up next. He told how the calf became a cow and he had to take a step stool out to the pasture to fuck it after a time because its ass got tall. Told us how once when he was laying the meat into it, his words, the cow shit and filled his pants, and how this happened one morning right before school and the school bus was coming, and there he was with pants full of shit.

He seemed to think that was a natural and funny thing.

Later, he and the family ate the girlfriend.

"Old man, before he was crushed, of course," August said, as if we might not put that together, "used to say you got to break them calves in early on account of once the bull gets to them they get stretched out like sweat pants."

And so it went. We learned everything about August but his shoe size, and I think that was coming, but Jaret said, "It's pretty clear now. With a light, I think they can see what they're doing."

"Yeah," Tom said. "We got some divers' masks in there and you can wear them. We were going to."

"You still can," Leonard said.

"No," Tom said, "we got you. You drown or a gator eats you or a snake bites you, it don't mean shit to us. But if we drown, that means a big shit."

"Not to us," Leonard said.

"I figure that's right," said Tom

"But no diver's gear other than a mask?" I said, as if I had any idea how to use diver's gear, but the idea of air tanks was appealing.

"The masks," said Tom. "That's it. Hope you can hold your breath good."

"Let me get this straight," Leonard said. "We go down there and get your dope, come back up, you're going to let us go?"

"Sure," August said.

"I don't know that I believe that," Leonard said.

"It don't matter what you believe," August said. "We plan to kill you, at least this way you got a little longer to stay alive, and you come up with our goods, who the fuck knows? Might feel happy enough to let you go. If not, well, you had a refreshing swim, didn't you?"

They washed the masks in the water so they would stick to our faces better and gave them to us. We put them on and went over and stood by the side of the boat like they said. We took off our clothes, like they said, stripped down to our shorts. We stood near naked in the chill night air and the harsh light that August was pointing at us.

"Here's what you do," Tom said. "You swim down there, and you go in the cabin, where the bodies are, and you look to the right, and there's a built-in wall chest there. They had the dope there, and we left it there while we did what we did with them, and then the goddamn boat sunk. You get it out of that and bring it up. Probably take both of you. Swim it up and give it to us and we'll let you go. You don't even have to get back in the boat. We'll let you swim off."

"And take this with you," August said.

He went inside the cabin and came out with a big handheld underwater light. "Use this, you can see better."

He handed me the light.

"And if it's too muddy to see even with the light?" Leonard said.

"You better hope you can feel your way, because you come up without that dope, we're going to shoot a hole in you."

"They might have to go down a couple times, find it, come back for a breath and get it," Jaret said. "We could tie a rope off here, let them take it down and tie it to the boat. That would give them a line to follow when they come up, make things quicker and easier."

"Guess that's right," August said, and rubbed under his nose. "So, okay. You get to come up once, maybe twice, but third time better be the fucking charm, or just stay down there and drown."

August looped one end of the rope through the boat's railing and gave the length of rope to Leonard.

I glanced at Leonard. He gave me a smile thin as the edge of a switchblade.

We took deep breaths and went over the side.

It was like being inside a cloud, the mud was so thick, but we kept swimming down, close together because I had the light. Finally we swam under the mud and it was a lot clearer. Not like it had been before when we first found them, but you could make out things pretty good.

Something heavy bumped into me, and I twisted away from it, and even in the grimy underwater light, I could see it was the child. He had come free of the open cabin door and was floating about in the river. It was eerie seeing him swirling around there, and the water kept shoving him at me, and when he touched me it felt like rubber. I pushed the little body away from me and that's when Leonard grabbed my shoulder.

I turned and looked at him. He was right in front of my face. He raised his hand and pointed down. I got it together and shined the light down and swam after the beam. Below we saw the boat, the cabin rising up, and the grasses and vines on the bottom of the river were swirling around. It wasn't like when we were down there in daytime. It was like an underwater haunted house.

The river was running fast and it was hard to swim in it, but it was easier the lower we got, another couple of feet down and it was totally different, calm almost. I was glad we got to the boat, but I was starting to lose my breath and knew I had to pop up pretty soon.

Leonard looked as if he was doing okay. He tied his end of the rope off on the boat's railing, and then he was swimming inside the cabin, and I swam after him. The man and woman were twisting about in the murky light, bumping against one another and against the walls and the glass of the cabin, like they were doing some kind of macabre dance.

It was all I could do to not focus on them.

We found the built-in chest, and Leonard tugged at it, but it was staying in place. I went over and hung the light on a wall hook for jackets. The light shone down on the chest. I helped Leonard tug at it. We fought at it, trying to open it for a while, and then I patted him on the shoulder and pointed up.

Leonard nodded.

I took the light off the hook, went out of the cabin, and started following the rope up. When we broke the surface, all three of them were leaning over looking at us. I let the line shine in their eyes a moment until one of them cursed, and then I pulled it away from them and held onto it. I pushed my mask up.

"Well, where the fuck is it?" August said.

"Still down there," I said.

"Why is that?"

"Because we ran out of breath, and opening the chest underwater isn't that easy."

"That sounds like a personal problem," Tom said.

"Be that as it may, it's fastened tight," I said.

"We need a hatchet, or a knife, or something to pry up the chest, or break it open," Leonard said.

"Why would I give you assholes a hatchet?" August said.

"I just told you," Leonard said.

"Hell, give it to them," Jaret said. "Tom's got the rifle."

August stood there looking at us hanging on the rope, then went away and came back with a machete that had a little leather loop for hanging on the wrist or on a belt. It was in a green, canvas scabbard, and he pulled it out of the scabbard and handed it to Leonard.

"Take this, and goddamn it, don't cut the cooler open. Don't break it apart or the water will ruin it."

"Got it," I said.

"It gets ruined, you get shot," August said.

"We might need to come up once more for air," Leonard said. "It takes it out of you. The current is strong and it wears you out to tug on that goddamn chest lid."

"You come up a third time and you don't have that chest," August said, "I shoot you, and we wait until morning and clear water and get it ourselves."

Tom pointed the rifle at us. "I'm thinking one of you, with a little work, could pull that chest up. I don't like there's two of you out there."

"It takes two," Leonard said. "Listen fellows, all we want to do is swim down and get it and bring it up so you can let us go."

Tom pulled a face, said, "Alright. Get on with it."

Down we went again, this time following the rope Leonard had fastened, me with the light and Leonard with the machete. It was a lot quicker using the rope as a guide, pulling ourselves down it instead of swimming all the way.

We got to the boat and with a lot of work we worked the wall chest open, and there was the ice chest inside, wrapped up in duct tape. First thing Leonard did was he took the machete and cut the tape loose with a few slices, and then he got the lid open by prying it with the machete, and then he stabbed into the wrapped bags inside. The dope came out in a white cloud, and I figured fish would be dying, or a week from now begging another hit. Water moccasins would be swimming in formation, conducting a water ballet. I pushed back from the stuff. It all went up to the top of the cabin and floated there, then slowly the cloud spread and it eased out of the open doorway as if it were a living thing.

Leonard let the machete dangle off his wrist by the thong, and then we swam out of the cabin, Leonard taking the lead. We kept swimming close to the bottom, kept at it until I thought my lungs would burst and I was starting to feel dizzy. Leonard got up close to me and took the light from me and pointed it and we swam where he pointed the beam. Finally we started rising up because we needed air. As we rose through a cloud of silt, Leonard cut the light and let go of it. I felt it bump my leg as it went down.

Sudden loss of the light turned the river black as compost, but we kept rising up, and then there was a pattern in the water made by moonlight and tree shadow. It was like a camouflage netting had been tossed over the surface of the river. We broke the water lightly, just our heads above it, pushed our masks up, and looked back. We could see the boat sitting in its spot, the three dumb asses leaning over the side, looking down. The boat lights gave us a view of the heroin rising to the surface in a white foam all around the boat, and then the foam subsided and the river began to darken again.

I heard August scream, “Goddamn it.”

I was hoping they thought we had drowned, dropped the ice chest and it had busted open. Leonard touched my shoulder, nodded toward the riverbank.

We swam as silently as we could and came to a series of old stumps in the water. The land and its dead tree stumps had been claimed by the river over time, but it was shallow there, and as we made our way to shore it was hard to be silent. I expected them to hear us splashing about and bullets would crash into us before we made the riverbank.

The clouds were gone now and the moon was bright. Tendrils of light twisted in through the trees like silver gauze. With our skin still wet it was cool out of the water, and though it was not a winter night, there was a breeze, and it was steady. We worked our way deeper into the tree line.

My feet hurt from all the pokes it got from forest debris, and I figured what might be an end to a perfect night was to be snake bit or scorpion stung, if not shot in the back of the head, but we managed to finally get deep into the trees. The wind was less cool there. We tossed the face masks and started moving more quickly. Once we surprised a possum. It hissed and made me jump three feet back, but it rustled into the greenery and out of sight, looking there in the mottled moonlight like a giant rat.

We stopped to whisper to one another for a while, figuring what to do next, decided we would find a spot in the trees where we could see the river and their boat. When we made that spot, we saw Tom hand his rifle to August, and then he started taking his clothes off. He stripped completely naked and eased over the side where the rope was, and then we couldn't see him anymore.

Squatting there in the woods, looking through gaps in low-hanging limbs and splits in thick-leafed brush, a lot of time passed. We trembled in the cool breeze. It was obvious August and Jaret were starting to get worried. They paced the deck. Finally, Jaret stripped down and went over the side.

I don't know how much time passed, couple of minutes maybe, before Jaret came up. His head rose over the edge of the boat as he pulled himself inside, then he and August started pulling on the rope. After some time they bent down over the side and hoisted Tom's body into the boat. It flopped on the deck like a big, white fish.

I got it then. Tom had gone down to see if there was some dope to be saved. He followed the rope, but we had the big light, and he got confused, trapped in the cabin and couldn't get out. Something like that. Jaret had groped around down there and found him and found the rope again, unfastened it and tied Tom's body to it, and came up by the rope. Then he and August had pulled Tom up.

There came a sob so loud and sad from August, that even under the circumstances I felt his pain. Jaret kept saying over and over, "Those goddamn bastards. Goddamn it. We should have shot them soon as we seen them."

Leonard said, "Ha, the fucker drowned."

I was learning Leonard was short on sympathy for assholes.

They were there for a while, crying and bawling like children, and all that did was make Leonard snicker. I on the other hand felt damn bad about it, but wasn't sure why. They would have killed us as easily as looking at us if we had brought that dope chest up. Maybe even tortured us like they did the family, just because they could. All in all, we had turned out alright, not dead, not in the depths of the river with bottles stuck up our asses.

I don't know how long we shivered there, but eventually August went inside the cabin with Jaret. The boat motor fired up, lights came on, and the boat made a loop in the river and started back the way it came.

We eased down to our camp site then, got spare clothes out of our packs and got dressed. Neither of us had spare shoes. The only way back to Marvel Creek was by river, and that meant we had to go the way they had gone.

I don’t know how long we waited, but it was a long time. We didn’t want to wait until daylight, because if we came upon them they would be sure to see us, but we were hoping to give them enough time to get off the river and pass wherever they were in the night. From the way they talked, they lived right along the bank.

Leonard had me hold the flashlight while he took the little tool kit he had, and slipped the motor cover off. He messed with it awhile, but couldn’t do anything with it. If we went back to Marvel Creek we’d be paddling up river for hours, and I wasn’t sure we could do it, fight the current all night. And still there was that whole thing about maybe being seen passing wherever they lived. Hell, they might even be looking for us.

We put our supplies back in the boat, slid the boat down to the river. The river carried us along with its flow, away from the way we had come, and we let it, using our paddles to speed up the process. It was a safer way to go, but it was going to be a while before we came to any place that was worth stopping.

Day eased away the night, and the water lit up with sunrise and was rust-colored, then within minutes, it turned dark brown. The air was cool with wind for a while, but it wasn’t long before it turned still and hot. We paddled onward.

There were fishing camps along the way, but we didn’t stop to talk to anyone there, as we couldn’t be certain who those three knew along the river. At some point someone took a shot at us, and we paddled really hard. No more shots came.

Eventually we came to a clearing off to our left, and we paddled for that, pulled the boat on shore, then sat back down in it to rest. We hadn’t been there long when we heard an engine groaning, and all of a sudden a black pickup barreled up beside us. It was going so fast I thought it would go into the river, but it didn’t. The truck braked and the doors slammed and two young men got out. I thought, okay, now what the fuck?

They came down and saw us sitting there in the boat.

“You have to put it in the water, you want to go anywhere,” said one of the boys. He was blond and stocky and had a little bit of blond fuzz on his chin that looked so thin you got the impression he could have wiped it off with a rag. The other was a darker-haired boy with a five o’clock shadow at the break of day.

“We’ve just stopped for a while,” I said.

The blond boy nodded. “Fishing?”

“Have been,” Leonard said. “Didn’t catch a thing.”

“You ain’t got no shoes?” said the dark-haired boy.

“We just ain’t wearing any,” Leonard said.

The dark-haired boy nodded. “I got some nigger friends” he said.

“That’s nice,” Leonard said. “I got some cracker buddies.” He pointed at me. “There’s one now.”

This made them laugh out loud. I was glad for that. I wasn’t sure they were the humorous type, but turned out they were. I had yet to determine which direction that humor could go.

The blond said, “Shit, man, I took a shot at you guys earlier.”

“Oh,” I said. “That was you?”

I thought it was about to all go south, end up with us being shot and butt-fucked while dead.

“Yeah,” said the blond. “I thought you was my brother.”

“Ah,” I said. I didn’t examine that comment any further. I merely said, “Is there a town nearby. Our boat motor played out, and we thought we might get it fixed.”

“What’s wrong with it?” the blond said.

“It don’t work,” Leonard said.

The blond laughed. “You’re a hoot. I always say, you want to laugh, hang with niggers.”

“That’s why we black folks are here, to make you laugh,” Leonard said.

The blond boy studied Leonard for a moment. “I like you.”

“I’m glad,” Leonard said.

“Let’s look at that motor,” the blond said. “Leroy, look at the fucker.” Then to us, “Leroy could fix the dead Jesus.”

Leroy went back to the pickup, leaned into the bed and pulled out a tool box. We got out of the boat and he got in. He popped the sheath off the motor and pottered around a bit, poking it with a screw driver, and after a while he popped it with a hammer a bit, then took a wrench to it. Within fifteen minutes he had pulled the rope out of where it had disappeared, and he managed to get enough of it to go back through the gap in the sheath after he put that back on. He tied the end of the rope over the handle of the hammer, and let that clamp up against the gap. Then he used the bit of rope with the pull handle lying in the boat to fasten it back together with the rope he had saved, freeing his hammer and making a big knot so it wouldn’t slip back through the gap.

“You ain’t got as much pull room,” said the dark-haired boy, “but it ought to go now.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I haven’t got any money to give you, but if you want my fishing tackle, you can have that.”

“Naw,” said the blond boy. “You’ll need that. We don’t fish much anyway. We come down here to shoot turtles mostly. We can help you push the boat in the water, you’re ready to go.”

“We are,” I said.

They helped us get the boat back in the water, and as we were climbing in, the dark-haired boy said, "You fellows want a beer? We got some cold ones."

"I'm going to pass," I said.

"Sure," Leonard said. "I'll have a beer, and I wouldn't fight you off if you offered me a pretzel."

The blond laughed. "You niggers are funny."

"What we black folk tell ourselves all the time," Leonard said.

"Y'all really do that?" said the blond boy.

"Naw," Leonard said. "I'm just fucking with you."

That made both boys laugh. The dark-haired one brought Leonard a beer from the truck, handed it to him without him having to get out of the boat. I used my paddle to push off.

"Thanks again," I said.

"Sure," said the blond.

"Don't shoot at us no more," I said.

"Naw. I thought I was fucking with my brother."

Leonard pulled the rope on the motor and the motor caught and away we went.

Eventually we turned the boat around and headed to Marvel Creek. We weren't as scared with a motor to speed us on. Nobody shot at us again, and we didn't see August and Jaret. When we got back to Leonard's truck and fastened the boat on the boat rack, I used the pay phone outside the feed store to call the cops. I told them about what we had found. I told them about August, Jaret, and Tom. I told them about the bodies in the boat and about the dope. I gave them a kind of overview of all that had happened, and did my best to indicate where the sunken boat was. I didn't give our names. I didn't want to be pulled into it. I didn't trust how the law would take our presence. They might think we were a part of the whole thing.

We went home after that, and the next day I read in the local paper how the Robbie family, which was the first time I'd heard their last name, had been arrested for murder, and how the law found Tom's body on their property. They were digging a hole out behind the house to bury him when the law came up with a search warrant. Eventually the Robbie boys, perhaps with the persuasion of rubber hoses and phone books upside the head, admitted they had killed the family, and showed the law where the sunken boat was. Of course, there was no more dope. The man's and the woman's bodies were claimed, but they didn't find the child.

About a week before Christmas I read in the paper that the kid's remains were found caught up in some stumps and brush. There wasn't much left of him by then, of course, but it was the child alright.

The little black mammy figurine, which was about the size of a chest piece, quit being one of Leonard's fishing sinkers. He fastened it to his key chain, and when he gets a new ride, he always moves the figurine to his latest set of keys.

Sometimes, I lay down at night, and there, in the dark of my dreams, swirling around and around, is that poor unfortunate child, his head blown apart. It's a dream that's been with me so long, I can from time to time wish him back into a swirling cloud of shadow, push him and the knowledge of what some people can do to others, far away from me.

9.

Stopping for Coffee

We finished up out at Marvel Creek and tooled back to my house. Brett and Chance and Buffy were home. The car was parked in its spot in the car port.

When we came in Brett was at the table playing checkers with Chance. Our shepard, Buffy, was lying under the table, her head on Chance's foot.

"Who's winning?"

"Brett is," Chance said. "I thought I had her a couple of times, but she blindsided me."

"She cheats a little," I said.

"Do not," Brett said, lifting her head so quick her thick mane of red hair snapped up and the clasp on it came loose and her hair cascaded over her shoulders like a fiery water fall. "Now look what you made me do."

"This," Leonard said, "is when you grab a checker, when she's picking up a hair tie, or push one closer."

"Not likely," Brett said. "I memorize the board."

"She does, you know," Chance said.

Chance, my daughter, was just the opposite of Brett. She was dark-skinned, with dark-eyes and hair as deeply dark as the bottom of a coal mine. They were both lovely. They were both wearing footy pajamas and had cups of hot chocolate near the board.

"How was the club?"

"Kasey was good," Chance said. "We hung out a little after she got off stage. I got my CD signed. The food there was lousy."

"How was Buffy?" I said.

"She was okay. I think toward the end she just wanted a place to crap and then lie down," Brett said. "The noise and the crowd made her nervous."

"Were there a lot of dogs?" Leonard said.

"A few. It doesn't work as well as you might think. The dogs get nervous with all the noise. I give it another six months, and then that place closes."

"Is there any more hot chocolate?" I said.

"If you make it," Brett said.

"Oh," I said.

"Vanilla cookies?" Leonard asked.

"Nope," Brett said.

"Animal crackers, though," Chance said. "In the cabinet by the sink."

I opened the cabinet and got out a large canister of animal crackers. My mouth was already watering.

"Those would be nice with chocolate," Leonard said. "I mean, if any was made."

"Wouldn't they?" I said. "Oh, okay. I'll make us some. But stay out of the animal crackers until I do."

I heated up some chocolate and poured us cups and we sat at the table with the ladies. They had wrapped up their game and Brett was folding up the checker board and gathering up the checkers and slipping them into the box.

"So, you boys been playing?" Brett said.

"Some," I said. "We punched each other and rode around for a while."

"Did you and Leonard do this when you were kids?" Chance said. "Drink chocolate and eat animal crackers?"

"We didn't meet until we were seventeen," I said. "And had we met before then, might not have been so easy to hang out."

"Oh, yeah, of course," Chance said. "I forgot. My history is shorter. How bad was it then?" she asked.

"Darling," Leonard said. "You don't want to know."

"I don't know things are all that better," Brett said.

"Oh hell, sure they are," Leonard said. "They got a ways to go, but they are nothing like they used to be. Let me tell you, those times blew. Me and Hap grew up in a racist, mean-spirited time, and I have never been one to say race has held me back, nor has being a homo, but it was worse then, at least in those respects."

"Still a lot underground, though," I said.

"Shit," Brett said. "It's not all that underground. Last few years, they're surfacing like dead bodies floating up. It's actually the change that's scaring the mean-spirited. The idea that it won't be like it used to be, even if it was never like they think it was, drives them crazy."

"On the same page," I said.

"Yeah, you're right," Leonard said. "But now I get to go in a store and buy a Coke and not have people looking at me. I can sit down in a restaurant and eat. I was a boy, couldn't do that. Neither could my uncle, and he wasn't happy about it. He caused a few scenes. Amazing he lived long as he did. He bucked that system. Being a homo wasn't all that easy for me either. For the dumb asses, being gay was the same as being a child molester. Didn't matter that child molesters come from both sides of the fence, you got labeled that, like all we did was hang around bus stop restrooms waiting to snatch a child and carry them into a stall in the toilet. I pushed forward no matter what. I think it made me stronger, it being like that and me going up against it."

"I think it was an unnecessary barrier and a burden," I said. "But you're right. It was worse, though if some people have their way, it'll go back to the dark ages."

"Sounds horrible," Chance said.

"Give Chance a history lesson," Leonard said. "Tell her about the café."

It was something Leonard knew about, but neither Brett nor Chance did. I didn't like talking about it. Didn't like thinking about it. But . . .

"Yeah," I said, "you ought to know. Ought to understand how things were, how they've changed, and how we don't want them to slip back into that old groove. Not in any kind of way."

Chance gained a serious look. "What happened, Daddy?"

On that afternoon I was out driving. I was sixteen and had owned my license for only a short time. I was going from LaBorde to Tyler, not for any reason, but just because I could. I had tried to find someone to ride with me, a girl hopefully, but I hadn't had any luck, so I went on my own.

It was a nice day at first, but then it got cloudy and started to rain. I hadn't planned to stop at the café, but the rain seemed to have come out of nowhere and it was very serious. By the time I reached No Enterprise, a place about a third of the way between LaBorde and Tyler, the wipers on my '64 Chevy Impala were working hard and accomplishing little. The ditches and gullies in the town were rolling with water and the water was flooding over them and into the street. I could barely see what was in front of me. I did manage to see some lights through the rain, off to the left, and when I felt I could safely cross the road, I did, and pulled in where the lights were. It was a café.

I decided to wait out the rain. I sat in the car to do it, and then I thought, well, if I'm going to wait I might as well go inside and have some coffee. The idea of being able to go inside and do that somehow made me feel like an adult. I had never really done that before, driven along by myself and stopped somewhere to have coffee on my own. It sounds like a little thing, but right then I thought it was a swell and amazing idea.

Jumping out of the car, I ran inside, shedding water and wiping my feet at the door. The place smelled of hamburgers, the way they only could smell back then when I was a kid and they were cooked on old black grills that were never truly cleaned by anything other than heat and scraping off the grease with a spatula.

I went in and sat down at a booth on the side and waited for my waitress. There were three older men sitting at a table, and two guys I judged to be in their thirties at a booth near the kitchen.

The waitress, an older woman with a slight limp and badly dyed hair that made it look blue, came over and asked me what I wanted. I told her coffee, but by then I had added a hamburger to the order and some French fries. Those burgers cooking really smelled good.

"I think they should bomb the whole country and come home," said one of the older men at his table. He was talking loud and so were the men with him. "Bunch of yellow niggers is all they are, ought to bomb the whole damn country into sticks and mud holes, is what I think."

"We just fought them yellow savages, didn't we. Goddamn Japs," said one of the other men. He was a fat little guy with a face like a jack-o-lantern.

"Well, it's been a while since then," said the third man at the table. He wore glasses and had on a business suit. The other two were wearing khaki shirts and pants and work boots, and had their hats hanging on the tops of their chairs. The suited man had his hat in a chair beside him. It was a very nice fedora.

"They're still Japs," said the man who had been talking the most. "I say the only good Jap is a dead Jap."

"Actually, they're Vietnamese," said the man in the suit.

"You can call them Siamese or Vietnamese, Chinese, or whatever, but they're all slopes to me."

"China was on our side during the war," the well-dressed man said.

"I don't give a shit," said the loud man. "I don't give a good goddamn one way or another."

"There are women in here," said the waitress from behind the counter where she was standing and eating potato chips out of a bag. "Watch your language and taking the Lord's name in vain."

"What ladies?" said the loudmouth.

"Me, Charles. Me. I'm a lady."

This revelation appeared to startle the loudmouth.

"Yeah, well, sorry, Louise. I got a bit het up."

"Yes you did," she said.

I glanced at the younger men in the booth. They had been talking when I came in, but now they were merely sitting quietly, eating hamburgers and drinking Co-colas out of the bottle.

Right then, a sharp-dressed black man came out of the kitchen and partway into the café. He looked about thirty, in good shape, with his hair cut close to his head. He was holding open the kitchen door, which was on a spring.

"I don't mean to bother," he said, "but we been waiting a long time."

"You got to go back to your place," Louise said. "You got a place back there. You know that."

"I'm just saying we been waiting a long time, and I don't think the cook has even started ours."

"He may not have. We serve white people first. You don't like it, you go on down the road a piece. You might find something there."

"I was just checking," he said.

"You ought not come through the kitchen like that. You go on back now."

The black man seemed to let his thoughts linger in front of him for a moment, and then he went back into the kitchen letting the swinging door swing shut on its spring.

"Damn niggers," Louise said. "They been listening too much to that Martin Luther Coon."

"It's alright if a woman says damn, but I can't say what I said," the loudmouth said.

"It's my place. I can say what I want, and I can serve who I want, and I'm thinking I might not serve those niggers at all. And I didn't use the Lord's name in vain."

She let her face crease, and then she let it un-crease and came around to my table with more coffee. She poured my cup full.

"You doing okay, Sugar?"

"I am," I said. "You want to feed that man first, I'm in no hurry."

"Niggers wait their turn," she said.

"Isn't it his turn?"

"It's his turn when I say it is," she said. "Don't go feeling sorry for niggers. You do, next thing you know they're up on your porch and trying to get their nose in your house. You can't be good to them, they take advantage."

She went around to the table with the older men and filled their coffee cups. They were talking about something or another, but I had tuned them out by then. I kept thinking about that poor man waiting on his food out back and the waitress and the cook not getting it fixed for him.

While I was waiting, Louise went behind the counter and the black man came back through the swinging doors. He said, "Really, we just need three hamburgers and some chips, some Co-colas. We been waiting near an hour."

"Didn't I tell you not to come through the kitchen," Louise said.

"Colored got the porch out there."

"The screened porch with the holes in the screen that flies come through?" said the black man. I could tell he was starting to lose patience.

"You can't come through the kitchen," Louise said.

"There's a black cook in there, he comes through the kitchen."

"When he goes home, he goes out the back way. I ain't going to ask you again. You go on now. Fact is, you pack that nigger family of yours up and get on down the road."

The black man stood there. He was holding the swinging door. "Let me buy some chips and some Cocolas and we'll go on."

"You'll go on, and without chips or Co-colas," Louise said.

The one called Charles, the loudmouth, got up and came to the edge of the counter where it was open and you could go behind it. He was looking right at the black man. He said, "In my day we tarred and feathered smart niggers."

"Your day is still here," the black man said.

This made the older man turn red.

"Yeah," he said, "it is, and sometimes niggers come to the wrong places and talk the wrong kind of talk."

"I'm talking alright," said the black man.

The other khaki dressed man at Charles' table stood up and came over to stand by the loudmouth.

The older man in the suit didn't move from the table. He said, "Hey, it's alright. Just go on back and wait. They'll get you those burgers."

"No we won't," Louise said. "Get on down the road, coon."

"Look, we been traveling all night. We been traveling a few days now, all the way from New Jersey. We got family in LaBorde. We just want something to eat."

"You can get it somewhere else," Louise said.

"You heard," said Charles the loudmouth.

"I fought for my country," the black man said. "I was in Korea."

This jumped out of his mouth as if it had been hiding behind his teeth, waiting to pounce.

"I was in Korea too." It was one of the younger men at the other booth. They had been so quiet, I had almost forgotten they were there. "Hell, lady, give the man some chips and some Co-colas."

"I'm not doing that." She reached under the counter and pulled out a sawed-off baseball bat and shook it at the black man.

"I was in Chosen Reservoir, so that bat doesn't scare me," said the black man.

"Give me the bat," said the loudmouth. "I can scare him with it."

The black man didn't move. He stood there holding the door to the kitchen open.

"That's enough," said the younger man, and he got up and went over and reached over the counter and snatched the bat from Louise. He tossed it to his buddy in the booth. His buddy caught it, stood up and leaned against the wall by the booth and held the bat against his leg.

"We're done with this stuff," said the younger man. He pulled half a dozen chips loose from the rack and walked past the old man, went behind the counter, and gave them to the black man at the door. He went over and got four Co-colas out of the Coke box, opened them with the opener in the box, walked over to the black man with them, holding the drinks between the fingers of his two hands.

"You better not do that," said Charles the loudmouth.

"Stop me," said the younger man.

Charles did nothing. He remained where he was and boiled.

The black man put the sodas between his fingers, pressing them in tight against the rims of the drinks. He had the bags of chips pinched between his thumbs and fore fingers. Both hands were full of all he was going to get that day in that café.

The younger man said, "You ought to go on now."

"Thank you," said the black man.

"I was at Chosen," said the younger man.

"It was hell," said the black man.

"It was more than hell. Now go on. I've done what I can."

The black man went through the kitchen and disappeared with the door swinging shut behind him.

The young man pulled out his wallet and put some bills on the counter, went around it and back to where he had been eating.

"You ought to go on," Louise said. "We don't know you two, and you ought to go on."

"You heard the lady," Charles said.

"Now she's a lady," the other young man said. It was the first time he had spoken.

Their hamburgers were only partially eaten. The young man who had given the black man the food put some bills on the table and he and his buddy started for the door.

"Nigger lover," said the loudmouth.

"It's alright," said the man in the suit. "You boys are alright. But go on now."

"They ain't alright," said the other man in khakis. "Nigger lovers. Not a damn thing worse. I hate them more than the niggers. Nigger is what he is, but you boys are what you are by choice. One's scum by birth, but you two are the way you want to be."

The young man with the bat dropped it on the floor and he and his companion went out together. There was a window at my booth. I looked out of it. I watched them drive away in a shiny brown Buick.

Louise went to the phone on the wall and dialed someone and spoke soft and I didn't hear it. I could tell she was mad though.

"Tell them they probably took the main road," said Charles. "I doubt that coon is smart enough to keep out of sight, and them other two, they don't figure how bad they've stepped in it. Goddamn niggers. Goddamn nigger lovers."

"Don't call anyone, Louise," the older man in the suit said. "Don't do that. It's not worth it for some chips and Co-colas. That fellow paid you."

"You're sounding like a nigger lover yourself," Charles said. "Don't come around here no more."

"You don't own this café," the man in the suit said.

"But I do," Louise said. "Don't come around anymore. Eat somewhere else. I can't abide a nigger lover."

The older man in the suit got up and opened his wallet and put bills on the table. He was trembling. He put on his hat and went out.

I put money on the table for what I would have eaten, and went on out behind him. I watched the man in the suit walk toward his car. I walked over to him.

"Who would they call?" I said.

"It's best not to know," he said. "It's even best not to think about it."

He got in his car and slammed the door and drove off.

I got in mine and did the same. I tooled on toward Tyler, but after about twenty minutes I turned around and headed home. The air had gone out of my adventure.

I stopped for gas when I came back through No Enterprise, and when I got on down the road, I passed the car the two young men had been in. Their brown Buick was partially off the road and both the front doors were open, but I didn't see them anywhere.

10.
Apollo Red

"Alright, let me ask this?" Leonard said. "Would your father have stood up for that black man in the café?

"Probably not," I said. "He may have been too much of his time. I hate to say that, but that might be the truth."

"I don't know," Leonard said. "He seems to me to have been a pretty straight shooter."

"In most ways I think he was, but when it came to race, I can't say completely. I mean, yeah, he had his moments. He used to do a lot of things to help black people. I think when it was just him and them, he could be kind and generous. I think the whole thing with whites looking on, well, maybe he could go the other way."

"He was brave, though, and that often says something about a man."

"Bad people can be brave, Leonard. Not that I think he was bad. But, hey, he was brave."

"I know the stories," Leonard said.

"Tell me one, Daddy," Chance said.

I looked at Brett. She was holding her face up with a hand under her chin and an elbow on the table. She had heard all these stories.

"Okay," I said. "There's the one about a guy I call Apollo Red."

"Oh, I love this one," Leonard said.

"Even I feel a bit more alert," Brett said. "I like this one too. And just for the record, I know more stories than I'm going to let you tell about your dad tonight, but I want to put my two cents in and say he has always sounded like a hell of a man to me."

"I guess he was," I said. "He was my hero, flaws and all."

"Tell the story, Daddy."

Summer this happened, I must have been about seventeen, give or take a few months. I was down at the garage with my dad. He was washing tools in gasoline, cleaning them up, getting ready for me and him to drive to the café and get some lunch, though in that day and time we called the noon meal dinner, and the later meal supper. Yankees had lunch. We had dinner.

Dad was always greasy because he always worked. He cleaned up when he was home, but he was the kind of guy that could put on freshly cleaned and ironed khakis, and within an hour at the garage, look as if he had been living inside an oil drum. He worked hard and was good at it. He could fix any kind of car and make it hum. Odd thing was, we always drove junk. I guess it's like the barber who needs a haircut, the dentist who needs his teeth cleaned, the carpenter whose porch is sagging. Dad spent his time working on other people's cars, trying to put food on the table and a roof over our heads.

When he was eight his mother died, and his fondest memory of her was that once for Christmas she had given him an orange and a peppermint stick. He talked about it like it had happened yesterday, like the gift was as important as a new car. For him it was.

His father was a mean-spirited jackass that made Dad work in the cotton fields when he was eight. At that time and place this was acceptable behavior. Once, on the way to the fields, Dad fell off the pinto pony he rode and busted his ear drum. He rode the horse back home, hanging on its back, limp as a blanket.

His father took a horse whip to him, sent him back to work with blood running out of his ear. You'd think with an upbringing like that Dad would have passed it down the line, but he didn't. I never got one whipping, spanking, whatever you want to call it. And I'll tell you, I'm not altogether opposed to a slap on the ass over doing something that is going to get you killed, but that's a far cry from a beating. I never got either from him, though my mother once took a flyswatter to me for something I well deserved. It embarrassed me more than it hurt me.

For a poor kid I was what they called spoiled in those days, and what my mother called loved. Spoiled was going to work at fifteen instead of eight. At the time this happened I was working a night shift at Imperial Aluminum and going to school during the day, but this was the summer, so I was free until three thirty. I got off at midnight. If there were child labor laws against that, neither the boys I worked with or the aluminum chair company we worked for was aware of it.

So there I was, waiting on Dad to clean up a bit, and this guy comes driving up in this shiny gold Cadillac with a golden swan ornament on the hood, kind that was made mostly of plastic. When you turned on the lights the swan lit up. Coming down the road at night you saw the headlights, and dead center of the hood, a golden swan floating across the night, seemingly pulling the car along with stiff-winged elegance. During the day it was just a gold-plastic bird with a wire and a bulb inside of it.

The Caddy drove up as we were about to leave, and this raw-boned, redheaded guy with his short shirt sleeves rolled up to display his sizable biceps, got out. His hair was well oiled and slicked back on the sides and he had a bit of a duck tail in the back. He looked as if he were wearing a copper helmet.

He got out and stuck a cigarette in his mouth, walked about halfway up to the wide open garage doors, paused, lit his smoke carefully with a gold lighter, doing it for dramatic effect, like he was posing for a photo, and then he snapped the lighter closed with a metallic clap, stuffed it in his tight pants pocket, and strutted into the garage, his black boots with red explosions on the toe flashing before him. The toes on those things were so long and pointed he could have kicked a cockroach to death in a corner.

The man kind of glowed. It was as if a white trash Apollo had descended from heaven in his golden chariot, down from the sun to get his oil checked, have a chicken-fried steak with white gravy, and screw a mortal before ascending back to the heavens. In my mind I nicknamed him Apollo Red.

There was a lemon-colored Buick parked inside the garage, and it was the car my father had been working on that morning. Dad was drying his hands on a shop rag when this guy swaggered in, leaned a large hand on the Buick, said, “This car fixed yet?”

Dad studied Apollo Red the way a snake studies a frog.

“Yep,” Dad said.

“My girlfriend’s got to have it.”

“Alright,” Dad said. And he told the guy what the charge was.

“She’ll have to owe you,” said Apollo Red.

“Owes me for the last time I fixed it.”

“You didn’t fix it good enough.”

“That was the transmission, this here was a leak in the carburetor. I rebuilt it so she don’t have to buy a new one. I saved her about thirty dollars.”

“Did, did you?”

Dad just looked at him.

The fellow strayed an eyeball my way. “That your boy?”

“Yeah,” Dad said.

“Needs a haircut.”

“Yeah, he does.”

“I’d hold him down and trim it with a pocket knife.”

I had heard this shit a million times, and sometimes it seemed a million times a day. Lot of the kids then had long hair. The girls liked it and so did I. I thought this hair remark was an odd statement coming from a man that wore his hair the way he did. Probably as long as mine, but tamed with hair oil and spray and a lot of mirror examination and a fine-toothed comb. I started to say something smart, but somehow I didn't want to get into Dad's bubble. And something about that guy made me cautious, like knowing to avoid a dark alley at night in a strange city.

"He might need it, but it won't be you cutting it, or two more just like you," Daddy said.

That caused Apollo Red to purse his lips and knit his brows. His gray eyes became slits. Apollo Red thought a moment, almost loud enough to hear his thoughts running about in his head like mice on gravel, and then he turned his attention back to Dad.

"Girlfriend needs the car. She sent me to get it. She can't pay you nothing right now, but she's good for it, and I'm going to take it."

"Naw, she ain't taking it, and neither are you," Dad said. "Shouldn't have worked on it, knowing she don't pay her bills."

"Is that right?"

"Know she works at the beauty parlor and has a long walk to work without a car. Wanted to help her out, but I need at least half what she owes me for the last job. You got that, you can take it, though how you're going to drive two cars is a puzzle."

"I'll pull it out, park it in the lot, bring her to get it when she gets off work. She needs it tonight."

"Tell her to get the money," Dad said, and he was through talking. He walked by Red toward the garage doors. The doors were two wide metal sections you pulled closed and linked with a chain that ran through a hole in the doors, then you padlocked them together. Dad was about to pull the doors when Red said, "Wait a minute, old man."

Now at this time, Dad was pushing sixty, and that was back when sixty was old. He had gained a lot of weight and was tired looking, but back in his younger days he had been a boxer and a carnival wrestler. He had a kind of strength, especially when he was younger, that was almost startling. It wasn't built-up gym stuff, it was working-man muscle, compacted and stretched and flexed by hard work from the time he was a child. He didn't look like much, but neither does a stick of dynamite.

That said, this guy was young and well formed, and he moved like a cat. Just looking at him I knew he had done bad things and wanted to do more. I could feel a crackle in the air when he talked. It's that strange feeling you get when things aren't right, a sensation of something mean and nasty on the other side of some kind of dimensional barrier, waiting to get through a slit in time and space, enter into one of us humans and ignite our most evil traits, send us flailing with fist, snapping with teeth, slashing with knives, slinging clubs and tossing rocks.

Apollo Red, obviously annoyed, came outside and put his butt to the fender of his car, said, “You ain’t going nowhere till you give me that car.”

“Going to get something to eat,” Dad said.

Apollo Red reached down and took hold of his belt with both hands and hitched it up, like maybe he was making room for a set of testicles the size of bowling balls, and said, “You ain’t going nowhere, Greasy, less’n you give me that car.”

“Soon as I lock these doors you can watch me and my boy and my greasy clothes drive away, ’cause I’m done talking to you.”

This was like tossing gasoline on a fire for Apollo Red. “Tell you what, old man, I’ll sort your shit out right now, that’s what I’ll do.”

Dad looked at him. I had seen that gaze before, and let me tell you, you had to be a fucking idiot not to know there was something feral behind those near-black eyes, and that this was a man who had seen the devil and kicked his ass. But the devil had taken his beating twenty years earlier, not of recent from an overweight, old man pushing sixty.

Apollo Red bounced himself off of the car fender, cocked his hand back as he came forward, and I thought, well, I’m stepping in. Dad’s getting old, and I better help. But even though I was no slouch when it came to fighting, I was afraid. Apollo Red wasn’t merely a smart-ass kid that wanted to tussle a bit. He was a bad man and you could sense it.

All of these thoughts came quickly, of course, and as I prepared to jump into the fray, Dad lunged forward. He was standing still one moment, and in the next he was covering ground like a bullet.

And then it came. It was an impossibly fast and short uppercut, but it was still a punch from hell. Before Apollo Red’s punch could reach him, the upper cut rose, almost touching Red’s chest as it tracked toward his chin. To this day I imagine flames coming off of it, Dad was moving so fast. His shot hit while Apollo Red was still bringing his punch around. Dad’s flat fat fist caught Apollo Red solid under the chin, and it’s the only time in my life I have actually seen someone lifted that high off the ground from a punch. That loudmouth was launched like a space rocket, and the only thing missing was a monkey on board and radio contact with NASA.

The blow made a sickening sound, and that upper cut lifted him onto the fender of his car. He rolled then, caught his shirt in the flying bird hood ornament; tore it half off, and rolled onto the concrete drive. One leg started kicking, like maybe he was trying to stomp a bug in a ditch, and then Apollo Red’s head cocked back and he let out with a wheeze similar to steam hissing from a teapot. His eyes rolled up in his head like cherries in a slot machine. I almost expected him to spit coins.

And then he was still.

Corpse still.

I wouldn't have been surprised if vultures were already passing the word.

I went over, leaned down, and looked. Apollo Red's lips were blue. He may have been the sun god where he came from, but the god of lightning and thunder had just knocked the sunlight out of his ass.

I said, "Dad, I think you killed him."

Dad always carried a stub of a cigar in his shirt pocket, and as he walked over he pinched it from his pocket and poked it in his mouth. He scratched around in his pants pockets for a box of matches. When he found them, he took a match out slowly, struck it on the strike-strip on the side of the box, held the flame to that foul-smelling cigar. He shook the match and threw it down. He looked down at Red, turned his head from side to side like a curious dog, said, "Nah. He'll come around."

I wasn't so sure.

"You hit him hard, Daddy."

"Man's punch is the last thing to go."

I guess Dad might actually have been a little concerned, because we didn't go to dinner. He stood near the guy's car for a bit, then went inside and picked up a comic book. He couldn't actually read, but he was learning a bit with Western comics. He liked *Billy The Kid* . I helped him with the words.

"Go get us some hamburgers, Baby Man," he said.

I had anything but dinner on my mind, but in a kind of daze I drove to the café and got hamburgers, fries, couple of Cokes, and drove back.

This took about thirty minutes or so. Dad was still attempting to read his comic, moving his lips over the words he was learning. Apollo Red still hadn't moved. It had grown really hot.

Dad ate his hamburger and fries, then went back to work on a car at the rear of the garage, his head under the hood, whistling like one of the dwarves from Snow White. Apollo Red, lying on the summer-hot concrete, still had not wiggled a muscle.

I tried to eat, but couldn't. I stood and looked at Red. About an hour after he had taken a ride on the rocket from hell, he twitched.

Like the Frankenstein monster testing his nerves and muscles, starting to recognize shapes and shadows, he writhed against the concrete. His jaw on one side had swollen to about the size of an eggplant and his chin had blackened like a two-day beard. The flesh around the eye on the side of the swelling had gone black as well. There was blood at the corners of his mouth.

Apollo Red stirred a little more. He rolled to one side with no more trouble than a beached whale. He lay there for a while pulling in ultra-violet rays. Birds flew over and dropped their shadows on him. Apollo Red finally got a knee under him, but his head hung low, as if heavy. The position he was in, it looked as if he were about to attempt an impromptu head stand. A tooth fell out of his mouth. He laid back down for a while.

I looked at Dad. He was still doping out the comic book.

Another fifteen or twenty minutes passed, and then Apollo Red moved again. He went through all the formations he had managed before, but this time, when it came to the knee position, he pushed up to his feet, wobbled a bit, and then forgetting he had come by car, started slowly zig-zagging away, as if practicing evasive maneuvers against a slow-moving, heat-seeking missile.

He staggered across the street, over the dead grass next to the oil well bit shop, fell down, got up with excruciating slowness, continued to zig-zag until he stumbled out of sight behind a high stack of tires at the rear of a filling station.

I finally ate my hamburger. Dad went back to work. I sat around for another hour. I had planned to eat dinner with Dad, go home and go to work, but I decided the hell with it. I was too shook up. I walked across to the bit shop, borrowed their phone, called my boss, said I would be in late, if at all.

There was only one old man there that day, and he grinned what teeth he had at me. “I seen him hit that sucker,” he said, and pointed to a window in the side of the aluminum building to show me the exact spot where he had stood. “Damn. Bud’s still got the punch, ain’t he?”

“Yes, sir,” I said. “Appears he does.”

By the time I crossed back to the garage, a police car pulled up alongside Apollo Red’s golden chariot. There with a young policeman on the passenger side, an older hand I recognized behind the wheel. He had once pulled me in for throwing water balloons. I nodded at him, like an experienced criminal acknowledging a foe.

The one on the passenger side, the younger one, got out as Dad came wandering out of the shop. Dad leaned against the hood of Red’s car, which bore part of Red’s shirt on the broken hood ornament like some sort of surrender flag. I came over and stood by Dad.

The young cop said, “Mr. Collins. There’s been a complaint that you hit a man here.”

“Hard as I could,” Dad said.

“He has a broken jaw and is at the hospital and is a little confused.”

“He was confused when he got here,” Dad said.

The young cop nodded. “Well, sir, why’d you do it?”

“Threatened me.”

"How?"

"Tried to hit me?"

"Did he?"

"Too slow."

The young cop computed this, said, "Sir, you have to come with us downtown. There's been a complaint. His girlfriend filed it."

"I don't think so," Dad said.

"You don't think what?" said the young cop.

"I don't think I'm coming."

The older cop behind the steering wheel leaned across the seat, and said through the open door, "Bud, you really got to come."

Dad turned his head in that curious dog way. "That you, Clyde?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know me," Dad said.

"Yes, sir," Clyde said.

"You know I'm not coming."

Clyde cleared his throat. "We're supposed to bring you in."

"Folks make plans."

The young cop, feeling the drift of things, stepped back and put his hand on his gun.

Dad reached out and gently pushed me away from him.

The older cop said, "Dean. Get back in the car."

Dean stood there with his hand on the butt of his revolver. He was sweating. The cop cap on his head seemed too big all of a sudden. I noted that the distance between him and Dad was not a lot different from the distance between Dad and Apollo Red when he had leaped forward and hit him.

"Dean," Clyde said. "Get back in the car."

After a long moment, Dean uncoiled and moved his hand from the gun.

Dad had not so much as changed his expression.

Dean got back in the car and closed the door.

They drove away and never came back.

Next day, when Dad went back to work, Red's car was gone, and about two weeks later the woman who owned the Buick came in and paid him all she owed, saying only, "How much?"

I was there that day, having dropped by to go to dinner with Dad again. The woman was a nice-looking blonde with a lot of hairspray on her hair; it formed a little blue cloud around her head when the sunlight hit it. I wanted to ask her if Apollo Red knew his own name and still remembered how to drive a car. I knew for sure he wasn't the one who had come for it. Apollo Red had descended, and would not be ascending for quite some time.

"It was the carburetor this time," Dad told her. "You might ought to think on getting some tires, too. These are may-pops."

"Yes, sir," said the lady.

Dad gave her the keys.

As she was slipping behind the wheel of her car, starting it up, Dad said, "Come on back, it gives you any trouble."

11.
Coach Whip

"But you don't know anything happened to them," Chance said.

"I think I do."

"It did, baby girl," Leonard said. "Those were the times. In East Texas, you were expected to take one side or another, and if you were black you knew your place, and if you were white you were worried about your place. That's how it was. Not that everyone stuck to that, thank goodness. Me and Hap here, we ought to have hated one another, but we didn't, and we bearded the lions in their dens so much, it's amazing we have survived."

"Yeah, some people never learn that things aren't as they appear to be, or they aren't as they should be. I got a lesson in that when I was little. I guess you can call it a true story with a parable attached. My dad was responsible for the latter part."

When I was young, my dad's job played out, so we decided to drive from East Texas to Arizona, where some of our family lived. They said there were jobs there, and Dad needed a job, so away we went.

It was hot on the road in that old, black car of ours, and there wasn't any air-conditioning in it, so we had the windows rolled down to bring in the breeze. I loved it when we drove at night. I would lie on my back and stuff my pillow behind my head and watch the stars through the back window. The air would blow in so that the inside of the car was quite cool. I'd pull a blanket over me and dream that I was in a space ship flying amongst the stars. I had my dog with me, my faithful space hound Blackie, who was small and fuzzy with a heart like a water buffalo. He would snuggle close to me, the wind fluttering his ears, and we would soon be asleep.

I loved that dream, and sometimes now, when I can't sleep, I have the same one. That I have had a great adventure, and that I'm recovering in my little space craft the size of my bed, and I have my battle-ready friend at the controls. Sometimes in my dreams the battle-ready friend is my fine redheaded woman, Brett, and she's dressed like Dale Arden from Flash Gordon, and she is guiding us carefully through the solar system in our swift space/bed machine. Sometimes it is an unknown driver, a comrade in arms. I feel safe and it helps me sleep.

But back then I was just a kid, and I never felt safer than when I was with my parents, especially my father who could bend coins with his hands and crush an apple in his palm, expand his chest and break belts, or bend metal bars, so he was at the controls, sliding our little black space ship through the infinite blackness, sprinkled with stars.

At night we would stop at tourist courts, as they were called then, the forerunners of modern motels, and we would spend the night. Sometimes we didn't have the money, and we slept in the car, but if my dad could find day work, and it was easier in some ways to find it then than now, he would be able to make enough to buy us food and a place to stay for the night and put gas in the car. He also had his shotgun with him, and there were a few times when we stopped along the way and he went out into the woods to hunt squirrels, which after shooting he cleaned quickly and expertly with a pocket knife, then we cooked the meat on a hot plate in tourist court rooms. My dog ate the scraps of our meals.

Once in a town in Arizona we made a wrong turn and ended up in a downtown parade. I don't know what it was for, perhaps a local celebration, but once we were in the parade with floats and other cars and young ladies in truck beds wearing bathing suits and waving at the crowd, we couldn't get out. Every time my dad tried to turn out of the parade there seemed to be a policeman there with a whistle and gestures pointing him back into position. We rode like members of the parade, our windows down, my little dog rearing up and looking out one of them, barking. Somewhere along the line, when no policeman was around and there was a clear exit, Dad broke for it and drove us away from the parade and back on track. I missed the parade. It was a fun thing to have happen.

We drove during the day looking for work, and the sun beat down and the wind blew through the windows. I had no idea we were poor and were sort of doing our own Joad moment on the road. My parents picked vegetables and fruit and cotton on the way, day laborers. Sometimes if the work was good we would stay a few days and build up our cash supply. I helped do some of the work since no one was keeping children from working, but all I remember about that was trying to pick cotton and getting so hot I ended up with heat exhaustion and had to lay out under a tree in the shade for most of the day, sipping water from what we called a jug that had once been an old pickle jar.

When we arrived at our relatives' home, we stayed with them for a few days while my dad found work somewhere. Perhaps it was mechanic work, more likely some kind of farm work as a field hand. I remember him doing both along the way, and after we arrived, he went daily to some job or another, came home at night tired and hungry.

We ended up renting a ramshackle place not far from where the relatives lived. It was a house that had settled down until it touched the ground. The porch itself lay flat against the dirt and the wooden steps in front of it stood higher. We never used those, and finally my dad pried them apart with a crow bar and moved the wood away from the porch. That way all we had to do was step about two inches higher than the ground. There was a chicken coop there, and if we cared for the chickens, it cost us less, so therefore we cared for the chickens. I remember my mother in the dirt yard calling, "Chick, chick, chick, here chick, chick."

This mass of chickens would come darting and clucking out of the open hen house and into the yard, where my mother stood with a pail of dried corn, tossing it to them by the handfuls, as they came pecking at it across the sun-hardened ground.

We ate a lot of pinto beans and cornbread. On Sunday we went to our better-off relatives for Sunday dinner. Dinner is what folks call lunch these days. We called the late meal supper. At the relatives we had fried chicken and biscuits, and all manner of delights, including homemade apple pie. Everything was home grown and homemade. One night I remember us being so in need of food my mother cooked up some of the hen scratch, as she called it, meaning the thick corn kernels used as chicken feed, and we ate that. I don't remember it tasting too bad. She cooked it the consistency of mush, and that's what she called it as well. Mush. When I was growing up, when we had more money to buy cornmeal, she made me that for breakfast, pouring milk onto it and stirring butter in.

As I said, the place we rented came with a chicken house and chickens, and part of our rent was gathering eggs for the owner, and being allowed to keep some. We were also allowed to eat some of the chickens, and besides the Sunday dinner of fried chicken we had at the relatives' house, once a week we ate one or two of the chickens, ones that weren't good layers, or older roosters who were past their time. New chicks were being born constantly and they grew swiftly. My dad, when he killed chickens, wrung their necks. He would grasp one by the head, sometimes one in each hand, clamp tight, and with a twist and a swinging motion, break their necks. Sometimes he could pop the heads completely off, and other times the necks stretched out long and they looked like short hoses with chicken bodies swinging on them. He would toss the chicken on the ground, and dead, or near death, it would get up and run around. This happened sometimes when you chopped a chicken's head off, hence the phrase run around like a chicken with its head cut off. It was terrifying to see either a headless chicken, or a neck wrung chicken with its dangling neck and head, running about until it finally fell over.

Me and my dog Blackie went out to collect eggs in the hen house, and there was a chicken snake in it. We surprised one another. I lifted up a hen's ass to grab an egg for Mom to cook for my breakfast, and found the snake curled beneath the hen. Me and the snake were traumatized, and when the chicken realized that somehow from below the snake had found its way into her nest and was under her ass, she too was traumatized. She leaped off her perch and went batting her wings around the chicken house and squawking wildly, stirring up all the other chickens, causing a cacophony of squawks. The snake lay still in the nest, its body swollen with eggs. Sulfur and cayenne pepper mixtures, moth balls, and other things of that sort, were placed around the outside of the hen house, as they were supposed to discourage snakes, but the chicken snake had ignored them. To it, a keep out sign would have been about as efficient.

I know this. I was through with that hen house, never went back into one until I was in my early teens. And even then, I was nervous. Snakes are something country people grow up with, and fear of them is hard-wired into our brain, and more often than not, for no real reason.

I remember seeing a sidewinder moving along a hot, red sand path near where we were staying back then, slipping along in that peculiar S fashion they have. The manner of locomotion itself terrified me. Just didn't seem right. Snakes back home could be scary, and we had rattlers too, and the sidewinder is a rattler, but the ones back home didn't move like that. Not only could they scare you and bite you, they moved creepy.

Not far from where we were was an old quarry. I'm not sure what they had mined there, but it was played out by this time. It was a big place and it was full of water. I wasn't supposed to go anywhere near it, but its mystery drew me to it as simply and profoundly as the proverbial moth to a flame. I would sneak off from time to time and go there. I would stand on the edge of it and stare at the still water. My older cousins would come over and they would go swimming in it, but I wouldn't. It was too deep. And besides, I couldn't swim. My father had lost a friend in the Sabine River once, when he was a kid. He and his buddy got pulled into a whirlpool. My dad was able to swim out, as he was strong even as a child, but his friend was pulled into the suck hole and drowned. He never forgot it, of course, and that story stuck with me, and my mother was afraid of water, electricity, gas, just about everything, including snakes, so you can bet I had my fears, especially back then. I've made a point over the years to either get rid of all of them, or to find a way to confront them. One of those fears was that great quarry full of water. Still, I was drawn to it, to stand near the edge of it and look out at the water and wonder at the depths of it; the fear of falling into it had a hypnotic draw.

I hated being there in that Arizona heat, out there in a place that made me feel blue, the air so dry it made my skin itch. I don't like places where there isn't greenery, and I don't enjoy seeing for long distances. Empty expanses make me sad. East Texas had lots of tall trees and water, creeks and ponds, and man-made lakes. I don't know how much of that I understood back then, but I knew this wasn't where I had been living, and I didn't care for it.

It was still bright and hot and the sun was just beginning to dip. I stood on the edge of the quarry and watched the water in it turning purple with shadow. Blackie wasn't with me. For some reason he had stayed back at the house. The heat maybe. Or maybe I had ditched him on purpose. It was hard to sneak off and go some place I wasn't supposed to be because he would actually run back to the house barking, and my mother, who would figure out I was where I wasn't supposed to be, would come after me. I loved my dog, but he was a snitch.

Kids, including my two cousins, swam in the quarry. There was a path where the rocks had tumbled down and some of the older kids and my cousins would skinny dip. I didn't know any of them, and it made me nervous to see them going down there, stripping off their clothes, boys and girls, and I kept thinking they might want to pull my pants down and throw me in. I was very modest in those days, and still am when it gets right down to it, and I had a fear not only of that, but that they would throw me into the water and make me swim, which I couldn't. I don't know why I felt that way, but I did. Actually, I don't think they even noticed me. I remember watching the kids swim for a while, amazed at their white skin in the darkening water.

Eventually they climbed out, dressed and went home, and I watched them go along the far side of the quarry, then I started home. The sun dipped even more and the sky bled over the earth and gathered up in the handful of scrub trees along the way home. I walked swiftly, wanting to be home before the sun went down and my mother started calling for me. I had already pushed my time, and my guess was she thought I was still in the yard playing.

The path was red and sun-bleak. There were some mountains in the distance, and the mountains held the shadows to them like possessions, and the darkness in their crags and crannies gave me a feeling of unease that is impossible to explain.

I was really missing those East Texas trees and all the creeks and ponds and sandy trails. When the sun went down in East Texas the woods and the greenery turned emerald, and the shadows between the trees were mysterious and lovely. This place turned red and sad and the shadows began to look like oil stains.

I walked along the hardened dirt road with red sand on either side, and even at the dying of the day, it made everything hot. It was so hot I could feel it through my tennis shoes. I still remember that. I remember that in East Texas as well, but there always seemed there was shade to be had, and when it was night the ground cooled quickly. There is much that is embraced and loved about dry heat compared to humidity, but when I sweat I know I'm hot, and I don't keep moving about and end up falling out. The East Texas sweat cools me when I find shade and be still, but in that dry heat of Arizona I think I'm fine until I'm not.

Bake or fry, when you get right down to it, doesn't matter, I suppose.

In time I came to where there was dead grass growing on either side of the trail. The grass was the color of crackers and there was no wind to move it, but I saw that in one spot it was moving, rustling ever so gently. I stopped and looked. I didn't see anything at first. The grass stopped swaying. A moment later it began to move again, and a dark head rose up from the grass.

The head swayed first to one side and then the other, and there was a little forked tongue that came out of its mouth, blue-looking, and it snapped at the red-shaded air, and then the head went down and the grass began to move again. It was coming right for me.

I came unstuck and started running, sure I would get away from the snake quickly, but when I looked back I saw it coming along the trail now, moving briskly, squirming its way after me, all three or four feet of it, its head lifted like a periscope as it moved speedily along.

I ran faster. Glancing back, I saw that it was still coming, and it was closing on me, and I didn't have one doubt in the world that it was pursuing me and perhaps wanted to bite me in the ass on general principles. When I saw the rent house was in sight, I began to yell for my mother.

I was a short ways from the house when my mother came out on the porch and saw me running. I don't think she saw the snake right away, but as I came up on the porch she did. Grabbing at me, she pulled me inside and shut the door.

My dog had stirred by now, though he wasn't supposed to be inside the house, as in those days that was thought of as bad housekeeping. But, my parents loved that dog as much as I did, and that's where he stayed. We looked out one of the porch windows, me, Mom, and

Blackie. That snake was on the porch, and it raised its head and looked in the window at us, swaying from side to side. I jumped back and I think I started screaming, because I had no doubt in my mind that it was me it wanted. Blackie, due to my screaming, began to run around me in circles, barking.

My mother said, “You stay here,” and went out the back door. After a moment she appeared on the front porch with a hoe in her hand. The hoe flashed out, missed the snake, and the snake turned away from the window and went along the porch away from my mother, but she chased after it. I positioned myself to see out the window, and the last thing I saw of the snake was its tail whipping off the porch and out of sight, and then my mother chasing after it, the hoe raised above her head like a cartoon character.

I don’t know how long my mom was gone, but finally I saw her through the window. She came up on the porch and put the hoe against the wall, and came inside. She was always dramatic, and she leaned against the door frame as if she had just been in a great battle that she had only marginally survived.

“I killed it,” she said. “I chopped its head off.”

Late afternoon, suppertime, my father came home.

Mother related our snake adventure, and how she had killed it, and protected us, because that snake wanted in, and when she was through telling her story that snake could have been an army of snakes.

My dad went outside to look at the snake. I went out with him. Even though it was dead, I wouldn’t get near it. I could see that its head had been chopped off, but I had heard even a headless snake didn’t die until sundown. I had heard a lot of mythical stories about snakes, including the one about the hoop snake which grabbed its tail in its mouth and rolled down hill like a tire. There was also the snake that was said to slip under cows, attaching itself to one of their udders, and sucking out the milk, which was a reason some farmers said a milk cow went dry. I had known plenty of grown-ups to tell those stories for the truth, as absurd as they were.

My dad looked at the snake, then looked at me.

“Come here, son,” he said.

I eased closer, but still a goodly distance away from the dead snake.

He said, “See the way it looks. It don’t have a triangle head. It ain’t poisonous. It’s not a copperhead, rattler, or water moccasin, and it sure ain’t no corral snake. It gets cornered, it’ll beat its tail so it sounds like a rattlesnake, but it’s not even close. It’s a coach whip. They’ll chase you sometimes, but they ain’t gonna hurt you. Had you stopped running, it would have stopped, and had you ran toward it, it would have run in the other direction. Get it cornered, it’ll bite, but ain't no poison in it, but you get anything cornered, it'll fight back. Thing is, boy, not everything that looks scary is. You got to know something well enough before you decide on it as being one way or another."

I wasn't convinced, but that was all he had to say. He went inside, and I went inside after him. For a few days when I woke up at night and turned toward the bedroom window, I imagined I saw that snake rising up in the moonlight to look in at me. I didn't care if all it wanted was to play chase. I didn't care that it didn't have a triangular head or that it wasn't poison. The idea of it terrified me.

Much to my pleasure, we didn't stay in Arizona long. None of us liked it and the jobs weren't that good. We drove up into Colorado, and my dad found work there, and then we drove back through New Mexico and West Texas, Central Texas, Dad and Mom finding field work along the way, and then finally we were back in East Texas, back in Marvel Creek where I had been born, and the air seemed right and the sky seemed right and the woods were dark and green and it rained a lot. I was home.

Some years later, when I was a teenager, I was out walking in the woods behind our house, down near the creek, and I saw the grass rustle. My skin crawled. I stopped and looked. I started walking away, fast, and whatever it was started moving toward me through the grass, and pretty soon I was overcome with what I had felt as a child. I started running like a gazelle.

At some point I remembered what Dad had said, and I found the courage to stop and turn and run back toward where the grass was moving, expecting the snake to run. It didn't. The grass was still moving, and finally the grass parted, and the snake squirmed onto the sandy trial. It wasn't a coach whip. It was a short, stubby water moccasin, one of the poisonous snakes that are partial to East Texas. I have had many people tell me since they won't do that, chase you, I mean, but that one did; it not having read the recent literature. I think a snake in the wild is not a snake in captivity. Maybe snakes make decisions that are not only based on instinct. Maybe now and then they just like messing with you, because that one was certainly chasing me, and I was running as fast as I could go, and it was making easy time toward me.

I glanced back again, and all of a sudden the snake slithered off the trail and into the grass on the other side, and away through it.

That snake had fooled me. I got a lesson out of it, though I don't think I really understood it until years later. Sometimes you can think something is going to hurt you and it isn't, but you can also think something isn't, and it will. I don't know the snake was dead set on catching up with me, because if it had wanted to, it would have.

Maybe it was merely waiting to reach its turnoff. But still, I had convinced myself this time that I was being silly and the snake wasn’t poisonous, was a coach whip, but it wasn’t. Had I chased into the grass after it, and stepped on it, it might have bitten me.

That may have been what Dad was trying to tell me. It’s the same way with people. You might see them coming from a long distance off, but you don’t know what kind of snake they are just by sight, and they don’t have a triangular head to judge by.

12.
The Bottom of the World

"My father damn sure had his moments, like telling me about that snake, but telling me something else in the process, teaching me a lesson. He could be contradictory, and there's no doubt he was racist. He hated blacks as a race but tended to like them as individuals. I think he couldn't quite understand if a black person could do better than him, because that didn't seem right. He had grown up with nothing, and the idea that there were people making fantastic amounts of money always seemed like a lie to him, or if it was true, he felt it was undeserved. I guess you grow up with nothing, ignorant and uneducated, it's hard to wrap your head around that. It didn't seem right to him that anybody ought to make the kind of money they did in sports, for example. Especially black athletes. On the other hand, he had a way of telling me things that mattered through moments like the one with that snake. Now and again he did it through stories."

"I think I'd have liked your dad, me being black or not," Leonard said.

"I don't think he would have liked you," I said. "But, you two are actually a lot alike. In the tough and straightforward department."

"I'm charming," Leonard said. "He'd have come around."

"You're not only black, but gay, so, I don't know."

"What kind of stories did he tell you?" Chance asked.

"All kinds. Sometimes things that happened to him. Sometimes even a ghost story now and again."

"Oh, I like scary stories," Chance said. "Can you tell me one of his ghost stories?" I glanced at Brett.

Brett smiled. "She's a grown woman, Hap. She can take a ghost story. If not, she and Buffy can cuddle on the couch afterwards."

"See," Chance said, "I'm all grown up." She smiled her dazzling smile. She did that, it was near impossible to deny her anything.

"Alright," I said.

The little electric heater buzzed like a bee and its grillwork glowed cherry red. Hap Collins, ten years old, sat on the floor with his arms clutching his knees, which he had pulled up close to his chest to create warmth. The house was dark except for the heater light. Outside, rain pecked at the glass and the wind howled as if it were a wolf in misery.

There was a scratching sound, and Hap nearly jumped to his feet. But then he remembered what it was. It was the branch of a magnolia tree near the window and when the wind blew hard, the branch moved and touched the window, making that sound. It reminded him of a cat scratching in gravel. Still, familiar as it had become in the last couple of months, it never failed to startle him.

Hap was glad he had his own bedroom though. He had hoped for one. They had been living in tourist courts for the last few months, traveling across Arizona and West Texas so his parents could work the fields and orchards. They picked fruit, cotton, dug potatoes, whatever job was available, until they ended up back in East Texas. But now his dad had a job at a propane company as a trouble shooter, a mechanic. That's what his dad loved doing, fixing cars, and he was good at it. Hap would be in a new school in a few days, in January after the Christmas holidays, and it would be 1960. He thought, new year, new house, and he liked both changes. It was nice to have a house of their own, even if it was cold and a little scary and he was behind in school for having been out for a while until they got settled. Another thing was he didn't know any of the kids in the neighborhood. Yet, it was all exciting to think about.

The bedroom door cracked, and a large man-shaped shadow fell through it, the hall light at its back.

"Son?" said the shadow. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Hap said. "Daddy. Would you tell me a story?"

"A story? Do you know what time it is?"

"No."

"It's . . . Well, it's late."

"You're up, Daddy."

"Came to check on you."

The shadow came into the room wearing boxer shorts and sat down on the floor near him. The heater spread its light on the shadow, and the shape was a shadow no longer. The light glowed on a stocky man with thinning hair with forearms as big as baseball bats. His chest was thick. His hands were thick and the fingers were short and blunt at the tips. One time his dad had torn a phone book in half to win a bet with his brother-in-law. It wasn't a very big phone book, actually, but the brother-in-law couldn't do it. He couldn't lift up the back of a car long enough to pull a flat tire off the rim either, but Hap knew his dad could. He'd seen him do it. He didn't know it was a big thing until he started hearing about it from others who had seen it with him. When they spoke of his dad's physical strength they spoke of it in awe.

"Can you tell me a story? A scary one?"

"You look like you might be a little scared now, let alone me tell you some kind of story like that. You ain't got a thing to worry on, Baby Man. The wind is just the wind and the rain is just the rain, and that ole tree is just a tree. In the summer you'll be able to play under it, though that magnolia tree will bring in the bees. You got to watch for them bees."

Hap remembered his mom saying the only thing in the world his dad was afraid of were wasps and bees. A sting from one of them could lay him low for days. He could take a punch thrown by a man twice his size and give him one back three times harder, and he might even be able to out wrestle an alligator and feed it to a bear and make him like it, but a bee or wasp made him nervous.

"I like scary stories," Hap said.

"Yeah. I know. I seen all them comic books you read."

"Tell me, please?"

"Alright. Well, you know we live not far from the river bottoms. All that rich bottom land and the river rolling down through them trees, them trees thick, and it all dark down there. There's all kinds of stories go with it. But they're just stories. And you want to stay away from that river. I was a boy, about your age, my friend Ronnie, me and him went swimming down there, and a whirlpool got him. It almost got me."

"Really?"

"Yeah. We lived not far from where we are now. Whirlpool sucked Ronnie right under, and I was near pulled in too, but I was a stronger swimmer, and I come out of it, but that water felt like it was pulling at my legs, trying to drag me under with him. I guess I kicked free of the thing down there."

"What kind of thing?"

"They say there was this woman lived down there on the banks of the Sabine, and she was young and pretty, and she had a lot of men wanted to marry her. But she didn't never let that happen. She was looking for the right one, and wasn't none of them suited her, you see.

"Well now, one day she sees a man near her cabin, and he's fishing with a cane pole, waiting patiently for a fish, sitting under an old willow tree. Now the woman, near girl really, she looks out and sees this man, and she thinks he's the best-looking fellow she's ever seen, including some in the Sears and Roebuck catalogue."

"Like them that just got on underwear and stuff?"

"Like any of them. So she looks out and sees him, and she thinks, he's the man I want, and she is bold, and goes down there to meet him. He likes her too, right away, and they become . . . friends. Close friends. So the days go by, and finally this young man decides that another young woman he saw in town might be better suited to him, 'cause not only is she pretty, but she has some money too. But the thing is, the river woman, she don't want to let him go, 'cause they done gone and got married, and she ain't gonna let him get shed of her. Arguing goes on for a while, but he can't get her to agree to a divorce, and all this sets heavy on him.

"Then one summer night he does a foolish thing. Wearing nothing but his undershorts, he takes her down to the river, drags her down there by her hair, and her wearing nothing but a flimsy old night gown. He throws her in and goes in after her, pushes her out to the middle of the river. It's not fast moving there, but it's deep, and though she's done spent most of her life on that river all by herself, she never has learned to swim good, and it don't help this fellow is holding her by the hair, and is pushing her under, and it don't take long before she's drowned.

"Now he's got a problem. He's done gone and killed her and now he's got a body. He leaves her in the river she's just gonna float, and though he could say she drowned out there swimming, or slipped on the bank fishing and ended up in the water, he knows ain't no one going to believe that, because she never did swim, and everyone knew she was right afraid of water, and everyone knew too she didn't like to do no fishing, and in fact, she didn't like to eat fish.

"This fellow he figures thing for him to do is get an old tow sack and put it over her head, and in another sack put an old anvil, tie it to her feet, and drop her out there in the middle of the river where it's deep, where there's a hole there so far down some say it ain't got no bottom. He took her out there in a row boat and dumped her over the side in that bottomless hole in the river. He put her in first with that bag over her head, and he was about to toss the anvil and the chain it was linked up to over the side, when the woman started moving in the water. She wasn't dead. He thought she was dead, but she wasn't.

"He took the boat paddle and went to hitting on her head in that bag. He beat it with everything he had and finally it wasn't moving. Just floating there, her feet was lifted up out of the water on the chain that was fixed onto the anvil in the boat, so she hasn't gone nowhere yet. When he figures he's finally got her settled, he throws that anvil into the water, nearly turning the boat over along with it. Well, that anvil hits the water and it jerks that woman straight down, way down there in that bottomless hole, and this fellow, he's got some relief now, 'cause he figures he's good and quit of her.

"That night he goes back to the house, thinking on how he'll say she run off with another man, and how after a time he'll get a divorce, saying she's run off from him."

"What's a divorce, Daddy?"

"It's a thing some people do when they can't get along, or are just too damn selfish to try and make a thing work. Anyway, this fellow, he's thinking in a while he'll get with that good-looking woman in town that he's been sneaking around and seeing, and with her will come all her money. But back in the house, the wife drowned now, he starts feeling lonely. He starts thinking on her, seeing strands of her hair in her brush on the dresser, a photograph or two around the house with him and her in it. Time he goes to bed, he's upset with himself some, tossing and turning, seeing in his head her tumbling down and down and down in that dark, old, night water, just a twisting around in circles, her hair swaying in the river, her body swirling in that watery hole that ain't got no bottom.

Finally he goes to sleep, and then he wakes 'cause he hears something. Like someone calling his name, and he knows that voice, or thinks he does, but it don't sound just right. You see, it's got this gurgle about it, like someone is trying to talk with a mouthful of water.

"He thinks, now that can't be her. She's in that river in that bottomless hole, going down, down, down, that anvil tugging at her toes. But then he hears something that makes his blood grow cold. There's a rattling noise, like the way a plow chain will shake when you're hooking up a mule to plow, and then there's another sound, a dragging sound, like maybe that chain is hooked up to something heavy, and someone has hold of that chain and is dragging that something heavy."

"It's her, ain't it, Daddy?"

"So he gets up and he gets his old shotgun out of the closet, one of them double barrels, and he sits on the edge of his bed, thinking maybe he's dreaming, and he's still lying there under the sheet, and that he didn't hear nothing for real, and didn't get up and get his shotgun. But that sounds just keeps a coming. A little louder now, that chain rattling, that dragging sound, and then . . . It stops. He don't really know where it stops, but he feels like he does. He feels like he knows it's outside the front door, and then there's a calling sudden-like, and it's that same voice with the gurgle in it. It's his wife's voice, like the way it would sound if she was full of water and trying to talk. She's calling his name. Ain't nothing else she's saying other than his name, over and over and over.

"He don't move. He just keeps on sitting there on the edge of the bed, shivering now, and it ain't cold a bit, but he feels wet as if he was in that river again. The voice calls and calls, and then it stops. It stops for a long time, but he don't move none, not a bit. And you know what happens next?"

"What?"

"Something starts a knocking at the door. Slow and steady, and then the knocking stops, and there's a scratching, like a cat, but still he don't move. And then that stops, and he hears that sound again, the chain and something heavy as it goes dragging around the house and comes to the window by the bed. He has his back to that window, but he's heard that sound moving around to it, and he knows without looking that someone or some kind of thing is at that window. So slowly he turns and looks. And damn if there ain't a water-fat face pushed up against the window pane, starring in at him.

He jumps up then, whirls and fires that shotgun, blasting a load through the glass and into that face, but that face don't do nothing but come apart some, and not much. And he knows it's just who he expected it was. It's his wife, and she's done come for him. She gets hold of the window sill and starts climbing through that window, that broken glass all around it not bothering her none. Hell, he's done shot her right in the face with one load from that double barrel, and she's still a coming, and only looking as bad as she looked before, which is bad enough. Though now she's got little buckshot holes all in her face and head and throat. And she's so white. So white. And there's no blood on her, just them holes, black and small as seed ticks. In she comes, the nightgown torn and ragged around her from her rising up from the river and walking through the close brush, and she's got that chain fastened to her foot, and she bends down and takes hold of that chain, and goes to tugging, pulling that anvil toward her, causing it to drag loud on the ground until it comes scraping up the side of the house and bumps over the open window and falls to the floor with a sound like a big tree falling.

"He can't run. He ain't got the legs for it. His knees is knocking together, and he is stuck there like his feet are nailed to the floor. He does open up on her with that other barrel, but he might as well have tried to tickle her ass with a feather, for all the hurt it does her.

Closer she comes, holding the chain in her hands, dragging that anvil across the floor. And still he's frozen. Step by wet step she comes, that heavy anvil making groove marks in the wood, and about the time he's come unstuck and is going to run, she moves faster than she ought to be able to, than anyone ought to be able to, and she's done let go of the chain and has grabbed him by the neck. She winds fingers in his hair and pulls him as she turns, and now she's dragging him by the hair, through the house, and to the front door, and when she come to it she just kicks it and it flies off its hinges and out into the yard, and still she comes, dragging him by the hair, her foot pulling the chain and what's hooked up to it.

"Out she goes, slow and steady, dragging him over the ground by the hair to the river. And then she goes into it, floating out to the center of the river where there's that deep old hole, the chain coming after her, that anvil swinging down below her, but still she keeps atop the water, doing what she couldn't do in life, swim, or at least float. When she's right in the center, she tugs him up and looks right at him, plants her water-thick lips on his in a sloppy wet kiss, and then she just lets that anvil pull her down. And away they go, whirling faster and faster, down, down, down in that deep dark hole filled with water, and now with them two lost souls.

"You'd think that'd be the end of it, but it ain't. She's still out there in the river, and where she went down, it's not only deep enough to flow somewhere out of China, the water is spinning around and around on the top of the river, the way it did when she and that man of hers was going down, pulled by that chain and anvil. That water ain't never stopped spinning there since, and that old suck hole don't like men at all, or boys. That's why it took Ronnie. That's why it tried to take me, and that's why over the years it's pulled down many a good boy that's tried to swim it. It's even tugged down row boats, tugged them down in that deep, bottomless hole where's she got her a big old bunch of men and boys, just a spinning around and around in that deep, dark, water hole. Which is why you don't never want to go out in that river to swim, 'specially not in that fast, deep water over the hole. 'Cause that Water Witch, which is what she's come to be called, she's waiting."

Hap sat silent a moment.

"That's near here?"

"It is."

"Is she real?"

"It's a story."

"If it was real, could she come back out of that water?"

"I don't think so. Not anymore. She's stuck there now. She got the man done what he did to her, and now she's got that spot that's hers, and hell to the fellow that tries to swim or fish there. But she can't come out no more. She's stuck right there with that husband of hers, Ronnie, and all them others. Now, you need to get in bed."

Hap slipped under the covers. The covers were warm. His dad tucked them in around him.

"I hate I told you that story," his dad said.

"I liked it."

"But you'll have nightmares, and not only is that bad for you, but Mama will know if you do, and that's bad for both of us."

"I like stories, Daddy."

“Good. I can sleep here beside you if you’re scared.”

“I’m okay.”

“Alright, then,” his dad said, and eased out of the room, once again becoming a shadow.

The heater hummed. The wind blew. The rain splattered. The house creaked. Hap envisioned that woman, all swollen up from the water, that chain on her foot, that heavy anvil at the end of the chain, and her spinning around and around just beneath the water, ready to grab a foot and pull you under. He found the story scary, but he found it comforting too. His dad had told him a story like he asked, and the kind of story he asked for, and he loved him for it.

Hap closed his eyes.

Around and around that woman spun. Her hair flowing about like spilled ink, waving in the current, dragging fellows deep down into the wet dark with her, all the way to the bottom of the world.

13.
Squirrel Hunt

“You know, Leonard, now that I think about it. I believe he would have stood up for that black man. I really do. He was a man of his time, but he was an honorable man, and had a true sense of fair play.”

“I don’t doubt that. My uncle never got over me being gay, but honestly, I think he and your dad were a lot alike. Had they known each other in a later time, they might have been friends, like us, thick as thieves.”

“You’re probably right,” I said. “Dad, in spite of his background, had a kind of wisdom about him, and a way of imparting it to you.”

“What kind of way?” Chance said.

“A backwoods kind of way,” I said.

“See,” Brett said. “Backwoods. Like your own father. You can take the boy out of the woods and pick the ticks off of him, but you can’t take the woods out of the boy . .. Or something like that.”

“It’s in the ball park,” Leonard said, “but maybe under the bleachers somewhere.”

“I was reaching for something there.”

“And didn’t quite get it,” Leonard said.

“You like those vanilla cookies I keep here?” Brett said.

“You are wise, and you have great ways of using old clichés,” Leonard said.

“Like when you said thick as thieves?” Brett said.

“Just like that.”

Chance laughed. It was soft and short and throaty, and that made me smile. “Come on, Dad,” she said. “Give me an example of your dad’s wisdom.”

“Alright. I can tell you an incident that shows that, and his sense of justice.”

I was twelve then, and the country was not like it is now. There were still plenty of tall and ancient hardwoods on either side of the road, mixed with pines and sweet gums and all manner of other trees, and the squirrels were thick in the hardwoods, and the birds when nested in them were so many they looked like colorful blooms.

Daddy drove up a hill in our old black car, and at the top of the hill we coasted down a ways, and then turned left onto a red clay road so narrow the limbs of trees brushed lightly against the windows and whispered over the hood and the roof of the car. It was a cool early winter day and the trees cast shadows across the little road we were on.

After a while, we turned off, and ended up at the end of a sandy rutted road even more narrow than the clay one. There was a car parked there, right next to the woods. A white Chevrolet. Daddy parked next to it, and we got out. Daddy pulled two shotguns from the back seat, a twelve gauge for him, and a four/ten for me.

Both guns were single shot and broken open and unloaded, and Daddy left them that way. He handed me the four/ten, placed his shotgun on the hood of our car, and looked at the Chevy as he pulled on a red vest that had our ammunition in it and some jerky he had brought.

“Hank Jenner’s car,” he said.

I knew Hank Jenner only faintly. He was a burly guy with tobacco-stained teeth and he wore a greasy fedora, the brim of which was turned down to canopy his eyes. He spent a lot of time at the feed store talking to other men who, like him, seemed to have little to do. I would see him when I went to buy comic books next door, and when I came by the open doorway of the feed store, walking along the sidewalk, he always said something or another. I never understood exactly what it was he was getting at, and he said things to my mother too, leaning out of the doorway to do it, but she ignored him. The men in the store laughed.

One time she told me, “Don’t say anything about Mr. Jenner to your Daddy, about anything he said.”

“Why?”

“Because if you do, Mrs. Jenner, who is a very nice lady, will be sleeping alone.”

I didn’t understand that exactly, not then. I did know Mama and Daddy didn’t like Mr. Jenner. Other than his crowd down at the feed store, not many did. No one could figure out what he did for a living, but he always had a bit of money. Most of it went for chewing tobacco, and according to Daddy, lots of alcohol.

I liked Mr. Jenner’s wife. She was my fourth grade teacher. She was sweet and funny and had kids of her own, some younger, some older than me. None were in my classes.

If I saw her out of school, with her husband, she seemed different. Not as tall as in the classroom, never smiling, and she never stopped to talk to anyone. She never wore one of the three or four nice dresses she wore to class, but instead old, gray things. Her kids were dressed poorly as well. At school they had a few good clothes, but away from there they wore old stuff. I understood that. My mother sewed my clothes mostly, and there were hand-me-downs from my cousins that I wore as they outgrew them. When I wasn't at school, or being made to go to church, I wore older clothes with patched knees and elbows. This was, and still is, a poor part of the country.

Sometimes Mr. Jenner would be waiting on Mrs. Jenner when school was over. He would park at the curb, get out and cross his arms, lean on his car, and wait for her to come out. You could see her grow smaller as she walked toward the car. They never spoke. She just got in.

On this hunting day I was excited, and the sight of Mr. Jenner's car meant little to me. A lot of people hunted those woods. I suppose the property belonged to somebody, but back then there was an understood rule that you could hunt on other people's property as long as you didn't shoot everything in sight, cut fences, or build unattended fires. I liked to shoot squirrels, and had gone hunting several times, and we had eaten what I killed like Daddy said we had to do. If we didn't kill anything, I knew we'd be having corn meal mush for dinner.

We went into the woods along an animal path, doing what was called "still" hunting. We didn't have a hunting dog, we just walked and looked up and watched for a squirrel's tail to blow in the wind, and then we shot it. We had a strict number of squirrels we killed, and then two more for a poor colored family. That was what African-Americans were called then. Colored

They lived not far from us. The man of the house had a bad foot injury and could only do light work, so they always needed food and money. His wife did cleaning and the children worked part-time jobs and went to the colored school beyond Marvel Creek at a place called Sand Ridge. A lot of coloreds lived there.

I existed in a state of confusion because Daddy cussed "the niggers and the burr-heads and the jigs," but was always giving them extra squirrels he shot, or extra fish he caught. When we didn't catch many fish or killed only a few squirrels, he would give them all away, and corn meal mush would be in the offing.

Yet, at home, way he talked about colored people in general was pretty tough and made me kind of sick to my stomach, even though I wasn't exactly sure why.

Mama saw the good in people, no matter their color.

She and Daddy talked very different about the colored folks, though they both seemed kind and generous with everyone, and Daddy, oddly, considering how he talked, seemed even more that way with the colored. The best I ever came to understanding him, was when he once said he knew what it was like to be hungry.

Out in the woods, carrying our shotguns, me and Daddy walked along for a while. It was fall and the oaks had shed their leaves. The pines were eternally green unless dying. The air smelled of trees and dirt and nearby water from the Sabine River.

After a bit, I saw a squirrel and Daddy let me shoot him. It was a good shot, and the squirrel fell. I grabbed it by the tail and tied it off to my belt with a piece of twine, and we carried on.

It was about midday when we stopped to eat something. I had killed two squirrels and Daddy had killed two. Daddy pulled out the jerky inside his vest, unwrapped the wax paper it was in, and gave me a piece.

“Eat slow, we might be a while before supper,” Daddy said.

I chewed slowly, pretending I was Davy Crockett on a hunt for bears.

Daddy said, “You like shooting those squirrels, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, them squirrels are food. Okay to be glad about food, but you start shooting to watch something fall, start thinking killing is good, you need to sit down on a log like this and have a little talk with yourself. Killing ain’t no good thing, son, unless it’s to eat or protect yourself. And you ought never to delight in it.”

That’s how Daddy was. He said things kind of off to the side sometimes, and then you’d think on it and understand it. But I certainly had been delighting in killing those squirrels. Guns and killing made you feel powerful.

When we finished eating, hunting continued, and we killed one more a piece. We were about to start back to the car, when Daddy saw something bright red on the ground between some sycamore trees, and there was something black on the red and it moved and shimmered in the strips of sunlight that fell between the boughs of the trees. We went over to it.

Daddy took me by the shoulders and told me to go stand by a big elm he pointed at, and I did. I could see what was lying on the ground, though, and I had seen it close up. A man with most of his head missing. I had shot a squirrel earlier and most of its head was gone, but I hadn’t felt the same way then. Flies had risen up in a cloud when we came upon the body, and now the cloud was descending again. The body was soon covered in them, and when they moved it was in mass, as if they were all part of one kind of creature. You could see bits of his red shirt between the mass of flies, and then for some reason or another, they would rise up in a blast and then come down again. The air smelled sour.

Something, a wild dog or coyote or red wolf, perhaps, had pulled off one of the body's cowboy boots which lay nearby, and had gnawed at a socked foot. It didn't even look like a foot anymore, and most of the sock was missing and part of it had been pulled out in a long strand. A greasy fedora lay nearby, on its crown, and by the body was a rifle.

"Jenner," Dad said.

You couldn't tell that by the face, but we knew it was him, way he was dressed, shape of his body, his car being parked at the edge of the woods.

Daddy leaned over the body and gave it a closer look. He glanced at Jenner's 30/30 on the ground beside him. He stood up and walked around Jenner and bent down and looked at the leafy ground. He ran his finger into something in the dirt. I couldn't help myself. I moved away from the elm just enough to see it was a footprint, and there were others. They were small footprints and they led off toward the river, which at that point you could hear it gurgling along not far from us.

Even at that age, it came to me those prints were out of place. Jenner was a big man with big feet. Those prints were much smaller and had been made the day before. I knew that, because they were dried now, and they had been impacted in the earth when it was wet. It had rained yesterday.

Daddy came over and pulled a big pack of chewing tobacco out of his pocket and stuck a wad in his cheek. He didn't say anything, just cradled his shotgun in his arms.

"We gonna tell the sheriff?" I said.

"In good time. He ain't gonna get no deader."

We started back for the car. It took about an hour to make our way out of the woods. Dad stopped by the Chevy, and did a curious thing. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and used it to open the front passenger-side door. He stuck his head inside, and then he picked up a black purse off the front seat, shoved the door shut with his knee.

"Get in the car, Baby Man."

I opened the back door to our car and snapped open my shotgun. The shell had already been fired, and it popped out and onto the ground. I picked it up and put it in my pocket with the other empties, and placed the four/ten on the backseat. I got in the car, and Dad placed his shotgun on the back seat as well, and dropped the purse onto the front seat.

When he was sitting behind the wheel, I said, "What happened to Mr. Jenner?"

"I'm going to say an accident."

"We telling the sheriff?"

I had already asked this, but it was on my mind. I had seen a lot of TV shows and movies, and something like this happened, you told the sheriff, the cops, the law.

“Shortly,” he said.

I looked down at the purse. It looked familiar.

After driving out of the woods, when we turned off onto the main road we didn’t go toward our house. We went the other way.

“Where we going, Daddy?”

“Little thing to do,” he said.

I guess we drove for about twenty minutes or so before we came to a house set off the road. It was at the back of about an acre of property. Great trees grew in the front yard, and the grass was dead as most grass was dead that time of year; it had turned brown as toast. The house was big, but it was old too, one of those that had a porch around it and a dog run right through the middle. The paint was peeling off the house in strips that reminded me of the way skin peels off of you when you’ve had a sunburn and it’s a few days after. There was woods behind the house, and I realized the river was close as well. As the crow flew, where we had found Mr. Jenner was a short distance from the back of the Jenner house, much closer than by car.

“You sit right here, alright?” Daddy said.

“Yes, sir.”

He took the purse and got out of the car.

Even though it was winter, it wasn’t cold, just cool. I had my window rolled down, and I rested my elbow on the window frame and thought about the body in the woods, but I didn’t think on it long. I don’t know if it was because I disliked Mr. Jenner, or because my mind didn’t want to keep thinking on that, his head blown off and the rising and lowering of that cloud of flies.

Instead, after a few moments I thought of supper. I was starting to think about fried squirrel. I hoped Mama had pulled some dandelion greens or some such to go with it. First though, when we got home, I had to skin and clean the squirrels. That was my job. To skin them by cutting the fur loose at the back legs near the feet, peeling it back from there, and pulling it over the squirrel’s head, like a night shirt. Then I would cut the head off and gut the squirrel, careful not to drag my knife through the squirrel’s ass first, but instead I would cut down from its stomach to the ass, pull out the guts for the dog. I would hose the squirrel off then, wash out its empty belly, and give it to Mama to cut up and cook.

That was what was on my mind while I sat there, but those thoughts went away when Mrs. Jenner appeared. She opened the door and stood at the screen for a moment, then pushed the screen door open and came out. She closed the screen gently behind her, crossed the porch and came down the steps. This took her a long while to do. She had on a very old dress, so faded it was nearly white, and if the sun had been bright, you could have seen through it. Mrs. Jenner's skin was almost as pale as her dress, and sunlight might not only have shown through the dress, it occurred to me that it might even show through her, though there was one dark spot on her: her left eye was black and swollen. It was then that Mr. Jenner's image came back to me, that blown-away head and the hard, dried blood spread out on the ground like paint. Something was churning around in my young head, but I couldn't quite get hold of what it was.

Daddy handed Mrs. Jenner the purse. I could hear him clearly.

"Found this."

"Oh," she said, and took it.

She stood looking at Daddy, as if she wasn't sure if he was really there or not. I thought she didn't seem sure she was there. At the front door one of the kids looked out through the screen, and then went back inside.

"Your husband," I heard Daddy say, "I found him in the woods where we hunt."

"Oh," she said.

"He's dead."

"Is he?"

It was as if she had been told he had a flat tire and would be home late.

"He was shot with a shotgun."

"I see," she said.

"Could be a hunting accident. Tripped on a limb, the gun went off and killed him. It happens."

"It does, doesn't it?" She crossed her arms and put her elbows in her palms.

"But only a 30/30 was on the ground. I think since he was shot with a shotgun, he should have had a shotgun there. He's not far back there behind the house. His car is parked off the road."

"Yeah, he never liked crossing the rickety old river bridge."

"It's not a good bridge for a big man to test," Daddy said. "But someone smaller, and lighter, it would be a good way to go."

She nodded. "He made me go hunting with him sometimes."

It was Daddy's turn to nod.

"I didn't really like it, but he made me go."

Daddy nodded again.

"I think he's been there a day, and I'm going to report it. But it will take me time to go to town, because I drive pretty slow."

She studied Daddy's face.

"I think since he was shot with a shotgun, that's what should be there. It’s hard to explain that 30/30, but I may have looked at it wrong. It might have been a shotgun lying there. It sure could be. It ought to be, you know, considering what happened. The accident and all. “

“Of course.”

“Sorry to bring the bad news.”

“No problem,” she said. “Someone had to tell me.”

“Lucky we came across him, so you’d know.”

“Yeah. It is.”

“We’re going to go now, and I’m sorry about your husband.”

“You said you were going to tell the sheriff.”

“I am, but like I said, I drive slow, and I may stop off at the store to buy some milk and bread. Yeah. I’m going to do that first, then I’m going to tell the sheriff. It might take a while.”

“Please do take your time,” she said.

Daddy nodded at her. “I’ll go then.”

Daddy climbed into the car and started the engine, but he didn’t put the car in gear. He just sat there. We sat there for a while.

I said, “Daddy, what are you doing?”

“Sitting on a log.”

“What?”

“Having a talk with myself.”

“Sir?”

“It’s alright, son.”

Dad put the car in reverse and backed around, put it in drive, and drove us out of there. I looked back and saw that Mrs. Jenner had come out the back door and was crossing the backyard. She was wearing men’s pants and had on boots and was carrying something, but we had reached the edge of the woods along the road near her house, and I only got a glimpse of her, and then I couldn’t see her anymore.

When we were on the road, Daddy said, “What kind of gun did you see lying by Mr. Jenner?”

“A rifle,” I said.

“No, son. It was a shotgun. Anyone asks you, it was a shotgun. I thought it was a 30/30 too, but it wasn’t.”

I knew what I had seen, but in that moment, I understood, or at least understood enough.

“Yes, sir,” I said. “A shotgun.”

Mrs. Jenner taught the rest of the semester, and she dressed well all the time and smiled outside of class, and then when the semester ended, she and her children moved off and I never saw or heard of her again.

14.

The Oak and the Pond

When I finished with the story, Chance said, "I love that.

Can you tell me more?"

I saw Brett glance at the clock.

"Nope, not tonight," I said. "I have to take Uncle Leonard home."

"He could sleep on the couch," Chance said. "We could stay up awhile, like a slumber party."

"Nope," Leonard said, "it's been a long day and a hard workout, time for me to go to my place and crash."

"Dang it," Chance said.

"Next time we do pizza, sit and tell stories," I said.

"Promise?" Chance said. She seemed so much like a little girl then, and I guess, when you get older, someone in their twenties, even thirties, seems like a kid to you.

"Promise," I said.

I drove Leonard home, and on the way he nodded off. When I stopped at his place he came wide awake. "Damn, you could have just drove around with me in the car and let me sleep."

"That's how they do babies," I said. "You are not a baby."

"I might be someone's baby."

"Not mine, though."

Leonard reached out and tapped me on the shoulder with his fist. "Tomorrow, bro."

"You bet."

He got out and I drove off. Thing was, though, I wasn't that tired. All the talk had made me nostalgic. I drove out to where Leonard used to live, where Trudy died and other bad things happened. There were good memories there too, and I tried to concentrate on those. I drove out here now and again, sometimes with Leonard, and each time I told myself I wouldn't do it again, but I did. It was like an alcoholic that says he won't take another drink, then goes to the cabinet immediately after the thought and pulls down the bottle.

But it wasn't Trudy I was thinking about now, not really, it was the place where Leonard had lived and the woods behind it and the Robin Hood tree.

At one time there was a great oak tree behind the house where Leonard was living then, and the oak was deep in the woods, and it was one of the last of the great oaks. It stood tall and thick and ancient. It had great limbs you could crawl up on and stretch out on and sleep without real fear of rolling off.

We called it the Robin Hood tree, like the great tree where Robin and his merry band of men gathered to talk and feast. I also thought of it as the Tarzan tree, imagined how you could build a treehouse on its massive limbs and have plenty of room to live with a lithe, blonde Jane and do more than call elephants and swing on vines.

Leonard and I would meet at the oak, me having hiked through the woods from my place. My place wasn't all that far if you came by wooded path, then broke off the path and took a deer trail, and finally a winding trace through a series of tall black jack oaks until you arrived at Fisherman's Creek. Across the creek the trees thinned in number but not in magnificence. There were sweet gums and hickory trees, and of course pines.

The Robin Hood tree was the granddaddy of them all. The oak rose higher and spread its limbs wider than all the others. Its bark was healthy and dark, and in the spring its leaves were green as Ireland. To stand beneath it when it rained was a miracle, because the limbs were so thick and the leaves so plush that during the spring, and much of the summer, if not the fall when the leaves were brown and yellow and falling, you would hardly get wet. When it stormed the limbs shook like angry soldiers rattling their weapons, but the limbs didn't break, just old dead leaves and little branches dribbled down. The soil beneath the oak was thick and dark with many years of dropped and composted leaves. There were acorns on the ground, and sometimes when you came to the tree, squirrels were beneath it, rare black squirrels that made this part of the woods their home. They were in the tree too, chattering and fussing as you arrived.

Leonard and I met there many mornings, usually having a breakfast of boiled eggs we had brought in sacks, drinking coffee from our thermoses, carrying fishing gear and small coolers with our lunches in them.

We would sometimes sit there beneath the tree and talk, and finally we would go away from there, carrying our coolers, through the trees, and then along the creek line to where the pond was. It was a big pond, and at one point in time there had been a house near it. Now the house was a pile of gray lumber and rusty nails and a few bricks that showed where the fireplace had been. Beyond that was a clapboard barn that still stood, the great wide doors gone, probably taken for lumber for someone's project. Trees crowded it, and one sweet gum had grown up and under the roof and was pushing it loose on one side.

The pond had been dug maybe fifty years before and had been filled with fish, and we were fishing their descendants. There was a boat down there, one we had tediously carried there along the creek bank, and we left it for when we wanted to fish. No one bothered it, because no one came there anymore but us. The land was owned by someone up north who had mostly forgotten about it. The pond was always muddy, but the fish were thick. We caught them and generally threw them back, unless they were good-sized enough and fat. Then they went home with us and became our supper.

We fished there with cane poles, not rods and reels. It wasn't a place for rods and reels. It was a place for fishing in an old and simple way. We put lines on the poles, sinkers, corks, hooks, and bait, usually worms. Out in the boat we would dangle lines and watch the fish jump, the dragonflies dip down on the water, see the shadows of birds flying over, now and again there was the sight of a leaping frog or a wiggling water moccasin. Turtle heads rose like periscopes, then fell beneath the water with a delicate splash and a small ripple.

In the spring it was cool for a long time, and in the summer it grew hot, but with wide-brimmed hats on, we still fished, and we lazed, and sometimes we talked, softly, fearing we might frighten the fish. We talked about all manner of things we believed in, and how we differed from one another. I told Leonard about my women, and he told me about his men. We talked about brotherhood without speaking of it directly. I told bad jokes and Leonard grumbled.

When Leonard moved from the house next to the woods, and I later moved from where I lived, we lost that spot.

Some years later the people up north remembered the land, and they brought in pulp crews and cut the woods down, even the great and ancient oak, which must have fought the saws with its old, hard wood. But the saws won, and it tumbled down and was coated in gasoline and set on fire. They didn't even bother to make it into lumber. The land where it stood was a black spot for a long time.

They planted rows and rows of soft lumber pines to be cut and replanted every fifteen or twenty years, a crop. People claim there are more trees now than before, but they are wrong. Once you could drive all through East Texas and there were trees as far as you could see, and not just pines either. The trees grew close to the roads and covered them in shadow. You don't have to go out in the woods and count trees one by one to know that the statements being made about there being more trees than ever before is a bald-faced lie. The pines they planted where the oak grew didn't shield you from rain or rattle in the wind the way the Robin Hood tree did.

Eventually, they filled in the pond, killing the fish. They dammed up the creek and made another, larger pond farther up, but it lacked charm, and finally scrummed over. Nothing lived in it.

A company that raised chickens for a supermarket chain bought the land, and a series of long, commercial chicken houses took the place of the original pond and the woods that had surrounded it, even the pulp trees, which they also cut down and didn't replant. Now there is a wide gravel road that leads out of where the trees once grew, on to the highway. It's odd. Looking down that gravel road, you can see the highway so easy. It seemed farther away in the years before the road was there and the trees were cut.

Leonard wouldn't even look in the direction of the old place when we drove by. I look, but I don't like what I see. The rain still falls and the wind still blows, but the oak and the pond are gone.

Afterword

So I bring you something different.

The Mosaic Novel. I didn't invent that term. I don't know who did, but the idea is that it's a novel that is not in order of the events, nor are all the events designed to roll precisely into the other. It is like a notebook where someone has been randomly recording events of their life and it's been found by a passerby. Some pages might even be missing, but the stories, in order, or out of order, constitute a portion of a young man's life.

The early life of one Hap Collins.

Leonard Pine, his close friend, and eventually his brother, appears as well. I know what this is like, to make your own family. I have a good family by blood, thank goodness, but I have some true brothers and sisters out there, like Andrew Vachss for example. Nick Damici. We just know, and there's no other way to explain it.

When I was growing up it was not unusual for there to be books connected loosely by this sort of tissue, and for the stories to gradually give you an overall view of a character's life, or a thematic overview of a town, or even something science fictional, like Ray Bradbury's version of Mars in *The Martian Chronicles*, or something far more earthbound as in Hemingway's *Nick Adams Stories*.

Those are merely two examples of many books of that nature. This is a modern example of that. I love the stories here. They are not all heroic or adventurous, but they do fill in a lot of reader gaps. Here you get some background you might not have gotten from the books. Most of it about Hap. Leonard is not in all the stories, and not all the stories are about Hap, even if he narrates. There is even a third person approach to some of the material. It felt right.

Hap and Leonard have become brothers by the time my first novel in the series, *Savage Season,* occurs, but before that they were two guys feeling out a friendship, finding it good, but it was not quite at the level of what it would eventually be. They would become family.

I love these guys. They have been with me a long time. I have had a lot of time to visit with them, and lately more than usual. New books, new novellas, a TV show, and now these stories. Some of them are brand new, some of them are rare, and only a couple have had much life outside of small presentations. "The Boy Who Became Invisible" appeared in a previous collection from the same publisher, but somehow it would have left too big a gap in this series of events had we restricted its presence merely because it appeared before. Here it becomes a valuable part of this mosaic construction. Same with “Not Our Kind,” though it has only appeared in the aforementioned book, which by the way is titled *Hap and Leonard*.

I am proud of these stories. I am proud of Hap and Leonard. They may even have broken a bit of new ground in their day. I won’t go into all of that, as I have written about their odd couple differences before.

I am also proud of Hap and Leonard’s influence on other writers, and I am happy to have those writers write and tell me how much the books meant to them, and how much they helped them create their own characters. And all you readers, Hap and Leonard fans, thank you.

As a side note, these stories may in fact violate some of the material in the novels, but not by much. These are the true stories, the true past. In the novels Hap dropped a step now and then, not revealing things, hinting at things, and in a couple of small cases they were just wrong. The TV show, soon to go into its second season, has borrowed some of the ideas in some of these stories, some true events from my life, and they have given Hap and Leonard a slightly different past than the one here, but as they say in the movie business, it is “in the spirit of,” which generally means bend over, no time to grease up, here it comes. But in my case I have been treated very well by the series, and so have my characters. I appreciate that. Thanks Sundance for not screwing it up. Still, there are differences in the TV version and my version. The record is set straight here. This is the official version.

Enjoy your visit with Hap and Leonard in the early days. I certainly enjoyed finding out about them myself. Hap has not always been as open with me about his past as I would have liked.

Lansdale
Nacogdoches,
Texas
2016

About the Author

Joe R. Lansdale is the author of more than forty novels and four hundred shorter works, including stories, essays, introductions, and articles. He has written screenplays and teleplays, including for *Batman: The Animated Series* and *Superman: The Animated Series*. He wrote the script for the animated film *The Son of Batman*. His works have been translated into numerous languages, and several novels and short stories of his have been filmed, among them *Bubba Ho-Tep*; *Cold in July*; *Incident On and Off a Mountain Road*, for Showtime's *Masters of Horror*; and *Christmas with the Dead*, which he produced with a screenplay by his son, Keith.

Lansdale is the recipient of numerous awards and recognitions, among them the Edgar Award and ten Bram Stoker Awards, one of which is for Lifetime Achievement. He has received the Grandmaster of Horror Award; the British Fantasy Award; the Inkpot Award for Lifetime Achievement; the Herodotus Award for historical/crime fiction; the Golden Lion Award for his contribution to the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs; the Grinzane Prize; and others.

Lansdale is also a member of the Texas Literary Hall of Fame and the Texas Institute of Letters, and he is Writer in Residence at Stephen F. Austin State University. He is the founder of Shen Chuan Martial Science and has been recognized by the International Martial Arts Hall of Fame as well as the United States Martial Arts Hall of Fame.

Joe Lansdale lives with his wife, Karen, in Nacogdoches, Texas.

Also by Joe R. Lansdale

Hap and Leonard mysteries

Savage Season (1990)
Mucho Mojo (1994)
The Two-Bear Mambo (1995)
Bad Chili (1997)
Rumble Tumble (1998)
Veil's Visit: A Taste of Hap and Leonard (1999)
Captains Outrageous (2001)
Vanilla Ride (2009)
Hyenas (2011)
Devil Red (2011)
Dead Aim (2013)
Honky Tonk Samurai (2016)
Hap and Leonard (2016)
Rusty Puppy (2017)
Hap and Leonard: Blood and Lemonade (2017)

The Drive-In series

The Drive-In: A "B" Movie with Blood and Popcorn, Made in Texas(1988)
The Drive-In 2: Not Just One of Them Sequels (1989)
The Drive-In: A Double-Feature Omnibus (1997)
The Complete Drive-In (2009), omnibus)

Ned the Seal

Zeppelins West (2001)
Flaming London (2005)
Flaming Zeppelins: The Adventures of Ned the Seal (2010)

Other novels

Act of Love (1981)
Texas Night Riders (1983, as Ray Slater)
Dead in the West (1986)
The Magic Wagon (1986)
The Nightrunners (1987)
Cold in July (1989)
Batman: Captured by the Engines (1991)
Tarzan: The Lost Adventure (1995, with Edgar Rice Burroughs)
The Boar (1998)
Freezer Burn (1999)
Waltz of Shadows (1999)
Something Lumber This Way Comes (1999)
The Big Blow (2000)
Blood Dance (2000)
The Bottoms (2000)
A Fine Dark Line (2002)
Sunset and Sawdust (2004)
Lost Echoes (2007)

Leather Maiden (2008)
All the Earth, Thrown to the Sky (2011)
The Ape Man's Brother (2012)
Edge of Dark Water (2012)
Hot in December (2013)
The Thicket (2013)
Black Hat Jack (2014)
Prisoner 489 (2014)
Paradise Sky (2015)
Fender Lizards (2015)

Praise for *Hap and Leonard*

“Seven laid-back adventures, one of them brand new, for “freelance troubleshooter” and good old boy Hap Collins and his gay black Republican partner Leonard Pine. . . . No one currently working the field demonstrates more convincingly and joyously the deep affinity between pulp fiction and the American tall tale.”
—*Kirkus*

«“Last seen in the novel *Honky Tonk Samurai*, Lansdale’s incomparable East Texas crime fighting duo show their chops in this remarkable story collection. Readers can also look forward to the debut of the TV show *Hap and Leonard* on the Sundance Channel in March.
—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

“An essential Hap and Leonard addition”
—*The Novel Pursuit*

“. . . it’s great to have all of these wonderful stories together in one nifty volume”
—*Horror Drive-In*

“A perfect introduction”
—*Booklist*

“East Texas charm, profane wit, and strong characterization, with enough snappy dialogue to keep a smile on your face . . . excellent entertainment, edge-of-your-seat action one minute, gut-busting humor”
—*Adventures in Genre Fiction*

“This collection is crime/pulp fiction at its best and most captivating.”
—*Risingshadow*

“If you find yourself on the wrong side of Hap and Leonard, be cautious, because they are quicker than a rattlesnake, and their bite is just as bad. If you find yourself an innocent bystander looking for a

great book to read, you've come to the right place."
—*Killer Nashville*

"For those new to either Lansdale or the series, this latest collection is an excellent introduction to the kind of trouble these two often find themselves in; all the while exchanging some of the funniest, lovingly antagonistic, and memorial dialogue of any crime series."
—*Bookgasm*

Praise for Joe R. Lansdale's Hap and Leonard series

"Hap and Leonard function as a sort of Holmes and Watson—if Holmes and Watson had had more lusty appetites and less refined educations and spent their lives in East Texas. . . . Not only funny, but also slyly offers acute commentary on matters of race, friendship andlove in small-town America."
—*New York Times*

"Lansdale reveals the human condition—our darkest secrets and our proudest moments, all within the unlikely confines of an East Texas adventure featuring the two scruffiest protagonists in modern crime fiction."
—*Booklist*

"Hilarious. . . . Addictively scarfable. . . . Lansdale excels at dialogue, especially Hap and Leonard's lewd insult-a-thons. . . . Two thumbs-up, and pardon the barbecue smears."
—*Texas Monthly*

"Joe R. Lansdale is one of a kind. His Hap and Leonard novels should be read and treasured."
—James Swain, author of *Take Down*

"As usual, the dialogue is deadpan tart and the actio extreme but convincing. . . . Lansdale once again prove he's the East Texas master

of redneck noir."
—*Publishers Weekly* (on *Hyenas*)

Praise for Joe R. Lansdale

"There's no bullshit in a Joe Lansdale book. There's everything a good story needs, and nothing it doesn't."
—Christopher Moore, author of *Secondhand Souls*

"[Joe Lansdale has] a folklorist's eye for telling detail and a front-porch raconteur's sense of pace . . . a considerable literary intelligence at work."
—*New York Times Book Review*

"Joe Lansdale is a born storyteller."
—Robert Bloch, author of *Psycho*

"Joe Lansdale simply must be read."
—Robert Crais, author of the Elvis Cole and Joe Pike novels

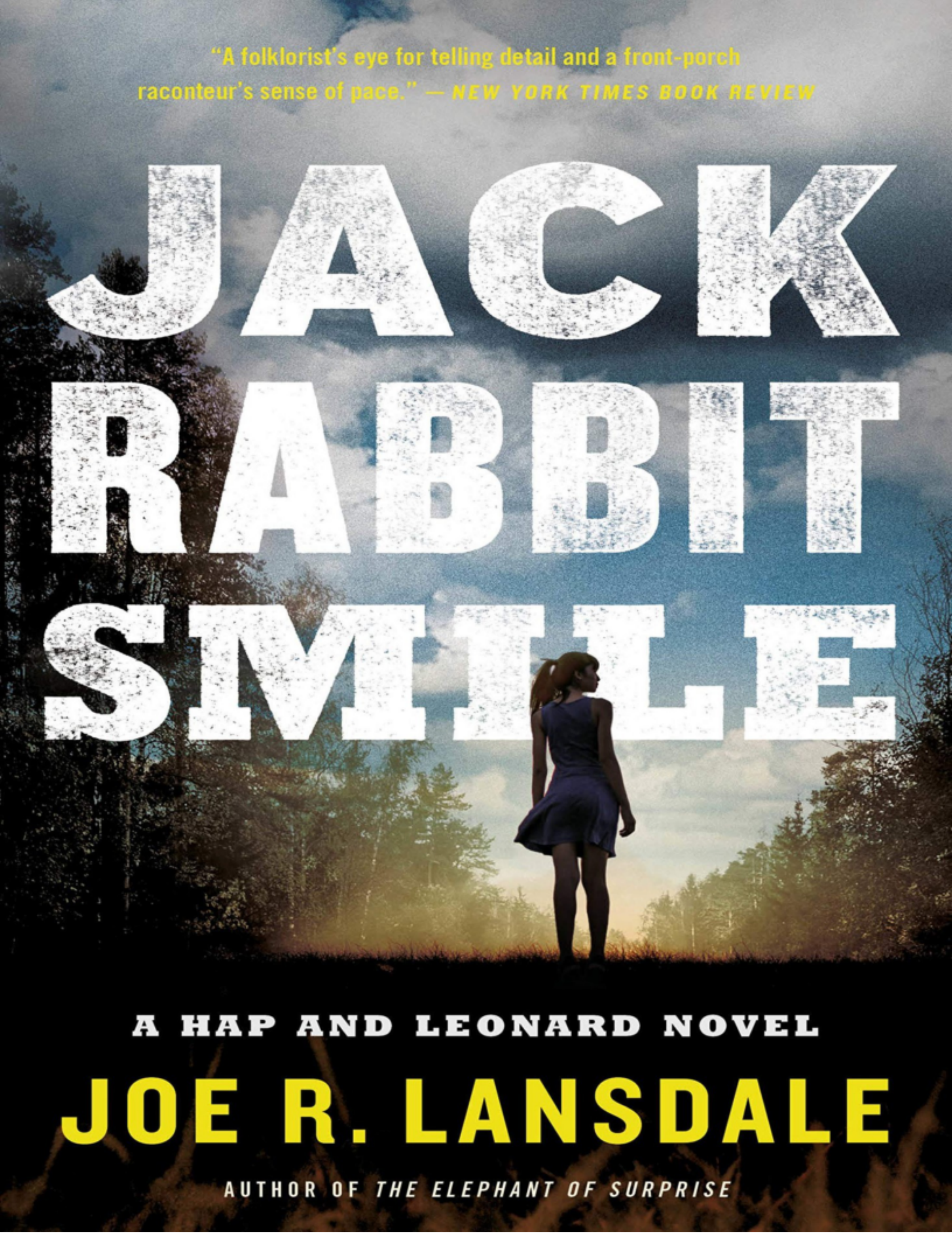
"Read Joe Lansdale and see the true writer's gift."
—Andrew Vachss, author of *Shockwave*

"Among the best fiction writers in America today, Joe Lansdale turns on the juice and cuts the damn thing loose. Enjoy the ride!"
—Kinky Friedman, author of *Ten Little New Yorkers*

"Hunter S. Thompson meets Stephen King."
—Charles de Lint, author of *The Onion Girl*

"A master at taking a simple everyday event and turning reality upside down."

—*Mystery Scene*



"A folklorist's eye for telling detail and a front-porch raconteur's sense of pace." — *NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW*

JACK RABBIT SMILE

A HAP AND LEONARD NOVEL

JOE R. LANSDALE

AUTHOR OF *THE ELEPHANT OF SURPRISE*

JACKRABBIT SMILE

JOE R. LANSDALE

MULHOLLAND BOOKS

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Discover More Joe Lansdale
About The Author
BOOKS BY JOE R. LANSDALE

To the memory of friend, fine actor, photographer, artist, and filmmaker Bill Paxton, who was taken way too soon

It is wiser to find out than to suppose.

—Mark Twain

Question with boldness even the existence of a god; because, if there be one, he must more approve the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear.

—Thomas Jefferson

1

Even when I'm doing something enjoyable, it seems death and destruction lurk nearby. I might not recognize those dual demons right away, but they're out there.

They might arrive in a pickup truck, and those in it may seem at first like a lot of people I might see. Just folks going about their business.

But they may be carriers of a repulsive kind of disease, and there are many symptoms. Hate and prejudice, ignorance and a profound pride in what they don't know. They are those who go with their gut, which is about as accurate as throwing chicken bones or reading signs in frog entrails.

I don't know they're coming until they're there, and even then, I might not understand exactly what has walked into my life. I may think, considering my experience, that I'll know right away if something is going to go dark and wet, but I still get fooled, and their kind of disease can have a ripple effect; it's not just their viewpoint, it's how their viewpoint affects others—they spread their germs without even being aware of it.

* * *

I was in the side yard with Brett, enjoying our Saturday, and a fine April afternoon, cooking up burgers, bratwurst, and weenies on the grill. Their aroma in the air was thick enough, if you smacked your lips you could taste them.

We were celebrating. Three hours before, me and Brett had gotten married by the LaBorde justice of the peace. No Bible, no preacher, just the law. Me and her had talked about pulling that trigger for some years, and finally we had gone and done it. I couldn't have been happier.

When we got married we had a small crowd there at the JP's office, close friends and a few strays we had taken in, and they were coming over in a little while to enjoy our wedding picnic. We had a long folding-leg table laid out with paper plates and cups, and an ice chest with a bag of ice in it. We had folding chairs stacked on the ground, ready for use.

I was scraping a burger off the grill, flipping it.

"I thought we might go to Paris for a honeymoon," Brett said, "but then I got to thinking about a cookout in the yard and nixed it."

"Yeah. French cooking can kiss my ass, baby. I'm doing burgers and dogs."

"Don't burn them this time," Brett said.

"Nope. I'm on it. And you know what, everything goes well, we can play horseshoes after lunch, and later tonight you can play with my ass."

"Oh, you charmer."

"That's right, baby. Stick with me and you'll be farting through silk."

A white pickup coasted to the curb in front of our house and parked next to the oak tree that grew near the street. It wasn't a truck that belonged to one of our guests. It wasn't a truck that belonged to anybody I knew.

The tires on the truck were so high that when the door opened, the driver, a thin, thirtyish man with wiry muscles and sandy-blond hair, practically had to dangle himself down to the curb. On the other side a woman worked her way out of the passenger seat and came around the front of the truck. She had lowered some kind of step stool to make her exit. I caught a glimpse of it from under the truck. Both of them probably had nosebleeds from sitting so high.

They started across the yard. It made me a little nervous, especially when I saw the T-shirt the man was wearing. It was white with blue lettering on the front that read WHITE IS RIGHT. Not one of my sentiments, even though my skin is as pale as milk when it isn't tanned or sunburned.

The young man had on black jeans and lace-up boots and so many tattoos visible on his arms and neck that, from a distance, I thought he was wearing long sleeves. Close up I could see more tattoos through the thin fabric of his T-shirt. I assumed he might have others in places less interesting to see, and a box of stick-on tattoos at home along with a pointed white hood for those special evenings out with the Klan. That may sound judgmental, but hey, that T-shirt told me a lot.

The woman was probably in her late fifties, garbed up in what I think of as traditional Pentecostal style, meaning her brown hair was in a bun so tall and wide she could have hidden an electric mixer under it, and she was wearing a blue-jean dress that fell almost to her ankles and was capped off by clunky black boots that looked one grade up from orthopedic shoes. She didn't have on any makeup, not even lipstick or eyeliner. From certain religious points of view, God and Jesus get all worked up about hairdos and makeup but couldn't seem to end a war anywhere or kill a disease. I thought maybe God had his priorities out of whack.

Those two looked so much like stereotypes it wouldn't have surprised me to discover they had venomous snakes in their pockets and could speak in tongues.

The man slowed and let the woman take the lead. She came right to me, stuck out her hand, and I shook it. She didn't offer it to Brett. The man didn't offer his hand to either of us. He stood there with his hands in his pockets. One eyelid spasmed from time to time, as if being periodically electrocuted. I could have sworn I saw one of his neck tattoos crawl under his shirt, but I suppose it was a shifting of the light.

Up close I could see some of the tattoos were professional and some were the sort you do yourself or get in prison, or perhaps a three-year-old with a carving knife and a bottle of ink had been hired to mark him up.

"You're the one's got that private detective agency, aren't you?" the woman said.

"She does," I said, nodding at Brett. "I work for her."

"Oh, I thought you owned it and had her and that…colored fellow working for you. What's he do there?"

"Eats cookies and drinks coffee, from what I can tell," I said.

"He works there, same as this man, who, by the way, is my husband."

I liked the way Brett said that. I felt like a big dog. I was so happy I wanted to wag my tail.

"You work for your wife?" the man said. It was like his mind had just snapped to attention.

"It's either that or she doesn't let me eat."

"Sometimes, when he's sassy or acting a little hysterical, I make him stand in the yard and hold a heavy rock over his head," Brett said.

The woman grinned a little, but the young man looked at me as if he were concerned I not only didn't wear the pants in the family but might have accidentally cooked my dick on the grill in place of a sausage.

"We looked you up in the phone book. Drove by your office a few times," the woman said. "We asked around about y'all, trying to decide."

"Decide what?" Brett said.

"We got this problem, and truth is, everyone else turned us down."

"Who's everyone else?" I said.

"The other private detective in town."

"There's another one?" I said.

"And all them over in Tyler and Longview too. Ain't none over in Marvel Creek, which is where we've got the problem, so there wasn't no one to ask there. Cops here can't do nothing. It's out of their jurisdiction."

"Thing is, we heard you had that nig…colored man working there," the young man said, "and that put us off some. At first we thought he just cleaned up the office."

I thought: Bless your little ignorant heart.

"Here's something might put you off even more," I said, and pointed.

Marvin Hanson's car pulled up at the curb, and he and Officer Carroll, as we always called Curt, got out.

Hanson was carrying a twelve-pack of diet sodas under his arm, and Officer Carroll had a twelve-pack of beer under his. The sodas were mostly for me, the beers were for some of the others.

From the backseat came the niece of Leonard's ex-boyfriend John. Her name was Felicity, and she was just out of her teens and had her hair in pigtails today, tied up on both sides with bright blue ribbons.

Finally, there was Reba, the little girl Leonard called the Four-Hundred-Year-Old Vampire Midget. Truth was, twelve years old or not, Reba could be a bitch. She had a mouth like a sailor's and a mind as sharp as a butcher's knife. I had to make sure she didn't get in the beer when no one was watching.

All of them except Officer Carroll were black as black could be, and you could see the man and the woman taking that in, the way soldiers might count their enemies' artillery mounted on a hill. Officer Carroll was Leonard's boyfriend. I kind of figured same-sex relationships were probably on the pair's no-no list as well.

"What's all them colored people showing up for?" the young man said. The way he said that, you could tell he didn't go out and about among those who held different beliefs than his own.

"We're filming a Tarzan movie after lunch," Brett said. "Need a lot of them colored folks for that. Cannibal scenes, you know."

"Yeah, I get to play Tarzan," I said.

“No. You get to be Tarzan’s monkey,” Brett said.

I made a soft chattering sound. I thought it sounded like a monkey, and a damn sexy monkey.

“By the way,” I said, motioning to Marvin and Officer Carroll, “this gentleman is the police chief, and this white fellow works for him.”

No hands were shook. Everyone merely looked at one another for a moment as if all fingers had been dipped in shit.

Marvin said, “We’ll put these in the ice chest,” and he and Officer Carroll went to do just that.

I heard the screen door slam and looked up to see Chance step out on the porch with a large bag of potato chips in either hand. She wasn’t going to please them either. Physically, she was not only made up of whatever I was made up of, but she had her mother’s coloring, her dark skin, fine American Indian and Hispanic features, black hair tied back in a ponytail long enough to use for a lariat. She was beautiful.

Right behind her came Leonard, in charge of a box of vanilla cookies, his black face split with a bright white smile.

I watched the young man fold his arms across his chest, obscuring the writing on his shirt.

Everyone came over and wished us congratulations again—everyone except our surprise guests, of course.

It was then a second wave of guests arrived. Our friend Manuela Martinez got out of her car carrying a large paper bag. She was looking fine and petite in tight jeans and an equally tight orange top, her black hair cut to the shoulders; the white scar that ran from below her left ear to the tip of her chin gave her near-model features a kind of rugged class. I watched her walk toward us. I watched very carefully.

Brett elbowed me. “Watch it, mister.”

“Hey, what was that for?” I said.

“You know,” she said.

On the other side of the car, Cason Statler got out. He too had a paper bag with something in it. We were going to have enough food to feed the proverbial army. I had introduced him to Manny, as we called Manuela, and since that time they had become as tight as superglue in a gnat’s ass.

Cason was one of those guys that got better looking as he got older. White guy with thick, dark hair and a cock-of-the-walk stride, always in shape.

Brett said, “Now I got something to look at.”

“Then we’re even,” I said.

"Not exactly," she said.

The woman and the man from the two-story pickup truck stood stiff, like trees growing in the yard. We had sidelined them. And realizing we were being dicks, even though I thought they deserved it, I said, "Look, you want to talk, we can. On the porch."

They pulled roots and went to the porch and sat down on the glider and waited for us.

Leonard walked up to me, said, "Who are those crackers?"

"Why, those are racists who are a little worried we might have a colored boy working for us."

"Ah, now, Massa Hap, you know I'm one of the good ones."

"Yes, but don't forget your place."

"You mean with my foot up your ass?" he said.

Chance listened to us and smiled. She carried the chips to the table. Me and Brett greeted everybody while Leonard went on over to the porch to make the honkies nervous. He smelled blood in the water.

I gave the spatula to Manny, said, "Don't let the food burn."

"I warn you," Manny said, "what I cook best are kitchens. I've burned down two of them."

"No worries," Brett said. "We're outdoors. If the meat starts to smoke, use the spatula and take them off the grill. If they catch fire, use the spatula to beat out the flames."

"Gotcha," Manny said.

2

Me and Brett went over to the porch. As we were walking up, I heard Leonard say, “And I had me four of them fat white women in that barn. Lined ’em up against the wall, said, ‘Strip off and bend over and call me Daddy.’ Whole thing only cost me three dollars, and they let me brand them with a hot tire iron for free.”

“Ignore him,” I said.

The woman and the young man looked as if they had just survived a home invasion. The man especially appeared confused, and maybe a little angry, and yet at the same time there was a hesitation. I think he was afraid to say anything directly to Leonard, fearing his mouth might be writing a check his ass couldn’t cash.

All of us were on the porch now, our guests in the glider, me and Brett sitting on the steps, and Leonard leaning against the front door.

“Them two, the colored and the white man, they really law?” the white guy asked.

“Naw,” Leonard said. “We just let Marvin wear a badge and the other one got a cop suit for Christmas. Only reason he isn’t wearing it now is for fear of mustard stains.”

That got a blank look, an expression those two did especially well.

I said, “Yes. They are the real deal. First things first. I sense a disturbance in the color barrier. If you have trouble with black people, brown people, highly attractive redheads like my wife, or exceptional people like myself, then there’s no use in us talking.”

“All except that part about Hap being exceptional is real,” Leonard said.

The man looked at his mother. His eye was twitching a little more frequently now.

His mother said, “I guess we’re okay.”

"I don't know," the man said. "I'm not sure a colored is up to the job. So we need to know how much he'll be involved."

"As much as any of us will," Brett said.

"Though during the middle of the day, I might have to have me a nap," Leonard said.

The man and woman looked at each other, didn't speak, but when they turned back to us, the woman said, "All right, then. Beggars can't be choosers."

"That's the spirit," Leonard said. He was talking cool, but the anger was coming off him like a high fever.

Brett reached out and gently touched Leonard's arm. He calmed beneath her hand.

"Okay, tell us who you are, what you want," Brett said.

"My name is Judith Mulhaney. This is my son, Thomas. What we want is to hire you to find my missing daughter. His sister, Jackie."

"We called her Jackrabbit," Thomas said. "She has these big front teeth. Looked good on her, though. That's how we got to calling her a jackrabbit, saying she had a jackrabbit smile."

"She's been gone from home five years," Judith said. "Be honest, I don't think she's alive. Not to say she's been dead for five years. She was alive during most of that time, we know that. People saw her, but we didn't, just heard how she was doing here and there. Thought eventually, things would work out, that she'd come back to see us, but in the past few months, no one has seen her that we're aware of. Got to say we don't know many people over there well enough to be sure if we're getting the correct news. We kind of keep to ourselves. But I got a bad feeling. A mother knows."

"If anything was done to her," Thomas said, "I got an idea who might have done it."

"We want her back," Judith said, "be it flesh, or be it bones."

"All right," Brett said. "Before we know if we can be of any help, we need to hear the whole story. Need to know if you got money. Investigations don't come cheap."

"You get right to it, don't you?" Judith said.

"I do," Brett said. "You want us to do this, put us to work, you got to understand I don't like you or your son. You've insulted Leonard here several times and are too dense to know it or too insensitive to care. You've done everything but call him the N-word."

"I can say 'nigger,'" Leonard said. "It's okay I do. 'Nigger, nigger, nigger.'"

"Goddamn it, Leonard," Brett said.

"Just saying," Leonard said.

"That's what I don't get," Thomas said. "You can say it, but I can't."

"Oh, you can say it," Leonard said, "but say it with me standing here, next time you say it, it might be through a gap in your teeth. I say 'nigger,' we call it ironic, don't we, Hap?"

"Ironic," I said.

"You say it, and we knock your teeth out."

"It don't seem fair," Thomas said.

"It's on account of things having been so damn fair for us dark-skinned folks all these years. That too is irony, if you're wondering. And that doesn't mean something you do with starch and an ironing board."

"I know what 'irony' means," Thomas said. I didn't think he sounded all that convincing.

"Look here," I said. "Me and Brett, we're celebrating, and I don't want to deal with this. I'm sorry, but Jackie's been gone five years, she can wait a day. This is our day. Meet us at our office tomorrow at ten a.m., if you're serious. You know where the office is, I take it?"

Judith and Thomas both nodded in concert.

"And by the way. How did you find our house?" I said.

"Address is in the phone book," Thomas said.

"We looked up Brett Sawyer, like on the agency listing, and there's a house address for Brett Sawyer," Judith said. "We just drove over."

"Oh," I said.

So much for our Fortress of Solitude.

3

Me and Brett lay in bed breathing hard, our bodies covered in sweat. I was holding her in my arms and the air was beginning to cool. She reached over and grabbed the sheet and pulled it over us.

"Ah," I said, "you're blocking my view."

"You've seen enough for one night. My ass hurts."

"That was our first sex as a happily married couple," I said.

"Not to look a gift horse in the mouth, but it was a whole lot like the sex we had before we were married."

"This is true," I said. "But good, nonetheless."

"Absolutely. I'm glad we finally did it, Hap. Married, not had sex. Well, that came out wrong. I'm glad we did both. I don't know why being married matters, but it does. I didn't think it would. I knew you wanted to, and then I wanted to because you did, and now that we're married, I do feel different. I like it. Of course, I had a couple beers at lunch."

"It's a solid commitment, and I think it helps on our taxes."

"Married people break up all the time," she said.

"Not this time."

"Right answer," she said. "Do you think we were kind of mean to those people today?"

"I do. And they had it coming."

"Maybe we just fulfilled their idea of what liberal-minded folks are supposed to be like. Well, you're the most liberal-minded, and Leonard, he's not liberal, so maybe I don't know shit."

"Leonard was a real asshole," I said. "Talking about lining women up against the wall. He should have said men if he really wanted to get to them. Women aren't his attraction."

"I understand the sentiment," Brett said, and rubbed my thigh under the sheet.

“I don’t know if I want to help those two,” I said. “I really don’t like them.”

“It’s not about their beliefs, Hap, it’s about the missing girl.”

“Jackrabbit.”

“I bet she hated that name.”

“Probably didn’t use it with the general public,” I said.

“Thinking it over,” Brett said, “I think Leonard showed tremendous restraint.”

“Yeah, couple years back he would have set their truck on fire with them in it.”

“Think they’ll show up at the office in the morning?”

“I don’t know. But if you keep rubbing my thigh, I can tell you what will show up.”

“That’s kind of the idea,” she said. “Question? You mind I’m keeping my last name, not taking yours?”

“Of course not. I’m keeping mine. I don’t want to be Hap Sawyer any more than you want to be Brett Collins. I have thought about changing my name to Swinging Dick, though. Think that suits me better.”

“Oh, baby. Name like that, wouldn’t you need enough to swing, to give it meaning?”

“Oh, that hurt.”

Brett laughed that throaty laugh she has and took hold of my head and pulled me to her and kissed me.

4

In the morning, we got up and had coffee and buttered toast, then showered together. It felt funny having the house all to ourselves again. First Leonard had moved in for a while, then he was gone, then Chance came in, and then she got an apartment and was out, then Reba the Four-Hundred-Year-Old Vampire Midget stayed with us for a couple of nightmarish weeks, then Reba moved in with Chance, who could stand her best, and then Buffy, the dog Leonard had rescued but who lived with us, moved in with Chance as well. Buffy and Reba had the least bit of luggage, unless you counted all that was packed up in their pasts. Mistreated girl, mistreated dog.

After showering, we ended up having sex on the couch, just because we could, then we got dressed, and Brett drove us to the office in her car. The bike shop under our office was opening up. I always tried to take a glance at the owner, a beautiful blond lady who wore shorts most of the time, even in cool weather, and in cold weather she wore yoga pants that didn't do her any harm either. I didn't see her this morning, but I looked anyway. I love my redheaded woman, but I won't lie: I enjoy examining the female form. I like to think it's the potential artist in me. But it's probably hormones. I think I got an extra share.

Leonard was already in the office making coffee and eating from a bag of vanilla cookies. There was a large watermelon on the desk next to a stack of moon pies and a can of malt liquor. On the wall, his fedora hung on a nail, and beside it, on another nail, was a straw cowboy hat about the size of a bird feeder. He wore hats from time to time, these and another one he kept at home, an actual deerstalker cap, like Sherlock Holmes in the movies, but he was going through a hatless period and had taken to shaving his head. I think this was due to his hair thinning.

As we came in, Leonard said, “And how are the newlyweds?”

“About like we were before we were newlyweds,” Brett said. “Except, oh my God, the sex was amazing. We saw little stars.”

“Really, we did,” I said. “We bumped our heads on the headboard.”

“I don’t want to hear about it,” Leonard said. “The idea of heterosexual sex always makes me queasy.”

“Now that we’ve got that out of the way,” I said, “why is there a watermelon, moon pies, and a can of malt liquor on the desk?”

“I was hoping, those two showed up, I would fit the stereotype. Just love jacking with them.”

“Not today,” Brett said. “Put that stuff out of sight. I thought about it all night. They may be assholes, but if they hire us, they’re our assholes, so let’s treat them like clients. We can dislike them on our off-hours.”

“You’re no fun,” Leonard said, but he started moving the stuff off the desk and into the closet. He said, “I actually did bring all this stuff from home, except the malt liquor. That’s Officer Carroll’s. Had time, I’d have bought a bucket of chicken to go with this stuff.”

“Just finish putting it away,” Brett said. Then to me: “And you, mister. You can stop grinning. There’s sweeping up needed around here.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said.

I got the broom and dustpan and went at it, especially under the desk, where dirt was inclined to mound up from our shoes.

“Ha-ha,” Leonard said, watching me sweep. “You missed a spot.”

I finished up sweeping, checked the clock, saw it was a minute before ten.

Right then Brett said, “Here they are.”

She was standing by the window looking out at the parking lot. Leonard and I went over to look out with her. The same truck on big high tires was there, and the side we could see was the passenger side this time, and when Judith opened the door, she pushed a button and a series of steps folded out of the truck and down to the ground. She came down them, hit another button, and they folded up. Smaller tires could have eliminated the steps and the money required for them, but I guess their version of Jesus liked white people to have plain hair and clothes and an expensive, big-ass, gas-guzzling truck.

Judith closed the door and started toward our office with her son, Thomas, who came around the front of the truck and joined her.

“I was hoping they wouldn’t show up,” Leonard said. “Hit by a car or something.”

“That’s not nice,” Brett said.

“Like I don’t know,” Leonard said.

Brett sat down behind the desk, Leonard leaned against the wall, and I took a seat on the edge of the desk, near enough so I could bask in Brett’s glow.

We listened to them climbing the stairs, and after a pause, they came in. The woman was dressed the same as yesterday, but Thomas had traded in his WHITE IS RIGHT T-shirt for a black one that had HARLEY-DAVIDSON written on it above the company’s logo.

“Would y’all like some watermelon?” Leonard said. “I got one in the closet. I like to keep them around. I always got one at the ready. Moon pies too. Or maybe you’d like to wet your whistle with some malt liquor.”

They looked at Leonard but didn’t respond. Sometimes that’s all you can do, ignore him. He’s kind of like a dangerous wild animal; responses only encourage them.

Brett glared at him. Leonard gave them a little smile, like a farmer who had been caught with his finger in a duck’s ass.

I offered them the client chairs, and they took their seats. When they were comfortable, Brett said, “Listen. We were rude to you yesterday. I don’t apologize for why I was rude, but I apologize for being rude. We take your case on, you can be assured you’ll get our best service.”

“You won’t just take our money,” Thomas said.

“No,” Brett said. “We won’t. First, you have a photo of Jackie?”

Judith produced a couple from her purse and handed them to Brett. Brett looked at them, handed them to me. I had expected to see a girl with prominent teeth so extended she could eat an ear of corn through a split-rail fence, but Jackie was actually quite attractive, long, dark hair, the teeth even and white, but large. It made her kind of sexy-looking, I thought. She was probably in her early twenties in that shot, and it was obviously taken in a photo booth. The other was a picture of her and an older man, both leaning on a pickup truck. In that one she was younger, late teens, maybe, a little lost-looking, her face having yet to grow into her teeth. The guy was perhaps ten years older, or had lived a rugged life. He was big and dressed in camouflage pants and a white T-shirt. Guess a deer saw him from the belt down, he’d be invisible out there in the woods. There was about him a redneck air I always despise, a look on his face like a man that embraced ignorance as truth and lack of interest in education as a reward.

I gave the photos to Leonard. While he looked at them, Judith began to explain about Jackie's disappearance.

"Fellow that's with her," she said, "that's George Jeeter, over in Marvel Creek. He took up with her when she was sixteen. He's thirty in that picture. He'd be right on thirty-five or so now. Owns a junkyard. Jackie was always good with numbers, made good grades in school. She did George's books, or computer records, whatever it was. She wanted to be an accountant. George kicked her out, or she left him. Not clear on that, but they quit being together, we know that much."

"I'm presuming you went to Marvel Creek for a peek?" Brett said.

"Did," Thomas said. "Went over there and found Jeeter, but he claimed he hadn't seen her, not since he let her go. Said he didn't want to stay with her because she nagged him. I thought right then he'd done something to her."

"But you don't know that for a fact?" I said.

"No," Thomas said. "Guess I don't, but he's that kind of man. He don't go to church none, even though he's got the right way of seeing things on certain issues."

"You mean he's a racist, like you two?" Leonard said.

"Segregationist," Thomas said. "I ain't got a thing against niggers—sorry. Habit."

"I bet," Leonard said, and the look on his face might have made Thomas pee himself a little.

Thomas rushed to doctor the wound. "Ain't got nothing against you or your kind, long as we all stay in our place, same as birds do. You don't see no mockingbird mating with a blue jay, now, do you?"

"People aren't birds," I said.

"Tommy, you are seriously stupid," Leonard said.

Thomas's response to this was "No one calls me Tommy."

"But they must call you stupid," Leonard said.

Thomas edged off his chair a little, but just a little. Leonard didn't blink. Tension in the room grew thick as cold molasses.

"Let's forget all that for now," Brett said. "Judith. Give us anything you think we should know. Leonard, tuck it back in, baby. We all know who's the man here. You're manly too, Hap."

"Thanks," I said. "I wasn't having any doubts."

"Well, I don't know how to say this," Judith said, "and I ain't proud of it, but now and again, when her and George would split up, 'cause they did that often, she'd run with colored boys."

"Was she a fast runner?" Leonard said.

"I don't mean like track," Judith said.

“I know what you meant,” Leonard said.

Brett said, “Ground rules. We will all be polite. Especially you, Leonard.”

“She ran with colored because she knew that would bother George,” Judith said. “Or that’s what I think. She wasn’t as particular as the rest of us. She liked life a little on the trashy side.”

I heard Leonard sigh like air going out of a punctured tire. Brett shot him a look. He twisted his mouth as if to knot it and stayed quiet.

Brett turned her attention back to our potential clients.

“So, you’re thinking it might not be George did her in but these colored boys, as you call them? And you, Thomas, you think it was George?”

“We don’t know nothing for sure,” Thomas said. “Did, we wouldn’t need you people. But yeah, my guess is George did her in. I’d like to kill who did it myself, but I don’t want to get cross with the law. Already done that. Spent a little time in Huntsville. Another strike, I’ll be doing prison laundry for the rest of my life.”

“You know the names of the black men she dated?” I asked.

“Only know of one, the main one, goes by the name Ace,” Thomas said. “Me and Mom went asking around, and we didn’t find out much but that. It wasn’t like we were hanging with the same people she was hanging with.”

“You mean the black people,” Leonard said.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Thomas said. “On the other hand, George might have done something for his honor, and maybe that’s all right, maybe I can understand that some, but still—”

“It’s your sister,” I said, finishing his thought.

“That’s right,” Thomas said. “Thing I want to know is if he done it. And for what reason. Hell, I’ve thought about killing her myself for breaking sacred bonds. Some things are about honor and blood.”

“You mean she shouldn’t have crossed the color line?” I said.

“That’s right,” Thomas said. “It’s in the Bible. You don’t do that. I got a twenty-two at the house, and I might be inclined to use it on her. I sure thought about it.”

“It’s also in the Bible not to eat pork,” I said, “but you look like a bacon-and-eggs kind of guy to me.”

“It was okay for Jesus to eat what he wanted,” Thomas said. “And I said I thought about it, but she was all right, except for not knowing where the boundary lines ought to be. Me and her had fun as kids. We got along good then.”

I thought him saying how she was all right sounded about as sincere as a lion trying to talk an antelope into cuddling.

“They did have fun,” Judith said. “They were little scamps.”

“Tell you what,” Brett said. “I’m going to give you a pen and a tablet, and I want you to write down any information you have about Jackie and people she might know, black or white, the connections they had with her. Close friends, relatives, you name it. Not just people you might think could have done something to her but even those you feel certain wouldn’t do anything to her. Write it all down, and if you have a stray thought about this or that, something pertaining to Jackie, put that down too.”

Brett opened the desk drawer, pulled out a couple of yellow-paper tablets and slid them across the desk, gave them a pen apiece.

They took the tablets and started writing. We all sat in silence while they did. The only sounds in the room were the ball-point pens scratching on paper.

When they finished, they slid the tablets and pens back. Brett picked up Judith’s tablet, and I picked up Thomas’s. I had a pang of sadness when I saw he’d misspelled every other word and couldn’t write a sentence that was a complete thought. He had some ideas he wanted to express, and they were pretty much the same thing he had said before, about Jackie maybe being dishonorable for running with colored. He spelled “honor” as “oner.” I felt sorry for him right then. I wished I had never said a harsh word to him or her. I felt like a bully, picking on a mentally deficient mark.

It was a feeling I knew would soon pass. Sometimes there are people who deserve to be treated like assholes. I know I’ve had it coming more than once.

“How about Jackie’s father?” Brett asked. “What’s his story?”

“Sebastian. His name’s on there. I pretty much raised the kids alone,” Judith said. “He went another way, lost his religion, joined the Presbyterians or some such.”

“Also Christians,” I said.

“Not according to the Bible,” Judith said. It was as if she were trying to explain to us that red wasn’t green. It was obvious to her.

“Tomayto, tomahto,” Leonard said.

“The true word of the Lord will be known to those who wish to accept it,” Judith said. “Presbyterians are infidels.”

“Tomayto, tomahto,” Leonard said again.

“So he doesn’t have any connection to the children?” Brett said.

“He let them go a long time ago, and we let him go. He said he had to search for his feelings or some such. Started preaching false doctrine. He had some odd ideas about dying and about how he wanted to die. I don’t really talk about that ’cause I don’t understand it much.”

“Where does he live?” Brett said.

“Marvel Creek,” Judith said, “but you don’t need to talk to him. He doesn’t know a thing about the children after Thomas was twelve and Jackrabbit was thirteen. Didn’t deal with them at all. Besides, we don’t really know where he lives over there.”

“Christianity sure holds the family together, don’t it?” Leonard said.

I saw Thomas move as if he might get out of the chair, which was exactly what Leonard wanted. He gave Leonard a hard look that melted fast as a snowflake on a hot stove, and he suddenly found more comfort in the chair than before, located a spot on the window behind Brett and concentrated on that. My guess was being here with us was his idea of hell turned true.

After a few more questions from Brett, they gave her a fistful of money that was mostly ones and fives and would cover about two days’ work. They promised more just as soon as Thomas got paid over at the chicken plant, a place where I had worked briefly. I didn’t tell him we had the same alma mater.

They got up and left. Brett picked up Judith’s tablet and stared at it.

“There goes the fucking Madonna on earth and one of her little fucking shit-ass scamps,” Leonard said.

“Truth is, I feel sorry for them,” Brett said.

“Me too,” I said. “For a minute.”

5

For lunch, we went to an El Salvadorean place that had only been open a short time and had been built inside of what was once a tire-and-lube business. They had rickety tables and rickety chairs and really good food there. The tires had long been vacated, in case you were curious, and I presumed there was no lube business going on in any manner, shape, or form.

I had my favorite meal, jalapeños and cheese wrapped in grilled bacon with a side of rice and charro beans and a chicken tamale wrapped in a plantain husk, along with plantain chips for the table. Brett had chicken quesadillas, and Leonard had an enchilada about the size of a pontoon boat. I don't know what the people at the table near us had, but they seemed to be enjoying it.

"The father," Brett said. "They didn't say much about him, but I think we ought to start there, find out who he is. He's in the same town where Jackie disappeared. That's quite a coincidence. He could be hiding her. She could have gone there looking for him, and in fact, that makes a lot of sense."

"Their dislike of him kind of shuts off their thinking," I said.

"I don't believe they had a lot of thinking to shut off," Leonard said. "I'm surprised they got the brain cells to remind their bodies to breathe."

"Our dislike of them might shut off our thinking, now that I consider it," I said.

"Sucks to be them," Leonard said. "But, yeah, dear old Dad might have seen Jackrabbit last. For all we know she's living in Marvel Creek selling antiques, is married to a Klan Grand Wizard, and has four kids and a pet goat, all with bodies covered in tattoos and their own nine-millimeter pistols, including the goat."

“Goats prefer something lighter,” I said. “Maybe a twenty-five-caliber. Goes with their outfit.”

“Boys, that’s enough,” Brett said. “What I’m thinking is you and Leonard go to Marvel Creek. I’ll see if I can find some of the others on this list. Chance comes in this afternoon, and I’ll get her to help me. The Internet ought to be for something other than me looking up photos of men with huge dicks.”

“Zing,” Leonard said.

I ignored both of them.

“Well, we got his name, so we can get started,” Leonard said. “Sebastian Mulhaney. What a name.”

“Beats Jackrabbit,” I said. “Drop us off at my car, hon, and we’ll go. You can make phone calls and find addresses. Me and Leonard are people persons.”

“You, maybe. Leonard, not so much,” Brett said. “And I’m not that sure about you.”

“This is true,” Leonard said. “Nobody likes me and I don’t like nobody. I hope they all get ants in their ass.”

6

I rolled us into Marvel Creek about three o'clock in the afternoon on a warm day with a dry wind blowing. Way to the west, clouds were brewing like darkened beer suds, bundling up raindrops, rolling them slowly in our direction.

I grew up in Marvel Creek. Before I was born it had been a rough but thriving oil town, back in the thirties, then it became a rough played-out oil town in the fifties. It was made up of the descendants of oil-field trash, as they sometimes called themselves, thugs, prostitutes, pimps and gamblers, a few lucky oil tycoons. Back then, unless you were one of the lucky ones who struck it rich and stayed rich, it was a town where broken dreams got even more broken and crawled off to die in the river bottoms.

You were on the poor end of things, the blue-collar end of things, you saw stuff the better-off folks didn't see and sometimes refused to admit existed. Things the cops didn't always report and were actually sometimes responsible for. Black bodies, wrapped in chains, slipped off into the muddy Sabine; women and wives who wore black eyes so often they might have been part raccoon. Fights and bad deeds, enough to fill a thousand books, things done in the dark, and on the river, and in the deep green woods, even deeper back then, before lumber mills became pulp-wood serial killers and ravaged trees in the name of progress and the almighty dollar.

That muddy brown river winds along at one end of town, crawling under a long bridge, pushing mud and snakes and fish and debris all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. I spent a lot of time along that river and on it in rowboats and motorboats and even inner tubes. Once, long ago when we were young, me and Leonard even found a sunken boat out there with bodies in it.

Another time my ex-wife got us into some bad business searching for treasure in the river. We found the treasure, but in the end, it brought more pain than satisfaction.

Back then, when you crossed the bridge on your way out, you came to Hell's Half Mile, a line of honky-tonks full of drunken patrons trying to wash down poverty, bad marriages, and gone-to-hell children. Whores worked there, taking customers to little trailers out back. There was no family night.

Knives and guns came out on many occasions, mostly on Saturday nights. The altercation might have to do with some whore's attentions or with patrons' differing political views or their disagreements on the finer points of religion ("Love thy neighbor" with a load of lead or a sharp knife), but mostly it had to do with bottled-up rage from being poor and knowing full well there had to be something better than a life of hard work, hot nights, and empty bottles, and knowing too that if there was, you weren't going to get a taste of it. Mix it all with alcohol, and it was like trying to blend fire with gasoline.

In time, to the delight of churchgoing women and to the disappointment of beer drinkers and whoremongers, the tonks went out of business. The whores and the pimps and the shooters and knife fighters went with them or ended up on the school board, and the former patrons drank at home. The old buildings were burned down for the insurance money or turned weather-beaten and vacant.

Not so many people ran the river and the woods like before. A great used-book store had grown up in the town. It nearly took up an entire block, giving way on one corner to a Mexican restaurant. The restaurant's site had been a bank when I was a kid. The town was now known for antiques. It had become respectable.

Respectable place or not, driving around it always made me tremble a bit, like the past was blowing a cold wind over my heart. Always got the impression that the old world I had known was still out there, just one bloody scratch below the surface, and all it took was the right incantation to release it.

Or merely the arrival of good ole us, Hap and Leonard.

7

Brett sent to my phone the address she found for Jackrabbit's daddy. We put the address into the GPS and drove over there.

To our surprise, it was a church. When I was young it had been a theater. I had watched many a movie there, had seen cowboys and Indians ride, vampires suck blood, monsters jump out of the shadows, and I had seen crime shows, musicals, and stories of romance. Those days were gone.

There were white crosses painted on the old glass doors, the ticket booth had a wooden barrier over the ticket slot, and the door that led into the booth from inside the theater was now a solid piece of wall. Where garish movie posters had once filled frames on either side of the outside theater archway were now posters of a different sort of garishness, one with Jesus on the cross. The crown of thorns on his forehead had thorns the size of tenpenny nails stuck into his flesh, causing blood to leak down his face and drip over his lips. Beneath Jesus, a Roman soldier who looked a lot like John Wayne was holding a spear and was looking up at him on the cross with an expression of either satisfaction, boredom, or wonder. Maybe they were discussing the weather.

"Hey, you're going to get wet up there," says the soldier.

"Hell, don't I know it," says Jesus back.

On the other side of the building, there was a less dramatic poster with Jesus standing on a high place looking up to the heavens. People sat on the ground near him, looking where he was looking, and there were sheep and lambs looking up as well, unaware that they might soon be decorating a plate with some fig jelly.

We pulled on the front door, but it was locked, so we went around back, down an alley composed of cracked bricks, and found a door there that was wide open.

“It’s not breaking and entering if the door is open,” Leonard said.

“Way I heard it,” I said.

For a moment we stood there, considering, then finally went inside. It was deep dark in there and I used the flashlight on my phone to guide us down a space where odds and ends had been kept, and were still kept, but now those odds and ends were not movie-related. There were hymnbooks and Bibles, some of them quite ragged, and a number of cardboard boxes containing who knew what.

After a few moments, the hallway terminated at a door, one of those you push against. We pushed and came into the theater itself. It was lit up as bright as a visit to the sun, and it was cold with air-conditioning, the way a theater ought to be. I turned off my phone light.

The old theater seats were still there, but they had been reupholstered, and the carpet between the seats no longer sucked at your shoes due to sticky soda spills. It was bright red again and soft.

There was a guy on his knee, leaning into an aisle seat, his head out of sight. An elbow appeared from time to time, moving back and forth. We heard a soft clicking sound.

“Hello, the theater,” Leonard said.

The man stopped doing what he was doing and came to his feet. He had a staple gun in his hand.

“Sorry to barge in,” I said. “The door was open.”

“Quite all right,” the man said. “I opened it to bring some stuff in, forgot to close it.”

The man was about six five, broad-shouldered, with a bit of belly that anyone with any sense and experience would know wouldn’t slow him down if he decided to pull your head off and shit down your neck. He had a well-trimmed black beard and longish black hair that fell down his neck and over his ears. I guess he was about my age, give or take a year or two.

We walked up to him.

“Can I help you gentlemen?” he said.

“Hope so,” I said, and stuck out my hand. He placed the stapler on the closest theater seat, shook my hand, then shook Leonard’s.

“I was stapling upholstery on some of the seats.”

“I used to come here to watch movies,” I said.

“Ah, me too,” he said. “Wait a minute. Aren’t you Hap Collins?”

“I am.”

“You remember me?”

“Sorry.”

“Gary Jamesway.”

“You played football. I think you were a year behind me.”

“It was baseball, and I wasn’t very good at it.”

“Not the way I remember it,” I said. I had never really kept up with baseball, but there was talk about Jamesway all the time. I remembered it now. Yeah. Baseball, not football. “You went pro, right?”

“I was okay when we played who we played in high school. Graduated, got a chance with the Astros, but it turned out that against someone who could really throw, I couldn’t hit, and against someone who could really hit, I couldn’t catch, and I couldn’t run fast enough to match anybody. I was a high-school whiz and a professional dud. I warmed a bench for a couple of seasons, then they let me go, and I was glad of it. Haven’t picked up a baseball since.”

“At least you got to the show,” Leonard said.

“Yeah,” Jamesway said, “there was that.”

“You’re not actually who we’re looking for,” I said, “but glad to see you.”

“Who are you looking for?”

I told him.

“Oh my, Sebastian. May the Lord watch over his confused and tortured soul.”

“I’m thinking Sebastian’s story isn’t a happy one,” Leonard said.

“Might say it has a weird ending.”

“I thought he lived here,” I said. “Or preached here.”

“He did, once. I own the place now. I’m the preacher. Actually, I was the preacher a year before he left. He stopped showing up to preach, and when I started, I lost most of his flock, but in a short time I got a new one. It’s growing all the time. New people are coming in. The things he taught, they couldn’t stand the bright of the light.”

“That so,” Leonard said.

“Some years back I came here and heard him preach, and I didn’t like him. Stayed after one of his sermons and talked to him about, how shall I say, being more Christ-like and less Joshua-like, since being Christians, we weren’t supposed to be worshipping the old ways, but the new ways of Jesus. You see, he talked the Old Testament and tossed in lizard men from time to time.”

“Say what?” Leonard said.

“He and a large portion of his flock were what you might call conspiracy theorists. They didn’t require proof, only a need they wanted to fulfill. Something in their lives that was more interesting than braces on their kids' teeth, nursing a hangover, or paying bills while navigating a changing world. They weren't up to it. But if they could believe lizard men were out there, messing everything up for the rest of us, they could have a satisfying creepy feeling that was preferable to an unsatisfying feeling of boredom and routine and unimportance."

"His wife said he was a Presbyterian," I said.

"Hardly," Jamesway said, and laughed.

"So you told him he was full of it," I said, "and that lizard men had yet to show up, and he said, 'How about you preach?'"

"He was starting to fall apart. Had a lot of hate and disappointment in him. Didn't really seem to care about much at that point. He surprised me by offering me a chance to give a sermon the next Sunday. I didn't know it then, but he was looking for a way to get out of his responsibilities, and I came at the right time. His crowd was not my crowd. They left, and I stayed, and Sebastian stayed. But in the back. Drinking most of the time. Then a young woman came around for a while, and then she stopped coming, and he went away. Short time after that they found his remains in Davy Crockett National Forest. A hiker came across it. His corpse was in bad shape, but they could tell his chest had been split open, his ribs separated with a hammer. His heart and some other organs were missing, and they didn't think it was decay or animals that got to them."

"Damn lizard men," Leonard said.

Jamesway smiled.

"The grave he was in was deep and wide, but it had eroded. He had that wound in his chest and a jump rope around his neck. They concluded he was strangled with that, which considering they found it wrapped around his neck a couple of times doesn't sound like great police deduction to me. A cocker spaniel could have figured that out. He had his hands in the pockets of his pants, like he was relaxing. The bones of his hands, actually. Like he'd stuck them in there and held them there while he was strangled."

I was surprised Brett hadn't found Sebastian's death notice on the Internet, and I said so to Jamesway.

"It was just this week he was confirmed dead, but they figured he'd been dead for a couple weeks, give or take a weekend. No one went to the trouble to put an obituary in the paper. I didn't bother with it either, I'm ashamed to say. I don't know why I even came to this church. I like to think God had plans for me."

“What I want to know, is there any money in it?” Leonard said.

Jamesway laughed a little. It wasn’t something that would turn contagious, but there was humor there.

“Not that much. Not unless you want to be a giant blowhard like some evangelists are, always assuring you of a place in heaven if you’ll send them money. People can be easily conned out of their possessions and their common sense if you use religion as a lever. I don’t believe like that. Sebastian made a deal with me to buy the place. I got a loan, and I’m paying it off. Got it for a song. He had my money when we left the real estate agent’s office, or the check, anyway. When they found him, he didn’t have a check, or any money at all. Hey, let’s go up front to the office. I got coffee there, and I’m ready for some.”

8

We tagged along through the side door that led out of the main part of the theater and into a lobby that seemed so much smaller to me than in my memory. Fact was, the whole theater seemed a miniature of how I recalled it. I missed the smell of hot buttered popcorn and the way drinks fizzed in paper cups and made your nose hairs twitch. I missed being ten years old.

In Jamesway's office, which was a bit tight, we sat on some foldout chairs, and he settled in behind a cheap desk after he started the coffeemaker. The desk shook a little when he put his arms on it.

"This place, Hap, remember the black folks had to go up into the balcony, weren't allowed on the bottom floor?" Jamesway said.

"Of course I remember," I said.

"Black people wanted to go to the restroom," Jamesway said, "they had to leave the theater, walk across the street to a concrete bunker with a sign painted over it that said COLORED.

"In high school, I heard from a guy, older than both of us, Hap, that had been a part-time usher here, back when they had ushers, and he said the carpet in the balcony stank of urine. He was angry about it, people peeing on the carpet. He said, 'That's how those people are. Animals.' But he didn't have to cross the street to pee. Didn't have to miss a big chunk of the movie."

"Suppose all this nostalgia you're giving out is because Sebastian wasn't as forward-thinking as you," Leonard said. "We got the idea he left his family because his views had become more mainstream, but you say that ain't so."

"If he was more mainstream than they liked, then they must be way on the far edge of the cliff."

"Right there at the very edge," Leonard said, "looking into the abyss.

And I'm wishing they'd fall in, except we gave our word we'd work for them."

"That means something to you, giving your word?" Jamesway asked.

"It means a lot," Leonard said. "I keep my word until the people who I gave my word to break theirs."

"Fair enough," Jamesway said. "Let me tell you, Sebastian was crazy, talking about lizard men and the apocalypse on the horizon. Worse, he had folks listening to him. For a time, this was a kind of place where people who hated anything different in the social order since 1950 could come and say things they might be reluctant to say out in the open. They hated immigrants, black people, and anyone they considered liberal or progressive. They thought women were deemed by God to be of service to them."

Jamesway got up and grabbed some cups out of a cabinet, poured us some of the coffee, asked how we liked it. We told him. He used artificial creamer and artificial sweetener to fix it up. The coffee tasted like someone had steeped a dead gerbil in it. I drank more than I wanted so as to be polite. I hoped the gerbil had clean feet.

"And what exactly is your denomination?" I said.

"Church of Jesus," he said. "It's new."

"You mean you made it up?" Leonard said.

"Pretty much," he said. "All religions are made up, or they're modifications of what's gone before. I try and teach what some might call a progressive view of the Bible, what others might call blasphemy. There are more people moving in a positive direction than a negative, and I founded my church on that."

"You must not pay attention to elections," I said.

"I believe in people."

"That must take a real job of work, plus overtime," Leonard said.

"It's kind of what my job is," Jamesway said. "Believing and hope. I don't think Noah sailed around with an ark full of animals or that Moses parted the Red Sea, and I'm not even sure Jesus was divine, but I like his message. That's what I believe in."

"And that works for your congregation?" I said.

"I leave out that part about not being sure of Jesus being divine because I think the rest of it is worth it. I don't teach from the Old Testament at all, only the New. But you want to know about Sebastian?"

"Only so we can look for someone else," Leonard said. "His daughter."

"Ah, Jackie," he said. "Called her Jackrabbit."

"That's the one," Leonard said.

"She's the girl I mentioned who came around—well, woman. Interesting character, Jackie. Grew up with Sebastian and her mother and her brother, who, and I shouldn't say such a thing as a servant of God, but if he was a lightbulb he wouldn't light up the inside of a frog's ass. I'm basing this mostly on what Jackie told me, of course, but he and his mother came here asking about Jackie, Sebastian too. I told them a lot less than I'm telling you. I got bad vibes from the brother. Felt what Jackie'd told me, he confirmed. He was really irked she had been with black men. He felt the family honor had been diminished."

"Their honor was diminished when they were born," Leonard said.

"Well, mother and son have their heads firmly up their asses, but in their own way, they have a code they live by," Jamesway said.

"Hitler lived by a code," Leonard said. "But that didn't keep it from being a bad one."

"Point taken," Jamesway said.

"You didn't say you knew Jackie all that well before, but now you're saying you did," I said. "Before she was just a girl that came around."

"I didn't say I didn't know her," Jamesway said. "I was trying to say I didn't know her when she was first coming around to see Sebastian. She came back later, after he left. Ended up confiding in me soon as she figured out I wasn't someone who was supporting the nonsense Sebastian had been preaching. Jackie was different from her people. She was smart as a whip with numbers, helped me with some tax returns and the like a few times.

"As far as her father was concerned, she could have been a stray dog with the mange. He ignored her, wouldn't pay attention to her. Me and her went out a few times. Nothing serious. Grabbed a burger, went to a movie. I learned she had been with a man named Ace, and she said there was another fellow had a serious crush on her, and she kind of liked him. He had money. I hate to make Jackie sound like a gold digger, but I think she was looking for security. She didn't grow up with much of that. That's why it was best she gave up on Sebastian as a father, if for no other reason than he became obsessed with death."

"How so?" I said.

"You can fix this idea up with roast nuts and fill the air with incense, and it will still seem messed up and stinky. He wanted someone to murder him. Wanted it done in a specific way. And considering how his body was found, how it was worked over, he certainly convinced someone to help him out. That's what I meant earlier when I said I had some idea.”

“A form of assisted suicide,” I said.

“I really don’t know how to split that hair,” he said. “Helping someone buy the rope isn’t quite the same thing as putting it around that person’s neck and then cutting him open and busting his ribs out of the way to take his heart and a key.”

“That’s what he asked you to do?” I said.

“That’s what he asked. Said he’d pay me to do it. Told me what he wanted to do and said he was going to have a grave ready in Davy Crockett National Forest, wanted to put his hands in his pockets while I strangled him to make him weak, and then he wanted me to cut him open while he was still alive, use a hammer to break his ribs so I could get to his stomach. He was going to swallow a key right before he was to be strangled. He kept talking about how he wanted to see his guts steam in the air. He was obsessed with that. Seeing his intestines. Wanted them laid out on his chest so he could see them as he died. Said the key in his stomach would go to a bank box, and the box would contain half the money he promised; other half would be given to me before killing him in the manner he asked. Craziest thing I ever heard of. I didn’t take the bait and tried to counsel him, but he wasn’t having any of that. His mind was made up. Still, I never thought he’d find someone who’d go through with it. I thought he would drop it in time.”

“Tell the police this?” I said.

“Right after Sebastian was found.”

“And?”

“Chief didn’t think anyone would pay someone to murder them. But they were curious about how I would know about the body, how it was found. Had their eye on me for a while, since I knew things that hadn’t been released to the news. I think they’ve given up on me now. I don’t even own a car, so how would I get out there to kill and bury him?”

“I don’t understand why he didn’t just kill himself,” Leonard said.

“Isn’t merely about suicide,” Jamesway said. “There’s a name for it, but I don’t know what it is. People like him are looking for someone to make them suffer. They get off on it sexually. Suppose it has something to do with self-loathing. I don’t know. No expert on that kind of thing.”

“How much did he offer you?” Leonard said.

“Ten thousand dollars. Said he’d give me five up-front, the rest would be in the bank box at the bank here. There’s only one. He was offering me some of the money I had used to pay for this place. Maybe he thought that would be an incentive. Getting part of my money back.

"I told him, 'What if you give your killer the first half and they don't do it? Or what if they just shoot you in the head and ignore the ritual?' That didn't deter him. He was willing to chance it. I think the fantasy was so intense he couldn't shake it. That was his idea of the ultimate orgasm."

"Damn," Leonard said.

"Was a key found inside of Sebastian?" I asked.

Jamesway shrugged. "Don't know."

"Did they check the bank box?" I asked.

"I don't know that either, but my guess is yes. Maybe the police chief has five thousand dollars in his bank account now, or maybe whoever did it got the key like they were supposed to."

"That's some messed-up shit," Leonard said. "Jackrabbit, do you know where she is?"

Jamesway shook his head. "Not anymore. Last time I saw her, she was in deep despair. Tried to talk to me about it. I tried to listen. But she could never get it out. It was as if she were trying to cough up an anvil. She sat right where you're sitting, Hap. She opened her mouth but nothing would come out. I suggested therapy, told her I might know someone. Haven't heard from her since. She was an odd duck, but I like odd ducks, unless they're as odd as her father. He was less like a duck and more like a vulture."

"What was Jackie's job?" I asked.

"She kept books for a local company," he said. "New Paradise. I think she did accounting, but she wasn't an accountant. Just good with numbers. She told me once her mother thought she might be a witch, way she could figure things with numbers. Math, like gravity, is hard for those kinds of folks to grasp as reality."

"Do you happen to have a recent photo of Jackie?" I said.

"No…wait. There's a photo we took of the congregation at Christmas. She was here, trying to get in with her dad, trying to find some connection, you know. You think something happened to her?"

"We don't have any opinions right now," I said.

He opened his desk drawer and took out a stack of photos. He thumbed through them. "Here it is."

He handed the photo to Leonard, who looked at it, then leaned over and showed it to me.

There were a dozen people in it. I spotted Jackie right off. She was on the left side of the photo. It wasn't a great picture, and she might have been a little too thin, but she looked quite pretty. She was dressed up, high heels. Her hair was longer, falling below her shoulders. She was smiling. I could see those jackrabbit teeth for sure, but they fit her somehow.

"Pretty, isn't she," Jamesway said. "Unusual-looking. Believe me, I was hoping for more for us than there was. She was so worried about her father, about connecting to him, we couldn't find solid ground to stand on together. She wanted friendship, and I wanted something else. That said, there was always something about Jackie that made me think if you stood on ground too close to her, it would shift."

All the faces in the photo were white except one. A big black man with a shaved head and a smile so forced, all that was missing was a gun to his head.

I put the photo on Jamesway's desk and tapped a finger on it. "Who's this?" I had an idea what the answer might be.

"Ah, that's Ace. An old boyfriend of hers. Wouldn't have been in Sebastian's congregation, I can promise you that. Ace and Jackie had a thing once, when this was picture was taken. She outgrew him. She was outgrowing everyone she knew from the old days. Was about to start at Tyler Junior College, go on to the University of Texas branch there. Least that's what she said. Thing holding her back a little was a connection she wanted with her father. My guess is that's what she wanted to talk about the day she was here and couldn't do it. That and the baby."

"Baby?" I said.

"Yeah. She didn't want to stay with the father. Guess it was Ace's kid. I held Jackie while she cried about it all, and then she went away, and later she wasn't pregnant, but there wasn't any kid. I don't know what happened there. False alarm, maybe. Miscarriage."

"Could she already be in Tyler, for college?" I said.

"Said she was registering this fall, but that doesn't mean she isn't there already. Could be anywhere, I guess."

"Do you know about someone named George?"

"Nope, can't say I do."

"She lived with him for a while," I said.

"Never mentioned him to me," he said.

"Could we get an address where she lived?"

"I suppose that would be all right," Jamesway said. "I can tell you where she lived. I don't even know if the landlord knows she's gone yet. It's near here. I walked by her place, just in case she might still be around, knocked on the door, but she didn't answer. Truck wasn't there.

I peeked through a window. Looked abandoned.”

“Could she have just been out?” I said.

“I doubt it. I went by a couple times after that. No one was there. I think her rent is still paid up.”

He wrote her old address down for us, the make and color of her truck as well.

“Thanks for your time,” I said, and me and Leonard stood up.

“We have services during the week,” Jamesway said, “if you want to sample my style of preaching.”

“Nope,” Leonard said. “I got enough misery in my life without adding religion to it.”

9

As we left the church and drove to Jackrabbit's address, Leonard said, "What do you think?"

"About Jamesway?"

"No, about the price of wedding dresses. Yes. Jamesway."

"He seems all right, and that story about Sebastian is so wild, I believe it. Who'd make up shit like that? But I don't know if everything he said was true. Guy walks into a racist church, and next thing you know he's running it, minus the racism and lizard men? I don't know. As for Jackie, yeah, I think he had a crush on her, but where is she? How much did he really know about her?"

"Here's what I got to consider, Hap. What if Jamesway did take Sebastian up on his offer? That money would be a real boon to a fellow who is obviously living on a shoestring. Doesn't even own a car. That coffee we had, it had been run through the filter more than once."

"Maybe he likes it that way," I said. "And if he had the money, don't you think he'd buy him a fresh batch of coffee?"

"What about Jackrabbit? Where is she? Maybe she and her dad weren't so far apart on things. Maybe she's the one did him in for the money, and to please her crazy papa. Might be why she was upset when Jamesway spoke to her last, upset over what she'd done."

"Could be," I said.

"Shit, man. I don't recognize the world anymore."

The place where Jackie had been living was a little blue house on a clean street with simple houses of varying sizes and colors. The blue house was a nice enough house. The cobblestoned walk was lined with untrimmed shrubs, and a fat black cat was squatting in between a couple of them, taking a dump. The cat didn't bother to scamper as we came up. It gave us the cold eye as we moved along the walk past it, like we were the royal wipers falling down on the job.

We stopped under the porch overhang and I knocked. No one answered.

Leonard walked over and looked in the empty carport, knocked on the door that led from it to the house. No one answered that knock either.

We walked to the back of the house and found another door, knocked there. Nothing.

Looking around, we saw there was a backyard fence. It was the neighbor's fence, not one that belonged to Jackie's rental, but it blocked easy sight of us at the rear of the house. To the left were shrubs and another house. On the other side was a grassy section, and beyond you could see a street, and beyond that the old red-brick Piggly Wiggly that had closed down when I was in high school. No other business had replaced it. An old car motored by on that street, coughed around a corner, and moved out of sight.

"How fast can you pick a lock?" I said.

"Fast enough," Leonard said. He pulled his lock-picking kit out of his pocket but hesitated. He tried the door. It was unlocked.

"Fast enough for you?" Leonard said.

"Plenty fast," I said, and we slipped inside and shut the door.

The air was thick and warm and a little sticky, had that musty odor a house gets that's been closed up for a while with no one living there. There was furniture in the room, most of it of the bargain-basement variety.

We went past a kitchen table and some cheap kitchen chairs with plastic seats and backs with butterfly designs on the plastic. Very festive. We entered the bedroom, and because I am an ace detective, I noticed it was empty. No bed. No end tables. Nothing. The closet door was thrown open, and all that was in there was some dust.

Leonard said, "You hear that?"

"What?"

He put a finger to his mouth and became very still. When he spoke, it was softly. "Someone just came in the back door."

Before we could move out of the bedroom, the doorway filled with a shape about the size of a grizzly bear in platform shoes. The bear had on a red-and-white knit cap with ears on it, bear ears, of course, and he was carrying one of the kitchen chairs. Bear or no bear, he had entered the house and the room with no more noise than a polite lady folding a Kleenex. Before I could say a word or do a thing, he hit me with the chair.

10

He hit me a good lick. Even cheap chairs are surprisingly sturdy. It knocked me down. I tried to get up, but the floor wouldn't let me. It was holding me back. My shoulder, which had taken the brunt of the blow, felt as if it were missing, and my reflexes had taken a vacation. My forehead had intercepted a bit of the chair as well. It ached.

As Leonard charged him, the chair swung through the air again, but Leonard ducked low. The chair passed over him, and he rushed the bear, caught his legs near the ankles, and hit him in the groin with his head, which knocked him back on his ass, causing him to lose his bear-ear hat and his grip on the chair. The chair slid across the floor, hit the far wall with its legs, and bounced back toward us. That chair was aggressive.

The bear had enough savvy and experience, or had watched enough mixed martial arts, to wrap his legs around Leonard and squeeze him between them.

Before the bear could go for a move of some sort, Leonard snapped both of his elbows back and into the bear's inner thighs, causing him to grunt and drop his legs. Leonard got a knee up and in the bear's balls, grabbed the bear's left leg, and passed it quickly over his head, rolling the beast onto his belly. Then Leonard was on the bear's back, slamming a right and then a left hook into his head.

"That's for Hap," Leonard said.

I felt that was very thoughtful.

"Damn, that hurt," the bear said.

"You ought to try being hit by a chair," I said.

By that time the floor was nice enough to relinquish some gravity so I could sit with my legs crossed. The room was still moving a bit.

The bear had his hands over the back of his head, trying to protect himself.

“You done, shit-ass?” Leonard said.

“I’m done,” the bear said. “Done.” He sounded like a kid who had just been whipped by his mother for playing in the mud while wearing his Sunday go-to-meeting clothes.

I was considerably better by that point. My head hurt, but I was in control of my legs. The room wasn’t spinning anymore. I got up, went over, and squatted down near the bear. He couldn’t raise his head comfortably with Leonard on his back, but with me in my squatting position, he could hear me quite well.

“I got a question, Ace.”

“How do you know my name?”

“I’ll do the questions, you do the answers. Why the fuck did you hit me with a goddamn chair?”

“This ain’t your house,” Ace said.

“Isn’t yours either,” I said.

“You don’t know that,” Ace said.

“I’m a pretty good guesser. Were you looking for Jackie?”

“You know her?”

“We do,” I said. “Kind of. And we know who you are.”

“Yeah, calling me by my name sort of gave me the idea you might. But how do you know me?”

“You look as ugly as you did in the shitty photograph we saw,” Leonard said.

Ace said to me, “Can you get this gorilla off my back?”

“Is that racist?” I asked Leonard. “Calling you a gorilla?”

“No one would ever think a man as handsome as me might resemble a gorilla,” Leonard said. “But you know, sometimes that is an insult for black folk.”

“Why I’m asking,” I said.

“What the fuck?” Ace said. “I’m black too.”

“Damn, Leonard. He is black.”

“Then we got to say it wasn’t meant racist,” Leonard said.

“Shall you get off his back?” I said.

“Ace,” Leonard said. “I’m going to get up, and if you try to move and get frisky, I’m going to beat your ass flat as my line of credit.”

Leonard stood up, then bent and frisked Ace for weapons, didn’t find any. Ace remained on the floor.

Leonard stepped away from Ace, looked at me, said, “Hap, you all right?”

“Close enough to it,” I said.

“You want me to hit him with the chair?” Leonard said. “Would that make you feel better?”

“Naw, it’s cool,” I said.

Ace remained on his stomach. Leonard righted the chair, pulled it up close to Ace, and sat down on it.

“Now,” I said, “why-for-how-come did you hit me with a goddamn chair? And let’s keep our answers to the point, because I’m in a bad mood, and you put me there.”

“I thought y’all was thieves, coming up in here.”

“What are we going to steal?” I said. “Those nice kitchen chairs, the shitty table? Couple dust motes out of the closet?”

“I don’t know,” Ace said. “I was hoping it was Jackrabbit, then I seen you two.”

“You could have said howdy,” I said. “Where I come from, it’s a nicer greeting than hitting someone with a fucking chair.”

“All right, then, I’m sorry.”

“My head hurts anyway.”

Leonard hummed a few bars of Kasey Lansdale’s song “Sorry Ain’t Enough.”

“I hear that,” I said. “And agree.”

“What?” Ace said.

Leonard tapped Ace on the ribs with the toe of his boot. “I can tell you’re no music lover.”

“Hadn’t knocked me down,” Ace said, “I’d have whipped both your asses.”

“Yeah,” I said. “So you’re saying if Leonard hadn’t whipped your ass you’d have whipped his, and mine too? Well, hell, dumbass. If the world wasn’t turning we could all get off. You can sit up now.”

“But do it easy and don’t get cute,” Leonard said. “You might not be as big and able as you like to imagine.”

11

We ended up in the kitchen. I took the chair that had been used to whack me and placed it at the table and sat on it as a kind of vengeance. Leonard stood with his arms crossed and leaned against the wall near where Ace sat.

Ace had retrieved that ridiculous hat and it was resting on his knee. I knew from the way Leonard eyed it, he wanted one. It had a tie on either side that could be used to bind it under the chin.

“You hit me hard,” he said to Leonard.

“Yep,” Leonard said. “And I can do it again.”

“I’m starting to think I should have let Leonard hit you with this chair,” I said.

“Look here, Ace,” Leonard said. “Let’s bury the hatchet. Door was open when we came. We’re here looking for Jackie—Jackrabbit—on account we were hired by her mother and brother to find her.”

“Well, that’s something,” Ace said, looking at Leonard. “Was you wearing whiteface when her family showed up?”

“They wanted me to,” Leonard said.

“What the fuck, then, man?” Ace said. “Why would you work for them fucking peckerwoods?”

“Money spends either way, no account for color,” Leonard said.

“And they wanted to know about their daughter,” I said. “I thought if she was missing and something was wrong, we ought to find out. Seemed like the right thing to do.”

“One of you works for money, and the other one is some kind of knight?”

“We both spend the money,” Leonard said. “You came here looking for her, so you expected her to be here.”

Ace shook his head gently. I figured it hurt too much for him to shake it hard.

“I came by here even though I knew she was gone, but then I seen your car at the curb. I tried the doors, and the back one was unlocked. I came in and found y’all, and I thought maybe you had something to do with her missing.”

“And your immediate solution was to hit me with a chair,” I said.

“I didn’t know if you had guns or not,” Ace said. “I didn’t know if you was all right or not.”

“You’ll have to take our word,” I said. “We’re all right. All we want to do is find Jackie.”

“Still don’t like the idea of that brother of hers seeing her again,” Ace said, “and neither does she. You ought to keep that in mind while you’re looking for her. He’s dangerous. Got some old ideas.”

“We find her, we won’t make her go home,” I said. “We’ll just make sure she’s okay and tell our clients she’s fine or she isn’t, and then Jackie can do what she wants. I think it’s fair enough that even a couple of racist assholes ought to know what happened to their loved one. And if you know something about where she is or what happened to her, and you don’t tell us, we might have to think you got something to do with her not being around. That could look bad for you. We got some friends in LaBorde who are cops, and they got friends all over the place. We tell some kind of story that includes you in a starring role, some people might believe it.”

“He means you might go to jail, you did something or not,” Leonard said. “No charge for the translation.”

“I ain’t done nothing with her, man. I been looking for her. I come by here just like I said. Seen your car, thought she might be with someone else. Don’t know exactly what I thought. I came in and heard y’all, picked up a chair, and hit Whitey with it.”

“And Whitey didn’t like it,” I said.

“When did you see her last?” Leonard said.

“I don’t mark it on the calendar. Me and her, we had a thing going, you know, and her mother and that fucked-up brother didn’t like it. He threatened me once and pulled a knife. I hit him with a chair.”

“Seriously,” I said.

“Yep.”

“You like chairs,” I said.

“Thomas never mentioned you two had a confrontation,” Leonard said. “That didn’t come up.”

“Still happened,” Ace said. “Bet he didn’t mention getting his ass handed to him."

"But really," I said, "a chair? You go around hitting everyone with a chair?"

"It was handy. Me and her, we done all right, even had a kid. I think that fucking preacher might have talked her out of staying with me."

"That's not his story," Leonard said.

"He's probably got a lot of stories," Ace said.

"We heard about the kid and the miscarriage," I said. "Sorry."

"Shit, there wasn't any miscarriage," Ace said. "Kid got born. I didn't see it much, and I don't even know what she named it. She went back to Junkyard George for a while. Found out he was the same asshole he was when she left him the first time. She wouldn't tell me nothing about the baby. Said that wasn't my concern no more."

None of this fit anything we had been told so far.

"Take it you weren't hanging with the white folks when her dad was preaching at the old picture show," Leonard said.

"I couldn't get in that church then. Jackrabbit's father would have shot my ass and told how a wild nigger come up in there to rob him, and he'd most likely been believed. Folks in this town ain't entirely civilized, you know what I mean?"

"You knew Sebastian, though?" I said.

"Knew who he was," Ace said. "I came to the church after he sold it to that other fellow, Jamesway. Listened to a couple of Jamesway's sermons, but I wasn't thinking Jesus. I was trying to get back with Jackrabbit. And they had free cookies on Wednesday, and some really bad coffee. I tell you this, and I'm serious, don't drink the fucking coffee over there."

"Too late," Leonard said.

"Ain't it bad?" Ace said.

"The worst," Leonard said.

"Sebastian ever threaten you, say anything to you about being with Jackie?" I said.

"Like I said, didn't go up in there when he was running the show. Went later, when Jamesway came in. Her father still lived in the back then but didn't have no say about who came and went anymore. Spent his time drinking, until one day he's gone. Then there's stories about what happened to him, and then Jackie's gone."

"Stories?" Leonard said, knowing full well what Ace meant. But we wanted to hear him say it.

"Stories about how he was killed. Talk about how he had himself killed in a fucked-up kind of way. Never heard of nobody doing something like that. Don't know I believe it. Course, he'd offered money to have it done, so a person might make an exception. Fucker wasn't exactly lovable. Before it went down, when me and Jackrabbit was together, she told me how her father's favorite part of the Bible was where Jesus got whipped, nailed on the cross, and stuck with a spear. He told her with Jesus on the cross like that, had to have pissed and shit himself, 'cause that's what would happen. He liked all that pain and death, piss and shit. He wanted to have something like it, to die slow and in pain."

"How'd Jackie take what happened to her dad?" I said.

"Pretty well, actually. By then, think she was glad he was gone. She tried to get this daughter-and-daddy thing going, but she might as well have been invisible. Her being pregnant didn't move him off the dime either, it being a black baby. Never did find out what happened to my kid, but I will. Hell, I think I'd do better than Jackie raising a kid."

"You don't look like the dedicated-father type to me," I said.

"Shit. You don't know me none at all. Jackrabbit had some fucked-up ideas. All she thought about was numbers and diagrams and shit. She was always saying how numbers and diagrams could explain anything except emotions. That's the way she put it. Something would come up now and again, and she'd say something about this or that, and I'd think, Damn, that gal has stripped a gear. She'd say how she could move between dimensions or some such shit and how in one of them she was happy as a pig in shit, and in this one, not so much. She'd go to the good one when she needed to be happy, but she came back to this one to be mad. Claimed you could do that 'cause it could be explained by numbers, but I don't see it. How does that add up or subtract into living in dimensions and shit? Hell, I still have trouble with the times tables, so what do I know? Didn't matter none. Just wrote it off as part of the bill I had to pay to get that pussy. Let me tell you, in the sack, that name of hers wasn't just about teeth."

"Possible you liked being with her so much," I said, "that when she quit being with you and started skinning someone else's banana, you got jealous and did her in? That possible?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I loved that woman. Loved her like only an idiot could love her."

"Bet that's right," Leonard said.

Ace looked wounded.

Leonard said, "Where'd you get that hat?"

“What?”

“The hat. Where’d you get it?”

Ace told him.

“How much did it cost?”

Ace told him.

“That ain’t bad,” Leonard said.

12

I figured we had out of him all we were going to get, at least under the circumstances. Combined with the fact that we were all guilty of breaking and entering a home that didn't belong to any of us, even if the door was left unlocked, we decided to play it quiet and decamp.

We left out of the house, turning the inside lock behind us, so that when we closed the door it clicked solid shut. Ace stepped on ahead of us and was around the side of the house before we were.

As me and Leonard reached the walk, the black cat came out from between the shrubs, where perhaps it had still been shitting, and crossed in front of us.

"Oh, good, that's par for the course," Leonard said. "Black cat crosses our path."

When we got in the car, I saw in the rearview mirror that Ace was climbing into a junky black truck parked across the street and back from us. Leonard turned and wrote its license plate down on a notepad for good measure.

No one seemed to be watching us besides Ace. There was no one out in the yards or peeking through house windows. No spy drones buzzed overhead, and there were no street cameras. Ace didn't drive by us shooting a tommy gun.

As we cruised away from there, I said to Leonard, "What do you think?"

"I think everybody's lying."

"Maybe Ace was lying a little," I said, "but I don't think he was lying a lot."

"You seem in the mood to believe everybody. Let me sell you a sack of shit, 'cause in the morning it's going to turn into a bag of gold."

We found a dollar store where I could get something for my chairinduced headache, and then we drove to the Mexican restaurant on the block next to the bookstore and ate. They served damn good chili there and I took my headache cure with a glass of iced tea.

After we ate, I decided to let Jackrabbit stay missing a few minutes more, having by this point concluded she had split the country or was lying dead in a ditch somewhere and was not all that worried about our timing or anyone else's. I didn't have good feelings about the baby either.

We went to the used-book store and prowled around for a few minutes while I waited for the headache medicine to kick in.

Leonard bought some Western novels and I bought a book by a guy named Rocky Hawkins. It was *He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother: Guns, Girls and Gambling in East Texas,* a memoir. It was about growing up in East Texas, and it looked interesting. His father had been a gangster.

The day had mostly eased away from us by that time, and frankly we didn't know what else to do outside of finding George, and to be honest, my headache was so bad by then I wasn't up to it. Leonard drove my car while I closed my eyes and nursed my pain. He hauled us out of Marvel Creek to the nearby city of Longview where we could find a hotel.

We ended up in one that sat near the highway and was as big and soulless as an abandoned aircraft hangar. We got a room on the second floor overlooking the highway. I took my headache medicine again and went to look in the bathroom mirror at where the chair had hit me. A knot had come up that was no bigger than a cantaloupe, and my skin had turned bruise-blue.

I stripped down to my underwear and lay down on my bed, and Leonard lay on his bed with his head propped up with pillows and read. I wasn't up to reading. I thought I'd shut my eyes for a moment, but when I woke up I'd been asleep for a lot more than a moment. It had been hours. I had dreamed of Sebastian having his stomach cut open while he was alive, his hands stuck deep in his pockets, steam rising up from his belly as his innards were exposed to the air. He was smiling and his teeth were covered with blood.

By this time, it was dead dark and the air-conditioning was constantly cutting on and off. Leonard lay on his bed with his hands behind his head. I could tell he was awake, lying in the dark, thinking.

I still felt bad and decided I might as well stay in bed, but I had a hard time getting back to sleep. I would close my eyes and lie there awhile, and then the air conditioner would act up again, and once I sort of got used to that, a rainstorm came through with a sound like an army dragging chains. The lightning cracked and the thunder pealed; the wind that pushed it coiled around the hotel like an invisible constrictor.

I sat up and saw Leonard sitting on the edge of his bed, looking out the window. The curtains were pulled back and he was watching lightning stitch across the sky. When the thunder rolled, the hotel shook. The nightstand clock was flashing red bars instead of numbers. The electricity had been off for a bit.

I went over and sat on the side of Leonard's bed, said, "Pretty big storm."

"Yep. Makes you feel small. Head any better?"

"A little. That son of a bitch could swing a chair."

We watched the lightning some more, listened to the rain come down in jagged sheets, fade away, and come back hard again. I got up and stood by the window, looked out at the highway. I liked the way the rain hit it and the way the streetlights rippled in the water and the way headlights wavered on the concrete when cars came along. I liked how the tires splashed through the streaming rain and the droplets rose up and the light filled them so that they looked momentarily like molten beads of gold.

Leonard got up and stood by me. "I like to pretend it's washing away all the bad shit in the world. Sometimes, when the thunder isn't too loud, and there's just the rain and no lightning, I lay down thinking that way, and I can sleep better."

"Not a bad thing to imagine."

"Yeah, but when it stops, and I get up and go outside again, the same shit is there. I kind of hate everybody. Except you. And sometimes I'm not so sure about you."

13

We ate the free hotel breakfast and went to work.

The address for George was a junkyard on the outskirts of Marvel Creek. On the way there, we passed the ruins of the old drive-in theater where I had made love to girlfriends in the backseat of my car. Once monsters and cowboys, gangsters and such, had roamed across those screens, but now those days were gone, and it made me a little sad.

The junkyard was almost to the top of a large red-clay hill that looked as bleak as an Orc's wet dream, the junkyard cars resembling the husks of ravaged insects. Some were in rows, and some were in heaps, and there were platters of metal that had once been cars in stacks, like fat pancakes.

There was a greasy white sign pinned against a tin privacy fence that said GEORGE'S JUNKYARD, and there was a gap in the fence where the chain-link gate was open. We coasted through and got out. Somewhere inside, a dog was barking. There was a lot of bass in that bark.

A whining and metal screeching noise led us to a large man sitting high up in a car crusher's saddle, working the levers, smashing up an old Dodge truck, turning it from a truck into one of the large metal pancakes. I recognized him from his photo with Jackie, the one Judith had shown us. It was George. He had weathered a lot since the photo, like life had held him down and slapped him, but he was still easy to recognize. In person, he had a threatening air about him, like a thunderstorm building on the horizon.

Nearby, on a chain big enough for tugboat use, was a squatting, blue-skinned, scarred-looking pit bull. The chain was about ten feet long and was attached to a big dog house. The dog was barking nonstop, just in case we might not have noticed him.

George saw us, looked at us with an expression akin to an eagle considering swooping down on a couple of mice. He killed the machine and hoisted himself down. He looked bigger on the ground, bigger than Ace. Certainly bigger than either of us.

“Yeah,” he said.

“You George?” I said.

I knew he was, of course.

I stuck out my hand. George glanced at it but didn’t shake it. I dropped it to my side. Leonard was looking at the dog.

“He don’t like black people,” George said.

Leonard walked over to the dog.

“Better get away from there,” George said. “He’ll tear your ass up.”

Leonard squatted, started speaking in a soothing manner. The dog kept barking. He was showing his teeth and the teeth were foam-flecked.

“He’s gonna eat that nigger,” George said.

“Might want to come back, Leonard,” I said.

Leonard eased his hand closer, palm down, kept talking softly. “It’s okay, boy. It’s all right. I’m a friend.”

“Gonna tear your arm off, nigger,” George said.

“You and me will talk in a moment,” Leonard said. He eased his hand toward the dog some more. The dog quit barking. “Good boy.”

The dog lunged, snapped at Leonard’s hand, but Leonard moved it just in time.

“Told you,” said George. “Rex will get you good.”

Leonard tried again, continuing with the soothing talk. “Rex. It’s all right.”

The dog sat down.

I saw George’s face grow even more rigid than it already was.

Leonard patted the dog on the head and the dog let him.

“Goddamn it,” George said. “Rex has gone to seed.”

“No,” Leonard said. “He’s tired of being on a chain.”

“I let him loose at night in the yard to discourage light-fingered visitors.”

“But there’s no one here then, is there?” Leonard said. “He gets lonely.” Leonard was hugging the dog’s neck now.

“Get away from my dog.”

Leonard took his time, patted the dog some more, then came over to stand where me and George stood.

“You got a way with dogs,” George said.

“Yeah, it’s people I don’t like. Ought not keep him chained up like that," Leonard said.

"Who are you two? Fucking ASPCA? You come here to give me freelance dog advice, or you got a real reason for being here? Buy some junk or take a hike. I got cars to crush."

I knew Leonard, and I knew he had not dismissed that whole "nigger" business, but as of late, he seemed to be a little calmer. These days he was more likely to cripple you than kill you. But it could be a passing phase.

A man about my height and build but ten to fifteen years younger came out from behind the crusher. He was a nice-looking man with dark brown, cut-close hair and a face as smoothly shaved as a model's pussy. He was wearing a crisp bright smile that looked only a little less sincere than the one they paint on ventriloquist dummies. He had on a black T-shirt and black slacks and shoes to match. His nose appeared to have been broken at one time, giving his face a look of both boyish geniality and rakish menace.

"What's up?" he said. He said that like he had sensed a disturbance in the force, à la *Star Wars,* and was trying to calm it.

"Couple of dog lovers have come to visit Rex," George said.

Leonard still had his eyes locked on George. He seemed to have hardly noticed the other man, but I knew better. One he was trying to intimidate, and the other he was watching without seeming to. There was this thing about the man in the black T-shirt that made you think he wanted you to notice him, and I think that's why Leonard wasn't.

"Ah," the man in black said. "Yes, and I hope you have asked him to give the dog more priority, something better than a short chain and a long life to live on it. I have suggested it, but so far, no response."

"Who says Rex gets a long life," George said. "Hell, he's happy. He's a dog. He gets to fight other dogs from time to time, and he hasn't lost yet. He likes that. That, and eating and fucking and cat-killing, that's his pleasure."

"You fight dogs?" Leonard said.

"When the law doesn't catch me," George said. He smiled. He was missing a top back tooth. I hoped it had been knocked out with a two-by-four. I know Leonard was considering knocking the rest out with his fists, and it had certainly crossed my mind. Dogfighting is next to child abuse in my book.

"Horrid business," the other man said. "They call me Professor." He came forward and shook our hands. "George here, he's a friend, and he's all right, but he's not, shall we say, refined."

"Oh, hell, Professor," George said.

That's when I noticed two men drifting out from a row of cars and moving in our direction. They were dressed alike in clothes that looked too heavy for the climate. Long-sleeved white shirts and black vests that I knew were designed to cover holstered guns. They had thick hair that was black as death combed tight against their heads, and whatever they used to hold it in place glimmered in the sunlight like a waxed car. They were both tall and lean, alabaster faces and thick lips, and the same features. Twins. They came over and stood by George, and I have to tell you, I have never seen deader faces than those, eyes as black and empty as tunnels to nowhere.

Professor said, "Oh, that's the Fairview twins. They work for me, but I won't introduce you to them. They don't make friends all that well."

"They don't look to me like they could make change," Leonard said. He was studying them like they were specimens in a petri dish.

The twins seemed not to blink, and now they were no longer moving.

I turned my attention to George, said, "What we're here for is we're looking for Jackie Mulhaney, sometimes known as Jackrabbit. You know her, don't you?"

"Knew her," George said. "Bitch was crazy. Always going on about numbers and dimensions or some such shit. Ran around with the wrong kind of people. I finally had enough of her. I've already had enough of you, for that matter. I don't know you from a sack of rocks, coming in here fucking with my dog."

"Be friendly," Professor said.

"You don't make them be friendly," George said, nodding at the twins.

"They are something else," Professor said. "You run a business."

"Not like they want any of this business," George said, nodding at us this time. "I think they're giving me the business, that's what I think."

"Answer their questions, George," Professor said. "Go on."

"You said she was running with the wrong kind of people," I said. "What do you mean by 'wrong kind of people'?"

"Ran around with people outside her place in life," George said. "She took a step down."

"You mean she was hanging with the brothers, huh?" Leonard said.

"Ain't my brothers."

"Reason she changed up like that is the dicks," Leonard said. "We black men all got enormous dicks. Mine is so big and heavy I keep it in the car."

“You’re not all that funny,” George said.

“Hey,” Leonard said. “Who’s joking.”

Professor chuckled a little, but it didn’t sound all that sincere to me. The twins hadn’t so much as moved.

“I’ve talked all I’m going to talk, coming in here telling me how to raise my dog, asking me questions ain’t none of your business. Ought to bust your heads.”

Leonard smiled, but there was nothing friendly about it.

“I think you only think you’re bad,” Leonard said. “Pushing us around, that won’t be like shoving some cracker that owes you money, chaining up some trusting dog. It might take a little more work. You might need an overnight bag. And I hope you got room up your ass for them twins, ’cause that’s where I’m going to shove them.”

George moved forward slightly. Leonard didn’t move at all. Neither did the twins.

“Here now, George,” Professor said, and he touched George on the shoulder.

George glared at Leonard, but he had stopped moving.

“Get out of my junkyard,” George said.

“All right,” I said.

The twins finally moved. Almost in unison they slipped dark sunglasses from their pockets and put them on. That was it. When they had them on, they let their hands hang by their sides again.

“Let me walk you gentlemen out,” Professor said. He looked back at the twins and George. “I’ll be fine. Stay here.”

“Where’d you get the bookends?” Leonard said, nodding at the twins.

“Best not to antagonize them,” Professor said.

Leonard stared at them a little longer, then we turned and started out, Professor walking with us.

As we went, Professor said, “George isn’t really a bad man, just a little unrefined.”

“That so?” Leonard said.

When we got to the car Professor said, “Let me explain it as best I can, keeping it brief. Once there were a lot of folks in this part of the country that felt they were superior to people that weren’t like them.”

“You mean people who weren’t white?” Leonard said.

“Correct,” Professor said, and nodded. “They were pretty foolish about the idea. Hated people with darker skin, led to them doing some very nasty things to them. Lynching, for example. It was our way or the highway. That was the white view.”

"I remember it unfondly," Leonard said.

"I suppose so," Professor said. "Me, I'm not like that. I'm not filled with that kind of hate. But I am a segregationist. Not a racist."

"Segregationist is just another way to spell racist," Leonard said. "Only difference is the long word wears a hat and tie."

"No," Professor said. "There is a difference. I can talk to you and work with you and generally get along with you, but I believe the races are supposed to be separated. I think it's God's word and nature's law. You over there, me over here. We can see each other on the street, can speak, even call ourselves friends, but when we part ways, you go to where you belong, and I go to where I belong. I believe Negroes should have their own section, if you will."

"Nigger Town," Leonard said.

"You said it, I didn't. I try not to use that word. I know it's offensive, but I don't believe in the absolute mixing of the races and certainly not dating and marrying. You come to my house, that's my castle. I might ask you in. I might give you a cup of coffee and not do what they did of old, which was break the cup after you drank out of it."

"Wow, you are just a beacon of contemporary thinking," Leonard said.

Professor didn't blink, just plowed ahead.

"You work for me or I know you, Negro or not, you got yourself in trouble, I'd be there to bail you out, help you out. Up to a point."

"You're assuming black people get in trouble on a regular basis?" I said.

"Not at all. I think there are good and bad on both sides of the fence. I merely believe in a fence with a gate, so we can cross over to either side for certain things, work, a bit of this, a bit of that, but I think sometimes we need to lock that gate. I wouldn't want the sun to go down with a black person in the house, nor, on the other hand, do I believe you should want a white person to be in yours. The mixing of races is not intended, and that is why we have different colors of skin. Tribal identification. It's a natural law, if not currently a legal one. Some believe we can't change that, can't have separate but equal, but I think we can, and will. We have to return to a more balanced life. Bar the Hispanics from crossing the border. Put up a wall. Keep other religions and races out of America. Our country can only hold so many comfortably. That's common sense. Is that racist?"

"I'm going to go with the idea that it is," I said. "Leonard lived at our house. Never ended up missing one piece of silverware while he was there. Vanilla cookies, however, you have to watch out for. Comes to those, he's without a conscience."

"They call my name," Leonard said.

"You can do as you please," Professor said. "But I believe there is a place for us all, and—"

"Is this where you talk about each kind of bird knows its place and doesn't mate with the other?"

"Perhaps," Professor said.

"What about dogs and wolves, donkeys and horses?" Leonard said. He looked at me. "Will a squirrel fuck a rabbit, Hap?"

"I think they have trouble catching them," I said.

Professor let a sagging grin hang on his face. I liked that grin only a little better than the ventriloquist-dummy version.

"And I don't use that kind of language. That's what's wrong with the world today. Not enough standards. I think we need to return to standards, courtesy, decent language, and a kind separation of races."

"You talk about keeping people in their place due to race, but you're worried about someone saying 'fuck'?" I said.

"Forget it," Professor said. "This will go nowhere."

"I got a question for you," Leonard said. "What you doing here with George at the junkyard? You work here?"

"I'm sort of an adviser," Professor said. "I was up at his house getting a drink, saw you fellows. I sometimes use the forklift to poke cars into the crusher for him. I enjoy the work."

"Do the twins hold your coat while you do that?" Leonard asked.

"If I want them to, but I'm not wearing a coat."

"In hot weather, maybe they sweat for you," Leonard said.

"If I ask them to."

"On what do you advise?" I said.

"Race relations, you might say."

"You need an adviser for that?" Leonard said.

"Also, I own a piece of the junkyard. Own a piece of a number of businesses in town. Completely own some of them. I make my living through investments. I advise on how to run successful businesses, here and elsewhere. I try to lay out nonviolent plans for a return to segregation. If I own a place, or a part of it, I have more power and can make recommendations."

"Like separate water fountains," I said.

"Heavens, no," Professor said. "That's ridiculous. Recommendations on how to actually live apart in harmony."

“Now that we’ve got your philosophy, can we ask you something else?” I said.

“Of course,” he said. He was so congenial I wanted to punch him in the mouth.

“What did you know of Jackie Mulhaney, also called Jackrabbit?”

“She was with George for a while,” Professor said. “He found it uncomfortable that she crossed racial lines, as he should. She was all right, though. Beautiful woman. But he did the right thing. As I said, there have to be boundaries. She was too smart for him as well. Is that all, gentlemen?”

I nodded. “Suppose it is.”

“You have quite a knot on your head there, Mr. Collins.”

“I do indeed,” I said.

“Might want to put some ice on that,” he said, then turned and walked briskly in the direction of the crushing machine, which we could hear hungrily munching on cars, making them squeak and scream.

14

Professor creeped me out more than George," I said.

"I hear that," Leonard said. "It's just the same old thing wearing a clean set of clothes, speaking in a polite voice. Guy like that, he's got more of an agenda than he's letting on."

"I have a feeling, you scratch Professor deep enough, you get George."

"And you send George to school and give him a haircut and a good bath, you get Professor, provided George could work his way through third grade first."

"Yep," I said. "Professor has got this insane mission to go back in time to Jim Crow days."

"Like I said last night, Hap. Just when you think the river is flowing nice and clean, along comes the sewage. I still believe in the American dream, but I also got to admit that the honey has a lot of flies on it."

"You can pick out the flies if you got the patience."

"I don't have it. And how about those fucking twins, man? They really creeped me out."

"They're like the walking dead," I said.

"But they ain't got as good a personality."

While I drove, Leonard called our buddy Chief Marvin Hanson in LaBorde, gave him Ace's license plate, asked him if he could run it for us, find a home location.

Leonard got off the phone, said, "He's going to do it, hit us back later. Said he had real police work to do first. How dare he?"

"Very rude," I said.

I looked in my rearview mirror. There was a black pickup behind us. For a moment, I thought it was Ace, but it was a truck in far better condition.

“You know,” I said, “that pickup started following us pretty quick after we left the junkyard. I thought it might be coincidence, but I’m beginning to wonder.”

“Do some turns,” Leonard said.

I took a side road, then another, cruised through a neighborhood of old but nice houses, took another turn, hit Main Street, and drove down it all the way out to the Sabine River Bridge in the direction of Tyler.

The truck stayed with us.

I drove over the bridge and kept going, right on out of Marvel Creek. The truck crossed the bridge behind us, but when I looked in my rearview mirror, it was turning around.

“I think we were just ran out of town,” I said.

“No, we left of our own free will. Separate but equal. I’m going to draw a line between these seats, Hap. You stay over there, and I’ll stay over here.”

“It’s my car. You’ll walk.”

“Yeah, massa, I done forgot that. Maybe I shine yo’ shoes or lick yo’ ass, Massa Hap, and won’t be no need to set me ’side the road.”

“We’ll see how you act,” I said.

“You know how I might act?”

“How?”

“Spending about twenty minutes kicking your ass up under your ears.”

“Better bring yourself a picnic lunch and a thermos of coffee, ’cause it’s going to take you more than twenty minutes.”

“Shit, all I got to do is hit you with a chair.”

“Don’t mention a chair,” I said. “The word makes my head hurt.”

15

Leonard's cell rang.

"Yeah. Sure. Let me write that down."

He got his pad and pen and scribbled.

"Thanks. We owe you one. Yeah. You're right. We've kind of got a long list of owes. Catch up to you later."

"Marvin, I assume."

"Yeah. I got Ace's address, his place of work too."

"That was actually pretty quick," I said.

"Technology," Leonard said. "Next thing is we're going to have cameras up our ass."

"They call that a colonoscopy, and that wouldn't be a recording I'd like to see," I said. "We got nothing more to say to Ace right now, though, do we?"

"Guess not, but let's locate Ace's crib in case we need that information for later, see where he works."

This meant we had to go back to the far side of Marvel Creek. I turned the car around and crossed the bridge again.

We found his house on a dirt road with three or four other houses nearby. The house was small and weathered and looked about three years from needing to be held up with a sturdy stick. It looked like some places Leonard and I had lived in once upon a time. These days we were more prosperous.

We didn't try to visit. Figured he was at work anyway, and right then we had nothing new to ask, but knowing where he hung out seemed like something we might need later.

As we drove away, I realized the black pickup was with us again. It had probably joined us not long after we came back through Marvel Creek on our way to locate Ace's house. I had been so focused on the address, I hadn’t noticed it right away.

I told Leonard they were back.

“I’m tired of this shit,” Leonard said.

He opened the glove box and got out the little automatic I kept in there. It was small caliber and could probably knock over a cardboard target if a high wind was helping.

We were still out in the country and were now far away from the little grouping of houses. There was only the blacktop road we were on and the trees on either side of it. We did pass a pasture with a few cows in it. None of them waved.

“Pull it over, and let’s get this done with,” Leonard said.

“Might be best to wait until we’re around more people,” I said. “They might be less inclined to shoot us.”

“I don’t give a shit, pull over.”

I gave a shit, but I pulled over. Truth to tell, I was tired of them too.

I found a spread of gravel beside the road that had a concrete picnic table with benches attached, and next to it was a historical marker. I pulled over and got out, and so did Leonard.

I reached back inside the car and took a sawed-off ball bat out from under the front seat, held it against my leg, and walked to the back of my car. Leonard had the little handgun in his front pocket, his shirttail over it.

The two guys got out. They were big guys. One was a little fat and walked with a limp, held his head to one side. He had scraggly brown hair and a scragglier mustache. He came toward me carrying an ax handle, and then he slowed down, and a smile cut across his face.

“Hap Collins, you old fucker,” he said.

“Jimmy Hems,” I said.

“You remember Lou here, don’t you?” he said, and he jerked a thumb at his companion.

Lou looked a lot like Jimmy, only not as fat and minus the limp and the head held to one side. They both had the same hair-and-mustache stylist. Lou was Jimmy’s younger brother.

“Hi, Lou,” I said.

Lou nodded.

“You lose the head goes on that ax handle?” I said to Jimmy.

“Naw, not at all.” He tossed the ax handle to the side of the road. “Lou, pack your shit up.”

That’s when I saw Lou had brass knuckles on his fists. He took them off and put one set in his right pants pocket, the other set in his left.

“What the fuck is this?” Leonard said.

“You don’t remember me, do you, Leonard?” Jimmy said.

“Nope.”

“You whipped my ass down by the river once at a tire-fire fight.”

“Remember the fights, don’t remember you,” Leonard said.

“You knocked me out.”

“I’ve knocked a lot of people out,” Leonard said.

Jimmy smiled at Leonard, turned to me. “Listen here, Hap. I got this problem, and I think we ought to discuss it.”

“I’m not a psychiatrist, Jimmy,” I said. “Even a town like Marvel Creek might have a therapist in it. You could maybe trade some chickens for therapy. Didn’t your family used to raise them?”

“I’m all out of chickens, Hap. Look, let’s cut the cute shit. Let’s talk.”

“Where?” I said. “Coffee shop?”

“Picnic table seems private enough,” he said.

Jimmy and Lou were nearer the back of my car now, having come up on little cat feet, like the poet said. They were standing a couple of yards from us. Leonard and I were leaning against the trunk of my car. Leonard had his hand in his pocket. I held my friend the sawed-off ball bat in front of me, the heavy end resting in the palm of one hand. I patted it now and again, just as a reminder.

“You remember that time at the Dairy Bob when Bob run them fellows out of there for acting fools, and they set a car on fire out back, thought it was Bob’s?” Jimmy said.

“I do. Burned down their own cousin’s car instead, as I recall. He had a car similar to Bob’s and had parked there while he and some friends went riding around in someone else’s car. If I could remember who all was in that car, or was supposed to be, it would take a real burden off of me, Jimmy.”

“I know, doesn’t matter,” Jimmy said. “You remember the cousin who owned the car, Taylor Atkins?”

“A little,” I said. “Thought it didn’t matter.”

“Taylor found out it was his cousins done it, burned it down to the fucking frame, and he and some of his buddies took his cousins down to the river bottoms and beat the dog shit out of ’em.”

“I remember the story,” I said.

“Taylor was close to his cousins, more like brothers, but he didn’t have money to replace his car, so he had to have some satisfaction out of it, even if what they did was an accident, mistaken car identity. Main one involved with starting the fire, Phil, you remember Phil Atkins?

Well, he lost an eye over that. I think Taylor hit him with a plank or something."

"I heard a bottle."

"Whatever, an eye was lost. They were a year out of high school, still hanging around Marvel Creek, scraping by, and you know what? They'd still be here if it weren't for prison. They live there now. They got a comfortable regimen. Taylor killed somebody, and the rest of them are in for this and that. All of the cousins, two or three of the friends. They got some serious stretches to do, and Taylor won't be coming out under his own power."

"You seem to have lost the point to your story," I said. "If there was one."

"So, Phil loses an eye, and it wasn't personal," Jimmy said.

"The hell it wasn't," I said.

"Okay. It was personal in that the cousins couldn't pay for the car, but they were still cousins, and they went on and got along together after that, even married sisters. Not their own, but another family with sisters. They're divorced now, and of course, the cousins are all in the hoosegow."

"Listen, Jimmy," I said, "you got some moral to this story you're trying to get across, I kind of wish it would show up. I'm starting to feel the effects of old age here."

"You and me, we were friends in high school—"

"We knew each other," I said. "We got along because we didn't know each other enough not to get along."

"That's right. We got along. Well, the cousins got along too, but there had to be retribution for that car, and it was a point of honor, even if in the end, all was forgiven."

"Is this shoe ever going to drop?" Leonard said.

"What I'm saying is Taylor didn't want to do what he did, but he had to make sure he kept his honor intact. That's what it was all about. What we got here isn't exactly the same situation, but it's something like it. We got hired to follow you, didn't we, Lou?"

Lou nodded.

"We are supposed to see that you leave town and help you leave if you don't choose to do it on your own. Thought you were gone for a bit there, and nothing needed doing, and I was happy about that, and then damn if you didn't come back. Saw you again, followed you out here, and now, here we are."

"Yep, here we are."

“Wait a minute,” Leonard said. “So that story you told is a kind of fucking parable about you doing the honorable thing, keeping your word, but you don’t have to if we leave? My suggestion to you is work up another story that’s more on point. But what I’m getting here from that fucked-up story, and believe me, it’s like a crow sorting through cow shit to find a corn kernel, you’re saying you been hired by someone to check us up and light us up if need be. Could the asshole hired you be George, or Professor Asshole?”

“Professor,” Jimmy said. “Pays good wages for little jobs. It’s a living.”

“Let’s sit at the picnic table,” I said. “Your story kind of wore me out.”

Jimmy said, “I got some beer in a cooler of ice in the back of the truck. Want one?”

“No, thanks,” I said.

“I’ll have one,” Leonard said.

“Lou, get this man a beer.”

“I’ll walk with you, just in case one of the beers shoots bullets,” Leonard said.

When Leonard and Lou came back, Leonard was carrying a beer. Lou was carrying two. I could see water dripping off their hands from reaching into the cooler. Lou gave Jimmy a beer, kept one for himself.

I put the shortened ball bat on the back of the car trunk and we all walked over to the picnic table and sat down, but before Leonard sat, he took the gun out of his pocket and laid it on the table next to his beer.

“Do you need that?” Jimmy said.

“I don’t know yet,” Leonard said.

The rain of the night before had left dampness in the trees, and being close to them we could feel the humidity. The heat oozed out of the greenery and made us sticky as sugar doughnuts. A light, almost transparent mist floated a few inches above a run of water near the trees, and the mist clung between the trees like a fallen cloud. I could see insects wiggling in the water.

“I want you to understand, fellows, that I don’t cotton to Professor’s beliefs,” Jimmy said. “I cotton to his money. Lou here, he’s on the fence.”

Lou nodded.

“Has he got something in his throat?” I said.

“Ah, that’s right. You didn’t really know Lou.”

“I didn’t really know you,” I said.

“Lou doesn’t talk much,” Jimmy said. “Bottom line is this. I don’t care one way or the other what the truth is, what someone’s beliefs are, if I’m getting paid to do a thing. And I’m getting paid.”

“Does your job have to come with a lecture?” I said. “Because I’m starting to get bored.”

“Always a smart mouth,” Jimmy said. “Even in school.”

“How would you know?” I said. “We didn’t hang.”

“Reputation, Hap, reputation. You had one. But listen here, man. I’m trying to reach what we might call a goddamn fucking compromise, and I’m trying to get there for your own good, the both of you, and maybe mine and Lou’s good. Shit can go sideways for any of us, so I want to avoid conflict.”

“That’s big of you,” Leonard said.

“Professor, he’s a solid sort, just has some, well, how do we say it, old-style beliefs in a fresh package. I don’t know how much he believes his own bullshit or how much he’s just playing to a certain type, but the thing is, from time to time he needs someone to help him out on certain matters. And the matter he wants help with is he wants you and Leonard to leave town.”

“Does his wanting us to leave have anything to do with Jackie Mulhaney?” I asked.

“It may, it might not. I didn’t ask. Don’t care.”

“Did you know Jackie?”

“Who didn’t? She was pretty wild, and maybe a little crazy. But beyond that, I know very little, like she had been with George, and this black guy…can’t remember his name.”

Lou said, “Ace.”

“Damn,” Leonard said. “He speaks.”

Lou smiled like a baby that had just passed gas.

“Professor kind of liked her, I think,” Jimmy said. “Thought she was hot enough to burn down a barn. Said as much. But thing is, I don’t care if Professor is fucking a duck on Wednesdays and a pig on Thursdays. I don’t want to do something bad to you two, and that’s why I seek a compromise. Just leave town.”

“I was thinking,” Leonard said, “we might do something bad to you two.”

“Leave, don’t come back,” Jimmy said. “I don’t want to get rough. I hate that kind of business, but it’s the business we got. We’re willing to give you until tomorrow morning. And that’s stretching it. But we see you in town again after that, we got to, you know, make plans for you to leave. I should also ask, do you remember my brother Delf?"

"He was in my grade," I said.

"He's police chief here," Jimmy said. "Just so you know. Have I made my position clear?"

"I think so," I said.

"Next time, we'll be a little more vigorous."

"Don't think we haven't got some vigor ourselves," Leonard said.

"Oh, I know you do. This is merely a polite warning and a desire for it not to go any farther. It was the twins, and I understand you met them, because if you met Professor, you met them, they aren't as affable as we are, and I'll tell you, frankly, they scare me a little."

"It's us you ought to be afraid of," Leonard said.

"I admit a bit of nervousness about tangling with you two, and that's another reason I'd rather avoid it. But I'm nervous, not afraid. Lou here, I don't think he's given it much thought."

"Yeah," Leonard said. "He don't look like he's thinking about much."

Lou smiled.

"But Professor calls out the twins, all discussion is off. I'm giving you a chance here to go your way. I mean, really, does finding a woman you don't even know mean that much to you?"

"We got honor too," I said. "We gave our word."

Jimmy nodded. I thought he sincerely looked a little sad.

"Think we'll head out now. Remember that time line."

"Remember I already whipped you once," Leonard said. "Meant so little to me, I'd forgotten it until you mentioned it, and frankly, I still don't remember you but I'm glad I did it."

Jimmy smiled a smile that made him look a lot more like Lou.

They got up from the table.

"Jimmy," I said. "One thing I have to ask, man: What the fuck happened to your neck?"

It was a mean thing to ask, but I was feeling mean right then.

"Car accident," Jimmy said. "Some kind of misalignment when it healed. But don't think that has any effect on how I get things done. Been nice seeing you boys. Just don't let me see you after tomorrow morning."

"Yeah, well, keep your head up," Leonard said.

Jimmy snorted, then he and Lou walked back to the pickup, got in it, and drove off.

16

I cruised us slowly back into town, and rolling back in, the bad things that had happened here when I was younger came down on me fat and heavy. Memory has weight.

To lift the weight, I thought about a time here when it had not been all bad, back when I practically lived in the woods, along the creeks and along the river, back when I would fish and the world seemed all right, and I believed in the code of the Lone Ranger, about how good always won over bad, and that things were constantly set straight by honor and daylight.

I remembered the fishing hole that was just off the Sabine River, where the water ran in and filled it, and willows grew thick all around it. It was deep there, though the hole was not wide. You could easily throw a rock across it. You could drop a line in the water and always catch a fish, always have your dinner. The sky was wonderful to see through the limbs and leaves of the trees that shaded the hole, especially as the day died and the night rose up, and the sky turned a strange purple because of the way the sunlight bled through the trees. Then there was the night, and the night wasn't bad either, because it seemed soft, and there were the stars to be seen between the limbs and leaves, and the crickets would make their sounds, and the bullfrogs theirs. If it was a moonlit night, it was like traveling by spaceship, lying there on the banks of the blue hole on a blanket, heading into the moonlight, hating to walk back to the car carrying my gear, hating to go away from there, trying to hold on to that moment forever.

I was musing on that when Leonard said, "That beer was like horse piss. Got to think Lou picked it out at the store, must have been some kind of bargain shit. Oh, hell, think he poisoned me?"

"It was sealed," I said. "No. He didn't poison you. Stuff Jimmy said about his older brother, Delf, being police chief, that was a way of telling us they could kill us and no one would look for us even if we were lying on the steps of the Marvel Creek Police Department wearing tutus. Only thing is, I remember Delf as an all-right guy. Kind of a blowhard, but all right."

"Maybe he's had a hangnail or two since then and it's turned him bitter."

"That's possible. And Jimmy, what I remember of him, he seemed all right too."

"He's not all right, Hap. Neither is his goofy brother. One thing for sure, we've somehow stirred the soup."

"Always do," I said.

"Question is, what have we stirred up? Came here asking about Jackrabbit, and we meet a preacher who liked her, find out her father was a weird masochist, next you get hit by a chair and have to be rescued by me."

"That's how you saw it?"

"Yep. Then George threatens us, and we meet a very nice man called the Professor who thought Jackie was pretty hot, but he doesn't like birds trying to mix. He introduces us to the twins, who also seemed very nice, and then he threatens us in a quiet way, and then he sends two goons to warn us to be out of town by tomorrow morning. It's been a big day."

"It has."

"And for the record, I don't cotton to threats from anyone," Leonard said.

"I, on the other hand, might be a little more prone to cotton a little, at least until I figure out why we're being threatened. Is this about Jackie or is it about black and white relations, and exactly why have we become the target for an ass whipping when we're merely asking about a missing lady who turns out to be good at math and is a little kooky?"

"Always the questions, never the answers," Leonard said.

"Know what, I say we visit Delf and say howdy."

"What else we got to do?"

17

The police station was a large stone building that looked more suitable for a library.

Leonard pulled the automatic pistol out from under his shirt, returned it to the glove box, and we went into the station like we owned it.

There was a pretty-faced plump lady at the desk. It was the kind of plumpness you wanted to roll in. Her cheeks were apple red and it didn't appear to be makeup. Her desk was behind a long glass wall with a little mouse-hole slot at the center bottom of it, and a metal fixture for speaking was positioned in the glass at mouth height.

She smiled at me, nodded at Leonard.

I stepped closer to the glass and put the smile on my face I used for seduction. It had worked at least twice in my lifetime.

"Can I help you, honey?" she said.

I missed really small towns right then, the casual sweetness they could have. "Honey" and "baby" and "child" and "sweetie" and so on. The sign on her desk said her name was Eula Jean Craig.

"You can," I said. "I'm wondering if the chief, Delf, is in. I'm an old classmate and wanted to say howdy, speak to him a minute."

"May I ask who's asking, sugar?" she said.

She was so unprofessional and sweet and sexy, I think I loved her a little. "Well, dear," I said, "tell him that an old classmate, Hap Collins, is here to see him, and I have a friend with me, Leonard Pine."

Eula Jean touched a button somewhere and there was a buzzing sound, and then "Yes, Eula," came a voice.

"Chief, there's a very nice-looking couple of gentlemen here would like to see you. One says his name is Hap Collins, and his friend is…" She leaned toward the metal fixture in the glass. "Sorry. What was it again?"

Leonard bent forward, said, “Leonard Pine.”

She told the speaker that, and then we heard a voice say, “Well, send them back.”

“That door is right there, gentlemen. And Hap, didn’t you used to date my sister, Paulette?”

The last name clicked then. Paulette Craig.

“I did indeed.”

“She’s married now and has four kids, but I’m available.”

“It’s a lovely thought,” I said, “but I’m with someone, and frankly, I’m too old for you.”

“Oh, honey, don’t let that scare you. If you die, you die.” She grinned and pointed at the door, said, “I’ll buzz you in.”

We went through the door, and it led into a tiled hallway that looked as if it had just been polished by the heavenly angels.

Delf stepped out of a door and into the hallway. He had gained weight and his belly strained his shirt and made it gap in a spot, and that made his white T-shirt visible underneath his uniform. He had lost all his hair except for a graying ring around his head, but he had all his teeth and was smiling them at us.

“Damn, boy, I darn near forgot about you.”

It was the kind of friendliness that comes with a certain amount of common history more than with true friendship.

“And Leonard, you might not know it,” he said, “but I know you too.”

“Say you do?” Leonard said.

We had walked up to him by then. He shook our hands and waved us into his office, which was as clean as the hallway.

He collapsed in a rolling chair behind his desk as if he were falling off the edge of a pier into deep water. He gestured at a couple of chairs arranged in front of the desk, and we sat down in those.

“You look just the same,” he said, “except older, grayer, and heavier.”

“Let me return that compliment,” I said.

“And you, Leonard. I’ve heard of you. Word gets around, you know. I think you knocked my brother out once. You boys, you’re kind of known as troubleshooters. Or is it troublemakers?”

“We’re actually private detectives,” I said.

“Whatever you are, word sure has got here, and some of it comes from my brother Jimmy.”

“Ah,” I said. “Native drums.”

“Yeah, well, not drums. He called me a few minutes ago.”

“Did he tell you he told us to get out of town by morning light?”

"No. Just said you had become a troublemaker, and he knew Leonard here, and he thought he was the same. Let me tell you something, Hap. Jimmy, he likes to think he has clout through me, and he's my brother, and I love him, Lou too, bless his dull little head, but the only clout I sling around is the law. Him telling me you're troublemakers, well, that remains to be seen, don't it? And if you're here to complain about him, you'll be getting in a long fucking line. But I promise you this. I'm going to uphold the law."

"That's good to hear," I said.

"How you like my receptionist?" he said. "You remember her sister? Dated her awhile, didn't you?"

"I did."

"She was a pretty one, and Eula out there, she is too. She might be packing more meat than she needs during a hot summer, but she's got it going on, don't she?"

"I agree."

"I'm fucking her, you know that?"

"It wasn't something she mentioned," I said. "She did kind of ask me out, though."

"I'm going to get her some sort of sign to wear that reads I'M FUCKING THE CHIEF, AND JUST THE CHIEF."

"It would clear matters up right away," I said.

He laughed at his own humor. I had a feeling if anything was going on between them, it wasn't true love, and maybe nothing was going on other than Delf trying to be his old blowhard, macho self.

"Did you agree to see us," Leonard said, "so you could tell us you're laying the pork to Chubby out there?"

I saw Delf's eyes darken a little, but then they cheered up equally fast.

"No. I agreed to see you because Hap and I went to school together."

"I'm not trying to fuck up y'alls reunion," Leonard said, "but Hap actually came to see you for a purpose other than reminiscing."

"That right, Hap?"

"Complaining about your brothers was part of it," I said.

"Jimmy was trying to blow hot smoke up your ass, and then he tried to blow some up mine."

"A little of it might have got in the hole," I said. "Why I'm here, I took them seriously, and I'd rather not have to defend myself, because I might hurt someone."

"And I might kill someone," Leonard said.

"Are those threats?" Delf said.

"They're cautions," Leonard said.

"Break the law, either of you, and I'm coming after you. Same for my brothers. After Mama died, I didn't have much to do with them. You might remember my old man died back when I was in high school. Got cancer of the dick or some such, maybe it was the stomach or the liver. I don't know. But he got it, and it killed him."

I didn't remember, but I didn't say anything.

"Being the older brother, I raised them two best I could, played the father to them, tried to bring them up right, but it didn't stick. I became a cop, they became assholes. Jimmy, he's always blaming this or that for his station in life. He wouldn't have his neck leaning out to the side if he hadn't been drinking. Hit a deer one night, car went flying through the air. He didn't have his seat belt on, so he took a trip through the windshield. Surprisingly, it didn't cut him up as bad as you'd think, but it gave him that permanent nod after they got through fixing him up. Thought that might sober him, put him on another path, but nope. Kept walking between the briars, tangling up in them now and again. Hate to say it, but for Jimmy, and probably Lou, it's a matter of time."

"For the record," I said, "he was drinking and driving today."

"Noted. Not surprised."

"Got a question for you," Leonard said. "We're hired to find Jackie Mulhaney, called Jackrabbit. You got any way to help us on that?"

Delf put his feet on his desk, looked at the ceiling. "That crazy bitch. She had a dad crazier than her."

"You say that because of the way he died?" I said.

He removed his feet from the desk and let the chair settle.

"You know about that?"

"Heard from the preacher at the old theater," Leonard said.

"Damn good waste of a theater. And let me tell you something. I think that nice-talking preacher over there killed Sebastian to take over his church. Made up this fucked-up story about Sebastian wanting his guts put on his chest and some such. And by the way, that is how we found him. How would Jamesway know about that if he didn't do it?"

"He claims Sebastian tried to hire him to do it," I said. "But he turned him down."

"Didn't say shit about it until the body was found, then he tried to work his way out of being a suspect."

"Wouldn't have been a suspect had he not told that story," I said. "He could have just been quiet."

"I thought about that, but really. The guy wanted to suffer? Be cut open? Swallowed a key so it had to be cut out of him? Come on. And this ten-thousand-dollar shit. Where would he get that kind of money? Motherfucker probably had to wipe his ass on his shirttail because he couldn't afford toilet paper."

"I presume you looked in the bank vault?" I said.

"You know about that too? Well, isn't Jamesway the little chatterbox? I went to the bank and had them open Sebastian's box. Empty. Either there was never anything there, and Jamesway is lying through his sanctimonious teeth, or whoever killed Sebastian Mulhaney got the key and got the money. Then there's this whole thing with Jackrabbit. I think she and Jamesway worked this out together, did the deed, then she took half, he took half, and she took a hike. Or maybe even more likely, she's somewhere out in the woods, and she ain't there enjoying nature. She's part of it, courtesy of Church Boy."

"Yet you haven't arrested him," Leonard said.

Delf nodded. "Thinking something is true and proving it's true are two different things."

"You obviously knew Jackie," I said.

"Everyone in town did. She was a good-looking woman, in an odd kind of way. But there was something about her. My cop instincts tingled. I wouldn't have trusted that gal as far as I could throw her."

"Appreciate the information," I said.

"I didn't tell you a damn thing you didn't already know," Delf said. "You boys leaving town like my brother suggested? Not forcing you to, but I'd go if I was you. Jimmy and Lou aren't the only ones working for this fellow called Professor. My brothers don't give you trouble, others might."

"Like the twins," Leonard said.

"Like them. I tell you, those fuckers make my skin crawl. See them in the café, they just drink coffee. Never seen them eat, never heard them say a word. I think they live off coffee in the day, suck blood at night. I think they're Yankees."

"Got to be," Leonard said.

"Who are they?" I said.

"Professor calls them the Fairview twins."

"What he told us," Leonard said.

"But thing is, I haven't found any records on any twins named Fairview, so I doubt that's their name. I got nothing on them."

"What's Professor's story?" I said.

"I've pulled him in before for this and that. But nothing sticks. He's a pig farmer. Between here and Longview he's got a lot of land and a lot of pigs on it, raises them on concrete. Who the hell raises pigs on concrete?"

"Gonna guess he does," Leonard said.

"Got drains to wash away the pig shit. There's constant feeding. Makes a mint selling hogs and butchering hogs. Has a small packing plant of his own. Drive down the road that runs by it during the day, you can hear them hogs grunting and squealing. I heard him say when they're butchered, when they scream, it sounds like money. Professor owns all kinds of things, or at least has his finger in them. The café, gas stations, lots of property. He's got the money to get things done his way, and he's got the gift of gab."

"And George?" I asked.

"On paper George owns the junkyard, but he doesn't really. There's a kind of deal between him and Professor. He owes Professor for helping keep him afloat, orchestrating dogfights for him. This and that."

"Professor said he was against dogfights," I said.

"Only time he's against them is if the dog he's betting on loses," Delf said.

"Pit bull out there looks as if he's been chewed on a little," Leonard said.

"Don't think I condone that stuff, or fighting chickens either, but there's a whole bunch of those folks out and around here who do. Goes on no matter how much I try and stop it. They call it part of their culture, as if that makes it okay. Professor, he works under the table on a lot of things, out in the open on others. Dogfights, junkyards, the café. This and that. His idea is to buy up as much of the town as possible, control what he can't buy, and make this a haven for folks like himself. Thinks people of his ilk will flock here. Next thing is, they'll push me out and put in a puppet. Maybe even Jimmy. They'll have their own society, and believe me, it'll be lily-ass white. Truthfully, I don't know how much Professor believes his own bullshit, but if you talk it and promote it, even if your goal is power and money, far as I'm concerned, you believe it."

"In other words, he wants to run all the black people out to make a certain segment here happy," Leonard said.

"Mostly it's about immigrants these days."

"They're the new nigger," Leonard said.

"Oh, he hasn't forgotten the old hatreds. If there's a bell he can ring, a whistle he can blow, he does it. He's hitting heavy on anyone that doesn't fit the pattern he's cut. Pattern he knows will appeal to a lot of people. You know, I got a black police officer. Johnny Williams. Nice man, good cop. A friend. Couple of new recruits, also black. Hired them myself. Came from bigger cities, came with fine recommendations. Lots of experience. Next thing I plan to do is ease a woman in. Can you believe that? This day and time, and I have to ease a woman into a position, can't just go on and do it? Got some backwoods thinking here, guys."

"Sounds like you might have some of that concerning Eula," I said.

"Shit, me and Eula got our own program, and we handle it how we handle it. I may not get all the talk right, and I still like pussy and think about it and don't apologize for it, but I'm fair, boys. These officers I got, they moved here thinking it would be an easier lifestyle, but with Professor out there, those fucking twins, who we think are responsible for a lot of things that aren't good around here, well, my men, they got to be cautious every time they pull someone over for speeding. Lot of people think the Professor gave them a free pass to do as they please, long as who they do it to isn't white."

"Jimmy seemed apologetic about his current position," I said. "His heart didn't seem all in."

"Don't get fooled, Hap."

"What I tell him," Leonard said. "He's still thinking everyone is going to live in teepees and share each other's goods."

"Listen to your pal here," Delf said. "Don't underestimate Jimmy or the Professor, and watch out for Lou. He follows as close as shit on an ass hair when it comes to Jimmy. They're both like Mom said our old man was. 'People of opportunity,' she called them. And then Professor has others in his employment, and I don't mean the creepy twins. There's nothing solid on them, but there are rumors, some of them fairly sound and none of them about humanitarian deeds. Frankly, you might want to leave town. Not because you have to, not because I won't try and protect you, but because I might not be able to. Leonard here is just the sort that upsets Professor the most."

"He pretty much upsets everyone," I said.

18

I turned a corner and drifted us toward the café where we had eaten our breakfast and where we were planning on having lunch. The idea of going there had a new feel about it, knowing Professor had some ownership in it.

In the café, you got to choose where you wanted to sit, so we took a booth near the large plate-glass window at the front where we could see the street. The sky had turned as gray as an oyster shell, but what it contained was rain, not pearls. I figured within the next few hours the clouds would let the water loose.

The Coffee Spoon was a place where if you wanted to eat healthy you were shit out of luck. I feared even the salad might be deep-fried with a side of fried coffee.

I asked the waitress if they served omelets at lunch.

She was a sassy lady with a face tanned by cigarette smoke and framed by dark brown hair. You could see beauty had once been in that face, and when she turned a certain way, it pushed itself to the fore, and then it went away again. Once upon a time men most likely lined up around the block for her, but eventually, time had carried her out to sea and tried to drown her.

“Is it on the menu?” she said.

“No,” I said.

“We don’t have it.”

“So nothing off the menu?”

“That’s why we have a menu. Goddamn it. Are you Hap Collins?”

“I used to be,” I said, “but lately I’m not so sure.”

“Sharon Young. You remember me?”

I did. And in fact, men had indeed lined up for her attention. I had been one of them. I had been unsuccessful.

"Sorry," she said to Leonard. "What's your name, hon?"

"Leonard Wants a Cheeseburger," he said. "My friends call me Had a Cheeseburger."

She laughed. "Sure. I'll get to it."

But she didn't move, just smiled at me. She had good teeth, and when she smiled it caused wrinkles to appear at the edges of her eyes, but even still, that smile peeled ten years off her face. That light she had once had came back for a moment.

"I remember you in school," she said. "I had such a crush."

"On what?"

"You, silly."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"I asked you out," I said. "I remember you, and I remember you said no."

"I was playing hard to get, way we were supposed to back then. Or way I thought we were supposed to. I thought you'd ask again. You didn't."

"I wanted to," I said.

"Isn't high school funny."

"I laugh every day, between the tears."

"I hear that. Best time of our lives. Bullshit. Come to think of it, though, for me, it might have been, and that's a sad statement. You doing okay?"

"I am."

"Wife?"

"Yep."

"Kids?"

"One girl."

"Me, I had three husbands and one got up one morning and said he was going to look for a job, tried to rob the bank that was across the street from where you fellows sit. They give out enchiladas now instead of loans."

"I know," I said. "We ate there last night. My first bank account was there. First State Bank. I'm assuming your husband's life of crime didn't turn out well."

"Everyone recognized him, of course. He hadn't thought about that problem. Andy Coleman, remember him?"

"Oh, hell. Really? Andy? You married Andy? Sorry, I'm just thinking —"

“Keep thinking it,” she said, “he was a piece of”—she leaned in close to me—“shit. So, my John Dillinger tripped going down the steps prancing out to his getaway car. Dropped the money. Got up and ran off to his car without it, and then, know what? Car wouldn’t start. Piece-of-crap Gremlin. Cops nabbed him, of course. Me and him got divorced while he was in prison. If he’s getting any now, it’s butt hole in cell block C. But to hell with all that. You want an omelet, I’ll fix you an omelet. And you, Leon. What would you like?”

“Leonard,” he said, “and still a cheeseburger, and double the onions and heap the fries.”

“No, don’t double the onions,” I said. “I have to ride with him all day.”

“Customer’s always right, sugar,” she said.

A redheaded man, tall and bony, wearing a khaki shirt and pants, guy who looked like you would imagine an oil-field worker would look, took a seat near the kitchen. Sharon noted his arrival.

“Back to work,” she said. “Order coming up.”

I watched her head to the kitchen. The girl she had once been moved under her waitress outfit, but there was more of her than before. I thought, Men are pigs, we really are, because that’s the first thing I noticed, her being heavy, as if I had ever been a Greek god and had a right to judge.

She stopped at the booth near the kitchen, talked to the redheaded guy, wrote something on her pad, then went on about her business.

Later, when Sharon brought our food, I said, “Let me ask you a question, Sharon. Did you know a young woman named Jackie Mulhaney?”

“A little. Came in from time to time. Daddy was a weirdo that used to run the nut church that was once the picture show. Now some other nut runs it, but he’s more pleasant. Me, I’m a Methodist.”

“Dancing Baptist,” Leonard said.

“That’s the one,” she said.

“Is there anything you can tell us about her?” I said.

Sharon thought a moment. “Not much that will amount to anything. Always had a salad with extra croutons. Had big teeth. Way men acted around her, I think those teeth must have looked good on her. Little horsy-looking, you ask me. I need to hit another lick. Got to look busy. Jobs don’t get handed out in this town, especially the ones I’m good to do, and you need your coffee.”

She went away for a moment, came back with a shiny coffeepot. She poured us coffee. I remembered that coffee from breakfast. It was still better than the Reverend Jamesway's coffee, but nothing so good you wanted a can of it.

"Know what she used to do?" Sharon said as she set the pot on the table. "She'd come in, bring her laptop, sit in that booth over there, on the side against the wall. That way she could type on her laptop while she noodled with her salad and drank a glass of tea. Bet she held down that booth an hour or two at a time. Tough on me when we had a big crowd and I didn't have that booth free to get fresh tips. Jackie always left a small tip, even though she held that space long as she did. If she left me over a dollar, I think she might have cried herself to sleep about it. Cheap as she could be. Ah, maybe I'm catty 'cause all the men liked her. I remember when I used to be something on a stick, and now I've just got the stick, so being honest, you got to measure that against what I say about her. That's all I got, Hap."

She eased away. Leonard said, "No one has thrown us out for being a black-and-white pair yet."

"Don't think they will. Don't think Professor has that kind of power. He wants it to be subtler, under the table. Where the Klan burned crosses and wore hoods, he wants to seem like a businessman. He'll take your money no matter what color you are, but try and buy a home in this town, set up a business, and your skin is black, he wants to keep that from happening. That's what he's working on. Separate but equal, he calls it."

Sharon brought the check and left. I was about to give the check to Leonard, remind him it was his turn, when I noticed there was a folded note with it.

I palmed it flat on the table and read it.

Come by at midnight and I can tell you something about Jackie. Can't now. The wrong ears might hear. Like the redhead in the booth near the kitchen. I really do wish you'd asked me out a second time. Come alone, please.

There was an address below that.

I slipped Leonard the note and glanced toward the booth Sharon had indicated.

The redheaded fellow seemed to be woolgathering as he sipped his coffee. Me and Leonard might as well have been on Mars, the way he acted. Had he been following us? Maybe Jimmy and Lou had traded off because we knew their truck, would recognize them. Could it be like that?

“We could just go over and ask Red there if he’d like his meal jammed up his ass, get this over with,” Leonard said.

“We could, but to me that seems like a bad approach to investigation, as well as a waste of mediocre food.”

“Might be,” Leonard said. “I can tell you clearly, though, you aren’t going over there by yourself tonight.”

“Hey, never intended to.”

19

We had nothing else to do for a while, so I drove us out across the Sabine River Bridge again.

“I think we should get a hotel in Tyler for tonight, come back when it’s dark,” I said.

“Yeah, all right. I got an idea or two I want to chase. But before I work those ideas, I want to canoodle with them, think them over.”

“That is so sweet,” I said. “Canoodling with your ideas.”

We ended up in Tyler at a Holiday Inn. We hauled our overnight bags up to the third floor, made coffee in the room, sipped and sat on our beds opposite one another, and talked.

“I told you I had some ideas,” Leonard said.

“You were canoodling with them,” I said.

“Yes, and after much hugging and kissing them, I kind of came up with a thing or two, and then that thing or two gave me another idea or two.”

“All that canoodling has caused your ideas to multiply,” I said.

“Other night, we’re in the house where Jackie used to live, and Ace shows up. I’m thinking he must have known she was long gone from there, and why would he think our car was Jackie’s car? He would know her car.”

“Could have thought she got a different car,” I said.

“Considered that. What are the odds Ace drives by where Jackrabbit used to live, decides our car might be her car, a car he doesn’t know? Maybe he came there looking for something, and then he saw us and thought we were looking for the same something.”

“Something hid in the house?” I said.

“It’s a long shot, but I been thinking that way.”

“Couldn’t Ace easily have come back since we last saw him, got whatever was there? Provided something was there."

"Could have, no doubt," Leonard said, "but maybe after he found us there, got his ass handed to him, he decided to stay away."

"Actually, if you count him hitting me with a chair, he came out all right."

"I was talking about me. I whipped his ass while you were stretched out on the floor. But if I'm right, and he wants what's there, he can't be cautious for long. Place might get rented out, and if there's something hidden there, it'll be harder for him to get to it then."

"Didn't look to be a place riddled with secret hiding places," I said.

"No," Leonard said, "it didn't, but I'm thinking something could be there just the same. Good chance he did go back and get it, but I think we ought to take a peek."

"Sounds reasonable," I said.

"I got another idea too, but for that one I'm going to need some gloves and a pair of bolt cutters, and if I get the chance, I'm going to order me one of those hats like Ace has."

20

After we left the hotel and shopped for some gloves and a nice pair of bolt cutters for Leonard, we came back there and holed up for a few hours, waiting for dark. I read the book by Rocky Hawkins about growing up in Gladewater, Texas. He knew his business. I had grown up in nearby Marvel Creek, and Gladewater seemed almost exactly the same. His father had been a gangster, one of the East Texas kind, and he knew a lot of the same people I had met in passing or knew of through story and perhaps legend. It was a short book and Rocky liked religion a lot better than I did, but he wrote simply and with heart. I came away from the book liking him and finding the book fascinating and honest as a dead hog.

Leonard read too, and about an hour before the sun sank, we put on the darkest clothes we had, fixed another cup of coffee to fortify ourselves, loaded up the gloves and bolt cutters, and away we went.

By the time we arrived back in Marvel Creek, it was solid dark and a light rain had started and the lights of the town gave the wet streets an eerie quality.

We drove as many back streets as possible, since with the town not being all that big, we didn't want to chance an encounter with Jimmy and Lou or for that matter the redheaded guy, who we figured also worked for the Professor. There was even a chance Professor or George might be in town for a big fandango at the Mexican restaurant, a fandango that would have consisted of some tinny Mexican music and some good food.

There was, of course, the twins to think about. They had said not a word and done nothing but walk and stop and stand, and from experience, I knew they were the ones to truly fear.

We parked at the side of the street where the movie-theater-now-church was, put on the gloves we had bought, and took a short walk over to the house, trying not to look as conspicuous as we were. What worked in our favor was most of the town had already rolled up their sidewalks and were at home having dinner, visiting with family.

The thought of that made me wish I was home doing the same. I missed Brett. We may have been together for years, but we had only been married a couple days, and though nothing was actually any different than before, I felt we should be basking in our recent decision together.

The rain was a mist now and the air was cool. The house was dark and it still looked empty. We went along the walk as if we owned the place and could shit anywhere. At the back of the house we found it still locked, way we had left it. I held a penlight while Leonard worked the lock and got us inside.

We didn't try to turn on lights, of course. There may not have been any electricity anyway, but if there was, we didn't want to try it. The house had a very bad smell, and we knew that smell, and as soon as we closed the back door, Leonard said, "Aw, hell."

"Yep," I said.

We followed the smell trail, which grew stronger as we came to the bedroom we hadn't gone into last time. There was nothing of Jackie there in view. No pieces of paper with a new address on it. No cryptic messages written in chicken blood on the wall or whatever it is the detectives find in cozy mystery novels.

The bedroom with the stink looked a lot like the bedroom that didn't stink. There was no furniture. We could see dust circulating in front of the windows without curtains, spinning in the bit of golden glow that came from the backyard light of the house with the fence.

And we could see a body splayed out on the floor.

21

The body was on its back. The mouth and eyes were open, as if the corpse were trying to mime excitement. One hand rested on his thigh, the other arm was thrown wide; one leg had a knee lifted, the other was stretched out with its boot turned to the side. There was blood coming out from under the body. It had made a pool around the man's head, had dried dark and thick, as if he had lain down in a mass of spilled molasses.

As we neared the body, flies that had found their way in through some crack or another rose up from the corpse with a buzz, out of the body's mouth and off of its eyes. They were thick enough that the next-door neighbor's light shining through the window made them momentarily appear like a little black cloud or a misshapen and alien creature. They buzzed up and into one corner of the room and blended with the shadows there.

Nearby, covered in blood, lay Ace's silly hat, Leonard's most recent craving.

"Gonna take a flier here," Leonard said, "and guess this motherfucker is dead."

We held our noses and I used my free hand to shine the light on him. It was Ace, of course. He had been dead for a while, probably had come back to the house shortly after we left it.

There was more blood near the closet, and it had flowed under the door, and there was a footprint in the blood. It had dried. It was average in size.

I could see a partial footprint, the heel, visible just outside the closed closet door. I gave Leonard my flash, and he held the light on the footprints while I used my cell to snap some photos, though I feared they wouldn't come out as well as I wanted, the light being weak. I was hoping we might match the print to someone's boots.

Being careful not to step in the blood, I opened the closet and Leonard shone the light around for me while I took a look. There was nothing there but more bloody prints.

There wasn't an attic entrance in the closet ceiling. No one had climbed inside the attic through the closet. There was a bit of masking tape dangling from the edge of the door frame inside the closet. The masking tape was painted over the same color as the inside of the closet. I mentioned that to Leonard. It didn't mean anything to him either.

I made an effort to search Ace's body without stepping in blood. The odor he put off was terrible. Damn dead folks. I went through his pockets with my nose scrunched up.

"Goddamn hat's ruined," Leonard said.

"Yeah. That's a shame."

Ace had a wallet with five dollars in it, a package of rubbers, and a picture of three black kids, all boys, with a goat. I figured it was from his childhood. One of the kids looked like the guy Ace would grow up to be, though he appeared a lot happier in the photo than he did now. In fact, everyone in that photo, including the goat, looked pretty content.

The blood on the floor had all come from Ace's head. Someone had parted his hair with a hatchet. His skull was split down the center to the bridge of his nose, and some of his brain had oozed out like puke. That had been some lick.

In his pockets, I found some lint and thirty-five cents. I put the wallet and the thirty-five cents back, let the lint fend for itself.

I stood up and stepped off a way. That helped a little with the odor. Another minute close to the body and I would have thrown up. I could see from the next-door neighbor's light that the flies had moved from the corner of the ceiling and had gathered on the windowpane like some kind of decoration.

"Whatever he was looking for," I said, "he didn't seem to find it, or if he did, whoever whacked him took it, or maybe afterwards they looked around and found it. Or there was nothing here to begin with."

"Ace thought there was, and whoever whacked him upside the noggin thought so too," Leonard said. "Guess they could have come in with him, pretended to be a friend, and took him out. My guess, though, someone sneaked up on him. I mean, hell, someone carrying a fucking ax or hatchet would make a man suspicious, not to mention nervous. You'd pretty quick guess he wasn't your friend."

"See the way the sleeves of his shirt are bunched up at the elbows, pulled up on the wrist," I said. "He may have fought with them, stretching his shirt, or someone grabbed his arms from behind and someone else gave him the death stroke."

"That is so cute. A detective-type deduction."

"I thought it was pretty good," I said. "I mean, wearing long sleeves this time of year doesn't seem smart, but I won't get the chance to discuss that with him now."

"He was stylish-minded," Leonard said.

"You know, this happens to us a lot. Dead bodies, I mean."

"Yep. Just lucky, I guess. Long as we're here, let's look the place over. Maybe we'll find a serious clue."

"That would be too handy," I said.

"Well, now and then a fart don't stink too bad," Leonard said.

"What? That doesn't make any sense."

"It's over your head, Hap. Let it go."

Leonard had been flashing the light around the bedroom, and now he had the light pooled in a corner. There was something small and dark in the center of the bright pool, up against the wall.

I went over and picked it up.

"So, their hiding place was they put this in a corner of the house?" I said.

I was holding it up now and Leonard had the light on it. It was a thumb drive designed to look like a little man in a tuxedo, but his head was missing.

"I don't think so," Leonard said.

He flashed the light around some more, went over to a spot along the wall and picked something else up. He came back and gave it to me. I saw that it was the top of the thumb drive, a man's head wearing a top hat.

"What I think," Leonard said, "is Ace did find it, but the guys who killed him didn't know that. It was taped inside the closet wall with some masking tape, which explains that. But before he found it, it would have blended in pretty good. Whoever gave him the chop came in on him right after he found the drive. They surprised him, and when they hit him—"

"He reflexively tossed his hand out and away went the drive, only they didn't see that."

"Another thought is they might have been following Ace, wanted to take him out for some reason we don't know, didn't know there was anything to look for. Followed him to the house, killed him, and left.

More I think about it, more I like that idea. They didn’t know what he was looking for, didn’t know he had found it, and didn’t care. It was him they wanted, and they got him.”

22

The rain had picked up and the streets were running with water. The rain was silver in the thin light from houses and it was cold as a wet eel as it slipped down my collar.

We walked carefully and quickly to our car, took off our gloves, sat in the car, and gathered our wits, which is a pretty short process most of the time. I turned on the heater for a few moments to cut the chill, and then it was too hot. I turned it off. We continued to sit there.

“I can still smell him,” Leonard said. “I’d rather stick my head face-first into a bucket of horse shit than smell another dead body.”

I agreed. I knew from experience that even when we were well away from the body, that stench would live inside of our nostrils for a time, and then after that, the memory of the smell would come back to us now and again as if we were still standing in that bedroom, looking down on his body.

We drove around looking for an old-style phone booth to drop a word to the police about the body, but we didn’t find one. In this town, phone booths had gone the way of the magazine stand.

We knew better than to call from our cells, so we finally decided to let the whole thing go for the time being. It wasn’t like Ace was going to have a resurrection if found.

Leonard said, “I don’t want to be insensitive, but fuck Ace. He hit you with a chair.”

“That chair did hurt.”

“I want to let him lay for now, and you know where I want to go.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I certainly do. But there’s no Dairy Queen here.”

“I don’t want ice cream, Hap. Remember the bolt cutters?”

“Oh yeah.”

I cruised us on out to George’s junkyard, and before long we were gliding over the top of the hill, looking down on the yard, which was spotted with booger lights and the rain gave the cars and the flattened stacks of them a kind of shimmer.

We were bold about it. Drove right up to the double gate. Leonard got out with the bolt cutters, snipped the chain that held the gates together, and pushed one of the gates open.

I drove inside and parked the car and stayed inside of it, watched as Leonard walked ahead. That's when I heard Rex. He was loose in the yard, as George said he would be, barking and growling, raising a ruckus. I could hear him running too, sounded like a herd of elephants stampeding between the cars. There was a stronger light near the gate, and it spilled wide over the ground, and soon Rex appeared in that light. He was demonic-looking, and I could almost imagine him with two more heads, Cerberus, serving as the guardian to the gates of Hell. He was charging right at Leonard.

Leonard bent down on one knee and dropped the cutters and held out both hands, palms down. I reached over and got the pistol out of the glove box and cracked the driver's door but didn't get out. I didn't want to get bit. I had already experienced rabid-squirrel trouble, and I didn't want to add a savage dog bite to my experiences.

Leonard said, "Rex, good boy," and I swear to you, that powerful dog quit barking and growling and slowed and came with his tongue hanging out of his wide mouth and ran right into Leonard's arms. I had never seen anything like it, and with Leonard I've seen a lot. He was like the dog whisperer right then. He cooed and talked to the dog and the dog licked his face and swabbed his ears with a tongue that seemed long enough and thick enough to use for a beach towel.

Leonard stood up slowly, bent and patted the dog, went over and opened the back door. Rex jumped in without hesitation. It was like he was making an escape from prison and we were his accomplices.

Rex leaned over the seat and licked me from the back of my neck to the top of my head.

"Yuck," I said.

Leonard was climbing in on the passenger side with the bolt cutters.

"That was impressive," I said.

"Learned it from our old friend Veil."

"I thought you guys hated each other."

"Only when we see each other. I talk to him on the phone now and again."

"Really? You guys talk?"

“Yep, that works best. No actual face-to-face contact. He knows dogs. He knows I love them, and I think that’s where we bond. He told me how to make a dog feel safe. A happy dog would have bit me.”

“Thought it was more unlikely a happy dog would bite.”

“A happy dog cares about his master, but an unhappy dog can be swayed.”

“I’m not sure I would have trusted that idea,” I said.

“It may be mostly bullshit when you get right down to it, but he didn’t bite me.”

“Yeah, you got that going for you.”

“Asshole like George, he don’t need to own a dog. Needs to own a coffin with himself in it, his black heart cut out and burned to ashes and poured in a ditch.”

“That’s your justification for dog theft?”

“It’s not theft,” Leonard said. “It’s liberation. Let’s go.”

23

It was still early and there was really no place to go and for the moment nothing to do in Marvel Creek, so I drove us back across the Sabine River Bridge, wheeled us to Tyler and our hotel.

We walked Rex inside with Leonard using his belt like a leash, and Rex came along like he was the hotel manager. The kid behind the desk didn't say a word. I figured he didn't want to argue with two rough-looking customers and a pit bull that was possibly the manager.

We sat in our room for a while and didn't talk much, which wasn't like us. I always hear how men don't talk, and maybe that's true of some, but you normally couldn't shut me and Leonard up, and right then we had nothing to say, and if we did, no way to say it. The shared experience of finding Ace was enough to hold us for a bit.

Rex climbed up on the bed with Leonard and lay his head in Leonard's lap. I had some jerky sticks in my bag. I got up and gave a couple of those to Rex. He ate them with about two smacks apiece. When he was finished eating, he looked at me hopefully. I spread my fingers to show him I was all out. He understood and lay his head back in Leonard's lap. I sat on my bed and watched Leonard stroke Rex's scarred head. The dog closed its eyes and pretty soon I could hear him snoring.

I don't know when I came undone from it all, but I finally got up, fixed us more coffee, and got Rex another jerky stick. He was awake by then. I think he heard me rustling in the package that held the jerky. Sleep came second to eating for dogs.

We had our coffee and Rex had his stick, and then we sat around for a while longer and finally started talking.

"What are we going to do with the thumb drive?" Leonard said.

"Stick it in a computer, of course," I said.

"I'm thinking something hidden like that might not be easy to crack, unless we know the code. We can try just poking it in the computer, but I don't think it's going to be that easy. If it isn't, you know who we need?"

I did. Mercury. He was a computer wizard, among other things. He used to work at the Camp Rapture newspaper, but recently they decided they didn't need him to do what they'd had him doing, which was transferring all the old records and newspaper articles, which went back about fifty years, to modern computer storage. News and facts had lost prominence to glossy ads and bullshit.

They gave Mercury a party and a plaque and two weeks' severance pay, and sent him home. He had worked there for a large part of his life, but in the end, it was only a little different than him having wandered in off the streets. That's company dedication for you.

Mercury worked out of his home now, mostly computer repair and a bit of consulting, but he was still the best there was when it came to deciphering difficult data, and if Leonard was right, we might have some for him to decipher.

It could turn out to be nothing, might contain photos of Jackie in Disney World wearing a Minnie Mouse hat. Maybe just the hat.

We put the thumb drive in Leonard's overnight bag. Leonard put the belt on Rex again, took him outside for a walk while I waited upstairs. About fifteen minutes later Leonard and Rex came back.

"Manager said something about Rex this time," Leonard said. "He's not welcome."

"Well, shit."

"Let's take our bags and go. We've been thrown out of better places than this."

"And frequently."

The three of us left the hotel. The rain had stopped and the air tasted good and it had a slight chill. As Tyler was much bigger than Marvel Creek, we were able to find an all-night place for coffee fairly easy.

The café had some tables outside, and we could have Rex with us out there. He was still on Leonard's belt leash. Rex lay at our feet under the café awning and quivered from time to time in his sleep, made noises that almost sounded like a chuckle. I think he was delighting in his assisted escape from the junkyard, dreaming of better days eating jerky and humping lady dogs.

"I got this feeling maybe there's something about all this that isn't what we think it is," I said. "Like looking in a fun-house mirror and seeing a distorted image. That’s what I think we’re looking at. The distortion.”

“Fair enough,” Leonard said. “Always is a little of that, I suppose. Distortion, I mean.”

“Might be more of it this time than usual,” I said.

That was it for profundity. We sipped coffee. It was the last cup I intended to have for a while. One more and I’d be dancing down the highway juggling my nuts.

There was a surviving phone booth next to the café, and I used it to drop a call to the Marvel Creek Police Department. It had been so long, I had almost forgotten how the damn thing worked. Turned out Eula was not only the receptionist, she was also what served as a dispatcher in a small town like Marvel Creek. Add to that part-time mistress to Delf, and I wondered when she slept. Maybe while she and Delf were having sex.

I tried to disguise my voice by putting my hand over my mouth and talking between my fingers. I don’t know if that did anything at all. I told her there was a dead body in an empty house and gave the address. I told her there was a funny hat there as well, and it wasn’t salvageable. She didn’t seem to recognize my voice and made no comment about the hat.

I bought Rex a hamburger, hold the lettuce and tomato, and he woke up long enough to eat it. We all got in the car and started slowly making our way back to Marvel Creek, Rex sitting behind us, licking the backs of our heads. When we were about halfway to Marvel Creek, Rex lay down, rolled onto his back, and, with his paws in the air, went to sleep.

“Poor baby,” Leonard said, looking over the seat. “Eating that hamburger tired him out.”

“I think it was licking our heads that wore him out,” I said. “I feel like I need a hair dryer.”

“Or, better yet, more hair,” Leonard said.

“Says the man who has started cutting his short.”

“It’s the style, Hap. If there is one thing I am, it’s stylish.”

“Yeah. That’s it.”

When we crossed the Sabine River Bridge we were the only car out there. A high mist was rising off the water and it was entangling itself in the trees on both sides of the riverbank and blowing across the road in slow motion.

I pulled over and put the address my former schoolmate Sharon had given me into the GPS, then continued onward.

It was eleven thirty.

24

The house wasn't in town but on the outskirts near what we used to call the Gilmer Highway. It sat off the highway a goodly distance but could be seen from there. There were houses behind Sharon's house, and they went back a way and were separated only by small yards.

There were a few well-cared-for trees in the yard, and there were lights on behind the windows of one large room. A car was parked under a carport.

"She said come alone," I said, "so that's what I want her to think I've done."

"That's all right," Leonard said. "I'll sit with Rex and the gun. Something looks or sounds fishy, I'll be there like a shot."

I cruised past her house, turned around, and parked in her driveway. Leonard slid down in the seat and waited there with the gun from the glove box in his hand.

As I made my way up the walk, I saw through the trees that there was a white pickup parked out to the side of her house, behind some hedges. It wasn't exactly hidden, and it might not mean anything. Maybe the truck had got up in the middle of the night and drove itself there, perhaps liking the view. Maybe the truck belonged to the owners of the house behind Sharon's house.

But in for a penny, in for a pound, the motto of the dedicated investigator, the mantra of a fool.

I knocked gently on the door. Hardly any time went by before Sharon opened it. She was still wearing her waitress outfit. She smiled at me. It was another of those moments when she was a girl again, back in high school, with a line of suitors.

"Come in," she said.

I did. I stood near the door and waited. "You have something more to tell me?"

"I do. Something to show you. Wait one minute."

She went down a hall and turned into a room and out of sight. I rocked on my heels. It was a nice house. Too many knickknacks for me, but nice. I could see into the kitchen from where I stood. There was a large clock on the wall with a white background. It was an old-style clock, not digital. The black hands really stood out. I watched the second hand swing around in a circle a few times.

Perhaps Sharon didn't have any information, and she was changing into a negligee, hoping to rekindle that old school spirit. That would be awkward. Brett didn't let me date.

After a moment I heard movement, looked up. Sharon was coming out of the room at the back and she wasn't wearing a negligee. The redheaded man from the café was with her. He wasn't wearing a negligee either. He had a gun held down against his leg. I would have preferred the negligee.

Sharon looked wimpy. She stepped to the side so that the redhead was directly in line with me. He patted his thigh with the gun. He smiled the kind of smile a shark does right before biting the head off a tuna.

I said, "I wasn't expecting a threesome. But before we start, I don't do anal. Or anything that involves rubber dicks and lube oil."

Redhead kept smiling. It wasn't because he liked my humor. "You try and run, I'll pop you. I can shoot quick as a cat can jump."

"But can you hit anything?" I said.

"That too. Don't believe me, try me."

"Sorry, Hap," Sharon said. "Professor, he says for you to do something in this town, you do it, even if you don't agree with it. For the record, I don't, but he said, so I did."

"That's all there is to it?" I said. "You're a Judas because Professor says you ought to be?"

"Red here made me an offer. I need the money. And he said he'd break one of my arms if I didn't."

"I let her choose which one," Red said.

"Well, damn, that sure makes me feel a sight better," I said.

"I am sorry. Really, Hap. I meant what I said today. I wished you'd asked me out a second time."

"You're just making it sweeter," I said. "So, they really call you Red?" I said.

"Sometimes. Where's the nigger?"

“She said to come alone.”

“But where is he?”

“A hotel in Tyler,” I said.

“Which one?”

I told him where we had been but didn’t mention we had checked out. I told it convincingly, I thought.

“Bet you figured you were going to get you some nooky, didn’t you?” Red said. “Sorry you’re going to miss out. She’s got some good stuff. This is done, I might be coming back to see her.”

Red reached out and patted Sharon’s ass with the gun.

Sharon turned bright red. I thought that was swell. That was sweet. She turned red because she got her ass patted, but she was fine with giving me to the wolves. It doesn’t take all that much to go to the cops. She could have done that.

“I’ve dipped my wick there a few times, haven’t I, honey?” Red said.

Sharon didn’t answer, just looked straight ahead, sad and still blushing.

“What I’m going to want you to do,” Red said, “is go out the door there and then out to your car. You’re going to drive me and you where I tell you to drive. Later, I’m going to get the nigger. Divide and conquer. Always the best way to do it. Coming alone, that was stupid, boy.”

“So, Professor has all this power, but he just sends you?” I said.

“One town, one ranger,” he said.

“You’re no Texas Ranger,” I said.

“Easy-peasy. You get popped, then I’ll have to give the nigger some attention.”

“Might not like the attention you get back,” I said. “You’re going to need you, the twins, and maybe a pet alligator.”

“Sure,” Red said. “Go. Out the door.”

I went out. Red prodded me with the pistol in my back, pushed me toward my car. I couldn’t see Leonard in it.

When we got to the driver’s side, Red said, “You drive where I tell you to drive, and you live longer. I might have you drive out somewhere far away and let you out and take your car. George pays for cars to be mashed up by that fucking machine. He gets through, don’t matter who owned it. What’s left you could slip under a door. Course, way it might work is I could leave you in the car when he mashes it. I could do that. I’ll let you worry about which I’m going to do. And drive carefully and slow. I get carsick when I’m not driving.”

“Like I give a shit,” I said.

He popped me one in the back of the head with the barrel of the pistol. It wasn’t too hard, but it wasn’t a love tap either.

I opened the car door, looked for Leonard. He wasn’t in the car.

Red said, “Wait a minute. I want to check.”

He pushed me aside, had me stand back about four feet. He leaned inside the car, over the front seat, and took a look at the backseat, and that’s when Rex hit him. I had forgotten about him.

It was like a shark attack. Rex’s wide jaws clamped on Red’s face, right over his nose and mouth. The impact of it was like a punch, knocking Red back and onto the ground, the dog coming out after him, close as a natural appendage, his body a mass of coiled muscle.

I stepped on Red’s gun hand while Rex tore a large chunk of Red’s face off and then grabbed him by the throat and bit deep, making a sound like someone snapping a crisp celery stick. Blood gurgled like coffee in a pot.

Red’s hand went limp. He let go of the gun. I kicked it under the car.

Leonard came out from the bushes holding the automatic. He stood where he was, across the way from me, watching Rex work.

Sharon came to the door, put a hand to her mouth, and let out some air. Red was being whipped around by Rex as if he were wet laundry. I felt drops of blood land on my face. Red tried to scream, only managed to make a sound like someone gargling peanuts, and then he didn’t make any more noise besides what his swinging body made on the gravel in the driveway. After a moment, I could hear bones cracking in Red’s face.

I had no idea a dog could be that strong. Red had to weigh two hundred pounds, but he might as well have been a feather the way Rex manhandled him.

“Bad dog bite,” Leonard said.

“I’ll say.”

Leonard walked over to me. “Shall we call Rex off?”

Rex had quit shaking Red, was just holding him to the ground by the neck with his jaws.

“Don’t think it matters much now.”

I looked to Sharon. She stood in the doorway. She was gray as ash in the porch light. She had one hand against her throat, as if to protect it from a dog attack.

I said, “Rex doesn’t like people pushing his friends around.”

“Oh Jesus,” she said.

“You should have asked for him a little earlier,” I said. “I think he shows up now, it’ll be too late. Jesus couldn’t resurrect that motherfucker. Only way he gets up is with a forklift.”

25

The interrogation room was much nicer than the one in LaBorde or, for that matter, any I had ever been in, and I have experience.

It was small, but it was very neat, and you could smell the freshness of the wood paneling. There was a nice long table with no scratches on it, and Leonard and I were sitting on one side of it with our hands on the table. Our hands were free now, but we had worn handcuffs earlier, when Delf had us picked up by a very nice big black policeman with a very big gun.

That was all right. I was the one that called the cops to come out.

Delf came in. He wasn't as friendly this time. He looked at us like a housewife spying rot in store cabbage. He sat down. He had a notepad in his hand. He placed that carefully on the table. He glared at us the way Marvin looks at us. It made me feel homey.

"This is a nice room," Leonard said.

Delf ignored him.

"Sharon, she backs up your story. Said she had no choice but to set you up. She was under threat of death."

"I believe that," I said, "but that doesn't mean I like it."

"How's Rex?" Leonard asked.

"Animal control," Delf said. "They're considering putting him down."

"Don't do that," Leonard said. "He was in our car, minding his own business, when Red tried to look inside. Red had a gun, I might add."

"You had a gun too," Delf said. "And it's not registered to you."

"It's Hap's. I could see a man with a gun through Sharon's windows. I got the gun and got out of the car. Also, I had to pee. Rex hadn't got him, I would have. Rex isn't at fault here. He's my dog and he was protecting the car we were in while I was pissing in the shrubs."

"What's funny," Delf said, "is that dog looks exactly like the dog

Junkyard George owns, and here's another coincidence. That dog's name is Rex too."

"Do tell," Leonard said. "Pretty popular dog name, huh?"

Delf took a deep breath and let out a tubercular-sounding sigh.

"Red set me up," I said. "He planned to get rid of me, and Leonard was next. He wanted us divided to make it easy. Sharon said to come alone. I didn't. I had Leonard and Rex."

"Yeah, well, as I said, Sharon tells pretty much the same story," Delf said. "Let me tell you something. I believe you guys. I believe her, for the most part. I could make a big deal out of this, but we're going to call it self-defense by use of dog. I'm not going to put in my report you stole the dog."

"That's very nice of you," Leonard said.

"Is, isn't it?" Delf said. "I don't like Professor, don't like what he had in mind for you. Don't care much for Sharon either. Red wasn't with her the whole time. She said he came over about ten, waited. She knew he was coming. She could have called and told me. I could have set him up. She likes the money they were going to pay her more than she liked you not being killed. I believe she was threatened, but she had a way out and she didn't take it."

"My sentiments exactly," Leonard said. "And that cheeseburger, at the place where she works. They use funky cheese."

"You know," Delf said, "they do. Kind of, I don't know, chewy, and not in a good way."

"Exactly," Leonard said. "What about Rex? Can I have him back?"

"I don't think George needs him. I'll have him brought over to you. They got him all muzzled and shit. Pit bulls, they can be dangerous."

"Only if you make them that way," I said. "Rex, he did what he did because Red pushed me. He likes me. He didn't care for Red. He loves Leonard. He ought not to be blamed for defending me and the car. He hadn't, me and my car might be flat and in a pile out at George's junkyard."

"Did Red say George wanted it done?" Delf asked. "Getting rid of you two, though, I'm beginning to understand why someone would want to."

"He said Professor wanted us taken care of, and he talked about having George crush my car with me in it," I said.

"That's thin," Delf said. "You say it, but Red can't say now that he said it. Professor and George can deny it. It's nothing, really."

"But Sharon backs it up," I said.

"She does, but some lawyer wants to play it cute, they could say she's covering her ass. Could say Professor wasn't in on this shit, just her and Red for some reason. They'll find a reason. Still, I'm talking to Professor and George. One of them might drop a ball and not mean to."

Delf sat there for a long while saying nothing.

We said nothing.

The air conditioner made a peculiar sound. It was kind of cold in there.

"Now, here's something else," Delf said, "and I just throw it out there, because I don't believe in this being just one of those things, since all manner of shit has been happening since you two came to town. But does the name Ace mean anything to you?"

We both shook our heads.

Delf studied us as if the word LIE was stamped on our foreheads.

"Big black guy, about the size of a tree, wore a bear-ear hat and used to date Jackie, the missing girl whose father turned up dead? I know you know some of this story. Jackie used to live with George until she got some kind of Martian mind-meld and got smarter and figured out George and her whole family and the whole fucked-up religion they belonged to was bogus…the name Ace still doesn't ring a bell?"

"Oh," Leonard said. "That brother. Yeah. We know who he is, but dead? Wow. That's some shit."

"Ain't it?" Delf said. "I didn't say he was dead, now, did I?"

"I'm a good guesser," Leonard said.

"Then you do know him?"

"Jackie's mother told us about him," I said, "and not happily."

"That whole nigger-in-the-woodpile business made her nervous," Leonard said.

"Did it now?" Delf said.

"And Jackrabbit's brother, Thomas," Leonard said, "he kind of gave us a vibe like he might think Jackrabbit ought to be killed for riding a brother's dick. Didn't you get that vibe, Hap?"

"I did."

"Someone took what was probably an ax to his head and left him in the house where Jackie used to live," Delf said. "I got to wonder why he was there, and who killed him, and who called in that he was murdered. Call turned out to be from a phone booth in Tyler, Texas. Where were you guys holed up?"

"Tyler," I said.

"Pretty coincidental," Delf said.

"Naw," Leonard said, "lots of people stay in Tyler."

“Uh-huh,” Delf said, but he left that line of questioning alone. He turned to another. “Was Jimmy or Lou mentioned in any of this business by Red? You know, them being involved.”

“Nope,” I said.

“The twins?”

“Nope.”

“Know what? I’ll be glad when I can let you two go home. Or to prison. Or to a home for the demented. Someplace other than here.”

“Lot of people feel that way,” I said.

26

We spent the night in a jail cell. It's cheaper than a Holiday Inn. It was a small room with bars and the door was locked. We had one shitter and a bunk bed. I got the bottom bunk, Leonard got the top. Unlike Holiday Inn, the cell had room service of a sort. They fed us sandwiches. That's a plus.

Delf said us being in jail for the night was all for show.

It seemed real enough, though.

During the night, I dreamed of Rex and Red, how Rex's teeth ripped Red's face, how his jaws clamped on Red's head and crushed it like a Chinese paper lantern. The memory of it was so intense, I awoke several times. I glanced at Leonard's bunk. He was sound asleep.

Son of a bitch.

Come morning, about six thirty, we were let out of our cozy little room by the big black cop that had picked us up. He had his cap pushed back on his head. He was heavy around the middle and had legs like railroad ties. He had a face that looked to have collected some violence.

"Good morning," he said as we rolled out of bed, still wearing last night's clothes, of course. They didn't even spring for little orange pajamas.

"And good morning to you," Leonard said as he dropped down from the top bunk.

The cop unlocked the door.

"Y'all can come out," he said. "I'm supposed to take you so you can have breakfast. I'll eat with you. We didn't have an introduction last night, since I was putting you in cuffs, but my name is Johnny Williams. Breakfast will be your treat."

He drove us over to the café in a cruiser. I had yelled for shotgun, so Leonard got the backseat. It was no longer raining, but from the night before the streets were as shiny as a snotty nose.

“This was not a nice place for us yesterday,” I said as we sat in the car in front of the café. “We ordered food and ended up getting snookered.”

Johnny sat behind the wheel of the cruiser and grinned across the seat at me.

“Wasn’t that bad a day,” Johnny said. “Your dog ate a bad guy. Really, he ate a bad guy’s head. And you got to sleep in a nice comfortable room, and you aren’t being arrested or detained, and you’re getting your dog back, and you’re about to buy me a nice breakfast, so how bad could it be?”

“When you put it like that,” I said, “not bad.”

Johnny nodded at the café.

“Place is all right, it’s the owner that sucks shit through a straw.”

“Professor,” I said.

“Yep. He’s not the actual on-paper owner, but he’s the owner. Got money invested, got a deal made with the lady who owns it on paper. He could sink her anytime he wants, so she toes the line. Deal he has with her pretty much goes like a lot of deals he has in town. You get to do what you want until he don’t want you to do it anymore.”

“What we heard,” I said.

“A hungry black man like myself comes through, they’ll feed him at the café, but a black man won’t work here, and he won’t own businesses in town or buy property. No new ones, anyway. And Professor prefers you not be supportive of the black people already here, most of them living in what we can politely call a collective spot on the far side of town. Plan is, Professor is going to gradually lily-white this place. Which is why Delf hired black officers on the force, to not have the town completely in his sweaty palm.”

“That’s also how we heard it,” Leonard said.

“People here, hell, most of them moved on from all that real hard-core racist shit years ago. Thing is, they got to live in this town, so they are sometimes what I like to refer to as overly cooperative with Professor. They like black people individually, it’s when they start thinking of them as a group that things get shitty. They seem to think all black folks are on welfare except the ones they know and like. Or they’re doping it up or committing crimes. Let’s go inside. I want Professor to hear that two brothers were in here today along with one white asshole, and who knows, tomorrow there may be four, then eight brothers. I like to think that kind of stuff keeps Professor pissed.”

"Good enough reason to eat here," Leonard said.

"By the way," Johnny said, "Sharon will not be serving today. She has a few things to answer for, and maybe for some time, and she'll be answering at the jail. We are not being as nice to her as we were to you. She's still in a cell and she will be having a very cheap breakfast. Has all the nutrients necessary, though. We are not savages."

"What about Professor and George?" I said.

"Chief is talking to them, plans to talk to his own brothers as well. Chief's all right. Full of shit a lot of the time, but aren't we all?"

"And the twins?" I said.

"Nothing to talk to them about right now," he said.

Johnny got out of the car, and we followed.

Inside, a couple folks gave us the look, but most went about their business, filling their bellies before they headed to work. Johnny smiled and nodded at a few of them. No one called him names or burned a cross.

We found a booth at the side, the one Sharon claimed Jackrabbit occupied when she came in and ordered tea and a salad and left small tips.

A very tired-looking older lady with dyed-black hair who walked like a pirate with a peg leg waited on us. She wasn't chatty, but she was efficient. She took our orders and went away.

"That lady right there," Johnny said, referring to our waitress. "She works two jobs to take care of her kids. Husband ran off with some floozy and actually got run over by a bus, him and the floozy both. He had signed his insurance over to the floozy, and it ended up somehow that the floozy's drunk-ass mother got it. Fifty thousand dollars to that piece of shit, an old hag that hadn't worked at anything more than fifteen minutes in her life, and that fifteen minutes she was most likely trying to con some poor retard out of a dollar. And his wife, the waitress here, she didn't even get his best wishes or a finger up the ass. Woman like that works hard to take care of her family. She's like most of this town. Basically good."

"Basically ain't always enough," Leonard said.

"I think this place can be as good as any," Johnny said.

"Ain't you the little optimist," Leonard said. "You and Hap should get together for a sing-along."

"I got hope," Johnny said. "But I'm not foolish. Professor doesn't get dug in too deep, there's a chance. He does, it's like a seed tick gets in your balls and you try to pull it out, and the head breaks off in you.

That's hard to get rid of."

"Damn, now I'm really hungry," Leonard said.

Actually, he was, and so was I. We ate and were on another round of coffee when Delf came in. He came over and sat by Johnny. He looked like he had been up all night.

"You want something to eat, Chief," Johnny said, "they're buying."

"I'll just have coffee…wait. You two are buying?"

"Looks like it," I said.

"All right, then," Delf said and summoned the waitress, gave her his order. "I'll have coffee, steak and eggs, a side of toast."

"You talk to Professor?" I asked.

"Him and George. They got nothing, of course. Said they talked to you two, that you were looking for Jackie and they didn't have any information and that's all there was to it. George said his dog is missing."

"He ought to put out some flyers," Leonard said, "maybe run a missing-doggy ad in the paper."

"What I told him," Delf said. "Johnny here explain our position on you two sticking your noses into our business?"

"I haven't yet," Johnny said. "Not really. But here it is in a nutshell. Don't get caught. Otherwise, do what you have to do."

"And if we do get caught?" I asked.

"Sucks to be you," Delf said.

"It's like that, is it?" Leonard said.

"That makes me nervous," I said. "It has…how shall I say it? A scapegoat sound. What if we decide this job isn't for us and we just get our dog and leave town?"

"That's fine too, but if you decide to come back, and you will, remember the ground rules," Delf said.

"What makes you think we'll come back?" I said. "Folks who hired us, we've used their time and money up."

"I don't think the money matters all that much to you. You leave, you'll be back."

"How could you know?" I said.

"Because I remember how you were in high school, Hap. How you crossed the color line when it was obvious it would cause you grief. I didn't do that, and I'm ashamed I didn't. Saying you're not a racist is not the same thing as living like you aren't one. You leave, you'll come back. Neither of you strike me as easy to get rid of, and I think now this is about more than finding a missing girl."

"Don't give us too much credit," I said.

"Yeah, I start to think I'm being worked," Leonard said, "all this highfalutin talk makes my nuts shrivel up. It has a bit too much of King Arthur and the Round Table to it. Like you think you'll pull us in deeper than we are just so we can feel noble."

"Is it working?" Delf said.

"I'm not sure," I said.

"By the way, called Chief Hanson in LaBorde," Delf said. "Told him I knew you two, asked how you guys were back home, how you acted, asked about your character. He confirmed you both are assholes and hardheads but said he would trust you with his life but not to tell you."

"But you just did," I said.

"I can't keep a secret," Delf said.

27

We picked up Rex and drove back to LaBorde. Screw all that macho shit from Delf about how we'd be back. We got paid for two days and we did two days. It wasn't all that wonderful a couple days either, least not as far as our case went.

We arrived in LaBorde close to noon, parked in our office lot, opened up the car trunk where our luggage was. As Leonard prowled around in there, I saw the bicycle lady through the plate-glass window at the front of her business. She was still blond and pretty and she still liked to wear shorts. Really short shorts. She looked up and saw me and smiled.

I should add that I am noble of heart.

Leonard got the thumb drive out of his luggage and put it in his pocket. Rex stood with us, watching things carefully, as if he might be thinking about coming back to steal the car when we weren't looking.

The three of us climbed the stairs to the office, and when we came in, Brett was behind the desk with her laptop open.

"Porn?" I said.

"Of course," she said. "Well, almost. I been reading up on guys like Sebastian, people with his kind of inclinations. People who want to witness their own deaths. It's fucked up. You boys seem to have brought a friend."

"Yeah, he's just hanging," Leonard said.

There is a foldout couch in the office, and right then it was folded up and was just a couch. Leonard made a beeline for that, sat down. Rex jumped up on the couch beside him and put his head in Leonard's lap.

"Cute," Brett said. "Poor baby. He another rescue?"

"He is at that," Leonard said. "Last night he ate a bad guy, chewed his head up like a Tootsie Roll."

Brett stood up then and we embraced. I sat in a client chair and told her the entire story.

“Jesus,” she said. “You boys have had a couple of bad days. And the police chief thinks you’re coming back?”

“But we aren’t,” I said.

“Our lovely clients actually brought in some more money,” Brett said. “I feel guilty taking it if you aren’t going back.”

“They’re doing all right,” I said. “Got a nice truck. They could do with paying a little extra. I got hit by a chair.”

“I see the bruise on your noggin,” Brett said.

“Will this allow me sympathy sex later?” I said.

“One never knows,” she said. “Guys, I went to the address the Mulhaneys gave us and checked out where they lived. Patch of weeds outside of town with a trailer on it, and the trailer has one end burned off. Kitchen fire is my guess. They’ve put a tarp on that end to patch it, used lots of duct tape to hold it in place. The truck they have is better than that trailer.”

“Duct tape is underrated even by those who love it,” Leonard said. “Like a friend of mine, Eugene Frizzell, once said, you got duct tape, you can get to the moon. You know what, maybe the trailer burned up on one end because someone had one of those intense religious moments and burst into flames.”

“I have no idea what that means,” Brett said.

“It means don’t underrate duct tape,” Leonard said, scratching Rex’s hard head.

“So, we got more money, and you can afford to go back, or we can return their dough,” Brett said, “just claim the two days we got paid for. Tell them what you found out and call it a day. It’s nothing definitive, but it’s what you know.”

“I don’t like them,” Leonard said. “They’re not the first folks who’ve lived in bad trailers. I lived in a ragged one, right out of the military. I’ve lived in houses with walls so thin the wind stayed inside instead of out.”

“What do you think, Hap?” Brett said.

“Well, we did find something,” I said.

Leonard stretched out a bit on the couch so he could get his hand in his pocket and pull out the thumb drive. “We got this.”

I leaned out of my chair, took it from him, and gave it to Brett.

“That’s the one thing I hadn’t told you about yet,” I said, and then I told her how we had come by it.

“Damn, you boys have certainly cracked a few eggs,” she said.

She put the thumb drive in the laptop, and we waited.

“Nope,” she said. “Not happening. It’s coded.”

“Not surprised,” I said. “It may be nothing but personal porn or a pie recipe, but it may also be something more important, and it’s maybe what got Ace killed.”

“Still don’t think the people killed him were looking for that,” Leonard said. “Think their beef was with Ace himself. Followed him there, gave him the ax.”

We heard footsteps on the stairs. The door opened and Chance came in. She had her hair tied back and was wearing a loose shirt and jeans and slip-on tennis shoes. I thought she looked cute as the proverbial bug.

I got up and hugged her, and she went around behind the desk and hugged Brett.

“Don’t forget old Uncle Leonard,” Leonard said.

Chance went to the couch and hugged him. She gave the dog a pat.

“What’s his story?” she said, nodding at the dog.

“He’s a client,” Leonard said. “He lost his cat.”

“Ha-ha,” Chance said.

Leonard told the whole thing over again about how the dog was rescued, and then he told her about the case, all we had discovered.

“Oh yeah. Brett told me about the case,” Chance said. “I wish I could have been more involved, but I’ve been taking a couple of college courses, so I’ve only been working part part-time. And I’ve been taking care of Reba a lot.”

“That really shouldn’t be your job,” I said.

“Then whose job would it be?” Chance said. “She doesn’t have anyone. I’ve been making sure she goes to school. She’s smart as a whip, so she should go. She worries me, though. She said there was a little honky there she was going to pop a good one. I suggested she not do that.”

“Probably has it coming,” Leonard said.

“Agreed, but in time we may be hearing from child protective services,” Brett said. “Honky-popping could certainly get them called in.”

“She needs someone,” Chance said. “She’s like a little sister to me. She cusses worse than Dad and Leonard, though.”

By this time Chance had taken a seat in the other swivel client chair. She spun in a circle and came back around to face us.

“You go back, you going to push until something blows?” Chance

said.

“If we were to go back,” I said, “that’s exactly what we’d do. It’s really all we know. But we don’t know we’re going back.”

“They’ll go back,” Brett said.

“I don’t know,” Leonard said. “We’re getting a little long in the tooth for the tough stuff. Divorce cases, sneaking around taking photos of some wife or husband doing the two-bear mambo, that’s starting to be more our style.”

“Damn right,” I said.

“They’ll go back,” Brett said.

28

That night, at home, getting ready for bed, Brett said, “So Jackie thought she could move between dimensions?”

“According to some,” I said. “I don’t know if she thought that or not. Sounds to me like she was speaking theoretically. Of course, maybe we can’t find her because she really did move into another dimension. She could be dead. She could be in Australia training kangaroos to dance the jitterbug.”

“They would be good at that,” Brett said.

“Thing is, everyone we talked to thought she was a little on the odd side, so maybe something to it, about her thinking something like that, thinking she could do it. And maybe she’s merely talking quantum physics to a bunch of knot heads who have a hard time believing in a calorie because they can’t see it.”

Brett was beside the bed, pulling a nightgown over her head. When she had it on, she slapped her ass. “I believe in calories, unfortunately.”

“You wear them beautifully,” I said.

We got in bed and covered up.

“Jamesway, he might have been able to at least carry on a conversation with her,” I said. “He seems like a bright guy.”

“What was your take on him besides being bright?”

“Seemed all right, maybe someone using the bullshit of religion for good. To be honest, I liked him quite a bit, but man, he makes terrible coffee.”

I turned off the light.

“Shit,” I said.

“What?”

“You know.”

“I do?” Brett said.

“Yeah. You know. I decided to face it just now.”

“You and Leonard are going back,” she said.

“I know I am.”

“Then you know he is too.”

“Pretty much. Yeah.”

“I wouldn’t want you to go without him.”

“He wouldn’t want me to either,” I said.

29

Next morning I got dressed and called Leonard. Officer Carroll, aka Curt, picked up the phone.

“Hap,” he said.

“Leonard there?”

“I stole his phone. I’m in Puerto Rico.”

“I know better than that. Leonard can’t afford the roaming, and you can’t afford the trip.”

“Okay, he’s in the shower, which is a polite way of saying he’s taking a shit.”

“Have him call me, but wait until he’s good and finished. I don’t want him doing a half ass-wipe to hurry up and answer the phone.”

Officer Carroll chuckled.

About twenty minutes later Leonard called me back.

“That was one hell of a shit,” I said.

“Championship. I had burritos last night. We’re going back to Marvel Creek, aren’t we?”

“We are.”

“Good. I was going to call you and suggest just the same thing. I already got Rex boarded with some friends of Curt’s. I knew this was coming even when I said I didn’t know it was coming.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

“I don’t like being ran out of a town, or ran out of most anywhere, for that matter, unless I’m ready to go. Hey. Curt is off for a couple of days. He’s going with us.”

“Him being LaBorde law, could that cause him problems?”

“I’m only going to let him get involved so far, but I think he could be a help. I think you’re slowing down a little, so I want some backup.”

“Fuck you.”

“Pack a lunch. Three sandwiches and some chips. We’ll stop and get drinks. And clear out your trunk. Me and Curt will be rooming together, and I want space back there for a crate of rubbers. Now that I think about it, you might want to throw out the spare tire.”

30

I drove. Leonard sat beside me, and Officer Carroll sat in the back, leaning over the seat like a Labrador retriever. He had brought enough luggage for a month in Paris and, along with that, a bulletproof vest.

"You really need the vest?" I said.

"Never leave home without," he said. "That and clean underwear."

I liked Curt, but he was kind of a pest, so it was like driving on a cross-country vacation with a six-year-old. We had already stopped twice. Once for soft drinks, once for Officer Carroll to pee, and now he wanted to go again.

"Pookie, I told you to go before we left," Leonard said.

"I was excited," Curt said. "Are we on a tight schedule?"

"Guess not," Leonard said.

"Pookie?" I said.

"I call him that," Leonard said.

"I kind of like it," Pookie said. "My dad used to call me Poot. I never cared for that much."

"I can understand that," I said. "From now on, I'll call you Pookie too."

"All right," Pookie said.

"Shit," Leonard said, "I should have never let that out in public."

We stopped and Pookie took another pee, and then on down the road, he said, "I wouldn't mind getting some coffee."

"Damn," Leonard said. "That's why you always got to pee."

"If we could stop someplace where they also got pie," Pookie said, "I'd like that best. I like pie. You guys like pie?"

"I should have left his ass at home," Leonard said.

* * *

Brett had found us a bed-and-breakfast on the outskirts of Marvel Creek in a little community that would soon be annexed by the town. It was the only real place to stay unless we wanted to drive on to Longview.

Brett said according to the Internet photos, it was quite charming and, better yet, pretty cheap. The money we got from the Mulhaneys was not a fortune, but it was a fortune for them, as it would have been for me just a few years back. It was hard to believe there had been such a turn of fate in my life. I still had a lot of bad stuff going on, but at least now I could afford to be miserable.

Reminded me of my dad. He was a troubleshooter mechanic at one time for a butane company. Had to be on the road a lot, and he was, by all accounts, good at his job. Over time, he asked for a raise. It was promised, but it never seemed to make it into his paycheck.

Next time he asked for a raise, they said again, “Sure, we’ll do that,” but they didn’t. And when he received his paycheck and saw the raise had still not been added, he went to his stall and began packing his tools in his toolbox. The boss came by, said, “Bud, what are you doing?”

“Well,” Daddy said, “if I’m going to starve to death, I might as well be rested.”

Anytime I thought about being in need of more money, I remembered that story.

Brett had checked us in online, and when the lady who owned the place saw one of our group was black and that he and Pookie intended to share a bed, you could see the hair on the back of her neck stand up. The rest of it was in a gray knot on her head.

“You know, I’m not sure that room is ready,” she said. She reminded me of a nervous wasp, the way she flittered behind the desk. I had an idea her reluctance had nothing to do with Professor, who probably didn’t own things this far out.

Still, our credit card looked better to her than her bullshit church-lady morals, so after a bit of nervous fluttering, she decided the room was ready and checked us in. When we left, she would probably bring in one of those hazmat teams that clean up oil and chemical spills, have them give Leonard and Pookie’s room a real going-over, maybe burn the mattress.

“Breakfast is from seven until nine,” she said. “After that, you’re on your own.”

Leonard laughed at her without really meaning to.

31

After I got my stuff stored in the room, I called Brett and asked about the thumb drive. She was supposed to get it to Mercury so he could see what was on it.

"You know," Brett said, "turns out Jackie is damn smart. Even Mercury couldn't crack it right off the bat. I drove over to Camp Rapture this morning, gave it to him, and after about twenty minutes he said he was going to need time."

"Wow. That is some serious encryption."

"That's what he said. I think he was impressed. It takes a lot to impress him with computer stuff."

"I'll say. Well, we are all tucked in. Pretty soon we go back to shaking trees to see what falls out of them."

"Be careful something big and mean and ugly doesn't fall out of one and land on you."

"Of course. Which reminds me, have I told you the joke about the gorilla hunter?"

"I don't believe in hunting gorillas."

"Neither do I. It's a joke."

"I think you've told me that one."

"I don't think I have," I said.

"Think you have. Don't remember all the details, but pretty sure you have."

"You don't want to hear my joke, do you?"

"Got to go, hon," and she was off the phone.

I actually have some pretty good jokes. I don't know why no one wants to hear them.

32

The best way we figured to stir things was to make sure we were seen, and one place we wanted to be seen was at the Coffee Spoon again. Everyone came there. Someone was going to slip a word to Professor, and that was bound to bring out some of his help. Jimmy and Lou maybe, George perhaps, the twins, someone we had yet to meet who wanted to shoot us in the back of the head or beat us to death with sticks and stones. It was always a pleasure to make new friends.

First, we drove over to Marvel Creek and the cop shop to talk with Delf.

“So, you’re an officer of the law?” Delf said after we introduced Pookie and took seats in the office.

“I am,” Pookie said.

“He’s like fucking McGruff the Crime Dog,” Leonard said.

“I am,” Pookie said, “except I don’t sleep in a doggy bed.”

“What happened to Rex?” Delf asked.

“He’s having a spa day,” Leonard said.

“Knew you’d be back,” Delf said.

“You called it,” I said.

“I can be of assistance, but only to a degree. There’s a line I best not cross, but I can cross some lines. You find something, tell me. Don’t get yourself between a rock and a hard place. Also, Johnny, he’s part of this. The other officers, not as directly. I handle them, but Johnny, I can give you his cell and you can contact him if necessary. You can tell him anything you can tell me.”

“Thing is,” I said, “you got your agenda and we got ours. Finding Jackie.”

“Jackie, if she’s found, is dead, my man,” Delf said. “But our agendas cross enough we can be of help to one another.”

“Guess that’s true,” I said.

“Good,” Delf said. “Try not to shoot anybody.”

“No promises,” Leonard said.

“My brothers,” he said. “Don’t let them hurt you, but try not to hurt them. If possible.”

“Deal,” I said, and out of there me and Leonard and Pookie went.

33

We decided we weren't ready to hang out at the café drinking coffee, and it occurred to me another visit with Jamesway might be in order, and that seemed to suit Leonard and Pookie.

This time we came through the front door, which was unlocked, went through the lobby, and found him in his office with his feet on the desk reading a rather ragged-looking leather-bound copy of the Bible.

"Hap, Leonard," he said. "Good to see you. Who's your friend?"

We introduced Officer Carroll by his real name. I immediately feared coffee would be offered.

It was. Leonard and I declined. Pookie, not knowing any better, accepted. We left him to his fate.

"We're just going over our path again," I said.

"Meaning you haven't found Jackie, and you want to know if I know something. And you want to know if I had anything to do with Ace's death."

"We didn't say that," I said.

"But you were thinking it."

"Maybe," I said.

"I told you what I knew about Ace, and that's it. Next time I heard about him was reading about him in the newspaper, that he was found dead in Jackie's old house. What can I tell you I haven't told you?"

"It's just procedure," Pookie said.

"Procedure?" Jamesway said.

"I'm a cop," Pookie said. "I use cool cop terms. Don't get me started. I got a nest of stuff I can rattle off."

Jamesway smiled. "Ah."

"I don't know if we have any other questions," I said, "not really. But I'd like to come back to something. Just to touch it again and move on.

Jackie's good with numbers, had what some call odd ideas. Was she odd or just smarter than the average bear?"

"Maybe both," Jamesway said. "You don't find bears doing mathematics or theorizing on the universe."

"Don't talk like you know all the bears there are," Leonard said.

Jamesway laughed a little.

"Did she believe she could travel between dimensions, alternate worlds, or some such?" I said.

"She's a thinker. Maybe even a genius when it came to mathematics and physics, and she had to learn most of it on her own. We used to talk for hours about all manner of things. Did she actually think you could do it, travel between the dimensions? The answer is, theoretically, yes, but she didn't think she herself could."

"She wasn't saying what they thought she was saying?" Leonard said.

"Not at all," Jamesway said. "Truth is, I miss our conversations. She could make you think, and I was attracted to her. I told you that. But there was always something kind of dangerous about her. Not that she did anything I could put my finger on. It was just a feeling she gave me."

Jamesway went over, fixed Pookie his cup of coffee, and brought it back to the desk.

I watched as Pookie picked up the cup and tasted the coffee. I thought Jackie might not have passed into another dimension, but with a sip of that stuff, perhaps Pookie temporarily had. One of his eyes twitched.

"Jackie wanted to do something with that brain of hers other than what she was doing," Jamesway said. "I think she decided she'd had enough of this hole in the road."

"You don't think she could be dead?" Pookie asked.

"I hope not. I think she had bigger fish to fry. I think she merely went away to someplace better. Someday, I believe she will resurface. She may not even be hiding. I'd check out the colleges in Tyler."

Brett had actually done that while I was home. Nothing found, but I didn't mention it to Jamesway.

"Nothing else?" Leonard said.

Jamesway shook his head. "Sorry…wait a minute. The librarian. Marylou Cinner."

"Librarian?" I said.

"Friend of hers. Well, she used to be a librarian. But she and Jackie got to be friends there at the end, meaning the end as in when I saw

Jackie last. I sort of forgot about it. She didn't mention Marylou much, but she did mention her, and she said they were friends. I think Marylou, who was a quiet sort, was someone she could talk to about the things she was interested in. Someone to talk to smarter than the rest of us. I think Marylou had about three degrees or something, but what she was cut out for was being a librarian. I can't say I really knew her, but that's what Jackie said about her."

"Do you know Cinner's address?" I asked.

"I know where she lived. The house is empty now. Up for sale. It was repossessed. Didn't respond to foreclosure letters, or so I was told. One of the ladies works at the bank goes to church here, and she told me. If you're quiet, and you know connected people in this town, eventually they talk out of school. One day Marylou Cinner was working at the library, next day she was gone. Didn't give notice, just up and left. People went to the house, and all the furniture was there, but she wasn't, and there was a note. Note said she had a sick aunt and had to go take care of her, I think in Ohio. Something like that. Said she was sorry to leave so suddenly, and she was letting the house go back, and that was it."

"That's interesting," Pookie said.

"Yeah. Oh, and she was Ace's cousin," Jamesway said.

"Also interesting," Pookie said.

"Does it mean anything?" Jamesway said.

"If it does, we don't know what it is," I said. "Not yet, anyway."

We thanked Jamesway and left.

On the way to the car, Pookie said, "That coffee is the worst thing I've ever put in my mouth."

"I got something for your mouth that can sweeten it," Leonard said.

"I know that, baby," Pookie said, and pinched Leonard on the ass.

34

We drove around town hoping to stir someone up, but no one was stirred. We went to the café and had lunch, but no one threatened us. We drove back to the bed-and-breakfast, but no one followed us. I looked out the window from my room. Nothing happening out there, though a large black bird on the lawn looked a little suspicious.

Maybe we had pushed as much as we could. Maybe Professor and his minions had got smart and decided to leave us alone and let us fade away. Maybe Professor had nothing to do with Jackie's disappearance. Perhaps Ace had been killed by someone who had nothing to do with either Jackie or the Professor. And Marylou Cinner, did she have anything to do with this? No fucking idea.

I sat down and turned on the TV and watched a bit of the news, but the political situation was so much like a shitty reality show, I turned it off before I got sick.

Brett called.

"It's your wife," she said.

"I love hearing that," I said.

"Here's something else you'll love. Thumb drive cracked. I picked it up from Mercury. A large part of it is numbers."

"That fits. She was a self-trained mathematician."

"Yep, but it's accounting. Nothing to do with any kind of super-math, but it is fanciful math at times."

"Come again," I said.

"It's records she kept. Way Mercury figured it, Jackie was the bookkeeper for Professor, and she started carefully moving money out of his account, disguising it as this and that, not something you'd notice right off, subtle stuff, but it was getting moved."

"Where to?"

"You're going to love this. It doesn't seem like anything at first. All legit, but she had a clever way to siphon the money off and have it end up somewhere else, and you know whose bank account it's in, and right there in Marvel Creek?"

"Do I have to guess?"

"Yep."

"All right," I said. "Her own account."

"Nope."

"How about Jamesway?"

"Nope. Your junkyard man."

"George?"

"Yep."

"That's a surprise," I said. "I thought he was Professor's man."

"George seems to have been his own man. He had this girlfriend who was a math whiz, and either he got her to do it or they were both in on it. Appears they began to slip money away from the Professor. Did it in small bits here and there. Never anything noticeable. Disguised as an expense, but the thing was, the expense was maybe half of what was used to pay out, and then part of the expense got transferred to this or that, traveling through channels, and pretty soon it's in George's bank account."

"I'll be damned. Might George not have known?"

"It was in his account," Brett said. "Surely he looked at his bank statements from time to time. There were several different companies under his name, and there were three banks, one in Marvel Creek, one in Longview, and another in Tyler. But in the end, they all came back to George."

"Damn interesting."

"Yep. But that's not all. Mercury figured that later, all that business was reworked. Not so you'd notice it unless you understood money and how to launder it and make everything look clean and on the up-and-up until all of a sudden you got nothing in your account, because what you see isn't what you get. It's all been boosted to another account. The figures in the former account are what Mercury calls ghost figures; the remains of dead money. George's bank accounts got shifted to Ace's bank account. Again, at a glance, George had money, but when you really looked carefully at the transfer numbers, Ace had it. Maybe Ace had something to do with it all too."

"Ace would be lucky to know which end the shit came out of an elephant even if he was standing under its ass."

“However it got there, it got there. But I’m not finished. Later on, Mercury figured out from all the revising what Jackie was doing. She was moving money from Ace’s account to one Marylou Cinner’s account.”

“The librarian.”

“What’s that?”

I said it again and told her the little bit Jamesway had told us, including the fact Cinner had moved off.

“Now, that is interesting,” Brett said.

“Yeah. It is. Cinner hasn’t been a player on the field, and all of a sudden, she is. I’m wondering, did she mastermind all of this?”

“I’ll see if I can find her by the usual routes, on Facebook, that sort of thing, and if that comes up goose egg, I’ll see if Mercury can help me. He’s still looking into the material on the thumb drive. He says there’s more, he’s just not sure what it all means. Looks like Jackie’s long game might have been being aided first by George, then Ace, and then it went to Marylou Cinner’s account. She may have been using them all as channels to take the money out and keep it for herself. Up to you to figure out what it all means. I have given you the tools to do your work, so now you can do it.”

“I gave you the tools to find the tools,” I said.

“True, but I’m your boss, and shit rolls downhill in a large stinky ball. Catch.”

35

I went over to Leonard and Pookie's room, told them what Brett told me.

"Bottom line," Leonard said, "it's like that movie where they say follow the money. We follow that, we find what happened to Jackie and her baby, if there is one. All this talk about segregation, shit, it's the money, you wait and see."

"Why not go talk with George?" Pookie said. "He works for Professor, and us knowing George was stealing money from Professor, even if he didn't end up with it, might not be something he would want revealed. Could give us some leverage and make him cooperative."

"I like it," Leonard said.

"Me too," I said.

36

We got directions to George's home from Brett, but when we drove out there, there was a burned-down house with a washing machine in the yard, blackened by fire. No one had lived in that spot for a long time. Somehow, George had gone off the grid, at least temporarily.

Plan B was since we were close to Longview, we would drive over there, and Pookie would rent a car and drive back out to the hill over the junkyard, find someplace to park, and see when George headed home. For all we knew, George had left the day before and was on vacation in the Bahamas. But as it stood, Pookie observing him and following him home and then giving us a call with directions was the best we could come up with. We wanted to talk to him somewhere other than the junkyard, somewhere away from Professor's influence, should he coincidentally be at the yard.

We figured this was a good plan because George hadn't met Pookie, and he didn't know the rental, but he knew my car and he knew me and Leonard.

By the time we got to Longview and rented the car and stopped to have coffee and a snack, because Pookie insisted, it was near what we thought would be George's quitting time.

Me and Leonard drove to a place not far from the junkyard but out of sight and parked and waited to hear from Pookie. We hoped no one thought we looked suspicious.

We played I spy for a while, but there wasn't that much to spy, and Leonard cheated. He changed what he had spied if he thought I was figuring it out. It was like playing with a five-year-old, but with a nastier vocabulary.

After a bit, the rain, which had left us for a while, came back. The sky turned dark and the clouds rolled in and there were splashes of rain on the windshield.

Leonard's cell rang. "Got you," Leonard said into the phone, then clicked off. "Pookie is following him. We'll get a report from him with directions shortly."

Pookie called back, and we followed his directions. George didn't live far from the junkyard. He lived down a road that ran into a path through the woods. It was a narrow road of shipped-in caliche and it worked good for the tires in the rain.

We saw Pookie parked off to the side. He had the rental car turned around, facing us. We pulled up in front of him. He got out in the rain and ran toward us, slid into the backseat.

"Just a bit farther up the road," Pookie said. "Best to walk from here."

"Did he see you?" I asked.

"Please," Pookie said. "Fucking spy satellite couldn't have found me, I am that stealthy."

We got out in the rain and started walking. We didn't have umbrellas or raincoats. What we had was wet clothes and skin. It was a damn shabby night, and I felt pretty shabby myself.

Only good thing was we didn't have far to go.

George's house wasn't a house but a double-wide trailer that looked as if it had been recycled from a major storm event. The windows had cheap curtains over them, and the bottom of the trailer had a dark outside waterline. The front door had a green lumber porch built up in front of it with an overhang. Rain cascaded off the slanted porch roof in a waterfall so thick it could have drowned a hippopotamus wearing diving gear.

I bet it was nice inside. Probably an example of interior decorating at its best. Lots of deer heads and a couch covered in camouflage, a shit-ring around the toilet, and maybe some cum-stained towels.

It was the only trailer on that lot, and it was set into a cutaway of the forest, which left it exposed out front and with trees at the back and on the sides. There was a pole with an automatic light on it, and it was on because the rainy sky had turned the world dark and soon the night would add to it.

In the glow of the light, I could see a small TV satellite dish on top of the trailer and I thought I recognized three struggling blades of grass on a patch of clay out to the side of the trailer along with some random spots of caliche.

In the caliche driveway, a soda-pop-orange truck was parked.

We spread out. I went left and Leonard went straight to the front door, hunkered down on the tacked-on porch. Pookie went right.

When I came around to the back of the trailer, I saw one window had open curtains. I ducked down under it and glanced over at Pookie coming up from the other side of the trailer. There was a door at the back of the trailer and a few steps leading up to it.

I met Pookie at the porch, and we got up close to the door and pressed our ears against it. We could hear a TV going. It was the usual twenty-four-hour redneck-news channel.

There was no overhang on the back porch and the rain came down on us like wet bullets. I was so miserable, I was ready to do something even if it was wrong.

I left Pookie where he was and went back to the window with the open curtains, lifted my head, and peeked inside. I could see George sitting on the couch with his shoes off, his socked feet up on a stool.

I edged back to Pookie, got out my lock pick, and went at it, silently as possible. In the meantime, Pookie sent Leonard a text letting him know what we were doing.

The lock snicked softly, and when it did, I jerked the door back, and Pookie and his pistol slipped inside.

37

George jumped to his feet as we came in, got caught up in the stool, and fell on his face. He started crawling toward the corner of the room where a shotgun leaned against the wall. I sort of accidentally stepped on his hand and stood on it with most of my weight.

He let out with a scream. By then Pookie had the shotgun.

I took my foot off George's hand, said, "Why don't you sit on the couch, partner."

He sat on the couch, which was not covered in the expected camouflage but had been nicely decorated in what appeared to be coffee, beer, and probably ejaculation stains. He sat there with his teeth gritted, holding his injured hand against his chest.

I picked up the stool George had tripped over, pulled it back a few feet from the couch, and sat down on it. Pookie gave me the shotgun. I placed it across my knees.

Pookie went over and turned on the light.

I looked around. There was indeed a deer head on the wall, and the nose of it looked to have been a moth buffet. One of the eyes looked as if it might fall out of the head. There was a cobweb in one nostril.

"What the fuck are you guys doing?" George said.

"We thought this was where the party was," I said.

"Fuck you," he said.

"Man, that told us off," I said.

"Yeah," Pookie said. "I feel told."

Pookie picked up the remote from the arm of the couch and cut off the TV racket, tossed the remote on the couch by George, then moved to the front door to let Leonard in.

Leonard came inside. He had been under the porch overhang, but he was still damp. He shook like a dog, slinging rain everywhere, including on me.

“You’re the first nigger ever through that doorway,” George said. “And you’ll be the last.”

“Yeah. You look like you’re in a great position to give me shit.”

Leonard sat in a fat-cushioned armchair and kind of worked his ass around on it.

“I’ll burn that chair when you’re gone,” George said.

“Ought to burn this whole place down, way it looks,” Leonard said. “I’d start with that fucking couch. What the fuck, man? All that money Jackie put in the bank, and you never got around to buying a nice place, and now she’s gone, and you’re left with dick, and I bet it’s a little one.”

“What money?” George said. But I could see his eyes had brightened with interest.

“Don’t go dumb,” I said. “Or dumber than usual, anyway. You were stealing money from Professor. If Professor found out, bet you told him Jackie stole it for Ace, since he ended up with it.”

Of course, he hadn’t actually ended up with it, but I thought that was a good place to start.

“Goddamn it,” George said.

“Bet it hurts to think Ace was working his weenie in your gal’s pussy,” Leonard said. “Big, black wiggle-weenie. Even made a baby with her.”

“That kid didn’t last long,” George said, and there was an odd look on his face. It looked a lot like the one he’d had when I stood on his hand.

“Here’s the thing we’re thinking,” I said. “We have all of Jackie’s accounting, how and where she put Professor’s money. He may not even know yet it’s missing, and the thing is, we got a clear trail to you, buddy. We can prove a lot of that money was in your account before it was in Ace’s and then, later on, someone else’s.”

“Someone else’s?” George said. “Someone besides Ace?”

“Yeah,” I said. “You didn’t know about that. You knew about Ace because I bet she told you. Kind of a jab. That might be why she can’t be found. You didn’t like being made a fool of, though, frankly, George, I think you should accept fool as your full-time job.”

“Wait a minute, now,” he said. “I didn’t do nothing to her.”

“Remains to be seen,” I said.

“Look here, I didn’t know she was doing that,” George said. “Not at first.”

“And when you did,” Leonard said, “you told her to put it back in Professor’s account. Want us to believe that?”

“Sure. I didn’t want that money.”

“I call bullshit on that,” Pookie said. “I think you’d steal quarters off a dead man’s eyes.”

George jerked his head toward me. “Who the hell is this plug?”

“He’s going to be the plug that sticks that pistol in your ear and gets rid of about forty years of ear wax,” Leonard said.

I could see that George had gone from being frightened to being terrified. And I don’t think it was the gun threat that was doing it.

“Thing is, your fault, Jackie’s fault, the fault in the stars,” I said, “doesn’t make a lot of difference. I think you try and explain to Professor how you didn’t know it was going on, that’ll be like kicking a dead rabbit and telling someone it’s jumping.”

Sweat beads popped on George’s forehead. Outside, thunder rolled and the rain came down harder than before, spattering on the cheap mobile-home roof. Loud enough I had to speak up.

“Know what I think?” I said. “I got an idea you did use some of that money, maybe laying you out a getaway plan, and Jackie might not have gotten away with it all.”

“Yeah,” Pookie said, “wouldn’t it be funny if some of it traced to a nice house and truck somewhere. Probably in another state.”

“Never did nothing like that,” George said.

“Let me get right to it,” I said. “You need to tell us about Jackie, where she is—”

“I got no idea,” he said.

“Don’t interrupt my man when he’s talking,” Leonard said.

“Like I was saying. You tell us what we want to know, and we won’t tell Professor what you don’t want him to know.”

George hung his head.

“Goddamn it,” he said. “Jackrabbit said we could bleed off more money. To wait. We’d be filthy rich. I didn’t buy anything. I don’t have a goddamn thing waiting anywhere. Don’t even own the junkyard. Professor, he bled me off, said he was helping me. I wanted to pay a bill, I had to go to him to get permission. I worked for that son of a bitch for years, and that’s the thanks I got. I wanted to fuck him over by taking some of his money. And I was sick of those goddamn twins. Always sneaking around.”

“That’s a sad fucking story,” Leonard said.

“Jackrabbit said we would take the money and go, and then after a time she quit hanging around with me and I started getting pissed, and then I find out she’s fucking Ace, and then I wanted my money, or my share, anyway, and I wanted rid of her."

"I bet you wanted rid of Ace too," I said.

"Sure," George said. "Then I found out the accounts she made for me, they were empty. Every cent. There wasn't even electricity left in those online accounts. I told Professor that I didn't trust Jackrabbit, said he ought to have someone look at his books. That was my way of getting back at her. He hired some smart-ass from Houston to give the records a check and saw how his money had been shifted. But me, I was in the clear. Ace had the dough by then. Professor never knew I had it, way I figured it."

"We found her records," I said. "And they will show you had that money for some time. It will be hard for Professor to believe you didn't have a clue. We could explain to Professor what you did and just walk away. How will that work out for you? I think those twins will be paying you a visit. It might be best to give us all the information there is to give, because you might end up with the cops, and they like you better when you're cooperative."

I let him mull that over.

"Of course, me and Leonard, we're not law. We can do what we think is best."

"Yeah," he said, "and how good will your best be?"

"It's what you got," I said. "We're it, Georgie."

"I tell you some things," George said, "you got to protect me best you can."

"Sure," I said.

It hurt me a little to know I was telling a lie.

38

I looked at Pookie, said, "It might be time for you to go."

Leonard got up, walked over to Pookie, and said, "You go on back to the bed-and-breakfast. You can't be here. Some things the law can't see and still be the law. We'll catch up to you later."

Pookie looked hesitant.

"I mean it," Leonard said.

Pookie nodded. He and Leonard touched hands, and out Pookie went.

"He's with the law?" George said. "You said no law."

"He's gone now," Leonard said, and he sat down in the armchair again.

"Tell us something we don't know," I said to George. "For that matter, tell us some things we do know, but don't get cute. Don't try and beat around the bush."

You could see George's brain weighing the possibilities, and then you could see him give in.

"Like I said, I told Professor about the scam Jackrabbit had going, like I had found it out and was turning her in because I wanted to save him his money, money Ace had. I was also mad about the kid. I thought it was mine when she got pregnant. She didn't tell me otherwise. I thought she was going to the library, turned out she'd been fucking Ace. I was thinking I was going to be a father, and I was getting used to the idea. Then one day she doesn't come to work, and then the money is gone out of my account. I find out about Ace, and then the baby's born and it's black as motor oil. Seen her and it around town a time or two. I didn't want nothing to do with her then, but I won't kid you, I was mad about that money too."

"And that's when you told Professor," I said.

"Professor decided it wasn't going to stand, him being snookered, and by a woman with a nigger baby. No way. You got to understand, he talks smooth, but you fuck with him, he'll jerk a knot in your dick. Or he'll have someone do it for him. The twins or someone else. One night, she's off to the store, her and that kid, and Professor has them nabbed on the way out."

"By you?" Leonard said.

"No. I couldn't do that. I didn't like what she'd done, that kid and all, and I hated Ace, but I couldn't do that, knowing what he was going to do. Anyway, Professor had done what he had done. He told me I could have Ace. I followed him one night to her old place, snuck up on him, grabbed the back of his jacket, jerked him down, and killed him with a Boy Scout hatchet. Those motherfuckers are sturdy."

"About Jackie and the kid?" I said. "What did he do to them?"

"Can I have a smoke?" he said.

"Light up," I said.

He scrounged around in his shirt pocket and pulled out a pack of smokes, shook one out, and lit it with a lighter he had in the same pocket.

"Professor had her and the kid brought out to the hog farm."

"And you're saying you weren't there?"

George shook his head briskly. "No. No way. But Professor and Red both told me about it. He had Red and the twins throw the kid to the hogs, like it was hog food. It didn't take them hogs long, Red said. Hog, if it's hungry enough, can eat a body like a cheese sandwich, and a little body like that…"

George paused. He actually did look bothered. He took a deep drag on his cigarette.

"I'm glad I didn't see it," he said.

"Jackrabbit fed to the hogs too?" I said.

"No. They were going to, wanted her to see what happened to the baby as punishment, but when they did that, she tried to climb over the barrier and get to the child. They held her back. She fought like a tiger, Red said, managed to break loose and get away. Baby was ripped apart by that time. She got through the woods out there and they couldn't find her, and then Jackrabbit wasn't around anymore. I think if they got her, they'd have said. They both told the same story.

"Professor don't normally do his own shit work, or even be around it, but that night, he was there. What happened out there to that kid. Not my style."

"I think something like that could get to be your style," Leonard said.

"Cowards can go any kind of way the wind pushes them."

George turned his head, looked at Leonard. "I think I could take you. I don't think you're so tough. Ace, now, he was tough."

"With you sneaking up behind him with a hatchet, you never really got to find out," Leonard said. "I did find out, and I handed Ace his ass. And without a hatchet."

"Sure you did," George said.

Neither Leonard nor I said a word. We just looked at him. I saw George's face change.

"Want to take on the man who whipped Ace's ass?" Leonard said. "You up for that? Maybe I ought to give you a hatchet to even things out."

Leonard gave me the pistol and stood up.

"Oh yeah, you're going to play it tough," George said, "but you got your boy here with my shotgun."

"He ain't going to do nothing but keep the peace in case you decide to run. I think that's a possibility."

George's face darkened.

"You want to talk tough, now I give you the chance to be tough," Leonard said. "You're still going to end up with the cops, but before that, you're going to get a beating."

"You said no cops."

"We lied," I said.

"You can't do that," George said.

"What do you think this is?" I said. "A sport?"

"Here's what you can get out of this deal, George," Leonard said. "And it's all you're likely to get, and it ain't that likely. You beat me, you get that satisfaction. I beat you, I get that satisfaction. Whatever, you still end up in a jail cell. And I tell you right now, you want to fight or you don't, you're going to take a beating."

George looked at me.

"What he said," I told him.

"Why?" George said.

"We don't like you," I said.

"No, we don't," Leonard said. "You need to take better care of dogs."

"What?" George said.

"You heard me," Leonard said.

"You took Rex, didn't you?"

Leonard merely smiled at him.

"Sure you want to bother with this?" I said to Leonard.

“Right now, it’s all I want to do,” Leonard said. “Get up, cracker, you and me are going to dance a bit.”

George stood up slowly, dropped the cigarette on the carpet, and put it out with his sock-covered heel. I guess he was showing us how tough he was. He was certainly a big boy. His mouth twisted in a smile as he gave Leonard a hard look. It wasn’t that confident a smile or a look, actually. Fear lived behind that mask.

Leonard locked the front and back door and moved to the center of the room. He stretched slightly to get the kinks out, bent his head from one side to the other. When he did, his neck made cracking sounds.

“Yeah,” Leonard said. “Now I’m good.”

George eased to the center of the room with Leonard, his hands up.

I kept my place on the stool.

George went for it, let one loose, a big looping right. If it had made solid contact, it could have dropped an ox, but making contact is the trick.

Leonard ducked the meteor, and then he was in on the bigger man, striking a series of quick punches low and to the kidney and bladder. George made a huffing sound, and then he hooked a left, and that caught Leonard, but Leonard turned with it. He’d have a bruise, but no bones were broken.

George came with a series of them now. Leonard slipped or ducked them all, and then he opened up.

George was easy. He was nothing. He was free pie.

Leonard worked the body so hard and fast, George couldn’t put any punches together, not anything good, anyway. And when he bent low to cover the spots Leonard was hammering, my man opened up on George’s face with a series of fast uppercuts. Leonard might as well have had a meat cleaver in his hand or that hatchet George had used, way he was cutting George up.

George staggered forward, tried another looping right, missed. Leonard slipped under it and to the side and swung a left deep into George’s belly. George dropped down on his ass. Leonard kicked him in the face and knocked him on his back. George peed himself. It was an acid smell and the piss stained George’s pants and the carpet.

George acted like he was going to try and get up, but then he shook his head, said, “No more,” and laid out on his side, breathing hard.

“You are one of the easiest nuts I ever cracked,” Leonard said.

That’s when headlights shone through the dingy curtains.

39

Not the newspaper boy, I assume," Leonard said.

"Think it might be our dear friends Jimmy and Lou," I said.

"I been wanting to see them again," Leonard said.

George lifted his head, said, "You son of a black bitch."

"Most likely," Leonard said.

"George," I said, "you move, I'll shoot you."

"I'm laying in piss," he said.

"And whose fault is that?" I said.

I was looking out the gap in the curtains as I talked to George. I saw two men get out of the pickup. Yep. Jimmy and Lou. You could tell Jimmy right off, the way he held his head, as if someone had screwed it on crooked.

They had what looked like shotguns.

Not good.

Leonard slipped to the other side of the door where there was another window, pushed back the curtains, and looked.

"Maybe I need to get my pistol back," he said.

"My pistol," I said.

"Tomayto, tomahto," he said. "Besides, you got the shotgun."

He walked briskly over to me and took the pistol.

That's when we heard the back door of the trailer swing open, and George was out of there in his sock feet.

"Goddamn it," Leonard said. "I must be losing my touch. I hit him really hard."

"Lock the doors," I said.

Leonard did that. I saw George out the front window, coming into view. He had come around the trailer, moving awkwardly, nursing his kidneys. He had his hands above his head, waving frantically at Jimmy and Lou.

“It’s me,” he called to them. “It’s me.”

Jimmy spoke over the rain.

“I know who you are.”

And then Jimmy and Lou lifted their shotguns and fired. The blasts hit George and tore him up. Little dark spots jumped from his body and disappeared beyond the glow of the yard light. George hit the ground so fast, it looked like a circus trick.

Lou walked over to him and shot him in the head, just in case there were still a couple of brain cells stirring.

Jimmy called out to the house, “Hap. Leonard. Know you’re in there. Why don’t you come out and let’s get this over with?”

Leonard gently unlocked the front door and cracked it open.

“Hell no. It’s nice and cozy in here, except for the stink where George pissed himself. Why don’t you come in and have a cup of my black ass, you crook-neck shit-ass?”

Jimmy grinned wide.

“You done hurt my feelings, talking about my neck. Don’t be a coward. Come out.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Leonard said. “You boys come on up in here and get us. Let me see I can straighten that neck out for you.”

“That’s the way it’s got to be, we can come on up in there,” Jimmy said.

“Can you?” Leonard said. “Well, come on in. The bullets are fine.”

Jimmy turned and trotted back to the pickup. He and Lou got inside, and Jimmy gunned it.

The crazy bastard was racing straight for the trailer.

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The truck was flying right at my position at the window.

I did a kind of quickie two-step and dived across the room. That's when the truck hit the trailer and there was a loud collision, like the heavens blowing a bean fart. The window glass was knocked out, the window frame caved in, and the front of the truck came inside the mobile home. A light fixture fell from the ceiling, crashed on the floor near me, and the home heaved off its foundations and dropped on one end, sent me sliding with Leonard tumbling after me.

I lost the shotgun for a moment, and then I had it again. I almost managed to get to my feet, but unless I was a fly, I wouldn't have been able to actually stand, so I fell to the ground on my belly, rolled to the side, pumped one into the sixteen-gauge chamber.

The mobile home was still moving but in slow motion now as it continued to swivel off its foundation blocks. The lights went out, except for the light on the post outside and the truck lights that were shining right at me; they lit the inside of the home pretty well.

I heard Leonard behind me cussing.

I glanced back. He had rolled into the bedroom door and knocked the hinges off, loosened up a plastic fuck doll from somewhere. It lay across his back where it had fallen, as if trying to mount him. Leonard still had the pistol in his hand.

I heard the truck doors slam, and then Jimmy appeared on the hood of the truck, which was poking through the remains of the window like an anteater's nose. He was standing there with his head at that odd angle, like he was being inquisitive. His shotgun roared, and as I was in a precarious position, he had me, but that's when the sagging mobile home slipped completely off the blocks and fell, throwing off his aim. The shotgun blasted the wall behind me. The home dropped hard, and when it hit the ground, the impact sent Jimmy flying off the hood and into the home, banging him up against the couch, which was slow-sliding across the floor.

The drop jarred my teeth, but now the home was mostly flat on the ground. I came up on my knees as Jimmy, still clutching the shotgun, tried to regain his composure. I didn't let him. Here's a tip in life-or-death struggles: Unlike the Lone Ranger, you don't shoot guns out of people's hands. You shoot them solid and you shoot to kill, and a shotgun in that situation is sweet.

I cut down on Jimmy just as he was about to cut down on me. He wasn't more than ten feet from me, maybe less. My blast was first, and when he was hit, his shotgun rode up and fired into the ceiling.

I thought for an instant I could see light through Jimmy, but it could have been an illusion. His crooked head even straightened slightly, and then he toppled onto his face and his butt went up in the air and wiggled a bit, and then he came down on his stomach, squirmed like a snake on a hot stove, then went still. Debris from the ceiling sprinkled him like snow.

His head had fallen so that his chin was supporting him. His eyes were looking right at me. I felt as if I saw his life wing its way out of him, through his eyes and into the shadows, like frightened quail scattering into the brush.

Leonard was on his feet now, stepping past me.

Lou was entering through the window with his shotgun. When he saw Jimmy's dead ass, he made a noise. It was a cold and horrible sound, like a rabbit dying. Before Lou could get a bead on either of us, Leonard let off a shot from the pistol.

I couldn't tell where the shot hit Lou, but I heard a smacking sound and saw dark liquid fly up, momentarily framed by the pole light outside; the drops seemed to fall in slow motion.

Lou went sideways at a stumble, through the gap in the wall, back onto what remained of the hood of the truck, which looked like an accordion pushed in. The crunch in the hood caught his foot, and he fell, toppled out of sight.

Like a juggernaut, Leonard went after him, springing through the gap and onto the hood. I heard a shot from the handgun. I came out right behind Leonard, and when I got there, Lou was running toward the road, wobbling. He had dropped the shotgun.

Leonard jumped off the truck and walked after Lou like the angel of death about to collect a soul. The rain was still coming down.

Lou stumbled and fell. He fell hard. He started to crawl, clawing his fingers into the wet dirt.

I came up quickly behind Leonard, and now Leonard was right on top of Lou. He lifted the pistol. I gently pushed it aside.

“No need for that,” I said.

Lou was still crawling.

“Maybe I ought to pop him one for mercy,” Leonard said.

“I don’t think you’re feeling all that merciful,” I said.

“You’re right. I just want to pop him.”

“Leave the poor bastard be,” I said.

The decision was taken out of our hands as Lou shivered slightly and quit crawling. He collapsed slowly, lay with his face in the wet dirt, let out his breath, and was as still and silent as his brother.

In the distance, we could hear dogs and coyotes howling, disturbed from their nightly activities by the sounds of our gunfire, and most likely the stench of death.

41

Delf said, "Dead? Both of them?"

"Yeah," Leonard said.

"They tried to kill you?"

"Yeah," Leonard said.

Delf was sitting behind his desk in the police station. Me and Leonard and Pookie were standing in front of his desk. We had already told him the story of what George had told us, how his brothers died.

"How again, exactly?" Delf said. He looked so stunned, so sad, it was painful.

"We're sorry," I said, but I didn't tell it to him again.

"Jesus," he said.

Eula came in from the front desk and rolled a chair over next to Delf, put her hand on top of his, which was lying on the desk like a dead bird.

"I knew it was coming, I guess," Delf said, "I even thought you guys being in town might lead to it. I should have encouraged you not to come back."

"We had no choice," I said.

"And why were you not there?" Delf said to Pookie.

"I'm an officer of the law, same as you. I couldn't take a confession illegally. Hap and Leonard could. It's worth what it's worth to a jury, but I didn't want any part of it. I didn't know your brothers were going to show up or I would have stayed. I think it would have come out the same way."

Delf shook his head.

"Oh Jesus. I'm glad Mother isn't alive. She would be devastated. Christ, I'm devastated."

"Again, sorry," I said.

Leonard had not said sorry once. The reason he hadn't was he wasn't sorry. He could kill you and sleep like a baby if he'd felt he had to do it, felt you had it coming. He thought a lot more people had it coming than I did.

The door opened and Johnny walked in. He leaned against the wall with his arms crossed. Like Eula, he had heard the story earlier, when we reported it. They had called Delf at home, had him come in.

"I guess we need a formal statement, and then I got to go look at the crime scene," Delf said.

"I sent what passes for our forensic team out there," Johnny said. "You don't need to see that shit, Chief."

"Yeah," Delf said. "Maybe not."

Delf's face looked as if he had just bit into alum, and suddenly he got up from behind the desk and came around quickly, heading right at me, as I was the closest. Johnny grabbed him and turned him and guided him like a child back to his chair. Delf sat down and put his head in his hands.

"Did you have to kill them?" he said through his fingers.

"Yep," Leonard said. "That's getting to be an old question. It was us or them. They came to kill George, and did, and when they saw our car, knew we were there, they thought they'd get a three-fer."

"If it's any consolation," I said, "Jimmy died like a man."

"It isn't," Delf said. But then he dropped his hands and looked at Leonard. "Lou. Did he die well?"

"No one dies well," Leonard said. "I gut-shot him twice. I meant to kill him right off but didn't. I won't kid you. I wanted to shoot him again when he crawled away from us like a fucking snake in the grass. And let me warn you, you get up to hit me or Hap, law or no law, I will knock you down."

"Hey," Johnny said, and moved away from the wall.

"Take it easy," Pookie said. "I have to knock you down and Leonard knocks Delf down, it'll be hard to move around in this little room."

"You boys quit posturing," Eula said.

Johnny and Pookie exchanged glances, then Johnny leaned back against the wall. Pookie stood where he was, didn't bat an eye or move a muscle.

"Delf asked how Lou took it," Leonard said. "And I told him."

"I did," Delf said. "I did indeed. What I'm going to do is ask Johnny here to take you two to the interrogation room. Officer Carroll, you are free to go."

"I'd rather stay," Pookie said.

“Have it your way,” Delf said. “Johnny will see all of you get coffee.”

“No, I won’t,” Johnny said.

42

In the interrogation room we sat without coffee at the table where we had sat before. Johnny was standing, leaning against the wall in the same way he had leaned against the wall in Delf's office. Pookie was leaning against the opposite wall. Johnny and Pookie studied one another from time to time, sizing up who had the biggest dick, I guess, and who could swing theirs the hardest.

"You had to kill those two assholes?" Johnny said to us.

"On a loop here," Leonard said.

"Damn," Johnny said, shaking his head. "Sure. Sure. I know they had it coming. I know that. Just don't like seeing Delf like that."

"Then quit asking us about it," Leonard said. "Do what you're going to do. Charge us. Send us home. Fuck us in the ass and call us Daisy, but ask any more questions, we call a lawyer. We got a good one named Veil. Course, we'll have to fly him in from Oregon."

"There'll be questions, but not by me," Johnny said. "Not anymore. Ah, hell. It could just as easily have been me. I thought once they were going to go for me. I saw them and they saw me one time out by the old spillway. I wasn't on duty. I was fishing. I thought they were going to take me out, way they looked. They had guns with them, wearing them on their hip. Ain't that shit when the law allows that and they aren't law or military? Can you imagine a coincidence like that? Me there and them there."

"Me and Hap believe in coincidences," Leonard said.

"I don't. I think they came to kill me. They didn't have any fishing gear. I had my police-issue with me, and I guess they decided the time wasn't right. Or maybe they got cold feet."

"Jimmy didn't seem like the cold-feet type," I said. "Just cautious."

"Maybe it was a coincidence. Perhaps they had come to fish. If they had, they never did, not near me, anyway. For all I know they didn't leave, just went downstream to fish away from me."

"In our case, tonight was a coincidence," I said. "They happened to find us with George, and I think Professor sent them to take care of a loose end. I think Professor knew George was a weak link, knew he had been stealing money. Knew he knew some things he wished he didn't know. We would have been icing on the cake, had they been successful."

"Been those twins, might have been a different story," Johnny said.

"We hear about them," Leonard said, "but far as we know they haven't done shit."

"A lot of it might be hot air," Johnny said, "but a lot of it might not be. I vote on the side of caution."

"Do you know their names?" I said.

"Yeah. The twins."

"Nice," I said.

"That's all I got, all anyone knows. Word is they have done quite a bit of killing, but the problem is that's all we got, a word or two. Again, I stick on the side of caution, just in case they're as badass as some say they are."

Delf stuck his head in the door, said, "All right, boys. Going to see the Professor. Going to give him a bit of a talk. I'm bringing you with me."

"Really, Delf?" Johnny said. "I mean, Chief. That isn't protocol."

"It is tonight," Delf said. "I'm the goddamn police chief of this one-horse town, and if I say they go, they go. And Officer Carroll here, I'm temporarily deputizing him in our jurisdiction so he can go with us."

"Can you do that?" Johnny said.

"I'm the goddamn police chief, didn't you hear?" Delf said. "Consider yourself deputized, Officer Carroll. Town council can fire me if they like. Right now I wish they would, but for tonight I'm still the boss, and I'm calling in everyone, off duty or not. Saddle up, boys, let's go. Now. I have a judge to see first, and then we will give Professor an antisocial call."

43

Killing people makes you tired. It erodes your soul as well. In Leonard's case, I think it might energize him, but me, right then, I was feeling worn out and blue with a soul as thin as the edge of a razor. I didn't seem to know anything anymore. I was like a student at the Helen Keller School of Astronomy for the Blind, looking through a telescope. It was dark out there.

Me and Leonard were sitting in the back of the cruiser Delf was driving. Pookie and Johnny were in another.

My cell rang. It was Brett. She gave me some info and I told her I was kind of in a bad spot and had to go. When I turned off the cell, I said, "Here's something else. Computer guy, he found out something about all this money Jackie has been moving. Librarian, Cinner, that was supposed to have got all the money? Well, she didn't really get all the money either. Jackie made it look like Cinner had the money. It was in accounts that seemed to point to her, but our man looked closer, saw they were shells, that the money was offshore."

"Damn," Leonard said. "I hate fucking computers. How can you make something look one way and it be something else? It gives me the heebie-jeebies."

"Guess whose name the money was really in, when it was all said and done. Guess who had all the money?"

"What the fuck is this?" Delf said, slowing the car a little. "A quiz show? I'm not in the mood for this shit. Just tell me."

"Professor," I said. "Guy who supposedly was being snookered and had lost all the money suddenly had all the money, and maybe he had it all along, slipped it through other accounts like shit through a goose. Money-laundering it somehow. Getting it offshore. It was a shell game. Everyone thought the peanut was under their shell, but thing was, Professor always had all the peanuts."

"It do be confusing for a simple country boy," Leonard said. "Seems to me, Jackrabbit would have had to do that for him."

"Maybe he forced her to do it," I said.

"Well, one thing we need are any computers Professor might have," Delf said.

Professor's place wasn't as fancy as you might think for a man with money. It was a large acreage with a number of storage buildings on it, and the house was good size but looked to have been designed by an idiot. You could see sections had been built onto it randomly, like the Winchester House but without the class. It even had one little stained-glass window, high up on the left side. I couldn't make out the design because no light came from behind it, but it was the only piece of stained glass visible.

Before we drove out, Delf had managed to quickly get a search warrant from a judge, went directly to his house, telling him something or other. We had to wait in the car like children while he was inside.

Now we were at the Professor's pad with Delf and his search warrant. Johnny and Pookie were already there in the other cruiser. They had come through the open gate the same as we had. It wasn't locked. Frankly, it wasn't much of a compound and it wasn't well kept.

There was a big white man with a tavern tumor sitting in a lawn chair on the front porch. The overhang was running with rainwater, and some of it was splashing on him, but he had on a rain slicker with a hood. He looked uncomfortable. Another big fellow, also a white guy, also in a rain slicker, was in the yard, wandering about like a child looking for Easter eggs. He came out of the shadows and was partially lit up from a yard light.

They both had weapons, rifles of some sort. The man in the lawn chair stood up. There was a feeling in the air like the last bridge had washed away and the dam was about to break.

It intensified as another cop car arrived and two black men got out of it, one short and fat, the other lean and tall. They would be the off-duty guys Delf had called in. They had on slickers and they stood by their cars in the rain. They had pushed their slickers back so they could rest their hands on their guns.

Delf, Pookie, and Johnny went up to the door to serve the search warrant. The other two cops didn't move. The man walking around with the rifle stopped moving. This was the time when things could go wonky, shots could be fired, people could be killed. Leonard and I slowly got out of the car and stood in the rain. I didn't want to be trapped in that damn car.

Still, I felt kind of helpless standing out by the cruiser with no real power to do anything but put my hands in my pockets and hold my balls and let the rain run over me. Even with the rain like that, in the strong wind you could smell the hog farm that was out back of the house, near the woods. As we'd driven up, we could see the shape of it back there, huge and ominous, pigs getting fat. I wondered if they knew they were going to die for someone's bacon.

As Delf, Pookie, and Johnny reached the porch, the man in the lawn chair stood up and blocked Delf. He was much bigger than Delf.

We could hear them clearly while they talked.

"Belvin," Delf said, "are you really going to try and block a sworn officer of the law and someone who's known you since you were small enough to shit in diapers?"

"Nothing personal, Delf," Belvin said.

Johnny was standing off to the side of the porch, his hand on his gun. His dark skin and the black of the gun blended as if they were one.

Pookie was standing away from both of them, watching the man in the yard. Pookie had his hand behind his back. He was holding the butt of his pistol where it rested in a holster fastened to his belt.

The other man came wandering in from the yard. He held his rifle in an obviously nonthreatening manner.

"Ah," Delf said to the man as he walked up, "Terry Joe Fisher. Son of a bitch. I didn't see it was you. Weren't you preaching somewhere?"

"Not enough in the offering plate," he said. "Had to quit it. I guess I wasn't called by God after all. For a while I was called by insurance, but I couldn't sell enough, and then there was real estate, but I wasn't any good at that either. So now I'm here."

"Listen here," Delf said. "You two, you all behind the Professor's shit?"

"Just hired guns," Belvin said. "Your brothers do the heavy lifting, and those two weird fucks and Red, until he got himself chewed up by a dog or some such."

"Jimmy and Lou have joined Red at the hog farm in the sky," Delf said. "Though not by dog bite. By bullet."

"Oh," Belvin said. "Oh, man. We didn't know."

"It was all of a sudden," Delf said.

"Where's Professor?" Johnny said.

"We got no idea if he's in there or not," Belvin said.

“Now, that’s not true,” Terry Joe said. “He’s in there, and we both know it.”

“Goddamn it, Terry Joe,” Belvin said.

“I ain’t going to talk shit that will get me in a hole,” Terry Joe said. “And I wouldn’t shoot nobody nohow. Thought I’d just have to walk around with a rifle and listen to Professor’s bullshit and pick up a check. I ain’t no better at this than I was at preaching, insurance, or real estate. I’m thinking maybe my calling is selling used cars or some such. I’m going home, if that’s all right, Delf?”

“You go on, then,” Delf said. “You go on, and that’s the last friendly thing I do. I lost two brothers tonight, and, worse, they both had it coming. But it puts me in a mood. You feel me, boys? You feel my mood?”

“I feel you,” Terry Joe said.

Hell, I could feel that mood all the way back at the car.

Terry Joe leaned the rifle against the doorsill on the porch and walked to where it was darkest at the edge of the house. A moment later we heard a car door slam, then there were lights, and then a truck came barreling around the left side of the house and was gone up the road faster than you could say, “Shit in a can and clamp the lid down tight.”

The car’s red taillights glowed back at us through the rain.

“What about you, Belvin?” Delf said.

“Professor has the note on my house and truck,” Belvin said.

“Let me worry about that,” Delf said.

“How worried will you be?”

“Quite worried.”

“You’ll do something?”

“What I can. Go home, have a beer, watch some TV. Jerk your dick, let the dog lick your balls.”

“I could do that, couldn’t I?” Belvin said.

“Either that or I’m going to knock your ass down, and if you lift that rifle, Johnny will shoot you.”

“Two or three times,” Johnny said.

“What am I going home to?” Belvin said. “Wife left me.”

“Right sorry to hear that,” Delf said, “but you got that dog I mentioned.”

“Died,” Belvin said.

“Hell, didn’t you used to have a donkey? You could go home to the donkey.”

“Ah, Delf, I was sixteen,” Belvin said. “You know I don’t own a donkey no more.”

“Belvin here got caught putting the pork to a donkey’s ass in a barn, standing on a bucket behind it.”

“Sweet, sweet donkey love,” Pookie said.

“Ah, goddamn it, Delf. People have mostly forgot about that. You didn’t need to bring it up. ’Sides, that donkey died before the dog.”

Pookie made a nickering sound like a donkey.

“That’s not funny,” Belvin said. “No call for that.”

“Belvin,” Delf said. “It’s time for you to go. You can drive home and sit in the dark and dream about that long-dead donkey, or you can think about it in a jail cell. Make a choice, and make it now.”

Belvin sighed, put his rifle where Terry Joe had put his.

Delf said, “Anyone in there with him?”

“Them twins are never far away,” Belvin said.

“Go on, then,” Delf said.

Belvin took a deep breath and walked into the darkness and around the corner of the house. Pretty soon there were headlights like before, then a white car, then there were only the taillights, and then like his partner, Belvin was gone.

“If only he had that donkey to go home to,” Pookie said.

44

Del turned and waved the other two cops to him, then he looked at us. “Ah, hell, boys, quit leaning on the car. Come on over here, you’re deputized.”

We walked over to the porch. Delf handed us the rifles the guards had left.

“Prefer you just look threatening,” Delf said. “Try not to shoot anybody. I don’t want to have to explain this deputy thing too much, but some asshole in there, the twins, Professor himself, anyone that decides to channel their inner Wild Bill Hickok, shoot the shit out of them.”

Delf pounded on the door and stepped off to the side.

No one answered.

“Johnny,” Delf said. “You up for kicking it down?”

“Let me,” Pookie said.

Pookie pulled his pistol out from under his shirt. He was preparing to kick the door when a shotgun blast tore through the door and hit Pookie solid in the chest and dropped him like Newton’s apple.

45

The world got slow and I felt as if I were moving through gelatin. When the blast knocked Pookie down, his gun went up in the air, and it seemed to defy gravity, appeared to be floating down toward the earth with all the speed of a feather in an updraft. Along with it, fragments from the door spun in the air and were caught in the glow of the porch light.

And then the falling gun smacked on the concrete porch floor, spun a little on impact, and time came unstuck.

Leonard grabbed Pookie under the arms, pulled him off the porch and into the rain, back toward the patrol car. I could hear Pookie gasping like a large fish out of water. Leonard was saying, “It’s all right, gonna be all right.”

Johnny leaped across the porch and kicked the door. It cracked loudly, slammed hard against the wall, and sagged on one hinge.

Then Johnny, me, and Delf were inside. I could hear the two cops splashing in the rain after us, and then we were all inside, stupid-like, standing at the end of a hallway, trapped like a pack of rats in a sewer pipe.

In that moment fear washed over me and I could imagine someone stepping out with a shotgun, firing, smacking several of us in a scattergun blast.

There were two doorways at the end of the hall, and one to the right near us. I figured whoever had fired the shotgun had taken that closest exit, might be right inside, waiting, so you wouldn’t want to go there. But I did anyway.

Can’t explain a thing like that, but somehow, the idea of standing there, not doing anything, waiting for the other shoe to drop was worse than the idea of going through that open foyer and into whatever was beyond.

I went through at a crouch, the rifle in my hand, and when I came into the room, it was empty. In a strange way, I was disappointed. I wanted the bastard who had shot Pookie. I wanted him bad.

I edged back out into the hallway, and there was just me and Delf and Johnny now. I shook my head.

"I sent them around back," Delf said, referring to the two cops. "You can step out of this."

"Not likely," I said.

"Split up," Delf said.

I went back through the foyer and into the room as Delf and Johnny went down the hall, planning to split up and go into the rooms at the end, I figured, maybe right into a trap.

I moved along through the room, and then through an open door and into another hallway. I looked both ways down the hall and saw nothing. I was keenly aware of the sounds of the air conditioner humming and the rain slamming against the roof of the house.

Easing along, I came to a kitchen, and on the far side of it was an open door that led outside. There was a back-porch light and the rain made lines in the light beyond the porch like billions of falling needles.

I kept up my caution, glanced all about, but there was no trap. The kitchen was empty.

I made my way to the doorway and peeked around the edge of it and looked out at the night. There was too much light to see what was beyond it, and stepping out onto the back porch under the light would make me a perfect target. I touched the switch on the wall and turned off the light, eased through the doorway, staying low, and stepped off the porch. In the distance, I could see two shapes running toward a structure near the dark line of the woods back there. They were rushing toward the hog farm. I didn't know if it was the two cops Delf had sent out back or the twins. They were too far away and it was too dark to tell much about them.

I thought about alerting Delf and Johnny, but there could be other bad guys in the house with guns, and I didn't want to throw them off their diligence, so I took a deep breath and went out into the rain.

46

The hog farm was a long line of buildings linked together by brick and concrete, seemingly glued tight by thick shadows. Off the buildings was a stretch of pens made up of close-together horizontal bars covered over by an aluminum roof, and there were a handful of lights on high metal poles, and the lights shone down into the empty pens, which were floored with concrete. The smell of hog was thick in the air. The rain stirred the stench like a foul soup.

I didn’t see the twins.

I didn’t see the cops.

I didn’t see any hogs.

The rain plastered my hair to my forehead. I had started to feel cold and uncomfortable. I glanced back at the house and thought maybe I should go back there and find reinforcements, but it wasn’t a thought that stayed with me long. But one thing that did stick with me was the fact that the two cops could shoot me by mistake as easily as they could shoot the twins.

That was unnerving.

And then there was a blast that made me crouch, and I got a glimpse of gunfire at the far end of the pen, where it met the building. I saw a shape move quickly and gracefully from the side of the pen into the building, and I saw another shape fall out toward the pen.

I heard someone yell inside the building, and then I heard double shotgun blasts, and then a silence that was far from golden. I inched my way to the pen, slipped the rifle through the bars so that it was propped against them, stuck a foot on the lower bar, and climbed over.

I dropped down as silently as possible, picked up the rifle, and moved toward where the body had fallen. I was shaking a little, like leaves in a light wind.

I reached the wall of the building and put my back to it and crept along it until I came to where the man had fallen. There was enough light I could see it was one of the cops, even if his head was gone. He had on the uniform. His service automatic was still in his hand.

Trembling, I took the automatic from him and stuck it in my pants pocket, turned cautiously into the opening where the shape had gone, knowing now it had been one of the twins.

Inside it was dark and the smell was strong, but there was a light at the far end of the building, and I could see in the distance better than up close.

I crouched down and put my back to the wall and sat for a moment until my eyes adjusted to the darkness. I took a deep breath and started out along what I realized was a walkway. As I came nearer the light at the far end, I could see better. I could see the walkway was attached to a wall on the far side and ended at a closed door.

I also noticed that if I were to step too far left, I would fall into a long concrete trough, and worse, I would fall into what was in the trough. Manure and what might have been blood from butchering churning along, pushed by water, probably dropping off into a septic tank buried somewhere outside. It was hard to see exactly what was there in that light, but it was easy to smell and identify it. Right then I swore off sausage and pork chops but reserved the right to eat bacon.

If it wasn't bad enough that if I fell off the platform to the left I'd end up deep in hog shit and blood, to the right the concrete floor was twenty feet below, and it was my guess the hogs first entered there on their way into the butchering room. I could almost smell the remnants of their fear, or maybe that was my fear I smelled.

On I went, sweating, the rain pounding about the same rhythm as my heart. And then I tripped, lunged forward, almost lost my footing and fell into the hog mess, almost lost the rifle too, but I ended up keeping both. I got down on one knee and felt what I had tripped over.

I put my hand out and touched something soft and warm, wet and sticky. I pulled my hand back. I squinted. It was hard to see, of course, but I could make out that what I had put my hand in used to be a face. It was the body of the other cop, and he had fallen in such a way he was stretched across the ramp, barring the pathway.

I inadvertently wiped my hand on his uniform front, stepped over him, and moved toward the door. The twin who had killed him had to have gone through there, and now the door was closed, and if I were to open it, there was a good chance he, or both of them, would be waiting on the other side, ready to cut me in half.

I paused for a moment, then went back the way I had come, outside the main building, under the aluminum hog-pen roof, and then over the side of the bars like before, only going outside this time. When I dropped on the other side and picked up the rifle, I could see the house in the distance, some of the lights on, and I thought I might ought to give it up and go back there.

But I didn't do that. I couldn't do that. The bastards had shot Leonard's Pookie.

I slipped around the outside of the building, ducking low where there were windows. There were a few dim lights inside, the kind that stay on all the time but have low wattage. I made my way on around the corner and got to the other side and saw a door there.

I didn't think going through a door was any better an idea now than it was before. I passed it and moved along the wall, came to a pen on the far side, only this one was filled with Yorkshire hogs. Rain splashed on the outside of the pen and hammered on the roof, and the hogs stirred restlessly down there, lots of them, too many for the space.

I put the shotgun through the bars, climbed over into a large pile of hogs, managed to pull the rifle out from under hog feet, picked it up, and made my way through them. It was like climbing over stinky, warm, moving boulders. They sniffed and honked. I tried not to excite them. I moved along there until I could see the pen had bars that led up to the side of the building, ended below a window. There was an orangish light in the window, like a candle inside a jack-o'-lantern.

With hogs bumping against me, one of them nipping painfully at the back of my thigh, I put the rifle against the bars and took off my shirt. I rolled it with a few whips of the wrist, then I tied one end to the rifle barrel, the other to the stock, making myself an impromptu strap. I slung the rifle over my shoulder with it, started climbing the bars by standing on a hog's head first, and inched my way up toward the window.

When I got up there, I peeked over the sill. It was a large window about the size of two normal ones, but it was one pane of glass.

In the orange light, I could see it was an office, and the pale-faced twins were in the center of it, standing back to back, at a slight crouch, facing the two doors I might have come through.

I hooked my right leg over a side bar, made myself as comfortable as possible, poked the rifle against the window glass gently, took aim, and was softly squeezing the trigger when one of the twins, perhaps alerted by a shadow, a sound, turned and saw me through the glass.

47

Any kind of weapon pointed at you is call for loose sphincter muscles, but a shotgun at that range is in a completely different league. As the twin whirled in my direction I fired my shot, but it was so hasty, I didn't know if I had hit anything, because the next thing that happened was I dropped the rifle and swung down with my legs caught up in the bar so that I was dangling upside down. I heard a clanking sound below me but didn't take time to note it. At the same instant, the glass was blown out by the shotgun and it rained down on me and the hogs below.

As I was trying to right myself and stay below that windowsill, out came the twin. I had just pulled myself up slightly when he leaned out of the window and poked the shotgun in my face. I grabbed the barrel and pushed it away from me, and that caused the twin to lose his balance and come tumbling out of the window and into the pen below.

He landed on some rambling hogs, and the shotgun bounced away from him and disappeared under a sea of hogs. I swung down on one of the bars and then leaped out at him as he tried to get up beneath a horde of now squealing and rampaging hogs. They ran together and knocked one another down and slid on the concrete that was wet from the blowing rain.

I dropped on a hog straddle-wise and rode it for a few feet before falling off. I turned at a crouch, and there came the twin. He had a knife he had produced from somewhere, and he was stepping partly on hog backs, partly on concrete, making a unique path in my direction.

I remembered the automatic I had picked up and reached for where I had shoved it in my pants pocket, and that's when I remembered the sound of something falling earlier, and now I knew what it was.

The twin stepped one foot up on a hog, and the hog moved, and the twin fell, and I tried to push my way through the hogs to him before he could get up, but that didn't happen. Just as I got to him, he was up and the knife slashed out at me.

I slap-passed it, but it got part of my naked skin, nothing terrible, but it seemed like a harbinger of things to come. I practice martial arts, have for years, including knife defense, but as my Shen Chuan instructor once told me, "There is no good knife defense, only a defense that is better than nothing."

Also, I had been stabbed and cut before and had found it most unpleasant.

The knife slashed back and I scooted back. It missed me by inches. He came again, a straight thrust this time. I grabbed his wrist with both hands, something my dad had taught me. I grabbed it and held on and kicked him in the nuts as hard as I could. It was a little like kicking a Ken doll in the crotch. No effect.

He slugged me with his free hand, and it was a good left hook. It shook me. Birds and bees seemed to pass before my eyes, and hogs actually passed beneath my feet, and down I went, still hanging on to that wrist with both hands, pushing the blade away from me.

I wrapped my legs around him as a hog stepped on my face, and I could feel the wet stink against my naked back, the weight of the twin pressing down on me. He tried to slug me with his free hand again. I jerked my leg up and kicked him in the thigh and sent him back, and at the same time I squirmed out from under him, but I had lost my hold on his wrist.

He was up as quick as a whack-a-mole, and with the knife hand in front of him, his other hand folded across his chest to avoid me gripping it and to use it to slap punches I might throw, he advanced on me.

As he did, a hog ran between his legs and knocked him forward. I heard his teeth hit the concrete as two large hogs ran across his back. This caused his head to lift, and as it did, I kicked a field goal with it. It was a really hard kick, and I heard a sound like a rotten stick cracking, knew I had caused something to go in his neck. He made a noise like a water hose breaking loose, then lay flat on the concrete as more hogs walked on him. He was breathing, but barely. I could hear that busted sound still going, but softly now, like a child trying to play a bagpipe.

I shoved some hogs aside, searched about, found the twin's shotgun, decided that would do, and then, stumbling, nearly falling, I made my way toward the bars of the pen. I put the shotgun through them and climbed over, receiving a nip on the ass from a hog as I went. Behind me, I could hear the twin making a sound almost like a scream caught up in a corked bottle and then I heard a sound like someone ripping a sheet, and I knew the hogs had him. He was still and bleeding, and now he was their sausage.

48

I worked my way around to the building again, and this time I decided to chance the door. I had done one of them in, so the one inside, if he was still there, couldn't be blocking both.

I tested the door. It was unlocked. I pulled it open quickly and slid inside at a crouch, my back against the wall. But no one was visible. I inched toward the desks, pointing the shotgun. No one was hiding between them. The door at the back of the room was wide open. I stood at the side of the door for a moment, looking out, letting my eyes become more accustomed to the light. The doorway led back the way I had come in originally, before I had turned around and gone back through the pen. It was a platform that jutted out onto the walk that bisected the trough of hog shit and the twenty-foot drop to a concrete floor.

I took a breath, went through the door, and that's when I knew he had me.

He was standing right there beside the wall, and as I came through he punched his shotgun against my temple, and in that instant I visualized all I was and all I would ever be flying away from me in blood drops, skull fragments, and brain matter.

But that's when Leonard, who had come up behind him, grabbed the shotgun barrel and jerked it up, causing a blast from the gun to smack loudly into the ceiling. He twisted the shotgun out of the twin's hand, said, "Give me that."

He used the stock on the surprised twin's head, twice in rapid succession, knocking him against the wall. Leonard crowded him so he couldn't fall, hit him again, flattening his nose. The twin staggered, and Leonard moved and let him stumble by.

Leonard put the shotgun against his head, pushed him with it, made him walk backward. Leonard said, “You don’t fuck with Hap and Leonard, and I hope you’re the one shot Pookie.”

The twin looked at him oddly. A slight smile crawled across his otherwise dead face, and Leonard let her rip. The twin’s head dissolved, and then he toppled into the hog shit. I went over for a closer look. He floated on top for a moment, and then the water moved him along, and he went under and churned out of sight.

49

Walking back to the house, I said, “Sorry about Pookie. He was a fine guy.”

“Still is. He had on that bulletproof vest. He’s got a bruise the size of a cantaloupe and the color of cancer on his chest, a few pellets in his face, some splinters from the door, maybe a cracked rib. Ambulance picked him up. He’s at the hospital. He’ll be all right.”

“They killed both the cops,” I said.

“I saw the bodies.”

“You came at the right time.”

“I usually do. You lost your shirt.”

“Oh, really. I hadn’t noticed.”

Back at the house, Delf and Johnny were holding down the living-room couch.

“Sorry we weren’t with you,” Delf said. “We were clearing the house.”

Leonard and I put the shotguns aside. “You did right,” I said. And then I told them what had happened out there.

“It’s messy,” Delf said, “but you are deputies, and they were scum. We’ll make it right. You lost your shirt, by the way.”

“Oh, really.”

“And you’re bloody.”

“Another surprise. What about the Professor?”

“Didn’t find him,” Johnny said. “But those dick guards said Professor was in the house. We were going to make another sweep for him or evidence.”

Me and Leonard picked up our shotguns.

“Let’s do this,” I said.

50

The search was slow and tedious, and we didn't split up this time.

Delf and Johnny went through drawers and closets, everything, and me and Leonard followed about with our shotguns, just in case an army of samurai were crouched in a closet somewhere behind the winter coats.

You could see Delf and Johnny had already done this, way things were thrown around, but this time out they were less tender and short on police procedure.

At one point, Delf paused at one of the bathrooms and peed in the sink, us standing outside the open door, hearing his stream hit the porcelain. He came out drying his dick on a hand towel, which was not a pretty sight. He threw the towel in the corner and zipped up.

I said, "Doesn't that compromise evidence?"

"Not the way I see it," he said.

"All righty," I said.

Upstairs, Johnny took a leather jacket from a closet, tried it on. It didn't fit. "Shit," he said. "Always wanted one of these."

He tossed it back in the closet. It made a hollow sound when it hit the closet wall.

We searched high and low, but no Professor, and no real evidence. We ended up back in the living room.

"Could have slipped out the back way when we came up," Johnny said. "Might be why the twins were back there. He could be hiding with the hogs."

"He was, they'd squeal," I said.

"That's some funny shit," Johnny said. "But not that funny."

"Okay," Leonard said, "so we check the hog house, see if he's hiding there."

“I got to pee first,” I said.

“Be sure and pee on something that matters, and wipe your pecker on a towel or curtain,” Delf said.

“I saw the master at work,” I said. “I know how it’s done.”

I didn’t do that, though. I went to the toilet down the hall and took a leak, and when I finished, during the shaking of the member, I realized something.

I zipped up, went back to the living room.

“One thing,” I said. “Outside, you look at the house, there’s a room off to the top left. It has a stained-glass window. I don’t remember seeing it from the inside.”

“Oh,” Delf said.

We all went upstairs, moved down a wide hallway to the far side of the house. We went into a room that should have been the room with the stained-glass window, but it only had a normal window.

I remembered that the closet where Johnny found the jacket had only had a couple of coats in it, and I remembered too the sound it had made when it hit the closet wall.

The closet door had been left open. I turned on the light and stepped inside. The others stood outside the closet and watched me.

I ran my fingers along the left side of the closet. I could feel air blowing against my fingertips. I pushed gently against the wall, but nothing happened.

I took down the clothes bar to give me more room and felt around at the bottom of the drywall, but still nothing.

I heard Leonard say, “Here we go.”

I came out of the closet and saw him touch the light switch. He pulled the switch down and turned off the light, then he turned the little panel that contained the switch. It moved easily. Under the light-switch panel was a gap, and you could see the wires that went to the switch, but you could see another switch inside.

Leonard hit the switch, said, “Open sesame.”

The wall where I had felt the cool air made a snapping sound, and there was a bit of light shining through a crack.

Delf took out his pistol, went inside the closet, pushed the wall gently. It swung open.

51

In the room, you could see through the round stained-glass window, and you could see the rain blowing sideways in the light.

Johnny felt along the wall and found a switch, clicked it. The room filled with light. It was a bigger room than I'd expected. It was well furnished, even had a bed and a couch and a desk and a very fancy computer on it, along with a printer and a desk lamp. There was a door off to one side, a bathroom maybe.

I went over and opened that door gently, made sure I stepped back so no one in there with a gun would have a clear shot at me.

I peeked around the corner of the door, saw what was in there. Then we all saw what was inside.

In the bathroom, sitting on the pushed-down toilet lid, was a woman holding a dark-skinned baby sucking on a pacifier. The woman was dressed in blue jeans and a T-shirt. She was barefoot. She was very pretty, had black hair and prominent teeth.

"Not as good a hiding place as I had hoped," she said.

"Hey, Jackrabbit," Leonard said.

Johnny said, "Hey."

We turned and looked where he was looking. The bed. Underneath it we could see someone lying on the floor. Johnny walked over to the bed with his gun drawn.

"I am not armed," said the body from under the bed.

And then the body inched its way out into the open.

It was Professor.

52

We hustled Professor and Jackie downstairs, and Johnny went out to his car and brought me a T-shirt with a Marvel Creek Police Department logo on it. The logo was red. The shirt was blue, like me. I pulled it on. It was Johnny's size. You could have put two of me in it.

In the living room we all sat down, and I said, "So the baby wasn't fed to the hogs?"

Professor laughed. "You got that story from George. That's what he was told. What we wanted him to think. Look here, Delf, you see the baby is okay and Jackie is okay, so what's the problem?"

"My brothers aren't okay, and George isn't so good either. And you can add Red and the twins to the pile."

"The twins too?" Professor said.

"They weren't as bad as you thought," Johnny said.

"Oh, they were bad," I said, "just me and Leonard were more bad."

"They came with good recommendations," Professor said. "I paid them well. But just for protection. Nothing more."

Delf looked at Jackie. "What the hell?"

"We fell in love," Jackie said, and she gave Professor the sweetest look I have ever seen a woman give a man. It made my skin crawl.

"Black baby," Johnny said. "What gives, Professor? What about all that segregation shit?"

"I had a front to keep up," Professor said. "Without it, I'd lose influence."

"Professor doesn't care about color," Jackie said. "Not really."

"Jackie and me, we were a few days away from heading for someplace nice," Professor said.

"I got it," I said. "You and Jackie moved the money around so it wouldn't show you always had access to it. She's a whiz with numbers and computers, you're a con man. You don't believe in anything. You two took off—you three, actually—she and the baby would be thought dead, and you'd just be thought gone. That takes care of a lot of problems."

"Jackie changed me," Professor said. "That baby changed me. Boy's not mine, but it might as well be. I was selling all the hogs tomorrow. The farm. That was going to be the easy running cash."

"And you decided to tie up loose ends, like George," Leonard said.

"I didn't say that," Professor said. "Listen here. There's a lot of money. Let us go, you could end up with some of it. All of you."

"Write down he tried to bribe us," Delf said to Johnny.

Johnny didn't write down anything, but he nodded.

I looked at Jackie, sitting on the couch, the sleeping baby in her arms.

"I have a feeling the missing librarian didn't move off anywhere," I said.

53

Leonard was home in LaBorde with Pookie on the day I went out to Miss Cinner's house with Delf and Johnny and a couple of men with shovels.

Delf and Johnny went through the place and found nothing outside of dust motes, a cutout section of carpet from the living room, and a damp smell in the kitchen.

The backyard was enclosed by a tall wooden fence. There was a scattering of flowers. The grass had grown up high, and it was especially high in one spot at the edge of the fence where the ground was slightly sunken.

Delf had a couple of minions dig there. While they did that, me and Delf and Johnny stood over them watching. Johnny even had his arms crossed. You would have thought we were important, way we stood there doing nothing.

"Funerals for the deputies tomorrow morning," Delf said. "You coming?"

"I'll be there. It could just as easily have been me," I said. "So, the twins?"

"Dug one out of the hog shit," Delf said. "The other one got pretty well eaten by the hogs, even the clothes got eaten, except for one shoe. I'm looking for an amputee that might need it."

"What's peculiar," Johnny said, "one in the shit, we took his fingerprints, and they're not in the system. We don't really know who they are and may never know unless DNA turns up something. I have a feeling it might not."

The diggers were at it about fifteen minutes before they found something. The missing patch of carpet. It was rolled and wrapped in duct tape. They cut the carpet loose of the duct tape and inside was a badly decomposed body. There was a ferocious stink about it.

We stood around the hole and looked down on what was inside.

Delf put his hands on his hips, crinkled his nose, said, “Miss Cinner, I presume.”

54

It was late at night and I was back home in my own bed, having been to two funerals in one day. I was sleeping sound, all things considered, when Brett elbowed me awake and clicked on the lamp on her side of the bed.

“What?” I said.

“Don’t sound unpleasant,” she said.

“If you’re waking me for sex, I forgive you,” I said. “If not, I don’t forgive you. I was dreaming I was Batman.”

“It’s not for sex, unless you really are Batman. Okay, here’s the reason I woke you up. What’s your favorite color?”

“What the hell?”

“Okay, your favorite number?”

“Jesus, Brett.”

“Just fucking with you. Look here. I can’t sleep. I got questions and need some answers. Let me get this straight. Jackie and Professor became partners?”

“You woke me for that?”

“Yep,” she said. “She must have been something in the sack, to get him to give up his prejudice like that.”

“Professor really fell in love with her, and he didn’t care if she gave birth to a litter of rabbits. She got her hooks in him, and he liked it. Wouldn’t surprise me if it didn’t go both ways. He might have been next on her list to steal from. She might have even had plans to do him in.”

“What about the librarian? Who killed her?”

“Could have been any of Professor’s crowd, even her cousin Ace. Jackie was working everyone. Neighbors saw Jackie there, but after a point they didn’t see Cinner. Appears Jackie took over the place. No telling what was done to Cinner to get her banking information. Miss

Cinner thinks she's got a friend, and instead, she has the devil. I don't know. I'm guessing. We may never know."

"What about Sebastian?" she said.

"Again, no idea, same as when I got home. No revelations in my sleep."

"So that's it?"

"That's it. Hey, baby, now that we're awake, how about we try and reach the moon?"

"Are you asking to have sex?"

"Begging."

"No, thank you," she said, rolling over and turning out the light. "I'm sleepy now. Good night."

55

Couple days later, me and Brett and Leonard met the Mulhaneys at the office. We told them Jackie was in jail, told them what had happened.

"I hate telling you this, but she told the chief over there that she has nothing left for you two," I said. "And don't come see her in jail."

Thomas looked sullen. Judith looked somewhere between sad and relieved. She was very pale that day and seemed to have turned frail.

"Thank you," she said. "Better to know than to not."

Leonard mentioned there was an outstanding debt for services rendered. They smiled and left.

About a month after our meeting with the family, Jackie was released from jail. Professor copped to everything, said he forced her to do what she did, and Jackie didn't argue against it. That got her off the hook. I don't think anyone believed she was innocent. They just couldn't prove she was guilty, not with Professor taking the rap like that, and I think her having that baby helped the court decide to let her go free and take care of the child.

But the topper came one afternoon when Brett got back to the house from shopping and said, "Did you hear?"

"Hear what?"

"In Marvel Creek, someone shot Jackie and her baby to death."

"What the hell? Wait a minute. What was she shot with?"

Brett shook her head. "A gun. That's all I know."

Not long after, Leonard came over. He had heard about it too.

"She was at the Professor's property, and someone broke in and shot her, and then the baby, who was in a bassinet. One shot to the head with a twenty-two for both."

I said, “Where did we first hear that probable scenario?”

“Thomas,” Leonard said. “Come on. Drive me.”

56

We rode over to the mobile home where Thomas lived with his mother. One end still had the tarp over it. There was a brand-new mobile home moved in next to it. The big truck was parked near the new home and it had a set of new tires on it and fancy hubcaps.

Driving up in the yard, we saw there was a black wreath on the door of the new trailer.

Leonard got out of my car and walked up the steps in front of the trailer's entrance and knocked hard on the door. I stood below the steps and rocked on my heels. The air was warm but still as death.

It took a while, but Thomas answered. He was wobbly and drunk and his pants were unzipped and his underwear was showing.

"What the hell do you want, nigger?" Thomas said.

Leonard grabbed Thomas by the throat so fast it was like a CGI effect. He pulled him out of the doorway of the mobile home and turned a little and sent Thomas hurtling over the steps and onto the ground.

Thomas started to get up. I said, "Stay there, if you know what's good for you."

"What the fuck is with you guys?" Thomas said.

Leonard went over and squatted near Thomas, who was in a half-lying, half-sitting position.

"Where's your mother?" Leonard said. "I don't mind she hears this."

"She died, had a heart attack a week ago, you black moron," Thomas said. "Why there's a wreath on the door. You ain't getting another cent from me, by the way, don't care if I do owe it."

Leonard ignored him, looked at the brand-new mobile home, glanced at the new tires on the truck. I saw his expression change as he turned his attention back to Thomas.

"Keep the money," Leonard said. "You might need it for buying twenty-two shells. Though I think you got a bit of money from somewhere, seeing your new home. Your old daddy, who knew you didn't like him, I'm thinking he might have given you a call to help him fulfill that fucked-up plan he had, that's what I think. You'd be all for that. Revenge and easy money in one swoop. Bet you enjoyed pulling that rope around his neck, cutting that key out of his belly, taking that money out of his bank box. It all falls into place now. Want to know what else I figure?"

"I don't give a shit," Thomas said.

"Thanks for asking," Leonard said. "My figure is you already got rid of the twenty-two you used to kill your sister and nephew. I bet you never even knew the kid's name. I know I didn't, but you should have."

"You don't know nothing," Thomas said.

"You may think you're a badass, way you could sneak up on your sister and her son, do them like you done. I got nothing for her. I think she's as big a piece of shit as you are, as Professor is. But that child never did anything to anyone. Baby's only crime far as you were concerned was it had dark skin. The kid didn't even have a personality yet."

"Get off of me," Thomas said.

"Here's something I want you to think about," Leonard said. "I want you to know that one day you'll come out of this new blood-paid mobile home on your way to pick up a six-pack, and I'll be there. Might even call your name. Surprise, motherfucker. And then it's coming. A bullet. I might even use a twenty-two, same as you. I got one, and mine can't be traced."

"I'll go to the police," he said.

"Go ahead, my word against yours. What did you hear, Hap?"

"I heard you give your condolences about his sister, nephew, and mother."

"See? That's what Hap heard. Your day is coming, cracker."

Sweat had beaded up at Thomas's hairline.

"Now, me and Hap are sorry for your loss, but we got to go. I have to oil a gun or two."

Leonard stood up. He looked at Thomas, pointed his finger at him, brought his thumb down, and said, "Bang."

57

About six months later, give or take an afternoon, I woke Brett up and asked her her favorite color and got slugged in the arm. A few minutes later I got laid, so that took the pain away.

We had breakfast together, and then she went grocery shopping.

I was sipping a cup of very fine coffee and reading our local rag, which is mostly ads these days, when something caught my eye in the police report.

BODY FOUND, the headline read.

I felt a cold chill start at the base of my spine and move up to my neck and nestle under my hairline like a solidifying glacier.

A man had been found in a ditch partially filled with water. It was a ditch down a clay road in the woods. It was surmised that the man had gone out there to dump his trash illegally.

He was found clutching a plastic bag full of beer bottles. He had a bullet hole between his eyes. A .22 caliber was suspected. Most likely shot at close range. No suspects.

Surprise, motherfucker.

The dead man's name was Thomas Mulhaney.

I took a deep breath and put the paper down on the kitchen table. I sat there and thought for a little bit. I drank my coffee. I got up and poured myself another cup, sat down again, and reread the article. It said the same thing it had said before.

I carefully folded the paper and took a sip of my coffee. It tasted bitter as reality. I got up and carried it to the sink and poured it down the drain.

From the kitchen window, I could see a crow flying south.

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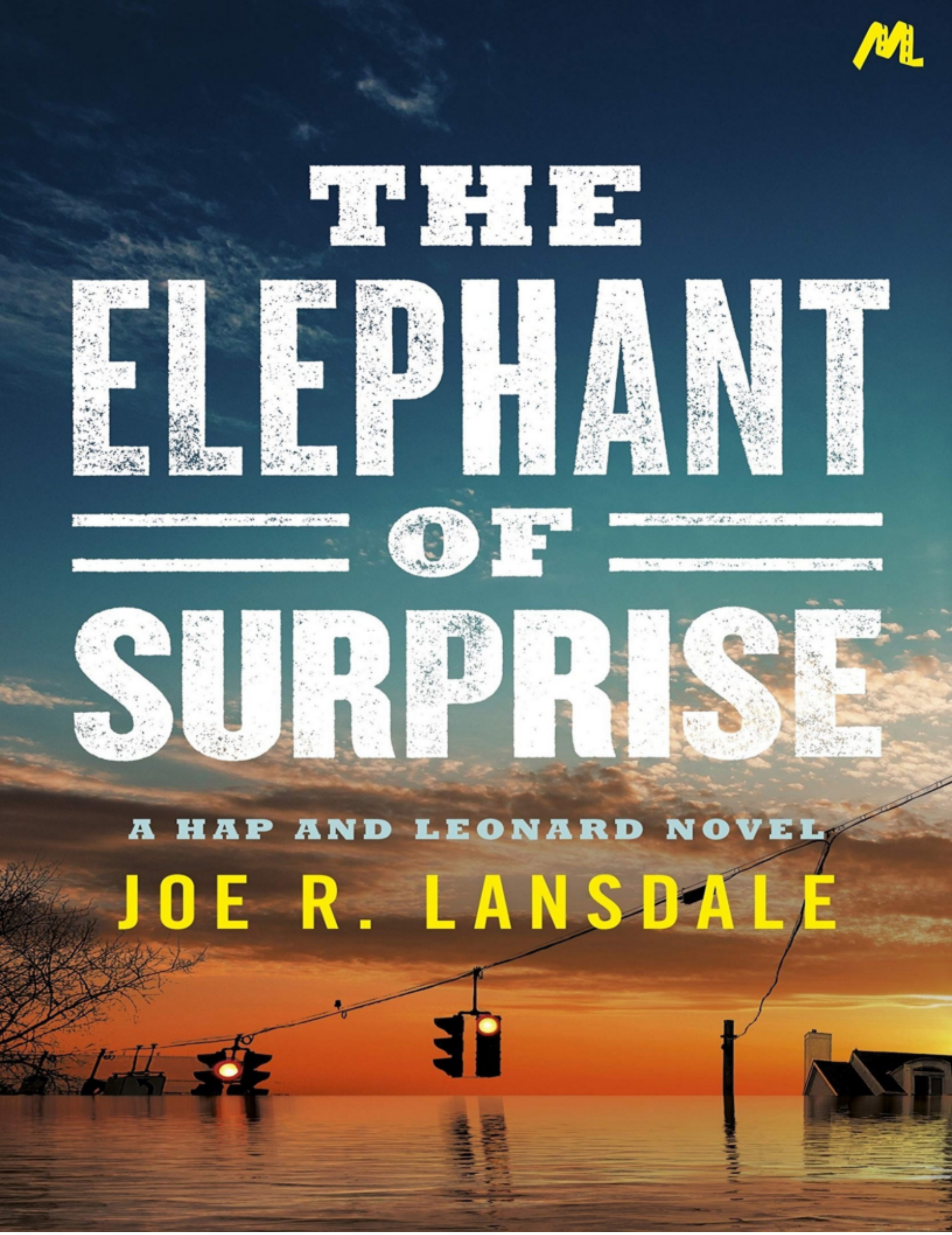

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A HAP AND LEONARD NOVEL

JOE R. LANSDALE

THE ELEPHANT OF SURPRISE

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BOOKS BY JOE R. LANSDALE

For Bill and Judy Crider. Good friends.
Gone, but not forgotten.

That’s a lot of damn water.

Noah

Me and Leonard got something better than the element of surprise, we got the elephant of surprise, and you can bet that’s some serious business.

Hap Collins

1

The night was dark, wet, and cold, and the rain was coming down hard. The trees on the right side of the road were bending toward us as we passed, and leaves and limbs were coming loose of them, tumbling in front of and against the car. I kept driving, dodging branches when I could, hoping there were no washed-out sections in the road or a limb didn't hang up beneath us.

The wipers slaved back and forth like a mean librarian wagging her finger at a loud child, and the lights bounced off the night. I kind of wished to see another car on the road, but most everyone else had sense enough to get in out of the storm.

Me and Leonard had finished up a surveillance job in San Augustine and were on our way back to LaBorde. When we'd left, the sky was clear and you could see the stars and the partial moon, but that situation had changed five miles out of town. First came the wind, then thunder and lightning, finally the rain, and then the wind picked up even more, and it began to seriously storm.

I had the car heater on to fight the January cold, and it was mostly working. I was hungry and thinking about being home with some food and a big hot cup of decaf coffee but knowing, late as it was, I ought to just go on and go to bed and wait for breakfast.

Maybe just a granola bar and a glass of milk.

Or I might have some cereal. Only one bowl. A small bowl. A bagel, no cream cheese. Light butter, maybe. Might be some of that barbecue left over from the other day. No. That was too heavy. But hell, barbecue, that was nice, and if it stayed in the refrigerator too long it could ruin.

Leonard said, "Look out, man."

I looked up as something ran into the highway. I whipped to the right, just missing a bar ditch, and skidded to a stop in a spray of water.

I glanced in the rearview mirror and then the water-beaded side mirrors, but all I could see was rain.

"It was somebody," Leonard said.

"Could have been an animal?"

"It was someone," he said. "A girl, I think."

I drove up a space and turned in the road, trying to be careful not to end up too far on either side, as the earth there slanted down into ditches. It was wet and muddy and steep, and easy to slide. If we ended up in a ditch, it would be full of fast-running water and the only way out would be a wrecker, if we had cell service to call them. We were in a bad place for that. And I wasn't sure a wrecker service would come out in this. Hell, Noah wouldn't come out in this, and it was getting worse by the moment.

I got us turned around and drove slow but didn't see anyone, at least not at first, and then Leonard said, "Hap."

I braked and skidded slightly, looked where he was pointing. A girl stumbled back into the road, having made it across, then having decided to come back. She was waving her hands at us. Her hair was white in the headlights and was plastered against her head like a cowl, some of it draped across her face, and there was something dark running from her mouth and down her chin. The rain washed it away as fast as it appeared. She was small and pale and obviously weak. She was wearing a stained T-shirt and pajama shorts and was barefoot. She collapsed in the road.

Leonard got out and went after her, the rain hammering against him, the cold wind whistling into the car through the open door. He picked her up like she was a doll and carried her back to the car. I unfastened my belt, leaned back and stretched over the crack between the seats and worked the back door open. Leonard set her inside, nudged her to the center of the seat.

With the doors open, the inside was lit up, and I saw the girl was an albino, and Asian, and so small I at first thought she was a child of eleven or so. She opened her mouth and blood ran out and dripped over her chin and onto her chest. She looked up at me with pale eyes, not white, but a blue so thin they were almost clear. She had the appearance of a wounded bird trapped behind glass. She tried to talk but all that came out of her mouth was blood and a choking noise.

Leonard closed the front passenger-side door, slid in beside her on the backseat, closed the back door, said, "You're all right. We got you. Easy, now, let me look. Open your mouth."

He gently touched her chin, looked inside her open mouth, said, “Hap, give me the flashlight.”

I reached over and into the glove box where we keep a pistol and a flashlight and some odds and ends and pulled out the flashlight and gave it to him.

The young woman was starting to moan.

“Easy,” Leonard said, “just a peek.”

Leonard looked, and there in the glow of the flashlight, I could see his face change.

“Give me the Kleenex,” he said.

I opened the glove box again and got out a small packet of Kleenex. Leonard took it, tore the plastic cover off of it, pulled out all the Kleenex, and said, “Honey, you need to put this here in your mouth and close it gently. Might tilt your head back, but don’t lie down.”

He put the Kleenex in her mouth, and she didn’t argue about it. He strapped the seat belt around her, said, “You’ll be all right.”

That’s when a big black SUV came out of a side road about where the girl had first appeared and turned into our lane so that its headlights were pointing right at us. The SUV stopped and a big black man in black clothes wearing a dark, rain-beaten hat got out of the car on the passenger side. He looked as if he could straighten the Leaning Tower of Pisa with one hand. He had a large pistol held down by his side. The tower gave him any shit, he could shoot it.

I said, “Leonard, hang on.”

The man in the road lifted the handgun.

2

I threw the car in reverse and looked over my shoulder between the woman and Leonard, and as far as I could tell, all that was behind us was night and rain and the faint glow of my taillights. I stabbed the gas and away we went. I heard a gun crack and something scraped across the top of the car. It had been a hasty shot.

I kept my foot punched down on the gas, took a forward glance, and saw that I had made quite a gap between us and the SUV, but a Prius isn't a race car.

Leonard said to the girl, "Hang tight, kid."

He slid between the seats and into the front, opened the glove box and took out the automatic pistol, said, "Turn it around."

I stepped on the brake and the car slid. I turned the steering wheel in the direction of the slide and whipped the car completely around amidst a spray of water and a moan of tires, a move that was aided by a wet road and a bit of experience.

I hit the gas and looked in the rearview mirror. Lights. They were coming, and they were coming fast.

For a moment, I thought about a side road but decided that was a bad idea. Then I considered the main road we were on and how fast they were coming, and that wasn't such a good idea either. The only way I could see out of this problem was levitation of the car, and believe me, I was really concentrating on that, hoping I would find within me unknown powers of telekinesis. But nope.

Leonard hit the window button, rolled it down, hung out of the window, and pointed the pistol at them. Leonard is a so-so shot, and with that handgun and the rain and wind being like it was, I felt he had about as much of a chance of hitting that car as he had of farting a bird off a tree limb.

He fired twice, rapid succession. I glanced back. The lights were still coming. They probably had no idea he had a gun. He fired twice more. The SUV went sideways and tried to straighten, and then sparks flew up from underneath it.

Leonard had somehow hit the front right tire and they were dealing with a blowout, the tire rim slamming on the concrete.

The SUV swerved and tried to slow, but it was too late. It was all over the place, and then it went sideways and the taillights tipped toward the sky. It had fallen into one of the long, wet ditches by the side of the road.

3

Someone tried to cut her tongue out," Leonard said. "They sawed about halfway through it."

We were sitting in LaBorde Memorial Hospital, having brought the girl in before calling the cops. Our friend the chief of police, Marvin Hanson, was off on a trip with his family somewhere up in the wilds of Montana, and Leonard's boyfriend, Pookie, also a cop, was out of town, visiting his sister in New Orleans. The two cops who were there didn't know us as well as the chief and Pookie did, and I couldn't decide if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Way they were looking at us and talking to us, you would have thought we had tried to cut her tongue out ourselves.

After a while, they had the hospital open up the gift shop that had closed hours before, and we bought T-shirts and underwear and socks and windbreakers that all had hospital logos on them. In a bathroom, we squeezed our jeans out in the sink and dried them pretty well in front of the hand dryers and put on the clean underwear and socks. The jeans were still damp but not as miserable cold and wet as before. Leonard had been out in it when he picked up the girl, but just going from the car into the hospital, Leonard carrying the girl, we had both been soaked to the bone.

When we came out of the bathroom, the cops were standing there like they thought we might squeeze into the toilet and flush an escape.

We had to drive to the station and answer all the questions again. A matter of routine, they said. Sure, they thought we were Good Samaritans. Sure, they believed us. Cops believe you like they believe in Santa Claus.

They had already sent cops out to see if they could find the SUV in a ditch, and they had taken the gun Leonard used. We both had permits, so at least we had that going for us.

We sat there in the station in the interrogation room until a lady cop we did know, Manny, came back and said they had found the SUV. We were sure as hell glad to see her, but she stayed professional throughout. It was all being filmed, of course. That's how an interrogation room works.

"The SUV was there. But shooting at cars, Leonard, that could cause you some problems," she said.

"Figured getting shot by them might cause me some problems too."

Manny was her usual attractive self, but the long white scar on her cheek was whiter than usual against her otherwise flawless Hispanic skin. She had a look on her face like she had been dragged out of bed by a pack of wolves. I looked at my watch. It was two in the morning. Did wolves work that late?

"Tracking the plates, of course," I said.

"Already have," she said. "They belong to a family in Oklahoma, but they don't own the SUV the plates are fastened to. VIN number on the car is being looked at, but you know how that will turn out."

"The car will have been stolen or the VIN number will be a false one, something like that," I said.

"Bad night for those assholes to be out wandering around without a ride," Leonard said.

"Unless someone picked them up," Manny said. "I tried my phone there. There's service. You should have done that, called it in."

"No service where we first came across them," I said. "And we were a little too busy being chased by them to try and phone on down the road. Yeah, I should have worried about that instead of worrying about getting the girl to the hospital."

Manny gave me a hard look. "Fair enough, and I get it. Don't run it into the ground."

"Look, Manny," I said. "You know we didn't hurt that girl, and you know we had to do what we did. They shot at us. They were trying to get to her, for whatever reason."

"Poor girl," Manny said. "Who could do that, and why?"

"Humans," I said. "That's who."

"Any idea who she is yet?" Leonard said.

Manny shook her head. "No idea, but whoever she is, someone wants her to suffer and die, that's for sure. Maybe she gets where she can talk or write a little, we can find out. She didn't have identification on her. If she was from these parts, someone would know her. Not that many albino girls around."

"Listen here," Leonard said. "Whoever did that will most likely still be looking for her. Best you have someone in the hospital to watch over her."

"How would anyone know she's there?" Manny said.

"That's an easy one," I said. "Where else would a rescuer take her?"

"Good point. I don't normally make the decisions here, but it's me for the night or until Marvin gets back. Wait a moment."

Manny went out.

After a bit, she came back. "They're posting someone at her door," she said. "He's already started over. Good cop, Eric Braider."

That was a relief. Probably unnecessary, but you never knew for sure.

Finally, they let us go with warnings not to leave the state. We drove to the IHOP at the end of North Street and had a late-night supper and breakfast. I had a short stack and Leonard ate enough pancakes, sausages, and eggs to feed an army and most of their relatives.

"Who would do such a thing to a little girl like that?" Leonard said, asking what had already been asked.

I didn't have an answer.

Outside, the rain slammed the parking lot and rattled the windows. We had just finished eating when the lights went out.

We sat there silently, and after a while a waiter came over with a flashlight and told us he was sorry, but they were going to have to have everyone pay up and leave.

Since the register didn't work without electricity, there was a tedious time when we stood in line and people paid with cash or their credit card numbers were written down. Leonard gave them the ticket with two twenties and we left.

The rain and wind were so bad we could hardly make it to our car. Once we were inside, this time with Leonard driving, he said, "Think we ought to go back to the hospital. Not long until morning anyway. We can see how the girl's doing. Jesus, why would they do that to that girl?"

He kept coming back to that, and I still didn't have an answer.

"I no longer wonder why people do horrible things," I said. "I just know a lot of them do."

"Speaking of that, I like to be ready for those horrible people. I have another pistol under the front seat. Find it and put it in the glove box? Makes sense to have it in a more reachable position."

4

Lights all along the street were out, and we were once again the only car on the road. It was as if we were in an old science fiction movie and everyone had been killed or was in hiding because bad aliens had taken over the Earth.

“Did you know LaBorde is the barbecue capital of Texas?” I said.

“I don’t give a shit,” Leonard said.

“They have a blueberry festival here too.”

“Who doesn’t? I live here, Hap. I know that shit. Hey, this isn’t the barbecue capital of Texas. Barbecue here mostly sucks.”

“I’m just trying to pass the time with interesting conversation.”

“It’s not that interesting when you make it up.”

“Boy, are you in a mood.”

“You should have seen that poor girl’s tongue,” Leonard said. “They almost cut it out.”

I was glad I hadn’t seen it. “My jeans are dry,” I said.

“Will you shut up?”

It took us an impossibly long time to reach the hospital. The lights were on there. Backup generators, I presumed. That would seem right for a hospital. But not all the lights were on, and some were not that bright. We went and sat in the lobby in the comfortable waiting-area chairs under dim lights. Leonard began to snooze, and then he began to snore softly.

Except for a middle-aged lady at the desk, we seemed to be the only ones in the hospital.

I pulled out my cell and called Brett, told her what had happened, told her we’d be home when we got home.

“Still have lights here, but it’s scary out there,” she said. “Chance and Reba and Buffy Dog are here with us. We had dinner and then they couldn’t go home, or didn’t want to.”

“They’re safer there. Did Reba eat you out of house and home?”

“Just complained about the food. She wanted McDonald’s. I told her she was free to go to town and buy us burgers.”

“Bet that shut her up.”

“Nope. She said give her the money and the car keys and she’d go.”

I laughed. Reba was a smart-ass kid we had kind of rescued. She lived with my daughter, Chance, and Buffy the Biscuit Slayer, also known as Buff, Buffy Dog, or the Buffinator.

Brett said, “Will the girl be all right?”

“I don’t know. I think so. They sewed her tongue up, gave her some pills. She’s sleeping upstairs.”

“Poor thing,” Brett said.

We passed a few more words and closed out the conversation. I turned to ask Leonard if he wanted to call his boyfriend, Pookie, but he was still asleep. Probably best not to call Pookie and ruin his out-of-town visit. Nothing he could do right then.

I put the cell away just as I saw a large tree limb tumble across the parking lot at the side of the hospital and slam into a car hard enough I could hear the impact. At least it didn’t set off an alarm.

The wind began to howl and the rain became even more fierce. Lightning cracked and thunder rumbled, shaking the glass in the hospital windows.

I could envision, somewhere out in the Gulf, a vicious, unseasonable storm, perhaps a hurricane, sending in its reserve troops, giving us a taste of what it could do just to remind us that compared to nature, we weren’t as important as houseflies.

5

When I awoke in the hospital waiting area, I checked my watch. It was seven in the morning. Leonard was still asleep. It was dark as night, and the rain and wind hadn't let up an ounce. In fact, it looked worse out there. Meaning there was nothing to see but absolute blackness. The sun wasn't going to shine that morning, maybe not all day.

The same middle-aged lady was at the front desk. I went up there, said, "You certainly are putting in the time."

She smiled at me. She looked weary.

"I'm supposed to be gone," she said, "but the rain is so bad I'm better off here in the hospital than on the road, and my replacement is better off home. I figure before the day is done, we'll have a lot of new occupants. A storm like this, it makes things crazy. If only the rain would stop. Better yet, the wind."

"Lady we brought in last night. When can we check on her? We were told she's in a room on the third floor."

"No visiting hours yet, but way things are, it gets nine, you can go in, unless there are any medical concerns."

I thanked her and sat down again, and that's when I saw a big man come in the front door carrying a long, damp cardboard box. He had it tucked up under one arm. He wore black clothes. He had a black plastic rain cover over his hat.

I recognized the man from his size. It was the big black man that had gotten out of the SUV with a pistol. He was even bigger than I'd thought, looked like a weight lifter, not a bodybuilder, kind of guy who could dead-lift a battleship. His face was as expressionless as a mannequin's.

He hadn't seen us last night, had seen only my car, maybe a shape hanging out of the window firing at the SUV, so he had no idea who we were. He hardly gave us a glance. He adjusted his hat with a touch of his hand and walked past us and the desk, toward the elevator. I had a good idea what was in the box.

The lady behind the desk might’ve thought about saying something to stop him, but she didn’t. Not the way he looked. She just watched him pass. I thought that was most likely a good choice.

6

I shook Leonard awake, said, “Hey, the guy that took a shot at us just walked in.”

“What?”

“He’s over by the elevator. Had a long cardboard box with him. I don’t think it was curtain rods.”

“Damn.” By that point he was on his feet. We both headed toward the big man as he stepped into the elevator, but moments later the doors closed.

We went back to the desk, but the woman was gone. A bathroom break, maybe. We couldn’t just hang out and call the police for backup. By the time they got here, it would be too late. That guy was there to finish the job he and whoever he was working with had started.

“How would he know where to go?” Leonard said.

“This is the logical place for her to be. Phones here work, so he called and convinced someone who didn’t know any better to give him her room number.”

I heard the front hospital door slide automatically back, and I saw another man enter. He was short and thin and white, wearing black clothes. He had a hand in his coat pocket, a bandage across his forehead, and he walked with a bounce.

Leonard saw him too.

We didn’t wait to figure him out. We made the stairs before he made the elevator. “I think those two may be an unmatched set,” Leonard said.

We charged up the stairs to the third floor, where the girl was, trying to beat the elevator. There was supposed to be a cop up there, and the thought of that was some relief. I hoped he hadn’t decided to drift off or take a bathroom break.

When we got to the third floor and rushed out into the hallway, we saw the cop in a chair. He was a young, curly-headed white guy. He was posted about midway between us and the elevators, next to the girl's room. He was sitting up straight in the chair, his uniform crisp and his badge shiny. He had his hand resting on the butt of his pistol. He looked as alert as a hungry cobra.

The elevator dinged.

We rushed toward the cop. He had seen us around, knew we had brought the girl in, so he wasn't overly concerned.

"Guy in the elevator," I called out. "He's got a gun."

The cop stood up, looked puzzled.

I said what I had said again.

The elevator door opened before we could reach the cop and the girl's room.

The elevator was empty.

"Shit," Leonard said. "He got off on another floor."

I thought, Yeah, that would be an idea. He didn't know us, but he might have suspected protection for the girl, and since I'd stood up as he headed to the elevator, he might have assumed I was part of a protection detail.

In a way, I was, but I'd been doing a piss-poor job, and Leonard had been napping.

"What's going on?" the cop said. We had reached the door to the room he was protecting.

"Someone has come for her," I said.

That's when the big man came around the corner. He must have gotten off the elevator on a lower floor, used the stairs on the opposite side we had taken. The gun was no longer in a box; it was a shotgun, twelve-gauge was my guess. He handled it with familiarity.

The cop pulled his gun. Leonard pushed the girl's door open and went inside as I ducked down and the shotgun ripped. The cop, gun in his hand, lost his head, so to speak, and I was peppered with brains and blood and falling shot.

As the poor cop fell, his handgun slid back toward me, our only lucky break so far, and I grabbed it, darted inside the room as another blast from the shotgun splintered the wall and pocked part of the door.

Once I was inside, the door swung shut. There was a small square of glass in the door and I saw the man fill the space on the outside. I flicked the door latch and scuttled backward with the cop's gun tight in my hand. I knew then how those three pigs felt when the wolf came to their door.

I took a quick look behind me. The girl was in the hospital bed. She was unconscious, probably drugged into peaceful sleep. Leonard snatched up a chair and swung it against the large, wide window, but the window held its own. He swung at it several times, but the chair kept bouncing off it.

I saw the big man push his face to the glass in the door. I jerked the gun up and fired and the door glass shattered. He had seen me move and had moved himself, and just in time. He moved fast for being about the size of the Statue of Liberty.

I turned, said to Leonard, “Stand aside.”

I shot a hole in the big outer window, heard it crack; the cracks started at the hole and spiderwebbed in all directions. Leonard hit the window with the chair again. It finally fell apart with a crunch and a tinkle of falling glass. The cold wind and rain blew in.

“Watch for that motherfucker,” Leonard said.

I glanced back at the door. I didn’t see the man. I didn’t see his shadow. I felt the cold wind and rain dampening my back.

I looked over my shoulder at Leonard.

Leonard set the chair down beneath the window, turned to the bed, jerked back the covers, lifted the IV bag off the IV stand, dropped it on the girl’s chest, and picked her up. All she wore was a hospital gown, not the best clothing for the outdoors, since your naked ass hung out of the back of it, but it might beat dying in bed.

Holding her close to him, Leonard put his foot on the chair he had placed beneath the window and then stepped out into the swirling storm.

7

The shotgun roared and the wood in the door jumped apart, made a gap large enough to ride a donkey through. That guy was packing some serious ammunition.

I hurried to the window. The wind and rain pushed at me. My hair and clothes were soaked in an instant. I trembled in the cold. There was a wide ledge beneath the window. Not something you'd want to have a pachyderm walk, but wide enough. I could see Leonard moving on it like a tightrope walker, one careful foot in front of the other, carrying the girl, going away as fast as he safely could. The ledge might have been wide, but it was wet as a snail trail.

I turned and looked at the door. Nothing yet. The big man was being cautious, now that he knew I had a gun.

I stepped up on the chair and went after Leonard, nearly losing my footing immediately. It was actually slimier than a snail's trail.

I put my back to the wall and inched along. Leonard made the corner of the building and turned out of sight. Carrying a girl, even a small one, walking on a ledge with a wet wind blowing hard enough to roll an army tank was no small feat.

What the fuck was he, a mountain goat?

I turned my attention back to the window. The gun was in my right hand, and I held it across my chest, kept my left hand down and against the wall, kept scooting.

The man stuck his head out the window. I snapped off a shot, and I could tell from the way the blood jumped like a dark arrow into the night that I had hit him. But I knew too that I had just parted his hair, because his hat jumped off and the wind caught it and carried it away. Had it been the shot I had hoped for, he wouldn't have been able to pull back.

I turned the corner around the edge of the building, crossed in front of one window and then another, and finally the ledge widened. Down below I could see another roof from a building that had been added on at some point.

That's when I caught up with Leonard, standing with the girl held tight to him, looking down at the roof below. It was at least a twelve-foot drop, and there was a lower concrete roof below us to another building, but it didn't look inviting.

I yelled out, "Don't do it!" but the wind snatched my voice and hauled it away.

Leonard looked down at the lower roof for a moment, then turned and continued along the widened ledge. I was moving along faster and caught up with them. When I did, Leonard said, "What now?"

I looked where he was looking. The ledge continued around a corner, but the question was, how did we get off of it without taking a swan dive? The best we could do was keep moving around the hospital.

There was a window near us. I said, "Hang on."

I pointed the pistol at the window and hoped no one's bed was right under it, that a nurse wasn't standing there doing something or other. The room was dark, so I figured the latter wasn't likely. I shot at the window, and it cracked. I leaned against it, and then I kneed it, and when I did, it gave and shattered and fell apart into the room. I felt a sharp pain in my knee but nothing to write home about.

8

The hospital room was empty, but it wouldn't take long for the big man or the little guy we had seen downstairs to find us. Not if they were serious, and I had a feeling they were.

I went over and locked the door, looked around the room.

There was a wheelchair folded up near the wall. The room smelled of disinfectant.

Leonard placed the girl on the bed and looked in the closet. There was another ass-open gown in it, like the one she had on, and nothing else.

"I need something to fight with," he said.

"Might I recommend a chair."

There was one by the bed. Leonard went over and got it and held it by the backrest.

"What we got to do is get her out of here," Leonard said.

"I'm just waiting for our gyrocopter to show up."

The copter didn't show, but a shape appeared at the busted-out window. It wasn't the big man. It was the little man we had seen come in downstairs with the bandage on his head, most likely covering an injury from the SUV taking a dive. He was stone-faced and wiry and had his hair cut so close to his head, he might as well have gone on and shaved it. His coat flapped in the breeze.

I lifted the revolver, but he sprang across the room like a kangaroo on crack, kicked me in the chest, and drove me back against the wall, sending the revolver skittering across the floor.

I was scrambling to my feet as Leonard swung the chair at him. He swung it low, but the man dropped down so quick, and was flat on his belly so quick, it was like he had turned into a snake. As the chair passed over him, he leaped forward, grabbed Leonard by the windbreaker with one hand, and used the other to hit him with a hammer fist in the forehead. I think he was going for the nose, which would have been smarter, but Leonard lowered his head a little, and just in time.

If Leonard's forehead hurt the little guy, he didn't let on. He grabbed Leonard's windbreaker with the other hand, swiveled, and threw Leonard over his hip, threw him so well and so high, Leonard's feet nearly touched the ceiling; a foot or so higher and he might have needed an oxygen mask. Leonard came down on the tile floor with a smack so loud, I felt the pain myself, felt it crawl up my ass and up my spine and come to a throbbing rest at the base of my neck.

I was on the guy by then, delivering a front kick to the side of his leg, but he moved, swung his leg out of the way and up, hook-kicked me in the temple. I was surprised to find myself on the floor.

As I tried to get up, he kicked at my throat, but I was able to throw a hand up and merely get my palm whacked, but that was no walk in the park either. It hurt so bad I considered gnawing my hand off at the wrist.

Leonard, who I thought might be napping, had recovered and was up. He leaped on the little guy from behind, wrapped his legs around his waist, hooked his heels into his thighs, threw his arms around his neck, and fell backward with the guy trapped between his legs.

That didn't last long. The little guy squirmed out of Leonard's grip so fast and so clean, it was like he was part eel. He recovered his footing and kicked out at Leonard, who was still on the floor.

I found the pistol, but by then the little guy had produced one of his own. It was going to be which of us could pull the trigger faster. Or that would have been the case, but Leonard stepped in with the chair again, knocked the little man's hand down. The gun went off and the shot hit the floor and bounced against the ceiling, went on up through the thin tiles. The gun itself was knocked from his hand.

By then the little guy knew it was time to leave. I had the gun, and he had air. He pulled his injured hand against his chest, scooped his dropped pistol up with his good hand, backpedaled gracefully, as if he always went places walking asswards.

He made the window, threw up a leg like a back kick, and set it on the ledge without even looking. Then he pushed off on his other leg and was suddenly standing on the ledge, looking in the wide space where the window had been. He grinned at us. I was going to try and shoot again, but Leonard fucked that up. He stepped into my line of fire and threw the chair.

It was a good toss, though. It hit the grinning asshole right in the face and knocked him off the ledge.

“Bingo,” Leonard said.

9

Not quite bingo," I said.

The little guy's hands were clutching the ledge.

"Goddamn monkey," Leonard said.

He wide-stepped toward the window, and as the little man lifted himself up and his face rose into sight, Leonard smacked him one with a good straight punch. The little man's head went back, but still he clung. Leonard slammed his fist down on the little man's right hand, striking the fingers.

That made the little man jerk that hand free of the ledge, and when Leonard hit his other hand, his fingers loosened and he fell.

I ran over and leaned out of the window with Leonard. The little man had taken that twelve-foot drop like a cat, had landed on his feet and was crouched down, looking up. The rain was washing blood from his face where Leonard had busted his nose. He grinned at us.

I leaned out with the gun and took a shot at him, but he was already moving, went over the side of the lower roof like Spider-Man.

"Where the hell did he go?" Leonard said.

"The ledge below, if he didn't miss his footing."

"I'm sure he didn't."

We pulled back into the room. I pushed the handgun into my windbreaker pocket, said, "Leonard, we'll put her in the wheelchair."

Leonard went to pick her up while I pulled the chair away from the wall and unfolded it. Leonard brought her over and gently placed her in the chair, giving me a glimpse of her naked ass, the color of the moon on a clear summer night. He arranged the IV bag so that it hung on the back of the wheelchair. I wasn't even sure if what was in it was getting into her.

I grabbed a blanket off the bed and threw that over her to give her some warmth and some dignity.

I sidled over to the door, pulled out the pistol, and peeked through the small glass square. Lot of darkness in the hallway. The little guy didn't stick his eye against mine. The big man didn't blow my head off with a shotgun.

I unlatched the door and opened it, stepped gingerly into the hall, listening to my heart pound.

Leonard pushed the wheelchair into the hall. The wheels squeaked a little.

"Maybe if we use the elevator, that'll fool them," I said. "They might not expect that."

"Why wouldn't they? They might also expect the stairs. Only thing they wouldn't expect is someone to drive a tank through the wall and evacuate us."

"We're on the third floor."

"We'll have to use the elephant of surprise. I'll punch the elevator down, but we'll take the stairs. You lead with the gun. I'll lift the chair and carry her down. She's light as a feather."

Leonard went to the elevator, pushed the button. By then I was turning down the stairs, the gun pointed in front of me.

10

With my heart still beating like a drum, I moved carefully. I had gone down one flight and was on the second-floor landing when the auxiliary lights went out.

I assumed someone had gotten to the backup generators, reasoning that if it was dark, we might not find our way so easy, but whoever it was hadn't considered my trusty cell phone. I took it out of my pocket and—

The battery was dead.

Shit. I put the phone in my pocket.

I put my hand on the railing and eased along until I had nearly made the bottom of the stairs. If it was like I thought, one of them would be waiting at each stairwell. The elevator was near one set of stairs, so whoever was there would have that covered. No matter which way we came down, they had us trapped.

I thought for a moment, then started up the stairs again. I met Leonard carrying the wheelchair with the girl in it.

"Turn around," I said.

We went back up, me helping Leonard lift the chair. On the second-floor landing I told him what I thought.

"Yeah," he said, "that's how I'd do it if I was them."

"But you'd think to bring snacks."

"Of course."

The girl hadn't moved. She could have been on Mars or at the bottom of the Grand Canyon for all she knew.

"I got an idea," I said. "Stay here."

There was a large trash can at the far end of the hall. I padded down there and picked it up. It was a little heavy, but right then, scared as I was, I had adrenaline strength. When I got to Leonard, I let the can rest on a stair step.

“Look here,” I said. “Follow close with her, and when it starts, you push her like you’re jet-propelled.”

“All right,” he said. “But what’s the plan after that?”

“Push her toward the front door, but wheel around the desk and head for the side door to the parking lot.”

“That’s not much of a plan. Front door’s closer.”

“It works electronically. My guess, that generator went dead, so did the door. It’s locked up for the night. Go out the back emergency exit, it’s just a push-bar door. And hey, maybe they won’t expect it.”

“And maybe they got people waiting out there.”

“Maybe they don’t.”

“Maybe shit don’t stink if the wind blows just right,” Leonard said. “That plan sucks.”

“It’s what we got.”

“What say we push her into a closet and try to take out these guys by ourselves, without her being in the line of fire?”

“A closet?”

“She won’t fit in my pocket.”

“I don’t know, man. We get killed, then she’s in a closet somewhere. They could kill us and still find her. If we don’t have her, they know she’s somewhere in the hospital.”

“Yeah, there’s that,” Leonard said. “Okay. This plan of yours is going to be back to our usual elephant of surprise, I suppose?”

“I don’t know how large an elephant it’s going to be, but if you mean half-assed but energetic, then yeah. But I got a little something in mind.”

“In case things go south, nice knowing you, bro.”

11

I stood at the bottom of the stairs with my trash can, leaning slightly against the wall. I could see through the gap leading off the stairs and into the main hallway. The lady who had been behind the desk was now on the floor near the front door. Blood was flowing out from under her head. Probably shot her so she couldn't get away and bring help. Poor lady.

That meant at least one of them was downstairs again, as we'd suspected.

I somehow lifted the heavy can above my head without it crushing me flat like an accordion and tossed it as hard and as far as I could. It hit the floor and bounced. A shotgun roared and the can jumped and the lid snapped free and trash popped out.

With the gun drawn, I stepped into the hall, turning in the direction from which the shot had come, thinking, Little Guy, don't be behind me, and I fired at Big Guy, who I could see standing, the shotgun lowered now, a look that might possibly pass for surprise on his face.

My shot hit him in the chest and knocked him down. Behind me I heard Leonard, who had been creeping down the stairs with the girl in the chair, rolling the wheelchair out of the stairwell and into the lobby. The wheels squeaked as he went. He swerved around the lady on the floor and charged past the desk toward the hallway and the rear exit.

I kept the gun on Big Guy. I went over and grabbed the shotgun he had dropped, saw him twitch a little, open his eyes, start to get up. I realized he was wearing a bulletproof vest. As he moved, the now-flattened slug I had fired rolled off his chest.

I should have shot him again. But I had his gun and we'd gotten the girl, so I figured we were ahead for the moment. No reason to kill someone if I didn't have to. Instead, as he put his hands and knees under him, I kicked him under the chin. It was like kicking a concrete block, but he went down again, rolled over on his back, twitched like a dying carp, then quit.

I put the pistol into my coat pocket, backed away from him holding the shotgun. I glanced at Leonard, saw him galloping toward the side door, pushing that chair.

I ran after them. Leonard wheeled the girl around and hit the door with his back; the door popped open, and out he went. I was exiting after them, pushing the door as it started to close, when a big blast of power hit it. A bullet. It had whizzed over my shoulder and torn a hole in the door about the size of a cabbage.

I ducked and wheeled back the way I had come. It was Big Guy, up and ready with a revolver about the size of a howitzer in his hand. I should have killed him when I'd had the chance. Leonard would have.

I cut down on him with the shotgun, but he was way down the hall and already moving to the side and behind the reception desk. Damn, he was swift for someone so big. I heard my shot rattle against the elevator.

I backed against the press bar of the door and went out into the parking lot, the chill wind howling and limbs and debris flying around me. I felt like I was in Dorothy's tornado.

Leonard was at the car, practically bouncing up and down on his toes. I knew why. I had the key in my pocket, if "key" is the right term for it; you have to indulge us older folks with all this new electronic equipment.

I reached them and touched the door and it automatically opened, needing only for me to have the key in my pocket. We got the back door open and got the girl slid into the seat. Leonard hung the IV bag on the laundry hook above her door. Outside, he popped the hatch up, folded the wheelchair, and put it inside. Part of it stuck over the backseat. That was all right. The girl didn't have to worry about headroom. She was asleep on the seat, blissfully unaware of all that was going on around her. You couldn't have stirred her with a brass band and a pack of howler monkeys.

While this went on, I was facing the emergency door with the shotgun. It was a good piece between us and it, but not as far as the hallway shot had been.

No one came out.

I eased around to the driver's side as Leonard slipped into the front passenger seat. When I got in, I gave him the shotgun, then I started the car and rolled down our windows so we could use our weapons if we had to. The cold and the rain blew into the car, but right at that moment, I found it refreshing. I was all het up.

I took the handgun out of my windbreaker pocket and put it on the seat between my legs. Leonard poked the shotgun out the window, said, “Show a head, you sons of bitches.”

I pulled out of the lot, and when I reached the street, I had only one way to turn. To our right was a tree that was old and thick when Davy Crockett passed through this area on his way to his fate at the Alamo. It had been uprooted by the storm and fallen across the road, blocking an exit that way.

I turned left and started down the street through a whirlwind of leaves and limbs, dirt and rain.

I felt relieved for about ten seconds.

In the rearview I saw a car come sailing out of the lot and turn after us. It was a big white Lincoln. I didn’t think it was a coincidence someone else from the hospital had decided to leave and come in our direction at a high rate of speed.

“Haven’t these assholes got something better to do?” Leonard said.

“Apparently not,” I said.

Then I saw the street ahead of us was blocked. Two cars had smashed together at some point, and the drivers had abandoned their vehicles.

I said, “Hold on to your ass,” jerked the wheel right, and hit the curb. The Prius bumped over it with all the grace of a tricycle going over a railroad tie.

Into the yard we went. The tires spun in the grass, dipped into the soft earth, and for a minute, I thought we were screwed and double screwed.

Then the tires caught and the Prius moved. We bumped over some rough spots, hit a driveway, and then I turned back into the street, just beyond the cars that had blocked the road.

Now we had something of a clean run, at least as far as I could see in the headlights. Leonard turned in the seat and looked behind us and laughed.

“What could be funny?”

“They’re stuck in the yard,” he said. “That’s what’s funny.”

“Okay,” I said. “That is amusing.”

Our bad luck held. We got to the end of the street and another large tree had fallen across it.

Simultaneously we both said, I think appropriately, “Damn.”

“Go through the yard,” Leonard said.

I looked at the yards on both sides of it. Only one side was possible, the one where the tree ended almost at the front door of the house.

"Here we go," I said, and bounced over the curb and drove with hope. As I passed between the tree and the front-door steps, the car scraped limbs on my side with a nauseating grate, and on Leonard's side I heard one of the tires against the concrete steps; it made a sound like an electric can opener for a moment, then we were on the wider part of the yard and around the tree. I kept going, across the yard and off the curb and into the street, past the middle school, the yard of which was festooned with all manner of limbs and papers and even a tumbled-over car.

Damn, what a storm.

Back on the main street, I gave the car the gas, turned left when another pile of broken limbs and unidentifiable debris kept us from going forward. On down the narrow street I went. We sailed over a bridge with water running over it, and the water caught us and moved us to the right. The door on Leonard's side screamed as the concrete bridge gave it a body job, and then we were over the bridge and on the road, where there was less water.

To our right, a water park was now surely a water park. Floodwater had filled the pools and the whole place was a lake with metal tubing and metal platforms rising out of it. It reminded me of the skeletal ruins of a long-dead dinosaur.

Straight ahead was all we had as a way of escape. We drove by my dentist's office on the left, but I didn't honk, and continued with only the headlights to show us the way.

On we went, toward the loop, but when we got there, a left turn was out of the question. Cars were stacked there like tumbled dominoes. It looked as if they had been washed down from the parking lots of a housing division just above the loop. On the right, there were limbs and unidentifiable wads of debris. All routes were blocked except for a squeeze-through path on the right side of the road, around a turned-over tractor-trailer. It had most likely been trying to make the corner too fast in too much water.

We took that route, brushing up against the tractor-trailer, scraping some more paint off the left side of the car with a noise like fingernails on a chalkboard, and then we were around it.

I let out a satisfied sigh. Looked like smooth sailing for quite a way. Then the tire that had scraped concrete earlier blew out.

12

The car spun on the wet concrete and I tried to correct it with a gentle nudging of the brakes and a slight turn into the skid as Leonard said, "About par."

When I finally got the car to stop spinning, we were facing in the wrong direction, toward the overturned tractor-trailer. I popped the hatch, and me and Leonard got out, and set the wheelchair out and pulled up the back flooring to get to the spare and the jack. The tire was a temporary tire, because the car manufacturer was too special to put a real tire back there. It was small and thin, like a life preserver for a three-year-old. The jack was one of those kinds I hate. I missed the old sort where you just stuck it under a spot on the car, put on the emergency brake, jacked the car up, and changed the tire. Now you had to put a rod in a hole under the car and crank it. It was a little like a mastiff trying to get his dick into a Chihuahua. It took patience, something I was short on at that moment.

Leonard said, "I hate everybody and everything."

I eventually got it in position with a lot of cussing and encouragement from Leonard. I offered to let him do it, but he declined, twice. He seemed to think he was better in a coaching capacity.

The rain beat on us like galley-slave whips, but we got the tire off and changed, threw the jack, such as it was, into the back of the car, rolled the tire into the street, put the wheelchair in, and closed the hatch. Then we saw car lights sliding out onto the highway, moving toward the overturned tractor-trailer.

Through a gap in cab and trailer, we could see the white Lincoln. They had gotten out of the rut and past all the crap, and since there was only one way to go, they knew that's the way we had to have gone.

We jumped into the Prius, and I turned it around and drove hard as the car would go, that little tire making the car feel like it was limping on a short leg. I reached the end of the road. Billboards had been knocked down and laid into the street along with their metal racking, so I took a left, which was not a choice but the only path, as to the right there was a giant sycamore lying across the highway.

If something else fell into our path, we were pretty much boned.

We knew it wouldn't take the Lincoln long, with a little scraping, to get around the tractor-trailer, but it might take them a bit longer than it took us. The Prius was small and maneuverable, the Lincoln less so, but when it came to motor power, we were riding a bicycle and they were riding a jet.

As expected, in minutes, we saw the Lincoln's lights pop up behind us. They were far back, but soon they would close. We had the shotgun and the pistol I took from Big Guy, and there was the gun I had placed in the glove box, but I had a feeling they had a lot of heavy armament, and I had no idea how many were in the car. Was it just Big Guy and that creepy little fuck, or were there more? The Lincoln had room for quite a gathering.

"Hey, are there train tracks up here?" Leonard asked.

I knew there weren't but immediately understood why he had said that. I could hear what sounded like a train. I rolled the window down, heard that pathetic tire bumping uncomfortably over the road, and then I saw the trees to our left part, and out of that came a howling black wind and a wet whistle of rain—a twister, nature's freight train.

13

When I came to, the car was upside down.

In the rush not to have our heads blown off by our friends at the hospital, none of us had put on seat belts. I lay on the ceiling of the car with the girl lying over my chest. The IV had come out and something wet from the IV bag had run over me and made me feel sticky and cold. Leonard lay with his legs across mine. He wasn't moving.

It was light outside, but it was a muted light, and there was still rain, but not like before, and the wind was no longer howling. The tornado train had come and gone.

I gently got out from under the girl, trying not to put my hands on her naked ass—she was pretty exposed in that hospital gown—and then I eased over to Leonard.

"Goddamn," he said as I touched him.

"You hurting anywhere?"

"Question ought to be, where am I not hurting? But I think I'm okay. You?"

"Far as I can tell."

"The girl?"

"She's still breathing."

It was a chore but I got a door open even though the car was upside down. It grated in the mud, and then it hung, but I was able to squeeze out. That's when I noticed the back hatch had twisted off like it was made of wet cardboard. Would have been nicer had I noticed that right away. I was lucky I knew who I was.

Leonard and I got the girl out that way.

I found the shotgun and then the handgun, which I put in my pocket, and then we looked around carefully to see if our friends in the Lincoln were about. It was possible the tornado had missed them, and it was possible it had hit them too. It sure was one hell of a wind.

We tried our cell phones, as it was the first time we'd had a minute to consider it. I remembered my battery was dead, and Leonard didn't have any service, so we might as well have been carrying turnips.

"Now what?" Leonard said.

"We take turns toting her."

"Where to?"

"Good question."

I looked at the sky. It was a pearly mist and the mist was damp on our faces. There were no clouds, and though there was light, the sun wasn't visible. I was trembling a bit with the cold, and the girl certainly was.

"Feels and looks like the end of the world," I said.

Leonard helped boost the girl onto my shoulder, tried to pull the gown around her a little and tie it off. It wasn't perfect, but it gave her some modesty and made us feel better. Leonard carried the shotgun and crawled back inside the car and got the pistol from the glove box and put it in his belt.

I carried the girl along what served as a trail, though there was twisted wood everywhere, and we constantly had to navigate around or between debris.

The tornado had cut a path through the forest, and we followed that path, even though it was in places littered with tree limbs and pieces of tin and shingles that had been torn off houses or barns. We had no idea where we were going but had decided the highway might not be a good idea, as the Lincoln and its occupants might be up there. For all we knew, they might be making their way through the woods on foot, trying to find us.

I looked at my watch, realized we couldn't have been knocked out long. I had seen the time on the dashboard clock shortly before the tornado tossed the car around like a toy, and only about a half hour had passed. That made me think the thugs had experienced the storm as well, otherwise they would have found us easily enough. Didn't want to be tacky about it, but I hoped the tornado had wadded them and the Lincoln up and tossed them into the Gulf of Mexico.

After a long time walking, switching the girl out occasionally, we heard birds rise up in a great blast of wings, and then we saw that they were rising off a large misty patch of water, and then we generally knew where we were.

Lake LaBorde.

We looked out at it. It was impossibly swollen. It swelled shiny into the trees on the far side of the lake and washed up against the doors of lake houses over there that had once had frontage between themselves and the lake.

"I was sure we were going in the other direction," Leonard said. "I can't tell north from south under this sky."

"This means we aren't anywhere near help…wait. What's that?"

I could see a small cabin through the trees. It was always iffy these days to come up on someone unexpectedly, because now everyone had learned to live in fear from television news, and people who wanted to be sure they were safe might be packing enough guns for defense against an invasion from Mars. They might shoot on sight if they saw us come out of the woods, me with a girl slung over my shoulder like a hunter bringing home a deer.

She wasn't heavy, but she was heavy enough, and I was getting tired and was bone damp. I was chilled and hungry, and while whoever was in the cabin might shoot us, I was willing to chance it, since those in the Lincoln definitely would. Why they had cut the girl's tongue and come after her was still an unknown, but I was quite certain they were unpleasant people and now we too were on their shit list.

When we got to the cabin, I switched the girl to Leonard and went up to the porch. There was still that whole thing about a black guy showing up on your porch unexpected, and we thought we'd put our best foot forward with a white foot.

I knocked on the door several times, but no one answered. I walked around the cabin, past an overturned barbecue grill and a little shed with a padlock on the door. The water from the lake had washed up around the shed, but the front of it was still clear.

I knocked on the back door of the cabin with the same lack of results, and then I walked around and looked in the windows. It looked dead inside, like no one had been there for a while. I got out my lock-pick kit, which is really a couple of little picks I have in my wallet, and worked on the back door and popped it open easy.

I went inside and looked around. I tried the light switch. Nope. Electricity was out over here too. Expected, but disappointing.

I ran my hand over a table. It was coated with dust. Same for the couch and the bar that separated the kitchen from the living room. It was a small two-story cabin. I went upstairs, calling out in case someone was asleep, but no one answered. Up there I found an open door that led into a bedroom. On the bed, under a blanket of flies, was a corpse. I couldn't tell if it was a man or woman, as the person had been dead some time. The corpse was dressed in pajamas, but they were the sort either a man or a woman might wear. The person's hair was short, but lots of women had short hair. A large revolver was near the withered, nearly skeletal hand, and what had been the person's head was broken open and some of what had been in it was in dark, dried wads on the wall. A window was open. Which was how the flies had got in.

I crept out and closed the door. I didn't know how long the person had been dead, but it seemed obvious they had got that way by their own hand and it had been long enough ago to allow a lot of flies to cluster.

I walked down the hall and came to glass double doors. They looked out onto a roofed deck surrounded by wooden rails. There was a heavy metal chair there, turned over and caught up in the railing. I didn't open the doors and go out there.

Downstairs, I opened the front door and signaled Leonard, who was standing in the misting rain with a frown on his face. He brought the girl in and laid her out on the couch, used couch pillows to prop up her head. There was a thin folded cover on the back of the couch, and he put that over her.

"She hasn't got the bag and the juice anymore," he said. "She needs a doctor."

"We'll just have to make her comfortable for now," I said. I told him what was upstairs.

"Well, shit. Aren't we on a run of luck?"

"Whoever is up there, their luck is worse."

"I'm sorry and everything, but my main problem right now is I'm starving," Leonard said.

The refrigerator was full of food, and the electricity hadn't been out so long as to allow things to rot. It was like it had been waiting on us.

Well, mostly. There was a gallon of milk that turned out to be spoiled, as it had been in there probably since the person upstairs decided to redecorate the wall. Electricity or no electricity, it had turned into a white glob of stink. I took it outside, found a big fifty-five-gallon drum for trash next to the overturned barbecue grill, and dropped it in. It was the only thing in the drum.

I was at a spot now where I could see behind the shed and through the twisted branches of a fallen sweet gum tree lying partially in the water. There was a long dock and a pretty good-size boat out there with a roof and fishing chairs fastened to a deck at the back. Of course, it was riding high in the water. So high it had lifted up over a weathered dock. The weight of it was starting to cause the dock to collapse. The boat surely belonged to the fly target upstairs.

I went back in the house. Leonard had found some TV dinners, but since the microwave didn't work, that wasn't all that much of a help. I found a set of a dozen keys on a ring hung on a nail by the door and went out to the little shed near the barbecue grill to try them.

After going through seven or eight keys, I found one that worked on the padlock. I opened the shed. Inside there were the usual things—a chain saw, general tools on a wall rack. A snakeskin on the floor. I knew the mice were in there because I could hear them squeaking. I prowled around in the shadows until I found a bag of charcoal and some flammable liquid in a squeeze bottle. I also found one of those things you could press and start a spark with. I tried it. It didn't work. I found a box of large kitchen matches. I shoved the matches into the windbreaker pocket that didn't house the gun.

The misting rain had ceased, so I felt I could get a fire going in the grill. I went over and righted it and put some charcoal in. I used the fluid in the squeeze bottle to coat it. I lit the doused charcoal directly with one of the kitchen matches. A flame jumped up and nearly took my eyebrows. I cocked the cooker lid over the fire without closing it all the way, then went back inside the cabin.

Leonard found a beer and a bottle of ginger ale in the fridge, and he pulled those out. I carried the TV dinners outside. They were enchiladas in paper containers, the kind designed for microwaves. I set them on the ground, went back inside, and me and Leonard looked through the shelves until I came across some aluminum foil.

Outside I shook the food out of the boxes and wrapped them in the foil and put them on the grill, waited impatiently while they heated up. I went inside and found some plates, went back out, put the food on those by nudging it loose from the foil with a stick, and took it all inside.

I sat the plates on the table. Leonard had found forks, and he gave me one, and we unrolled the foil and ate. It wasn't half-bad, though there were some cool spots in it. I had been too hungry to let them heat properly. I drank warm ginger ale and Leonard drank the warm beer.

I put the plates in the sink and washed them with tap water and bottled soap. I didn't want to leave the dead person a heap of dirty plates.

The wind began to whistle outside, and the rain picked up again, and the sky turned darker.

I said, “Damn it. Just quit already, will you?”

Leonard said, “I found some candles.”

“Not sure we want to light them,” I said. “The Lincoln folks may be searching for us.”

“Good point.”

Leonard went through the cabin, looking about. He went upstairs too, came down carrying a deer rifle and a box of ammunition. “We might need this.”

“There’s the handgun too,” I said. “You know, next to the corpse.”

“We’ll let the dead keep it for now.”

Leonard went over and sat by the window near the front door and pulled the curtain to, then pushed it slightly aside at one corner so he could see outside. He sat with the rifle in his lap. He put the box of ammunition in his windbreaker pocket.

I went around and pulled all the other curtains closed and locked the back door.

Then I checked on the girl. She was still out. I assumed that was due to the drugs she had been given, maybe what had been in the IV bag. She was breathing evenly.

In the bathroom, I found some over-the-counter pain relievers. I brought the bottle out with me, used a cutting board and the butt of a butcher knife to grind a few pills into a powder, and then I put the stuff in a cup, dampened it with water, let it set. I planned to give it to the girl if she woke up, so I thought it needed to be easy to take. I put the bottle of pills in my pocket.

I found a chair to sit in. There was a spare couch pillow. I got up and took it and put it behind my head. I wondered how many rounds were left in the pump shotgun. I wondered how many flies were on the corpse upstairs. Would we go to Mars in my lifetime? It was stuff like that running through my exhausted brain.

The chair I was in was a stuffed chair. It was comfortable. It was the most comfortable chair I had ever sat in since I was born. I yawned.

Leonard said, “Go to sleep, Hap. I got this.”

He didn’t have to tell me twice.

14

When I came awake, the wind was still blowing and the rain was still coming down. The sky was partially light, but the shadows were creeping in, dragging night along after them. I had slept a long time and I felt slightly refreshed.

I took Leonard's spot and the rifle, and Leonard took my chair. He was asleep immediately.

I'm not sure how long I sat there looking out the window, but at one point I chose to go upstairs to the deck, as I thought it might be a better vantage point. I opened the glass doors and stepped out. The rain was blowing onto the deck and splattering at my feet and hammering on the roof above. I stayed back enough to not get wet, close to the door. It was then that I saw something moving in the tangled woods beyond. And then I didn't see it anymore. I stepped back through the open doors and stood there, just inside.

It was starting to be solid dark again, and as the night oozed in with its wind and its rain, it was harder to see. I stood there for several long minutes watching that spot, but I didn't see anything again, and now it was so dark if a bear were dancing in a top hat, I couldn't have seen him. Though I would have liked to.

And then lightning cut across the sky and cracked a tree in the woods, and in that flash, I saw Big Guy and, off to his right, what I think was a woman. Pale-skinned with a rain hood around her head, damp black hair dangling out from under it, plastered wet against her cheeks.

Both wore black and they both had very nasty-looking guns. I couldn't tell what kind, but I was pretty sure they weren't water guns.

When the lightning was gone, they were out of sight, so I went downstairs quickly and shook Leonard awake.

"They've found us," I said.

He got up and got the shotgun I had been carrying. The handguns were still on us.

"I guess we play Alamo," he said.

"I don't want to. Hey, the boat out back."

I didn't have to say it twice. Leonard gave me the shotgun, picked the girl up off the couch, and carried her in his arms like a baby. She made a moaning sound. They headed out the back door, and I followed.

I thought, All right, they may assume we're here, but they don't know that for sure.

Or maybe they did. Maybe one of them or all of them were trackers. Maybe they had a pack of bloodhounds with them. One thing I'd say for them—storm, tornado, what have you, they were not quitters.

Outside we moved swiftly toward the boat. We had to climb over a tree trunk and push through some shattered limbs with wet leaves on them, but we made it to the sagging dock and finally onto the boat.

Leonard tossed loose the tie lines that held the boat to the dock. It was a tenuous connection. A little bit more storm, and the dock wouldn't be there to hold anything.

We pushed against the boat, and it came off the dock with a scraping sound that made me turn and look back at the cabin.

No one yet.

I kept my guard position there on the deck, giving Leonard time to get the girl inside. No one shot at me. No flashlights bobbed our way.

I had the ring of keys in my pocket and hoped like hell one of them was for the boat. I ended my vigil and went into the wheelhouse. There was a short stairway that led down, and I logically assumed that's where the girl was, that Leonard had tucked her away down there. She had certainly been through hell, although she'd spent most of it asleep.

I fumbled with the key ring while Leonard came up from below and stood at one of the wheelhouse windows and looked out. The view wasn't a good one, as there was a tree or two in the way, mainly that big sweet gum, plus the shed. From where we were, we could see in the direction of the back door, but the night had pretty much swallowed it and the cabin.

I found a key that fit. I hoped there was gas in the engine and the damn craft was in working condition.

I said, "I'm going to try and start it."

"Wait," Leonard said. He put the shotgun aside and picked up the rifle I had leaned against a wall.

He gently opened the door to the cabin, stepped on deck. I started the engine. It hummed like a champ. I heard a shot, and something struck the boat, and then a lot of shots struck the boat. I heard Leonard open up with the rifle, less rapid-fire, but by then I was steering us away from the dock and pushing out into the lake.

Bullets snapped. The boat pinged and ripped in places I hoped weren't serious. Lightning flashed across the water, and the wind made the water swell and the night was as solid as a big black brick.

I didn't try to turn on any lights. I gave the boat the throttle and went on into darkness, hoping there wasn't anything I might hit.

15

When Leonard came into the wheelhouse, I said, “You okay?”

“Fine.”

“Hit anything?”

“I shot at the gunfire. I don’t know. The boat took some shots, though. Guess it’s okay.”

“We aren’t sinking,” I said. “Better check on the girl.”

Leonard went down, came back in a short time.

“She’s all right. Still out but starting to stir some. Did you notice she smells like strawberries?”

“I did.”

“Shampoo, I guess.”

I reached in my pocket and took out the pills I had taken from the cabin. “Doubt she can swallow these,” I said. “Mashed her up a batch at the cabin but never got around to giving it to her. If you can find a cup and a spoon down there, if there’s water, maybe you can crush them up, make a liquid. You might give them to her if she wakes up.”

“Right now, all I’m worried about is this black water. I can crush pills anytime.”

I fumbled around until I found the lights, and when I hit them, the water lit up, and so did the wheelhouse.

“I think we’re far enough away now,” I said.

“Man, they are relentless.”

“Won’t be the first time we’ve dealt with their sort,” I said.

“It’ll be the first time we’re as old and tired as we are. And you know what? I think it may be the first time we’ve dealt with their sort. They are major prepared.”

The lake was littered with floating trees and all manner of windblown and rain-pushed debris. The boat rode rough and I wasn’t particularly skilled at driving it. A raccoon could have been trained to do better than I was doing, though it would have to be a smart raccoon.

I could sometimes see cabins on shore, when my lights caught them or the lightning revealed them. They were all dark and lifeless.

The lake was large, larger now due to all the storm waters, and I decided to push across it, try and find a place to dock, see if we could get help. Leonard tried his phone again, but no dice. He figured a tower was blown down.

I thought of Brett and Chance and Reba, and I hoped they were okay. Was the house still standing? Was Buffy the Biscuit Slayer under the bed?

I wished I were under the bed.

On through the rainy night and over the leaping water we went, and soon we were on the far side of the lake. In the lights from our boat I could see the water had risen far above the shoreline, and I feared there were hidden docks under it, so I tried to ease in, pulling back on the throttle. It was a good thing I did, because we bumped up against something that gave the boat a jolt.

Leonard went outside and leaned over the railing with a flashlight that he'd found in the wheelhouse. He came back inside, said, "There's limbs everywhere, and I mean big limbs. There's no way you're going to slide it in here."

I backed the boat off and gradually swung it around, and with my lack of experience it wasn't any harder than trying to turn a dead whale.

Back on the open water, we went along for a while, and finally the rain ceased, and the sky lightened some, and after a while we could see a star or two peeking through strips of dark rain-packed clouds. Then I saw lights suddenly pop on along the shoreline. Houses were visible now. The lights made them look warm. The electric company had been hard at work.

I eased toward the shoreline there and found a place I could run the boat aground. I throttled it up big-time and shot it forward. It bounced on the water like the lake was made of hard concrete. The boat went onto the shore even as I throttled it back; it was too late to make a comfortable nose-in landing, and the bumping water helped jump us onto a patch of mud. The bumping was hard enough to knock Leonard down and hard enough to make my teeth bang together and nearly cause my knee to go out from under me.

I killed the engine, and we went down and turned on the cabin light, found our girl still sleeping, quite comfortably. She hadn't even been shaken out of the bed.

Leonard went through the little closet down there, found a pair of men's pants and a rain poncho.

"You remember all I did was put pants on her," Leonard said.

"Gotcha."

"You can turn your head, Hap."

"I was going to. What about you?"

"I'm gay and I'm putting the pants on. I don't get excited by naked women. I want to double note that."

I turned my back as Leonard worked her pants on and pulled the yellow rain poncho over her head. I turned around again as she groaned and her eyes opened.

She started fighting immediately but then must have realized who Leonard was, remembered he had thrown her in the back of the car in the first place. She looked over at me. I could see her swole tongue. It looked like there was a pale, stuffed sock in her mouth. She tried to talk, but her words were like cars trying to get around a too-narrow pass in the mountains. They tumbled off into sounds that meant nothing.

"Take it easy," I said.

"You can zip yourself up," Leonard said. "Whoever those pants belong to was a lot bigger than you, but it beats traveling around with your butt hanging out."

It was then that she realized she had been wearing nothing but a hospital gown. She reached under the poncho and clutched at it, gave me a confused look.

"You were in the hospital," I said. "Some folks came for you. Not nice folks. They wanted to shoot you."

"And us, I might add," Leonard said.

"Are you in pain?" I said.

She shook her head gently.

"I have some over-the-counter pain stuff. I can mash it up and maybe you could drink it."

She shook her head again.

"All right, so next thing we do is get the hell out of here."

16

Considering people were trying to kill us, we hesitated to leave the shotgun and the rifle, but finally decided we had lost our pursuers, at least for now, and the best thing for us to do was to head out and make for the highway. It had to be out there somewhere.

We kept the handguns, tucked them under our wet shirts. We left the boat and started hiking out, the girl walking now but doing a weak job of it. Still, it beat carrying her.

We didn't stop by houses and ask for help. It had been a long time since you could knock on someone's door and ask for assistance and get it. No one trusted anyone these days.

There was a trail from the lake between two cabins, and we took that. Some dogs barked at us. I glanced down the shoreline and saw more lights coming on in lakefront homes.

We followed the trail to a little road that was an exit for those who lived along the lake. In short time we began to hear a buzzing sound, and then the sound grew louder. We came out on the edge of the highway. There were trucks there, people working, lots of lights. The electric company restoring power.

I went over and talked to one of the workers, a little Hispanic guy with a yellow hard hat. Others came over to see what we were about. They gave us some water, which even the girl managed to drink around her fat tongue. Then they called the cops for us over their radio. Before too long, perhaps an hour, a car came out and parked near the truck we were leaning on, the girl sitting inside of it.

The driver's door of the car opened and someone got out.

It was Manny.

17

We were dry and warm and had coffee and sandwiches that a short, stout cop named Alton had bought for us. He brought the sandwiches in a couple of bags and stood around, holding a white bakery box under his arm. He smiled at us.

Leonard and I ate and felt better, but the girl couldn't eat, not with that tongue. She did get some dry clothes, though, something Manny rustled up. Manny got a nurse over to the police station, thinking the hospital might still be unsafe, and a jail cell with an open door and a soft bunk became the girl's hangout.

The girl had got some fluids in her, thanks to the nurse, and now she was asleep again with an IV hooked up to her. We knew nothing more than we had when we first found her on the road, except some people wanted her tortured and dead. Right now, they didn't like me and Leonard too much either, but my guess was they had no idea who we were. Just a couple of meddlers.

"I think we'll keep her here for a bit," Manny said. "She seems stable enough. Then we have to consider if we'll send her back to the hospital with more cops to watch her. We have your descriptions of the shooters you saw, and that helps."

"These guys," Leonard said, "they strike me as professional, maybe ex-military. One of them, he's like a kung fu rabbit. Me and Hap, we're trained, we're pretty good, but this guy is crazy good and acrobatic. Not that big a guy either, but he didn't mind coming after both of us at the same time."

"And he damn near beat us," I said.

"I don't know about that," Leonard said.

"Thing is," Manny said, "he doesn't know who either of you are. That's to your advantage."

“What I was thinking,” I said. “But we don’t actually know how many of them there are and who they are connected to.”

Alton was standing in the doorway, a shoulder against the door frame. He watched us talk and eat, still with the white box under his arm. He had one of those sad faces, like a hound dog with a stomach ailment.

“For them, we were in the wrong place at the wrong time,” I said. “They weren’t taking names. Damn. What about the lady at the hospital? She make it?”

Manny shook her head. “Neither she nor the officer survived.”

“Guys did the shootings were sure of themselves. Me and Leonard, we had a streak of luck.”

“Bad luck,” Leonard said.

“Neither of you are dead,” Manny said. “There’s some good luck in there someplace.”

“You have a point,” Leonard said.

“Here’s what I think,” she said. “Since they don’t know who you are, you’re out of this. You can go home and put your feet up. My guess is the only person they really want is her. You were just in the way. When she wakes up, I’m going to get her a writing pad, ask some questions.”

“I could use some rest,” I said.

“Me too,” Leonard said.

“You got a lot more explaining to do,” Manny said. “Breaking into a cabin, stealing a boat. Taking the girl from the hospital. But it’s all logical survival stuff.”

“What about whoever was dead in that cabin?” I said.

“We’re looking into it. And by the way, I am the acting chief until Hanson gets back from his trip. It was decided last night.”

“A little promotion,” I said.

“Temporary,” she said.

“What time is it?” I said.

Manny hesitated. She wasn’t sure. She looked at Alton.

“Late morning,” Alton said.

We had been in there since before daybreak, telling Manny all that had happened, all that we’d seen.

“I’m hitting the bricks again,” Alton said. “At least where I can still see bricks, concrete. Lot of water out there. I got to put this up first.” Alton lifted the box under his arm to show us what he was putting away, stepped out and went down the hall.

“Alton’s all right,” Manny said. “He’s new, comes from a little cop shop somewhere in Louisiana, I think. Don't remember exactly. Transferred here a few months back. He'll do fine."

"Glad to hear it," I said.

"Poor guy, got a sick kid, and I don't mean with the flu. Really sick, some kind of neurological disease. Costs a lot to take care of his daughter, Ginger's her name, I think. He has another job being a part-time rent-a-cop, and his wife works two jobs, one as a baker. She's the one bakes the pies he brings in. That's what's in the box. His rule is whoever wants some can have it, as long as he gets a slice."

"Maybe it's a leftover from work," Leonard said.

Manny frowned at Leonard. "Whatever, he brings them in. But that poor kid, that poor family, even with insurance and additional government aid, and there's less of that all the time, they can hardly make ends meet. Actually, I doubt they do meet." She shook her head. "I think about having kids once in a while, but then I wonder if I have some genetic mess lurking inside me that will cause a kid to not be right, or the father has it, or we both have it. I don't even date much these days. Well, Cason, who you know, but we mainly just shag and we're both heavy on the protection. He likes to wear handcuffs and do it with a doughnut in his mouth."

"I don't want to hear about it," I said.

"Wait," Leonard said. "A doughnut?"

"No, I was just trying to make Hap uncomfortable."

"Shit, he likes doughnuts," Leonard said.

Manny grinned. "Well, our relationship may not be about doughnuts, but like that old Haggard song, 'It's Not Love, But It's Not Bad.'"

Since we no longer had a car and neither of us had a working phone, I used the office landline to call Brett and ask her to pick us up. Right then there wasn't anything I wanted more than being home in a nice dry and warm place that didn't have cops in it.

We stood outside the cop shop waiting for her to show up. There was a thin veneer of water over everything. We had learned from Manny that the outskirts of the town, the low places, were now deep water. We watched as Alton drove his cop car around the building, onto a side street.

On the far side of the street, there was a swollen creek, and water had run out of it and was splashing over the curb. Some of the water was running down a drain near where the road met the highway. It was a lot of water, and that drain could hold only so much.

When Brett arrived, we climbed in the car, and she turned in the seat and checked us out.

She wrinkled her brow, said, “You boys really shouldn’t ever go outside. It always turns bad.”

18

When Leonard and I walked in, Buffy the Dog licked our faces and wagged her tail. Chance peppered us with questions, while Reba sat in a chair at the table where we were gathered and watched us like we were monkeys in a zoo. She was a twelve-year-old child, and she seemed way too wise and just a little evil. Leonard nearly always called her the Four-Hundred-Year-Old Vampire.

After we told of our adventures, Reba said, “Y’all could have got yourself shot. And for some whitey.”

“I’m a whitey,” I said.

“Another whitey, standing right here,” Brett said.

“Make that three,” Chance said.

“I’m not in the club,” Leonard said.

“Yeah,” Reba said. “All y’all white except Leonard, and he’s just an asshole, but you said she was real white.”

“Albinism,” I said.

“She got them pink eyes?”

“Light eyes,” I said. “Not pink.”

“I thought they had pink eyes, like a rabbit or some such.”

“Albinism varies, Reba,” I said. “She’s a very pretty girl, or young woman. Frankly, she’s so small and young-looking, it’s hard to tell. She might be eighteen, she might be thirty.”

“That’s cause she’s a Chinaman,” Reba said. “They look young when they’re a hundred years old.”

“You can take the girl out of the projects,” Leonard said, “but you can’t take the projects out of the girl.”

“You talking big, country man,” she said. “Listening to all that cracker music and shit. You ought to put some shine on your black ass.”

Leonard gave her a look that could have made a bear call a taxi. “And you ought to shut up before I set you on fire, you little shit."

"Come on, Leonard," Chance said. "She's a kid. Talk nice."

"Naw," Reba said, and she might have been the bear's taxi driver. "Bring it, cowboy."

I saw Leonard fume and perhaps consider how long he would be in prison for killing a child. "Last time I rescue your ass," Leonard said.

"Yeah, well, you get killed, you ain't rescuing no one's ass," she said, and I thought I detected a small catch in her voice.

Leonard relaxed. "No way. Me and Hap, we're invincible."

"No, we're not," I said.

"Well, we're tough," Leonard said.

"Ain't nobody tough enough in the end," Reba said.

Chance got up and came over and put her arm around Reba. "They're both fine."

"Hell, I don't care," Reba said. She didn't look at either of us when she said it.

"I know what," Brett said. "How about I fix some lunch? You boys want coffee?"

"That would be good," I said.

"Good," she said. "I'll order us a couple of pizzas. Hap, start the coffee."

"That's not fixing lunch," I said.

"It's my way of fixing lunch," she said.

19

A couple days passed, and the weather stayed volatile. Every time it cleared up and looked as if it was going to stabilize, a black cloud would appear in the distance and the rain and the wind would come again and howl loud enough to scare the shit out of a lion.

The Atlantic kept brewing up unseasonable tropical storms, and it was said a hurricane about the size of Rhode Island was going to make landfall in Houston. It might even make it to LaBorde.

The news told us not to take it lightly, to prepare and expect storm damage. It warned that though it was rare for a hurricane to make its way this far inland, this one looked highly possible, and maybe with category 3 winds. The weather lady suggested we stock up on food, flashlight batteries, and candles.

We had already lost one window on the house due to flying debris, and I expected it would be worse in a few days. I nailed some plywood over the missing window. When the weather settled down, I planned to replace it.

Brett Sawyer Investigations was out of work right then. No one needed a cheating spouse followed, so we were mostly sitting around. Pookie was still away, so Leonard had been staying with us.

It was a crowded house. Chance and Reba gave up the bedroom, where Chance had slept in the bed and Reba on an air mattress. Leonard took their place in there. Chance ended up on the couch, and Reba had the air mattress on the floor next to it. Buffy slept with Reba. Reba loved that dog and cuddled her like she was a big stuffed toy. It seemed as if Buffy was pretending to be one.

Something about the storms, and the big one that might be coming, caused me to give my life a lot of consideration. The storms were out of season that year, and so was I. Leonard and I joked, but I was beginning to feel my age.

I used to heal practically overnight, but now my bones ached from past encounters, and I found I enjoyed lying about more, staying near Brett. We filled in places that the other lacked, and no doubt, I got the better end of that deal.

We had recently married after living together for years. There had been a couple of separations, a worry here and there about things the three of us had done in the name of justice, as if we had any right to deal out justice. But we had anyway. Leonard and Brett were fine with that. They slept well at night. They were pragmatic. Me, I was a wounded idealist with a liberal limp. I wanted justice, but I wanted hope, and I wanted to be the old me, the person I was before I had taken a life.

I was not a pacifist, but I didn't want to keep trying to solve problems with weapons and fists. The guilt of that had begun to outweigh the satisfaction.

Maybe it was time me and Leonard pulled out a couple of rocking chairs. We could just peek through windows to see who was cheating on who and cash our checks, take it easy.

We couldn't set everything right. Hell, me and Leonard had done all we could for that girl, and now the cops had her and she was safe. We were done.

Sure. It was over.

Like hell it was.

20

One morning I got the call from Manny.

“Here’s what we’ve learned. The girl is feeling much better. She wrote down her name. It’s Nikki. She won’t say her last name. We’ve asked her what happened, what’s going on? She wrote that she wanted you and Leonard. Actually, she wrote, ‘I want the black guy and the white guy who saved me.’”

“Okay.”

“She’s still here at the station. Doesn’t want to go to the hospital. I don’t blame her. In a nest of cops is probably the safest place she could be. Her tongue swelling has gone down. She might even be able to talk in a few days, and if she is, will you two come down and hear what she has to say so we can hear it too? Or maybe she writes it all down for you. Doesn’t matter. But I’d like for you to come.”

“We can do that,” I said.

“Should you ask Leonard?”

“I know what his answer will be. We’ve been talking about her, wondering how she was, what had happened to her. Wondering if someone out there was still determined to kill her.”

“Wondering the same myself. I’ll call you when I think she’s ready for it, because right now she’s on some strong pain relievers and sleeps a lot. Outside of her tongue cut like that, almost cut off, she’s all right. Looks like the doctor stitched it back together. The doctor, she says Nikki will be fine in time. But I wanted to know you two can be here so I could tell her. Have you heard the weather report?”

“I quit listening. It’s always bad.”

“It’s going to get worse. A series of tornadoes are expected for our area. Lots of rain and high wind the rest of the time, and then we’ll get some hurricane from the Gulf. Probably fire and pestilence to follow, could be a plague of boils and locusts, maybe an egg and bacon shortage to top things off."

"Thanks for making my day."

"Hey, blame global warming, not me. Who the hell expects hurricanes this time of year. Mother Earth hates us."

* * *

That night I came down from the bedroom, where I had been reading in bed beside Brett, and found Leonard in the kitchen with Reba. There was a bag of vanilla cookies on the table and she had a glass of milk and he had a large cup of coffee. I could smell the coffee when I came into the kitchen, and now I wanted some. I went over and put a decaf pod in the machine, put the cup under, and got that going.

"Now I get a cookie," Reba said.

"Just one," Leonard said.

Reba took one from the bag, dipped it in her milk like she was drowning someone she didn't like.

I sat at the table with them and told Leonard what Manny said.

"That little white girl ain't something oughta be messed with," Reba said. "White people get you killed. Real white one like that, she's nothing but trouble. More white on they ass, more trouble they is."

"You don't even know her," I said.

"Got some idea."

"I'm white."

"Done said that. And you trouble too. But guess you my trouble, and she ain't. She ain't oughta be none of yours."

Reba had seen some death in her young years, had been disappointed by people more than once. I couldn't blame her youthful cynicism, but sometimes, the depth of it for a child, the knowledge she had, pained me.

"She's got no one else right now," I said. "You know how that is."

Reba eyed me for a long moment, then looked at the sack of cookies. "Ain't you supposed to take a turn?" she said to Leonard.

Leonard reached in the bag and took one. Reba turned the bag and took one for herself. "Now we even," she said.

"You're one ahead," Leonard said.

"Ain't I always?" she said.

21

Upstairs, back in bed with Brett, I told her what was going on, said, “You know what?”

“What,” she said.

“I think you should take the girls, including the dog girl, and you should go someplace else for a while.”

“Sending us out for our own protection again,” she said. “I can take care of myself.”

“I know that, but I’m not so sure about Chance and Reba or Buffy the Dog.”

“I think you’re being all macho, the man taking care of his little woman. You know what?”

“What?”

“I like that. I’m all for being an empowered female badass, but I still need someone to lift heavy things off the top closet shelf.”

“There’s nothing heavy up there.”

“Now you’re going to get technical. Listen, Hap, I do appreciate you watching out for me. But I can take care of myself, boy. I like the thought, but I’ve been known to be trouble myself.”

“This is true.”

“You’re not the only one has murder in his history. You, me, and Leonard.”

“Thing is, why have more? It’s a heavy weight, and more just makes it heavier.”

“And no one hates carrying it more than you.”

“So you’re really fine with what you’ve done? What we’ve done? Hell, what me and Leonard have done?”

“It’s not about being fine with it, dear. It’s about knowing why it was done. I never lie down and think I’m a random killer or that I did anything for money or profit."

"In my case, revenge has been in the soup a few times."

"But there was more to it than being angry about being cut off in traffic or someone beating you to a Walmart Black Friday sale. It was more complicated than just getting even. You've stepped on some bugs, Hap. Me and you and Leonard."

"We do a lot of stepping."

"When the law does its job, we don't need to do a thing. They don't always. And as you've said, when the law breaks the law or refuses to do its job, there is no law."

"I think I stole that from the *Billy Jack* movie. I don't know how much I believe it."

"I'm not saying it's cut and dried, but you really seem worried. More than usual. What exactly are you afraid of?"

"I'm not sure. The weather, for one. It's becoming worse, and if the weather reports hold, it's going to make LaBorde very wet."

"It's East Texas, baby. We always have storms."

"And there's those guys I told you about. They're bad news. They know what they're doing, and what they're doing is dangerous and ugly, and they are persistent. I've got an uncomfortable feeling about that girl, like maybe whatever went on with her is still going on, and me and Leonard are somehow in the pile. That leads to you guys."

"You said they don't know who you are."

"Things can be found out. Guys that have the kind of organization and weapons and determination these people do, well, they got money behind them. And if you got money, you have power, and you have connections. We can be found out, and then you're found out. All that leads to Chance and Reba. I need them taken care of, and you're the one to do it. They love you, they trust you, and as you said, you're a badass."

"Where would we go?"

"First time in our life, we got a little money," I said. "My life, anyway. Why not take advantage of it? We aren't going to be getting any private-investigation business in this weather, and me and Leonard will be tied up a little with Manny and the girl, so, you know, you could go most anyplace."

"And what if you go in to talk with Manny, and you're back in two hours?"

"Then I'll meet up with you guys."

Brett twisted her mouth the way she does when she's considering an idea.

“We could go to Tyler,” she said. “I’d like to do some shopping. They got a Half Price Books there, a Thai place. I ate there when I bought Reba shoes. I like shoes too.”

“All the shoes you got, it’s like you got a lot more feet than two. It’s like you’re a centipede.”

“They have a new theater there too. Lots of movies.”

“That sounds good.”

“They have a hotel right there in the mall. All kinds of stores. It’s big-time for East Texas.”

“Does the hotel allow dogs?”

“I don’t know. Maybe not. If they don’t, then the closest hotel to the mall that does allow dogs would be our pick.”

“Sounding better and better.”

“I’ll be spending some serious money if I go over there.”

“It’s your money more than mine. I work for you, remember?”

“I never forget.”

“So?”

“I’ll give it some thought. We might do that. I do, you join us there when you’re finished.”

“Good. Go there and wait until you hear from me, stay as long as you need to stay. I’ll catch up with you.”

“Hap, you sound like you’re really worried, not like you’re excited about a vacation.”

“I said as much.”

“Yeah, but this feels different.”

“That’s because I’m really worried, but I’m not exactly sure what I’m worried about, and that worries me even more. I hope you’ll take that vacation, and before it gets really stormy.”

Brett rolled over and put her arm across my chest.

“Maybe we should see if we can make a storm ourselves.”

“I’m feeling a bit like a tornado,” I said.

“And I know a tornado alley you might like to visit.”

“Oh my, girl, you are nasty.”

“Uh-huh, I am.”

22

Time passed but the wind and rain didn't. The tornadoes Manny warned me about came, but we were lucky and our place wasn't hit by any. The twisters tore up the woods on the eastern edge of town and took a few houses and mobile homes out in the country on a sightseeing tour, and though there were some minor injuries, no one was killed, though there were reports of missing chickens.

That was a good thing, no one being hurt, though who knows about the chickens. The morning Manny called us to come down to the station, the weather was still bad. The sky was black, the wind was high, and the rain was furious.

We drove to the cop shop in Leonard's truck, and as we went, we saw the roofs of some houses were missing, and there were plenty of shingles lying about like dead soldiers. The streets were littered with wet leaves and paper. Now and again, something unidentifiable blew by or against the truck.

Even that early in the day we drove with the lights on. There were few cars out, probably folks like us, doing only what they had to do. We reached the center of town. Leonard drove slow and easy because the brick streets were slick as owl shit. There were a couple cars crashed alongside the road. I wondered how long they had been there.

Stores were closed, even the café on the corner. We had to turn a street early because we could see parked city electric company trucks and workers wearing yellow slickers in our path.

It felt so eerie.

We took Pecan Street next to the bookstore, went up a ways, turned left, crossed North Street, and came to the rear of the cop shop.

There was a parking lot back there, and there were two police cars in the lot. One of them had a crumpled front end, most likely a result of the stormy weather. There was a white transport bus there too. It had wire mesh on the windows. It was an old bus and had once been used to transport prisoners, and from time to time it still was. According to Marvin, it was supposed to be sold in the next county auction.

We cruised through the back lot, went around the side of the building, and parked out front. There were only a couple of cars there.

We got out wearing our black hooded rain slickers ("Same alike," Reba called them) and made our way into the station, leaning into the wind the way you would if you were trying to push a truck uphill and feared a hernia.

The receptionist knew us and we walked over to the plasti-glass she was behind and spoke into the little grate that allowed our voices through but not much else. That glass, Marvin once said, was built like the Great Wall of China. Evelyn was always friendly and kept her kids' and grandkids' photos in frames on her desk, which bent like a horseshoe around her in what was a good-size room. She looked like a lady who loved bacon and grease. She wore big flowery explosions of cloth and always had a tall Styrofoam cup of something on her desk. She had hair like a wasps' nest, but it wasn't by accident—she styled it that way. There was enough hairspray on it to pin a wrestler to the mat, and she wore a flakey white lipstick that reminded me of cake frosting.

"How's things with the family?" Leonard said.

"Fine. You boys in new trouble yet?"

"Why, Evelyn," I said. "We don't get in trouble, we get in adventures."

"Is that what you call them?"

"Yeah," I said. "We go with that."

"That's not what Chief Hanson calls them," she said, and pointed at the door to the side of her office and buzzed the lock. With waves to her, we pushed the door and went in.

Manny was easy to find. She was in Hanson's office going over some paperwork. The door was open. We went in.

"Caught you working," I said.

"Pretending to work," she said.

"So how is she?" Leonard said, and we both took off our slickers and hung them on hooks on the back of the open door and sat.

"She can talk a little, but not for long. She gets tired and her tongue starts to hurt. She might talk some and write some. But she can communicate and claims she'll tell more with you guys here. I'm not sure what the attraction is."

“Sterling manhood,” Leonard said. “There’s nothing like a real man that’s queer as a duck in trousers to bring out the enthusiasm of either sex.”

“What about me?” I said. “I’m not gay.”

“That sort of sets you back a notch,” Leonard said. “But you’ll do.”

“That’s funny,” Manny said. “Just not enough.”

“I think I’m perfectly manly,” I said.

Leonard grinned at me. Manny chose not to get involved.

Manny got up and led us out of the office and down the hall. There was a jail cell at the back with its door swung wide, and Nikki was sitting up in a hospital bed that had been rolled in for her. She had a stack of pillows behind her head and at her back. She wore an orange jumpsuit, same as a criminal. She had an IV in her arm, and the bag for it hung on an IV rack. The nurse, a slim, older woman, nodded at us and then, without a word, got up and went out.

I guess Manny had her trained.

There were three chairs in the cell, and they had provided Nikki with a small table. There were four books on it, popular bestsellers. There was a yellow legal pad and a ballpoint pen beside them.

We sat in the chairs.

I smiled at Nikki. “How are you?”

“Terrible,” she said. I understood her clearly, but there was an oddness about her voice. She had to pronounce the word “terrible” with painful care, and it arrived as if by banana boat.

“Looks like you got a lot of reading material,” I said.

“Nurse’s stuff,” she said. “She’s very sweet.”

“Manny said you’d like to talk to us.”

She nodded. She waved her hand, indicating we should come closer. We scooted our chairs nearer to the bed. When we were settled, Nikki reached out and took Leonard’s hand and pulled it up on the little table and held it. It was quite a contrast, the hand of a snow-white woman grasping a hand as black as the bottom of a coal mine.

She took a deep breath, let it out, said, “I’m scared.”

“We know what you’re scared of,” I said. “But we don’t know who they are or why they’re after you. That something you can explain?”

“Nicole Beckman.”

The three of us just stared at her. She might as well have pulled a name out of a hat, stuck her finger on a name in the phone book, or said that Santa Claus had sent his elves after her.

“Who’s that?” Manny said.

“A year ago,” Nikki said, “she was murdered in her home, and her girlfriend was there with her.”

I thought I had the answer. I said, “Are you the girlfriend?”

She shook her head gently. “I bat for the other team.”

“Okay,” I said. “How are you connected to her?”

“I’m not. Not really.”

“Shit,” Manny said. “Beckman. Yeah. Wait. I heard about that. Around Tyler, right?”

Nikki nodded.

Manny explained. “No one could figure out why Nicole Beckman was killed. No record. No indication of criminal activity of any kind. Someone broke in her house and blew her brains out while she was in bed. Her girlfriend was with her, and the girlfriend said the man with the gun came in and said to Nicole, ‘Is your name Nicole Beckman?’ She said it was, and he shot her, hit the girlfriend in the head with the stock of the shotgun, and got out of there quick. No one has any idea who it was killed Beckman, or why. Killer wore a mask, animal mask of some sort. The girlfriend said he seemed unsteady on his feet, like maybe he’d spent too much time at a bar. Odd observation, but I remember that’s what she said, what was reported, anyway.”

I was more baffled now than before I came to the station.

Leonard’s mouth fell open, and I saw a look in his eye like a chicken that had just laid an egg and was mighty proud of it. He leaned forward in his chair, said, “And is Nikki short for something else?”

“Nicole,” she said.

“And your last name is?” he said.

“Beckman.”

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Someone killed the wrong Nicole Beckman,” Leonard said. “They were after you.”

Nikki nodded.

She started talking, and although she eventually had to resort to writing it down, we got the complete story, and it was an odd one.

It boiled down to this, at least at first. The center of Nikki’s problem was Larry Keith, aka One Mean Asshole.

When Nikki said that name, Manny knew who it was immediately, sketched in some background for us so as to save Nikki’s tongue too much of a workout.

Larry operated a garage outside of Tyler, near Bullard, but he used it as a chop shop as well. Fix a car by day, chop one by night. Legitimate when the sun was up, crooked when the sun went down.

Larry was the son of Wilson Keith. We had heard of him. He was big in the Dixie Mafia. Leonard and I had put our hands into that dirt a few times and happily toppled some of those assholes off their thrones, but it was like whack-a-mole—someone new popped right up. Wilson Keith was that someone new, a former second or third in command that took over things due to design and attrition. Always suspected of this or that, always written about in the papers, mentioned on TV, but never caught with his hand in the cookie jar. He was as smooth as owl shit and twice as stinky.

Wilson set his son Larry up in business, and business was good. Larry was fond of older muscle cars when he could get them. Couldn’t sell the whole car, he sold the parts. But no matter how hard the local law or the feds tried to nail him, they couldn’t do it. It wasn’t that Larry was all that smart, but his old man was. And as long as Larry followed the old man’s lead, he stayed in the clear. He and his crew could take a car apart in seconds, redo it, and have it on a truck going up north about the time you pulled your coat on. They sold them way under the cost of the original cars. Theft has a low overhead.

Nikki said Larry's favorite car thief was a fellow named Pretty Boy Florence. He was a real pro, had been known to steal a car midday right off a car lot. He was quick, self-assured, and could talk a nun out of her underpants and convince her to buy them back. He had a girlfriend named Nicole Beckman. She knew all about what was going on. She was deeply in love with Pretty Boy, no matter that he was a thief.

That Nicole was our snow-white Nikki.

Nikki started talking again. Manny said, "If you're going to tell your story, I want the nurse here. I want to make sure we don't push you too hard or you don't overdo."

Manny got up and called the nurse in and I got up and went out and got another chair and brought it back. The nurse sat close to Nikki, but Nikki didn't let go of Leonard's hand.

Manny said to the nurse, "We want to make sure we aren't pushing her too hard and that she's not pushing herself too hard, but anything you hear tonight, it's confidential. You understand?"

"I understand," said the nurse. "And I appreciate being with my patient. I'm here for her health. You do what you got to do, and it's safe with me."

"Good," Manny said.

Nikki began talking again.

"One night I was out with Pretty Boy, and we were coming back from dinner, and he was always fun, so funny, and maybe at the bottom of it all, he wasn't that smart, but he dressed sharp and took me to nice places, and there was part of me that knew I was being shallow, that this guy was going nowhere fast and dragging me with him. But I loved him. I did. I dreaded the moments I was without him, but when I was with him I was, in the back of my mind, always wondering how I might shed myself of him. He was like having a dangerous wild animal for a pet, one that thinks you're the pet, and you know in your bones that pet isn't loyal, and one day it's going to turn and bite you, but, man, is it fluffy and cute, and there are such fine moments when you're with it.

"But this night, that was the night I had been dreading, that down-in-the-bones feel that something bad was coming. I can't tell you how many times I told myself I was standing on a railroad track and the train was heading for me and I ought to step off because the engineer was my wild pet.

“We’re driving back from dinner, and we take the residential-area street, a shortcut off the main road, and Pretty Boy spies something fantastic, like a Christmas present just waiting for him to pick up. A nice juicy red Corvette.

“He had never done that before, what he was about the do, with me on board, though I have to be honest and tell you I knew what he did for a living, and he had told me all kinds of things about how the business works, how he went about what he did, so I want you to know I’m fessing up, that I’m not a babe in the woods by any means. I knew. I didn’t participate, until this night, but I knew he was a car thief and good at his job.

“May I have some water?”

The nurse gave her a bottle of water, said, “Anytime you need to stop, you stop. You’re my patient, and they can wait.”

I glanced at the nurse. Her eyes were soft and hooded. I liked that look, and I liked the way she protected Nikki, but I hoped like hell Nikki would keep talking, damaged tongue or not. We needed to know. Manny certainly needed to know.

After swallowing some water and a pain pill, she took Leonard’s hand again and continued.

“He stopped the car, said to me, ‘Nikki, this will just take a minute, and then you follow me to the shop.’ Right then I knew that I was on the edge of crossing over, but I got in the driver’s seat, and Pretty Boy got a little bag of tools out of the trunk and crossed the street to the car.

“But things went wonky. I’m watching him, and I’ll never forget, he had a kind of strut in his step. Maybe that was for me or maybe it’s just how he was when he was doing something like that, because I know he loved it and had talked to me about how powerful it made him feel. He said to me, ‘They think those cars are theirs until I take them, then I like to imagine how hollow they feel when they come out and there’s an empty space where the car had been, and now it’s my car, at least for a moment, and I feel like someone made me the king of the world, and then when I get paid, it’s like money from heaven. Didn’t cost me nothing more than a lock pick and a hot-wire and fine drive to the chop shop.’

“So he’s standing by the driver’s-side window of the Corvette, glances back at me with a smile on his face, then turns to his work, and that’s when I know it’s gone wrong. I didn’t understand exactly what was happening at first, but then I saw a man’s head raise up, and then a woman’s, and I got the impression they had been parked in the drive so they could have sex. Why they parked there for that, I don't know. Maybe just for fun. Maybe not. I don't even know if that driveway was their driveway or just some random driveway they pulled into to do something naughty. But when I saw those heads raise up, Pretty Boy jumped back liked he'd come upon a snake. I saw the man jerk the door open and step out of the car, naked.

"Pretty Boy froze with that bag of tools in his hand, and I heard the man say, 'Who the fuck are you?'

"That's when Pretty Boy dropped the bag, pulled a pistol from under his sport coat and shot twice, killing both of them. If shooting them like that wasn't cold enough, he pulled the woman's body out of the car and left both of them lying naked on the driveway. There was blood all over the concrete.

"Pretty Boy came back to his car, the pistol shots still ringing in my ears. He put the bag of tools in the trunk, took a towel out of the back, came to the window where I was, said, 'Don't ask a question. Follow me.'

"Lights were coming on in a house next door and some dogs had started to bark. Pretty Boy went back to the Corvette, used the towel to wipe down what I figured was blood, then he got in the car, and, using the key the man had left in the ignition, he backed out and drove down the street. I went after him, did it with the car lights off too. At the corner he turned on the Corvette's lights, and I turned on mine. He turned right and I followed him.

"Part of me was thinking, Peel off, go to the cops, you're just digging yourself a grave. But, hell, I kept driving. Can I have some more water?"

The nurse helped her out, and Nikki drank long and hard from the bottle. She sighed when she handed it back.

"You need to stop and rest," the nurse said.

"No," Nikki said. "I'm fine. I want to get it all out, or as much of it as I can. I get tired, I'll write it out."

The nurse nodded. Nikki continued.

"I followed him like he asked, but I was almost in a trance. I just didn't know what else to do. We went out on the far edge of town where Larry Keith had his chop shop. All the way out there I'm thinking I've gone from being in love with a bad-boy car thief to being in love with a murderer. What do I do?

"I got to the shop and I parked out front. The shop doors were wide open. Inside it was bright. Pretty Boy drove the Corvette through the shop doors, parked, got out. I could see from where I sat that the seat of his pants was wet with blood. Then I see this guy walk up to him. I didn't know it at the time, but it was Larry Keith. Later I saw photos on the Internet, but I'll come to that. I saw Keith talking to Pretty Boy, who was explaining the blood, I guess.

"After a while, Keith, appearing none too happy, looked out the door at me in Pretty Boy's car. His expression could have curdled milk, as my mother used to say. He was a handsome guy, but even from a distance, there was something unsettling about him, like his soul was dying or was already dead. I know how that sounds, but when he looked at me, I felt like I was melting into a puddle of blood.

"Larry Keith walked Pretty Boy out of view of the doors, and they were gone for some time, but eventually they come back into view, and Pretty Boy, I could tell that plenty was wrong, and at first I'm thinking it's the murders he committed, as he looked like someone had let the air out of him. He was almost as white as I am, walked with a kind of shuffle, like his shoes were sticking to the ground.

"The two of them walked to where I was waiting in Pretty Boy's car, and I felt sick suddenly, because Keith glanced at Pretty Boy, said so I heard it, 'We got to clean things up a little, right?'

"I wanted to think they meant the stolen car, but in that moment, I felt it meant a lot more than that. And then Keith comes over and looks in the car at me. Puts his hands on the open car window and ducks his head and looks in. I've never seen eyes that cold before, like a dead animal lying on the side of the road, its eyes open and flat and looking at nothing. He stares at me a long time, says, 'Might want to eat some red meat, honey, you look kind of pale.' I knew then I would never get the chance to eat any meat or anything else if I sat there for very long, but I was glued to the car seat, looking out the window.

"Pretty Boy walked over to the car, told me they wanted us to come inside. I was surprised they wanted me. Why? I wasn't in a stolen car. Fact was, that was the closest I'd ever come to the shop. There was something odd about the way Pretty Boy looked at me, like he was about to shovel dirt in my face. I knew then for sure that I wasn't being melodramatic, that Keith wasn't talking about 'clean up' in the sense of wiping blood off the seat of a stolen car. I was a witness to the murders, and I was connected to Pretty Boy, and he was connected to Larry Keith. I loved Pretty Boy, but I knew right then he didn't love me. I knew what was coming. Pretty Boy would have a new girl on his arm in a week, if it took that long. I'd be buried somewhere, thrown in a lake, maybe turned into a sausage or mashed up in a car crusher along with some automobile. I threw the car in gear, gunned it backward, turned it quick, and started out of there. I could hear Pretty Boy yelling for me to come back. I glanced in the rearview mirror, saw Larry Keith and a big man come out of the garage, the big man with a wrench in his hand, Pretty Boy still looking down the road at me, growing small in the rearview mirror.

"There was a flash. A bright pop of light in the mirror, and I saw Pretty Boy fold up in the middle and fall to the ground, and then I saw the big man with the wrench go to work on him. I don't know if Pretty Boy was still alive or if they were just making sure, but in a moment, I didn't see them anymore. I was driving too fast. I knew then what Pretty Boy didn't know. They hadn't planned to kill just me, they were taking him out as well. He had crossed the line from car thief to stupid. They didn't care about the murder. They cared there would be too much heat brought to bear, and they were trying to throw cold water on things before they turned into a fire. I mean, I don't know if I was thinking about it that carefully then, but that seemed like the deal to me, and I had plenty of time to think about it later. Maybe they killed him because I got away, thought he was part of that, but I think he was going to die no matter what.

"I drove wild for a while, and then I slowed down and drove on, not knowing where I was going. I only stopped to buy gas and eat a burger. Later I had to pull over and throw that burger up beside the road. It fit in my stomach like an acidic boulder. I drove through the night without plans, just reviewing what Pretty Boy had done, then what had been planned for me, and finally I kept seeing what I saw in the rearview mirror play over and over in my head. The flash of light. Pretty Boy bending in half and falling to the ground, and then that big man with the wrench.

"In the end, I drove right out of East Texas, across North Texas, crossed the Red River into eastern Oklahoma. I found a town that had its bus station beside a liquor store and parked Pretty Boy's car, a '68 Ford Mustang, out back of that store with the keys in it. I caught a bus and got off at the first stop and ended up at an out-of-the-way town about the size of a postage stamp called Hootie Hoot."

"We know it," Leonard said. "We had a little adventure there once. It makes a stretched dead rat's asshole seem like a nicer place to live."

"That proves you've been there. About half the downtown is closed and boarded off. There's a theater still there, a restaurant where they burn a bad steak and grease up worse home fries. You can gain five pounds walking by that place. It's got a few service stations and a bank and some of this and some of that, and one of the thats they had was a flower shop.

"I had a little money, and I managed to get an apartment, was quick to get a job at the flower shop. It was walking distance from where I was staying. The shop paid in cash, because even though I had some credit cards, I thought it best not to use them. I feared those men finding out who I was and tracking me. Maybe they already knew—good chance Pretty Boy told them that night before Keith came out and looked at me. I started going by the name Nikki Smith. The old man and his wife that owned the place, I think they liked the idea of someone like me, an albino, working there. It was unique in that little town, brought in a little business. You know, 'They got that albino girl over at the flower shop. Let's go over and look at her.' All I had to do to stay hidden was let the old man in the shop rub his fat hand across my ass now and again. When his wife wasn't looking, of course.

"One time, when the old lady wasn't there, he asked if the hair on my vagina was as white as the hair on my head or if I shaved it. I told him I didn't shave it because I had a disease that might get spread by shaving. I thought that might make him leave me alone. He didn't believe me, or didn't care. He kept up with the touching.

"Compared to being discovered and killed, being groped by him seemed like a small trade-off. Most of the day I made deliveries, and though I had a license, it was the one with my correct name on it, so I was extra careful. I don't know if it would have mattered had I got a ticket. I don't know if Larry Keith could track me somehow because of that. I didn't think so, but I wasn't chancing it. He had money, so he had a lot of connections. Maybe had someone looking at arrest records, checking credit card use. I know Pretty Boy once told me Larry had people in high places, moles, and he got a lot of information that way, though Pretty Boy told me it was really Larry's father that had the connections. Larry's real connection was his father, Wilson Keith. Words Pretty Boy used was 'He's the real swinging dick. Larry, he's just the underpants.'

"Anyhow, I learned how to dodge around the old man, stashed some bucks for a long jaunt to somewhere else.

"Day I left there, I was going to punch that old man as hard as I could. And I did. Hard enough to knock him down. I had to stand on a stool to do it. But before that, when I was still delivering flowers, one day I was curious, peeked at the news with the flower shop's computer.

Up to then, I had managed not to bother. Didn't want to know. I knew Pretty Boy was dead, and I still loved him a little, even if he had planned to let them kill me, maybe even do it himself. I assumed he was ground up in a hot dog somewhere.

"But that day my curiosity got the better of me. Couldn't help myself. Really wasn't anything there. Nobody knew Pretty Boy was dead, didn't even know he was missing. No unknown bodies found, no one came up with a finger in a taco or some such. Then I saw another piece of news about the murder of a Nicole Beckman in Tyler. Then I knew. Someone had been hired to hunt me down and kill me, make sure I didn't talk about the chop shop, tell anything I might have learned from Pretty Boy. Thing was, someone had killed the wrong Nicole Beckman. My first thought was I was safe. They thought I was dead. My second thought was that poor girl. I felt I had to do something.

"I called the cops in Tyler, told my story. They needed to see me, of course, said they'd protect me. Wanted my testimony. On the same day I punched the old man at the flower shop as a way of delivering my resignation, the cops picked me up and hauled me to Tyler, Texas."

Nikki leaned back and shut her eyes. We all sat silent, waiting. Finally, she sat up, took the water bottle from the nurse, took another pain pill. When she started talking again, her words came slower and were tripping over each other a little, but she was determined.

"Reporters got wind of what I told the cop, about it being the wrong Nicole. Someone at the police station leaked it. News trumped common sense. They wrote how the wrong Nicole had been killed, which of course put me in even greater jeopardy. It was widely known then that I was going to be a witness for the prosecution against Larry.

"I was under protection, but I was nervous. If it had been leaked I was alive that quick and easy, I didn't know I was safe where they had put me up, a hotel downtown. Cops watching me, most of them were all right. Talked to me, played Monopoly with me, brought me books and movies, food. One night, one of those cops, he spilled some stuff to me. Not that he was supposed to, but he did, which goes to prove there are no real tight lips when it comes to rumor, gossip, or righteous news. Hell, for all I know, he was the one that let it loose to a reporter that I was alive. He liked to talk, and the thing he talked about frightened me.

"He said word was Larry Keith's dad couldn't let me stay alive. I guess it was a kind of pride thing. You don't get away from his family, not if they want you dead. And of course, there was that whole not-being-able-to-testify-if-I-was-a-corpse thing.

“This cop, Cantor was his name, he says, ‘Small-time car thief and lifetime criminal Pete Ridgely got arrested for trying to boost an SUV. Minute he thought he might end up going to prison, he wanted to land as soft as he possibly could, so he decided to cut a deal. He knew who had killed the wrong Nicole: Pete, his own self.’

“That’s how Cantor put it. ‘Pete, his own self.’ He had been paid to do the job, was so excited he got drunk, looked up Nicole Beckman in the phone book, drove to her house, and killed her. Thing was, the Nicole he wanted was me, and I was in hiding, so the wrong Nicole Beckman was murdered. Cantor said Pete told the cops, ‘I don’t do so good when I drink.’

“I figured his drinking had to be pretty damn bad, all right. Someone must have at some point mentioned I was Asian and albino, certainly memorable enough for those with brain cells.

“After that, Pete had his own head on the chopping block for killing the wrong girl. At that time, I was loose in the wild, so to speak, in Hootie Hoot, and Pete, he didn’t know which end was up. He didn’t know where to find me to make things right by killing me, and Wilson Keith wanted him dead for being a screwup, and maybe kind of wished his own son was dead for being stupid enough to hire a drunk who didn’t know an albino from a rhino. Pete knew it was his turn to get whacked, so he went state’s evidence. He didn’t last long in jail. He had provided written testimony, but he wouldn’t be speaking at the trial after all. Hanged himself.”

“At least he got to quit being stupid,” Leonard said.

Nikki smiled a little. It wasn’t exactly an amused smile. Maybe her tongue hurt.

“Do you need to stop?” the nurse said.

Nikki gently shook her head, kept talking.

“Cantor said shortly after a jailer named Frank Quinn found Pete hanging, he retired from the jailer business and began living high on the hog without visible means of support. Turned out he liked to talk, and rumor was he talked about Pete’s death now and then, like how maybe Pete got some help getting that rope around his neck.

“An explanation for Jailer Quinn’s expensive lifestyle didn’t happen. He was found under a piece of tin near an old fallen-down shack by two homeless men that had stopped to pee. Quinn’s mouth was stuffed with his amputated foot, a symbolic suggestion he had put his foot in his mouth. Damn. I feel like I got a foot in my mouth, way my tongue is swelling.”

"I said you could stop," the nurse said.

"I'm okay. At least until I'm not. May I have more water?"

The nurse gave Nikki the plastic bottle and Nikki let go of Leonard's hand and took a long pull of the water and gave the bottle back to her. She rested her head against the pillow, closed her eyes, and let whatever she was thinking about ramble around inside her head.

About the time I thought she might have fallen asleep, she opened her eyes, sighed, and picked up where she'd left off.

"Quinn had been another of Larry's hires, and now someone was cleaning up problems. Canton's guess was it was Wilson Keith doing the cleaning, or having it done, and this time by more efficient people, the cream of the crop, the High Cotton Gang, he called them."

Manny nodded. "Yeah. I know of them. Rumored team of hitters, dirty-jobbers sometimes employed by Wilson Keith, the king of East Texas dirt. Right amount of money, they'd kill their mothers."

"I was supposed to be safe, and I know Cantor was thinking he was keeping me in the loop, though he wasn't supposed to do that," Nikki said. "He had good intentions, I think. And he liked to talk. I figured I was next on the cleanup agenda."

That's when Nikki's voice began to sound as if it were coming through a potato in a sock. She had to stop. She had the nurse crank her up in her hospital bed, and she picked up the pad and pen on the table beside her and began to write. Her hand wobbled, like it was slowly being electrocuted by a weak voltage.

What she wrote in that chicken-scratch handwriting boiled down to this:

Larry's chop shop had already been shut down by the cops. They found some violations or some such shit, but there wasn't enough evidence to have him arrested on murder charges, just Nikki's word. But it was a strong word, and there were other pieces of the puzzle that might fit together and lead to a lethal injection for Larry, and if Pete's and Quinn's deaths could be led back to Wilson Keith, that ol' boy might be having his vein tapped with a spike as well. But to clinch the deal, to get them both, Nikki's testimony was just the thing. But she had to make it to trial, and it was reasonably certain someone at the cop shop in Tyler was leaking to Keith and cashing a check. Someone with all the ethics of that jailer who'd ended up with enough money to retire. Maybe whoever it was ought to have thought deeper, remembered how the jailer turned out, rotting under a piece of hot tin.

Cops hid Nikki out in the deep woods between LaBorde and San

Augustine, but the one thing wrong with it was that someone, or more than one, in law enforcement was on the Keith payroll. Nikki wrote:

> They knew where I was, where the cop protecting me, Cantor, was. It wasn't an accident they found me in those woods. Someone squealed, and certainly for money. Place where we were, a cabin, the toilet got stopped up, and I had to go, so I went outside to pee in the woods like some kind of wild animal, and then the real wild animals showed up. Cantor was inside working on the toilet, and there I was outside, peeing in the dark woods, with a storm brewing, feeling pretty safe, and the killers came. I heard a shot from the cabin. That would have been poor Cantor taking a bullet. Then I saw them coming along the trail, wearing night-vision goggles, carrying guns.
>
> I panicked, ran, but they caught me, held me down and used a pair of tin snips on my tongue. One held my head, another pulled down my chin, and then this little guy used the snips.
>
> My guess was that was Kung Fu Rabbit.
>
> I think they planned to get the whole tongue to take back to the Keiths. Symbolic stuff about me not being able to testify. But the little guy snipped quick and I was struggling. Hurt like holy hell. I passed out. And then they got me up and pushed me against a tree, were going to do the tongue business again, get it right, put a bullet in my head or a knife in my gut, but there was a loud crack in the woods, a tree breaking and falling, and in that moment, they wheeled and that limb landed right in the middle of us, knocked the little guy with the snips to the ground. I broke loose and ran, shots dancing around me.
>
> I was a track star in high school, and I can still run. I got some space between us quick, leaped over a pile of briars and rolled down a deep embankment and landed in a ditch full of water. Then I was out of that and running. They fired down at me, but the night and me running, all the brush, kept them from hitting me.
>
> I was growing weak. It was hard to breathe. I had to spit blood constantly. My tongue was swelling. I was starting to stumble, felt faint.
>
> I came through the woods out onto the highway, and soon as I did, there they came. They had me figured. I could see their lights coming down a little road next to the woods that emptied into the highway.
>
> I ran out into the highway, thinking I had to get across and into

> the woods on that side. Maybe not really thinking at all. Just trying to get away. And then you guys showed up. Another minute or two, they would have had me.

That’s where she ended it. She gave the pad to me and lay back against her pillow again.

24

By the time we got all of the story from Nikki, she was tuckered from talking and writing, and she had to take her medicine. The nurse handled that, and we went into Hanson’s office with Manny. She sat behind his desk. As always, I noted just how fine-looking she was. Even the scar along the side of her face gave her a uniqueness, like a model who had been in a knife fight.

She said, “Well, you believe that story?”

“It sounds possible,” I said.

“Yeah,” she said. “It’s too outlandish to be made up, and she tells it straight, writes it out straight. I believe it. I mean, hell, she may be protecting herself a bit here and there, and I’m thinking she might actually have helped Pretty Boy steal a few cars, but I don’t know if that’s true or if that’s just the cop in me talking. Do this awhile, you forget not everyone has an angle. Not everyone is trying to get away with something, and not everyone is lying. Lies are saved for presidents and Congress.”

“Everyone lies,” Leonard said, “and all the time.”

“Not everyone has a murder to lie about,” I said. “I believe her.”

“She seems to trust you two,” Manny said.

“We could be being used,” Leonard said.

“You really think so?” I said. “Hell, you dragged her hurt ass out of the rain.”

“Naw, I guess she’s telling the truth. Mostly. Like Manny said, I think maybe she not only knew what Pretty Boy was doing, but she might have been helping him do it.”

“At this point,” Manny said, “none of that matters. What matters is the big fish, so we have to take care of her, make sure she testifies. You guys mind sticking around? I’m going to see if I can verify what she told us, check out a few things. She might still prefer you two being here if I need to talk to her some more, and I'm sure I will."

"We're at your service," Leonard said, "long as you have something to eat."

"Go to the break room. There's some snacks there, coffee, nothing special."

"We've had the cop shop's hospitality before," I said. "We know what we're in for. Potato chips and bad coffee."

"Get tired, use one of the cells to lie down. We aren't exactly packing them in, and with all the storming, I doubt we will be. Even the weasels hunker down in weather like this."

Me and Leonard went into the break room and poured coffee so sour and acidic you could have used it to melt a hole through a vault. There weren't any potato chips, but there were some stale peanut butter crackers. We sat at the break table, sipped our bad coffee, ate our crackers, and felt forlorn.

Outside, the storm had regained its intensity. It just wouldn't go away. It would blow out, then blow back, and now the wind was howling and the rain was beating and my soul was quivering. There was something almost apocalyptic about that storm.

Manny came into the break room, said, "It's a wet hell out there. Lot of patrol cars can't get back to the station. Water's rising. I kid you not, I heard from dispatch there are people in boats cruising around where roads and highways used to be. Boys, you aren't going home tonight, and I'm not sure about tomorrow either. Supposed to get worse."

The lights flickered.

"We have a backup generator," Manny said. "Also, there's that pie Alton left for the station. Chocolate mousse pie."

"You took a peek?" Leonard said.

"Yeah, I looked. He always brings something different."

The pie was in a little refrigerator where the cops kept some personal food. Manny took it out of there and placed it on the table and opened the box.

The pie smelled delightful and my mouth began to water.

"You know, Alton is not going to get to taste this pie," she said. "Not even one piece, and I know that's mean and breaking his rule, but hey, we're trapped here. I'll take the hit for it, and I'll buy him a whole pie. But tonight, we are the pie-eaters of doom."

"Pie confiscation," I said.

"Absolutely," Manny said.

“What about the nurse?” I said.

“We won’t tell her,” Manny said. “Or the dispatchers, or Nikki, and she can’t eat it anyway, right?”

“Right,” Leonard said.

We split the pie in thirds with a plastic knife, put it on paper plates, ate it with plastic forks, and drank more bad coffee. When we finished, Leonard said, “Thank you, Alton, wherever you may be.”

“He’s on the street,” Manny said. “We’ve lost a lot of the old crew lately, resignations, people moving, and right now some people are on vacation. Bad time for this storm to hit. Currently, some of our force is out in the hinterlands. Now they’re trapped, cut off, can’t get back to the station. Some can’t even leave their homes and get to work to begin with. Lake LaBorde has grown so large the whole western side of town is an enormous lake. The dam isn’t looking too good out there either. It may not hold. The east side isn’t much better. Water is seeping out of creeks and swamps, and the water has closed the roads. Now they got a hurricane coming into the Gulf, and they think it’s going to hit us with more rain, and we may just get a direct piece of that windy monster. To make matters worse, weather people say it’ll stall here for a while.”

“Damn,” Leonard said.

The idea of all that water inching toward us gave me the creeps. I began to worry about my family. I stepped out of the office to call Brett to see if she had decided to haul everyone off to Tyler. I wanted to tell her our situation, what we were up to, but there was no cell service.

When I came back into the break room, I said, “Leonard, try your phone.”

He did. Nothing.

Manny tried her cell with the same lack of results.

“They can’t repair things fast enough,” Manny said. “Tower’s down is my guess.”

The lights blinked.

“So, if the electricity goes, does the generator cut on automatically?” Leonard said.

“It does, if we get to that situation, and I suspect we may,” Manny said.

“I’m going to see a man about a horse,” I said.

I thought I’d make a bathroom trip, then use the cop-shop ground line to call Brett. I walked along the hall to the bathroom. The place was quiet and eerie as a politician’s soul. There were only a few people in the station. The three of us, Nikki, the nurse, the receptionist, couple cops, three dispatchers.

As I walked by the dispatch room, one of the dispatchers was going in, having made her own bathroom trip, I suppose. The door closed slowly behind her. I didn't hear them answering calls in there. Maybe the landlines were out too, though I knew they had serious backup that most of the town wouldn't have.

I went to the bathroom, washed up, walked out, and went to Nikki's cell. She was up but groggy. The nurse was helping her to the bathroom, holding on to the rack with the juice in it, rolling it along.

"I thought you were knocked out," I said to Nikki.

"Light dosage," the nurse said. "But she'll go right back to sleep soon as she gets back to bed."

Nikki smiled at me. It was a drunk kind of smile.

They went on to the ladies' room, and I went to the back door of the station, pushed it open. It wouldn't open from the outside unless you knew the code to use on the exterior keypad. That was comforting.

The air that hit me was cool and sticky. It lifted my hair and shirt collar. It was dark as the source of sin out there, except for occasional rips of lightning. In those flashes, I could see water running wild over the concrete, and where the street dipped down a bit to the left, it was like a little stream. In the flashes, the water was the color of a vein of silver.

I wondered if we might be able to get home. It was wet and dangerous, but if we went to the right, on up to North Street, we might manage to turn on Main and make it to the house. But then below Main was the creek, and it filled easy, rose up over the bridge, so maybe not. I was thinking about us trying it in spite of what Manny said. Perhaps this was the time, before things got even worse. I wanted to see my family. If I got home and things got so bad we couldn't get out, at least I would be with them, and Nikki wouldn't be going anywhere anyway, not until the storm played out and the roads were cleared.

I took a deep breath of the wet air, let the door close, made sure it was locked, and walked back to the break room. It was then that the wind outside screamed and the rain fell on the roof like hippos dropped from a plane. The building actually shook.

All hell was about to break loose.

25

We sat around awhile, tried to talk about this and that, but that wind howling and that rain slamming made it difficult.

Finally, I said to Manny, “I’m going to take you up on that offer to lie down.”

“Other than the one Nikki’s in, the cells are open,” she said. “Pick one.”

“We’ve been here before,” I said, “and in a different capacity. We’ve got familiarity.”

Leonard said, “I’m out too. That coffee didn’t do shit for me. I’m starting to see dancing tigers. Going to bed. I’d like my breakfast on a tray with a little rose in a white vase in the morning.”

“Yeah, that’s going to happen,” Manny said.

Me and Leonard walked out together, down the hall, turned past where Nikki and the nurse were, found a two-bunk cell, went in, left the door open, took off our shoes, and stretched out on the bunks.

“I have never liked storms,” Leonard said.

“I know.”

“Think it’ll pass quickly?”

“No. This one is going to hang around awhile. You heard Manny.”

“She doesn’t know everything.”

“And I do?”

“You’re right,” Leonard said. “You don’t know shit either.”

I’d thought, as tired as I was, I would probably lie down and then the coffee would hit and I’d be sleepy but wouldn’t be able to sleep, and I’d feel miserable. Too much coffee bothered me that way.

This didn’t prove to be the case.

As my head hit that thin little pillow, I had a brief moment where I listened to the wind and the rain, and then I fell into a light sleep, one of those kinds where you are aware of where you are and yet part of you is in the night world. I remember I had a strange near-awake dream about a pack of wild dogs walking across high water like Jesus hounds, their fangs bared. The moon was bright behind them, and then the moon seemed to fall off a shelf and hit the water in a gold explosion, and then I was deep asleep.

I'm not sure how long I slept because I didn't check my watch when I woke up. Leonard was still snoozing. The lights in the corridor were flickering as if they were having a fit of some kind.

I got up and put my shoes on, walked down the hall to the bathroom. I went back and checked on Nikki and the nurse. The nurse was asleep in her chair, her head hung down, her nurse hat on the nightstand on top of the books.

Nikki lay in bed, unmoving, the IV in her arm, the IV bag in a rack next to her. Her white hair was spread out against the white pillow; a white sheet was pulled over her pale body. The shadows from the cell bars lay over her and the nurse like long bruises.

I padded down the hall, past the dispatch office, went into the break room, and got a new cup of bad coffee and a packet of peanut butter crackers. I made my way through one stale cracker, then the rest of them, along with the coffee, went into the trash.

I walked to Hanson's office. The door was open. Manny was leaned back in Hanson's chair, asleep.

I started back to the break room, but when I came to it, I kept walking. Now that I was awake, I was too wired to go in there and sit. I was like a bored child with no one to play with.

I walked along to the door that led to the foyer. There was a glass-and-wire frame in the door that led out to it. You went out, the door locked behind you. You had to be buzzed back in. I was thinking I might go out and walk around in the wide foyer, perhaps poke my head outside and look at the street from the front of the station, but I didn't want to be locked out.

I decided to walk through the back door to the receptionist's station and ask if it would be all right for me to go out front for a moment and have her buzz me back in. Maybe she and I could visit a bit to knock the boredom down.

I went in carrying my coffee, and the woman there, pleasant-faced, her hair tied back, dressed in blue jeans, boots, and a loose shirt, smiled at me. She looked fit, muscular.

I didn't know her. But there was something familiar about her.

"This weather," she said. "Really something, huh?"

"Yep," I said.

There was a long canvas bag at her feet, and the door into the foyer was cracked open, held in position by a brick. I had never seen them do that before. It was always locked. The closet to the right was leaking dark water under the door.

"Can I get you some coffee?" I said.

"Maybe later," she said. She swiveled in her chair and looked at me directly. She had a coat stretched across her knees.

"Are you new?" I said.

"I am. Came on shift a little while ago."

I nodded. "Well, all right. Hang in there."

I went out and closed the door and walked to the break room and poured my coffee into the sink. I picked up a chair and brought it back and tilted it under the door handle to the receptionist's office.

I made my way back to the door that was used to buzz visitors in, examined it. No way to put a chair under that. There was only a push bar on my side.

Quickly, I walked to where Manny was, shoved the door wide, and called her name.

She opened her eyes with tremendous effort. When she got them open, she glared at me.

"You better have fresh doughnuts and coffee or I'm going to shoot you."

"Let me ask you something. Do you have a new receptionist?"

"What?"

"Do you have a new receptionist?"

"Just Evelyn for this time of night. And I figure, like the rest of us, she's trapped here for a while. Now, unless you want to know who all is on the day shift, I have to ask: What the hell, Hap?"

"Evelyn seems to have been replaced, and the new woman's propped open her office door, one that leads to the foyer."

"That's against regulations."

"Figured it was."

Manny studied me for a moment, then opened the desk drawer, took out a couple lightweight revolvers. She came around the desk and handed them to me.

"I have a feeling I'm deputized," I said.

"Go wake Leonard."

26

I quickstepped down to the cell, and when I got there Leonard was sitting on the edge of the bed, pulling on his shoes.

He looked at the guns I was carrying, one in each hand.

"I snore that bad."

"Something isn't right," I said.

He finished with his shoes, and we went along the corridor after looking in on Nikki and the nurse. They were still asleep and fine.

We hustled down the hall, found Manny standing outside the receptionist door. She had moved the chair I had placed there.

She said to me, "You're backup if needed."

"What about me?" Leonard said.

"You're a man without a gun."

I gave Leonard the extra pistol.

I eased to the side of the door with Leonard. Manny opened it, left it open, and went in. I could see the "new receptionist" through the crack in the open door, where the hinges met the wall. She still had the coat stretched over her lap, and her hand was under it.

Manny said, "Odd, I don't recognize you."

"I'm a replacement," I heard her say.

"I don't think you are," Manny said. "Not a proper one, anyway. What you holding under that coat, girl?"

The woman's face turned sour. "My clit," she said.

"I bet mine's bigger," Manny said.

That's when the woman moved and the coat slid off her lap and her hand came out. It wasn't her clit at all. It was a big old nasty automatic with a fat silencer on the end of it. The gun huffed once.

Manny moved. It didn't seem fast, didn't seem an excited move. She merely lifted her pistol and fired. It was really loud inside that room.

Her shot hit the woman in the face and her head went back, and then I couldn't see her anymore because she had fallen out of the chair.

Me and Leonard entered in the office behind Manny. Manny was replacing her gun in its holster. I had the one she gave me held down by my side.

The woman lay on the floor. Her head was a mess. Her gun had slid across the tile and ended up against the wall. A cell phone was beside her, having also fallen out from under the coat. There was blood everywhere, even on the great sheet of plasti-glass that fronted the receptionist's area. Manny's bullet had gone through the woman's head and hit it. It had made only a small dent. That was some plastic.

I knew then where I had seen that woman. She had been part of the crew that had tried to kill Nikki, not to mention me and Leonard. Hers was the face I had seen in the lightning flash when we were at the cabin.

I went over and kicked away the brick holding the door open. The door closed automatically.

"How'd she get in?" I said. "And where's Evelyn?"

Leonard went over to the closet, where the dark liquid was running out from under the door in a broader and more recognizable pool than before. He opened the door. I saw Evelyn inside. She was sitting on the floor with her head on her knees. She was leaking a lot of blood from her ear. The inside of the closet smelled like heated copper. She wasn't sleeping. I thought of all those photos of her family on her desk, and felt sick.

"Somehow, this bitch," Manny said, looking down at the woman she had shot, "convinced Evelyn to let her in. That door is pretty solid, and the lock is good."

"Maybe she beat the lock, the keypad code," Leonard said. "People can do that."

"Damn," Manny said. "Evelyn was all right. What the hell?"

"Nikki," I said. "They've come for her. And considering the weather, they must want her bad. Someone, Daddy Keith is my guess, is paying some serious bucks to get rid of her."

It sort of came together then. The woman Manny had killed had managed to talk her way into the receptionist's office, maybe used some kind of sob story. Or maybe she shot Evelyn through the little speaker hole in the glass, dragged her into the closet, and cleaned the blood up a little before she took her place.

However it had been managed, it had been managed.

Seemed to me her next step would have been to let some coconspirators in. Folks who could deal with the cops, dispatchers, all of us. Leaving no witnesses, including the most valuable one to the Tyler Police Department's case.

"I'm going to take a look outside," Manny said. "Close the door behind me, and unless it's me, and just me, don't open it again."

"Hey," Leonard said, "you're what law there is here. You got to stay around to handle things. I'll take a look."

Manny thought on that. "I don't know," she said.

"I'm going," he said.

Before Manny could think on it anymore, Leonard was out of the reception door, clutching the pistol. Me and Manny stood by the glass and watched as Leonard eased across the foyer to the front door, pushed the exit bar, then slowly stuck his head outside into the wild weather.

The wind came whistling in, slipped through the talk-hole gap in the plasti-glass, hit us inside the reception room. The air was damp and wet and cold, like the skin of a drowned person.

Leonard eased out farther into the storm, and soon most of him was no longer in sight. We could see his hand, which was holding the door open. Water was rushing in around his feet, washing over his boots.

He came back quickly and the front door closed behind him. I opened the inside door and let him in.

He had a look on his face like someone had borrowed his dick and forgotten to give it back.

"Well?" Manny said.

"Things are bad."

27

The parking lot is nothing but water," he said. "Worse, there are people in a fucking armored car out where Highway Seven used to be. There were some people wearing water boots and slickers sitting on top of cars. Sitting there with the rain pounding on them. They have guns. They were pointed at me. Pretty sure they're the same assholes that tried to kill Nikki in the woods, plus others. Though they are missing one now."

He looked at the body on the floor.

"Armored car?" I said.

"Yeah. SUV all tricked out. Got a winch and shit on it, probably holds five or so, has a boat trailer on the back and there's a motorboat in it. The car is about halfway submerged, but it looks like it could plow through some pretty deep and fast water. Speaking of water, it's two feet high and rising. There's a dump truck parked on the far side of the street, and there's a garbage truck too. That's not where those are kept, is it?"

"Nope," Manny said.

"I think they got them some special rides," Leonard said. "Makeshift tanks borrowed from the sanitation and street departments. Drivers would be sitting high in those things, could navigate this bad water a lot better than in cars."

Manny picked up the dead woman's coat, popped it out, and placed it over the corpse. "Shit," Manny said. "I killed that woman."

"Yeah, she ain't gonna get no deader," Leonard said.

"I felt like I had no choice."

"Drop it, sis," Leonard said. "We've got our asses in a crack here, so feel bad about it later, and when I'm home. I don't want to hear it."

"It's not the first time I've shot someone," Manny said.

“There you are,” Leonard said. “Now you’ve had more practice. And she’s still the bitch you thought she was before, only she’s a dead bitch. And you should check your ear.”

Manny reached up, brought away her hand with blood on the fingertips. “My earring is gone.”

“Silent shot,” Leonard said. “Clipped your earring. Had she been a better shot or faster, you’d be on the floor instead of her. You did all right.”

Manny took a deep breath, went where the receptionist had sat, reached under the little counter in front of the voice hole, and flipped a switch. The automatic front-door lock clicked. Water was running under the door now, and that was a tightly framed door.

A moment passed, and then there was a push against the door, but the door held.

“Good timing,” I said.

“That’ll hold them for now,” Leonard said.

“This is a police station,” Manny said. “They’re assaulting a police station. This is absurd.”

“And except for you, there are no police here,” I said. “Just the dispatchers and some citizens. Maybe it’s not that absurd.”

Leonard gave me back the pistol I had given him, picked up the dead woman’s gun, unscrewed the silencer, and tossed it onto the floor.

“I want those motherfuckers to hear me coming,” he said.

We went back into the main station, letting the door to the receptionist’s room close. I put the chair back under the latch so I could pretend it was another barrier, but considering these guys had commandeered a dump truck and a garbage truck and had brought a fucking boat, it didn’t seem like something that would stop them for long.

Manny’s boot heels clicked as she walked along the hallway, and we followed her. She used a key card to unlock a metal door. It was a roomful of weapons and body armor.

“Suit up,” she said.

It was the police arsenal.

Most of the weapons were high-powered pieces of business. I decided on a twelve-gauge pump shotgun and an automatic rifle. I put on a bulletproof vest and traded in the gun Manny had given me for a large-caliber revolver.

Leonard loaded up with a serious shoot-’em-up automatic rifle and two handguns, including the one from the dead woman. He also put on a vest.

Manny took an automatic rifle and another handgun and put on a vest. She gave each of us shells for the weapons and a kind of slip-over jumper that had numerous pockets for shells.

We loaded the weapons and packed the remaining boxes of shells into those jumper pockets.

There were some rain slickers in there too, and they were better than the ones we owned, so we took them, went ahead and put them on. I had a feeling we were all going to end up outside in the rain.

All of this was done quickly.

Manny went down the hall to the dispatch room to prepare them for what might happen. She punched the code and went inside. Me and Leonard hurried down the hall to where Nikki and the nurse were sleeping.

Just before we reached the cell, when we came even with the short hall that led to the back door, we heard the automatic lock on it click open.

28

Damp air blasted through the doorway as it widened, and then we saw Alton. At first, I was much relieved, and then I saw his service weapon in his hand and the stone-cold look on his face, and I knew sure as shit stinks, Alton was bought and sold.

I could see behind him two other armed men, both holding serious long guns. I didn't recognize either of them. Alton came in lifting his weapon, startled at seeing us as much as we were startled at seeing him and suddenly knowing on which side he stood. I whirled with the shotgun, pumped a round into place, crouched low, and cut loose.

At the same time, I heard Leonard's automatic rifle bark, and I was reasonably certain it was a miss, because they all kept coming. Thinking Alton probably had on an armored vest, I shot low and took out his knees. It was like he had fallen over a trip wire. His head came forward and his legs went backward, into the doorway.

I got a glimpse of the two other men that were now in the doorway, and then there was a sound like two pans being banged together. I saw one of the men lose half his face, due to Leonard's second shot making good, and behind me a shot slapped into the wall and sent plaster flying up and snowing down on me.

I pumped another round, and the last man standing, the one who had sent a shell into the wall behind me, got a load from my shotgun. The blast hit him in the neck, and he went straight to the ground, so fast it seemed as if a hole had opened beneath him. He fell onto the concrete platform outside the door; the rain washed his blood away as fast as it gushed out of him. He raised one hand and made a movement akin to someone flagging a ride, and then he caught one—the bus to hell. His hand fell down, trembled slightly, and he was still.

Leonard was already dragging Alton away from the door, letting it close. Alton would have been the one with the key code, but I figured he might have given it to one of the others, and that was a sincere worry. If he hadn't given it to anyone else, then in time, if Keith's crew were as well equipped as they seemed, they were coming through that door, one way or another.

Leonard rolled Alton over on the tile, which was turning wet and dark with blood. My shot had taken out his legs. They were just raw bone and shattered flesh hanging together by frayed strands of muscle. Alton was still alive.

"Piece of shit," Leonard said.

"Needed the money," Alton said.

"Piece of shit," Leonard said again.

Alton managed a smile. It seemed strange there on that pained face, or maybe he was past pain right then. Maybe it wasn't a smile but a clenching of teeth.

"Wish I hadn't done it," he said.

"I bet," Leonard said. "And just for the record, I ate your slice of that goddamn heavenly pie."

Alton laughed blood onto his lips.

"Of course you did," he said.

Alton stared at both of us as if straining to see us from a great distance, and then what was left of Alton's life left him with a burst of air and a violent tremble. The blood beneath him pooled wider.

"What the hell was he thinking?" Leonard said.

"I bet he was thinking about his sick kid," I said.

"Well, he might as well have been thinking about dog shit, because he can't do a damn thing for her now."

Behind us we heard footsteps. I pumped a round in the shotgun and turned.

It was Manny hastily making her way toward us.

29

Manny saw Alton on the floor, said, “They got him, those bastards.”

“Wrong bastards,” I said.

I saw the realization wash over her face. “You guys shot Alton?”

“Technically, Hap did,” Leonard said.

“He switched sides,” I said.

“We’d been a second slower, him and his two buddies, who are now holding down the wet concrete outside, would have come in,” Leonard said.

“Alton has the lock code,” she said.

“Had,” Leonard said.

“Damn you, Alton,” she said.

“Remember he brought us a good pie, and let his memory go,” Leonard said.

“Do you think he might have given the code to the others?” she said.

“Probably not,” I said. “That would have meant they didn’t need him at all. Knowing the code and not telling them could have been his trump card. Then again, what do I know?”

“Believe him,” Leonard said. “He doesn’t know much.”

We saw the nurse then, peeking around the corner of the cell section. From there she could see us but not what was down that short hall, the one where Alton lay in a puddle of blood.

“It’s all right,” Manny said as we hustled toward the nurse. “But we are going to have to make some tough decisions.”

“Tough decisions?” she said.

“Is Nikki awake?” I asked.

The nurse nodded. “She’s groggy, but awake. We heard gunfire.”

“You did indeed,” Manny said. “Come on, let’s get Nikki.”

As we hurried into the cell block, Manny said, “I gave the dispatchers guns, told them to stay inside the dispatch room. They aren't cops, though, aren't professional shooters, so the ones outside get into the station, it's only a matter of time before they break into the dispatch office."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," I said.

As we reached Nikki's cell, Leonard said one of his favorite sayings. "Hope in one hand, shit in the other, see which one fills up first."

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The nurse unhooked the IV bag from Nikki, and then we had them moving. We guided them down the hall to the dispatch office, Nikki kind of stumbling along, about half doped up. Manny knocked at the dispatch door. It was a couple of knocks, followed by a series. Code she had given them.

One of the men, a guy with longer hair than you would expect on someone working for dispatch, opened the door. Manny went inside with the nurse and Nikki. We stood outside the room and waited.

Manny came out. “She’s safer there, at least for now.”

That’s when we heard a clacking sound in the hallway, a voice. We followed the sound, came back to Alton’s body, which was leaking even more blood, like a spilled can of red paint.

Leonard, careful not to get too much blood on his shoes, bent down, patted Alton’s coat pocket, found a little walkie-talkie, old-school. Leonard fished it out.

Leonard touched the walkie, turned on the speaker.

Leonard said, “Hello, Pippo’s Pizza Parlor.”

“Who do I have?” a voice on the other end said.

“Well,” Leonard said, “it ain’t Alton.”

“Ah,” said the voice. “I’m assuming Alton met with a bad end.”

“You could say that,” Leonard said. “You can also mark the two that were with him off your Christmas-card list.”

“I see. Well, I’m going to assume you’re the black guy. You sound like a black guy.”

“You sound like an asshole,” Leonard said. “But I’m going to assume you’re Wilson Keith.”

The voice on the other end laughed. “You know, I know who you are. You’re Leonard, and Hap’s there, and that cute little cop piece, Manuela, is there with you as well.”

Alton had given him that information, of course. I wished then I could shoot him again. I was glad we didn’t save him any pie.

“We just want the girl, then we go,” said the voice.

“That’s it? You don’t want maybe some coffee first, little hand job?”

“We just want the girl.”

“Yeah,” Leonard said. “What we want is better insurance, some new clothes, and a trip to anywhere but here, but I don’t think that’s happening.”

“Leonard,” said the voice. “That sounds practiced.”

“A little. I like to have some quips on hand. Sometimes I say things over and over, I like them so much. Here’s one now: You’re an asshole.”

“Alton said you two thought you were smart guys.”

“Maybe not that smart, but smart enough not to give you the girl and expect a free ride out of here.”

“I can see why you might not trust me, but I think we should talk.”

“Aren’t we talking?”

“I mean in person.”

“So you can shoot us?”

“You could shoot me. What say you to this? I come to you, through the front door, but I bring in one of my guys, and we work this out.”

“We can’t work this out.”

“Might be a way we all go home happy.”

“I’m not seeing that,” Leonard said.

“What’s it hurt to talk?”

“I don’t trust you.”

“Fair enough. But it might be productive for all of us.”

We were all listening to this. Manny leaned in to Leonard, whispered something.

Leonard nodded, clicked the walkie. “All right,” Leonard said. “You come in through the front door in five, not before that, and you can have a guy at the door, but he can’t carry a weapon.”

“I would be taking all the chances here. So what about this? You stay behind the reception glass, we’ll talk through the voice hole, and my guard carries a weapon in case things go south. You can have weapons too. Fair?”

“All right. You stay on your side, us on ours, but the bodyguard at the door can’t be carrying a big weapon. He can have a handgun, holstered, put away. We’ll do the same.”

There was silence on the other end for a long moment. Then: “Place me a chair out front of the reception glass. I like to be comfortable. Maybe some bourbon."

"A chair we got, bourbon we don't," said Leonard. "Maybe I could just piss in a jar for you."

"The chair will do."

31

We could just shoot him in the head," Leonard said, "guy at the door too."

"I don't think so," Manny said. "He still has people outside, and maybe a second in command. His son may be out there."

"Larry sounds like the one we'd rather deal with," Leonard said. "He's not as bright. But the dad, he sounds like trouble. Crafty-ass shit on a stick. Kind of guy thinks he can talk his way out of anything and talk you into anything, along with providing a lot of goddamn money. I hate that type. I wish I had money out the ass like that. I did, you and me would retire, Hap. Well, I would. Maybe I could give you a light allowance or something."

"What we're doing here is stalling for time," Manny said. "I have an idea that might help us out, but we got to get our Mr. Asshole to chat awhile."

"Have Hap talk to him," Leonard said. "He's chatty."

"This is true," I said.

"Thing is, with the water rising and them knowing exactly where we and Nikki are, this place won't be safe. They'll get in, and we'll be trapped like rats."

"Okay," I said, "what's the idea?"

She told us. It wasn't that great, but considering our circumstances, hiding under one of the jail-cell bunks was beginning to look like our only other option. This idea of hers, well, it was something.

While me and Manny talked with him, stalling for time, Leonard was to take the others to the old transport bus and start it up. That didn't sound all that good, but there was one advantage to it: There was a hidden exit that led into the compound yard. The bus was about twenty feet away from the back door.

Thing was, we then had to have enough time for Manny and myself to get on the bus. And then once we roared out of there, if we made it that far, we had to worry about outpacing them and not getting caught in deep water.

Piece of cake.

Though, actually, I would have preferred another piece of that chocolate mousse pie, no guns, a nice warm house, and a foot massage from my one and only.

32

Before me and Manny went into the receptionist's office with the walkie-talkie, Leonard said, "Don't let anything go wrong. Just keep him engaged."

"That's all? Don't let anything go wrong?" I said. "What could go wrong?"

"Remember, this is us."

"Yeah," I said. "That means most anything could go wrong."

"I'll wait on you."

"Don't wait any longer than we've talked about waiting. You go when you should go. Don't worry about me."

"How can I not? You're so incompetent."

"Yeah, but I have my charm to fall back on."

"You better have that pistol instead of your charm."

"Listen, Leonard. Me and Manny, we're not out there on time, you head out."

"You think I'd wait on your ass?"

Manny was bringing everyone out of the dispatch room right then. She hustled them down the corridor, and Leonard waved them to him, and away they went, my brother heading out into the unknown, a pack of ducklings behind him. Except one.

The long-haired guy.

Manny said, "Jordan, you know what you got to do?"

"I think so," he said.

"No thinking so," she said. "You go into the generator room and in fifteen minutes from when I say 'Mark,' you do what I told you to do, then you go out the back door and run to the bus like your ass is on fire. Do not mess around."

"I don't plan to."

“Here’s a flashlight for when the lights go out.”

Jordan took it. I saw him take a long breath like he was about to jump into deep water, and with the weather the way it was, he just might be doing that.

Manny looked at me. “You ready?”

“I am. Hearing Keith on the walkie, I think he’s a guy likes to talk, same as me. His plan is to wear us down with fear, make us give up and give him the girl, so I think it’ll be easy to keep him talking.”

Manny turned back to Jordan. “You got a watch?”

“Phone. Well, it’s nothing but a clock now.”

“What time you got?”

He told her. She adjusted her watch. He held up his phone and they compared timepieces.

“Mark,” she said.

“Mark,” he said.

“Okay,” she said. “Get into position.”

Jordan nodded, started down the hall.

Manny handed me a small flashlight. “I have one too. Put it in your slicker. You’re going to need it.”

I looked down the long hall and saw Leonard and the others standing in front of the door to the back lot, waiting.

Leonard gave us a thumbs-up.

I nodded at him.

“All right,” Manny said, “let’s play the game and hope the prize isn’t a bullet in our heads.”

33

I was all right until we went through the door into the receptionist's room, and then the fear hit me. My legs trembled and my mouth felt dry and tasted of copper. Me and Leonard had been in plenty of tight spots, but we were braver when we were together. At least I was. Leonard probably did okay either way.

I think what was scaring me more than my own possible demise was that my brother Leonard might be killed. It had been close a few times, for both of us, but if something happened to him, no matter how much I loved Brett and my daughter, Chance, I had to wonder if I could make it. It would be worse than losing an arm. Family breathes for each other, and close family breathes as one.

I took a deep breath and propped the door we had come through open so we could make a fast retreat into the station. We put the long guns just to the outside of the reception room, leaning them against the wall. We took off the slickers, not wanting Keith to see them and think we were ready to hit the great outdoors, and dropped them on the floor next to the wall.

The lights were adjustable in the office, so Manny turned them down a bit so we wouldn't look like moths against a lightbulb. I found a chair like Keith asked for, went out of the reception room into the wide foyer, and put the chair there, about four feet from the plasti-glass.

"Comes through that door," she said, "nothing says he won't come through shooting. He may not come through at all, but some of his goons might, and not to talk."

"Keith will show up, all right."

"Because you trust his word?"

"Because of what I already said. I trust his ego. He believes anyone can be cajoled into anything, bought out, intimidated, what have you.

I'm counting on that."

"Yeah, you do keep saying that."

"And I keep believing it."

Manny nodded at me, turned on the walkie Leonard had given her. "You out there?"

Static, then a voice. "I'm at the door. Unlock it."

"You come through in a rush or there's a pack of you, we'll be gone before you can get to the reception glass."

"My bodyguard will come in first. No long weapons, but she'll be armed, a three-eighty in her holster. She's ready to go if it comes to that."

"So are we," Manny said. She clipped the walkie to her belt, reached under the desk, and flipped the door-lock switch. We stood with our hands near our pistols.

There was a moment of hesitation, and then the door opened slowly. The bodyguard came in. She was short and stout and moved like a cat. She pushed a rain hood off her head. Her dark hair was tied back. She had hard features beaded with water and a look on her face that almost made me think she had laser vision.

She stepped to the side and Keith came in. He wore a black rain slicker but no hood. The slicker was made like a cowboy duster and fell low to his ankles. He had on a cowboy hat with a transparent blue plastic cover over it. He was tall and looked Native American. He was probably sixty, but a good, solid sixty. He had on black cowboy boots, the toes of which were all I could see beneath the slicker. He took off the hat and flicked it a little, sending rainwater into the foyer. He gave the hat to the woman and she accepted it without taking her eyes off us. She held the hat in one hand, the gun in the other.

Keith unzipped the slicker and took his time slipping out of it. He handed that to the bodyguard as well. He took his hat back and put it on. Under the slicker, he had on a pair of black jeans and a light black jacket. It was unzipped, and a black shirt was visible. It had silver snap pockets and silver snaps where buttons would be. He looked as comfortable as a pimp in a whorehouse.

He walked over and sat in the chair. The woman stayed next to the door, just in case Keith wanted her to hold his hat again.

Manny hit the switch under the counter, and the door lock snicked. The bodyguard touched the butt of her .380.

"Is that wise?" Keith said. He had a nice voice, like a radio announcer's.

“Just keeping things honest,” Manny said. “Tell her to take her hand off the gun.”

Keith looked back at the woman, nodded. The woman put the gun away.

The chair he was sitting in was a tall chair, so he was looking directly at us. He crossed his legs, then reached out and pulled his pants leg down slightly. Manny took a seat in the receptionist chair, and I stood at her side, one hand near my gun, the other on the back of her chair.

“This really can be easy,” Keith said.

“Can it?” Manny said.

“It certainly can. It’s a simple thing you need to do, and you do that, then both of you walk away.”

“I think I know what that simple thing is, and I’m not going to do it,” Manny said.

“Look, I respect honor. I do. But the truth is, this isn’t a comic book, this isn’t the sort of thing where everything is black or white. The world has a lot of gray.”

“I agree,” Manny said, “but some things aren’t that gray. And there’s that whole law-and-order issue. I’m a cop.”

“So was Alton, but, like you, he had bills to pay. He wasn’t a bad guy, just knew how to do business. Is that so bad, taking care of your family?”

“Depends on how you pay those bills,” Manny said. “And you know what? He paid a big bill tonight.”

“Unfortunate,” Keith said, spreading his hands. “Things don’t always work out. But what I can assure you is this: You don’t do as I like, it won’t work out for you, and Hap here…I assume that’s who you are. Alton described you. Said you were like a once nice-looking guy who had gone through a wringer and then been heated up in a microwave.”

“Now I’m glad I shot him,” I said.

I was talking to Keith, but I watched the woman in the back, making sure Keith’s conversation wasn’t just misdirection. That plasti-glass could take a solid hit, but still, I watched her. My take was, she made a move, I was going to shoot through the speaker hole and blow a canyon in Keith’s chest. He was lined up good for that.

“Just so you know, you’re thinking about shooting me through that little hole, you would have to be quick.”

The son of a bitch read my mind.

“And then I got a vest on. Good one. Better than the ones you two are wearing, I assure you. And that locked door? Once shots are fired, my crew will come inside. Door being locked won't matter. It'll be as easy as throwing rocks through cotton candy. And that plastic in front of you, it's tough, but we got weapons that will make it seem like nothing."

"You don't have a vest on your head," I said.

"You'd have to be a really good shot, restrictions of that hole and all. And if you hit that little metal framing, who knows where a bullet could go?"

"Look, you got something to say, say it," Manny said. "I'm starting to get bored."

I sneaked a glance at my watch. The time was being eaten up, and if Leonard left when we agreed he should leave, I wanted us to be on that bus. All Manny and I were doing was stalling to make sure the noncombatants got on.

It wouldn't be too long before Jordan hit the switch in the generator room and all the lights went out. That would be our cue to haul ass.

Manny sighed, said, "Why don't you give us the short-story version of whatever novel you got in mind to tell us, whatever you got in mind to stall us with while you do whatever you think is going to work."

"As if I don't think you got some kind of plan going," Keith said.

Manny said nothing.

Keith leaned back in the chair. He looked comfortable. I half expected him to put on pajamas.

"Very well," he said. "Let me lay it out for you."

"Lay what out?" Manny said.

"What you're going to end up doing."

34

Standing in that reception room thinking on it, waiting for those lights to go off, suddenly our little plan seemed goddamn crazy. We would have a long way to haul with people on our ass, and Wilson Keith, he was smooth and deadly and had the soul of a piranha but with less compassion.

And if we made it to the bus, Leonard had to drive it through the locked gate, and after that, well…I didn't know. I didn't know pig shit from axle grease. It was all a big crapshoot, and Keith had the loaded dice, not us. What we had was a wish and a hope and an old transport bus.

But Leonard was out there waiting. That was something. Still, bad as it looked for me and Manny, I hoped he wouldn't wait too long if we were delayed. I wanted to know he and the others, that little girl Nikki, got out of there alive and well.

I could feel my palm sweating on the back of the chair I was touching. Keith's voice seemed to be an echo. I took a deep breath, used my martial arts training to find my center. It was dark at that center, and a little loud from the thumping of my heart, but I found it, and I began to relax.

Keith had never stopped talking.

"…have to do is consider the reality of your situation. Reality is what dictates ethics and decisions, not morality. Something is fine and moral and ethical until it's about you and your life. We can all afford to be ethical and moral when our lives don't matter, but in this case, frankly, yours matters a lot."

"Situational ethics," Manny said.

"That's one way to put it, but I call it realism," Keith said. "You can do nice and fine and right when your ass isn't on the line, but when it's money or sex or your life, a person's viewpoint changes. Let me tell you what you should already know. You're old enough to have left your teddy bears behind. The world isn't fair, and right now, you're caught in the unfair part. Idealism is a shield that melts with age and experience. You must know that. You must know you're holding only a piece of that shield now, or maybe you know it's gone already, but, out of habit, you keep hanging on to that bullshit we were all taught when we were young. Think about it. Everyone's dipping their snouts in the trough. What I'm doing is cutting right through the shit. I don't know you. I wouldn't care if I did. I neither like nor dislike you, but to suit myself, to put things at an easier advantage for me, I'm willing to do for you what lobbyists do for politicians. I'm going to offer you money, and you can be my little representatives. Hell, I'll promote you to senators."

"I have a feeling we might end up like the jailer your son hired, under some tin at a junkyard dump," I said.

"He took the money, but he didn't live up to his end of the bargain. My son picked the kind of guy that was a little too proud of himself and couldn't keep his mouth shut."

"But us, who you've known a few minutes, we're a wise pick?" Manny said.

"I'm picking you, my son isn't. He couldn't pick a rotten cucumber over a ripe one. And just for the record, Alton was on my payroll for some time. Let me add something else while we're having this discussion. Little Miss Nicole has false recollections."

"Could be," I said. "But I think she's closer to the truth than you are. Her tongue is a lot better now. I thought she talked quite convincingly, although I had to listen close. She's already got a written statement in, so even if something happened to her, shit, man, you're sunk."

"In the end, it's her word against mine. And I have a few of my spots picked, so to speak."

"Spots?" I said.

"He means money invested in lawmakers," Manny said. "More crooked cops like Alton."

"You said that, not me. I only hinted that I have friends in high places. Cops are actually on the bottom of the stack. There are others I have in my pockets, and they have more power. I'm merely suggesting we should be friends because it would be in your best interests."

"We are not your friends," Manny said.

"You ought to try to be."

"I was a friend of yours, even a passing acquaintance, I wouldn't like to look at myself in the mirror, see what was in it," I said. "Besides, you just made it perfectly clear no one is worthy of having a friend, because in the end, we're all going to turn on one another if the need arises."

"Mr. Collins, you are just a half-assed private investigator. Surely you see and do some pretty unworthy things from time to time."

"There are lines I don't cross."

"Let me put this in a way that will make sense to both of you. We all have loved ones. Some of them, like my son, who is outside, can be a cross to bear. There are times I think a sack of shit and the brain in that boy's head couldn't be any different, but he is my son. That said, if it comes down to me or him, I'll tell you truly, and I don't know that he knows this, but considering how I've lived my life, he must have some idea…I would throw his ass under the bus, and I would drive the bus over him, then back it up if it was about my survival. My dick still works, and I can find a woman to bear a child. I can make another son, but the empire I've put together, I can't remake so easily. You two, however, being as you're such idealists, might be more considerate of your family, and therefore maybe you truly would try to jump in front of the bus I'm driving to protect them. You do, that bus will run right over you. But if you want to get on the bus, well, hey, I can make room for both of you, and your friends and family too. Hell, bring the dog and cat, a pet goat, I don't give a shit. But it has to come out my way."

I saw where he was going with this. I hoped Brett had decided to leave, to go on to Tyler and take everyone with her. I wished I had been able to call her and verify that. I wished a lot of things right then. I took a deep breath, tried not to show how scared I was. I put a smile on my face. Maybe Keith was right. Maybe it all did come down to situational ethics.

"You didn't put together shit," I said. "You took over this crew and all the money that came with it when the people who had it before got nabbed, killed, or you helped finish them off. You didn't build a goddamn thing. You took in a short time what others spent years building. Not that I have any admiration for those assholes either."

"The ability to take something is important, Mr. Collins. That's called having the wisdom to recognize favorable circumstances. It's called power."

"Is that what it is?" I said.

"I'm giving you both an opportunity. I don't know where Mr. Pine is, but I am giving him the same opportunity. I want it to go well for all of you and the people close to you. That said, you make a different choice, I got to do what I got to do. I mean, hell, I know who you two are, and I know who matters to you."

"Let me give you a note, and you might want to stick this on your refrigerator. My family, you touch them, and I will kill you and everyone who works for you."

He laughed. "That's bold for a fifty-year-old man."

"I'll help him," Manny said. "And let me tell you something. Hap, he's spry."

"This is your one chance to walk out of here instead of what's left of you being washed out with a hose. Let us have Miss Beckman. You don't even know her. She's just a chink white-trash bitch, and I do mean white, who stuck her nose in where she shouldn't have. You want to give up your life for someone you don't know? You don't even have to hand her over, so you won't have that on your conscience. Just leave, and we'll take care of her. You'll find a nice package in the mail in a few days, something substantial inside that will help you forget what happened here…You can say we took you by surprise, put you in a jail cell, then grabbed the girl. We could do that, you know. Put you in a cell so it doesn't look too obvious. There are ways to make this look okay."

"You're not letting us walk," I said. "You're not letting anyone walk. And I couldn't forget doing something like that if I got a million-dollar check weekly and starlets from Hollywood came in daily to hold my balls while I changed pants. I'd rather be dead. Though the starlets would be nice."

"You realize I'm suggesting it could turn out that way, Mr. Collins. Not the starlets. The dead part."

"In the long run, the law will get you," Manny said.

"That is so precious. I keep telling you, the law and justice and the American way goes out the window when money shows up."

"Not for everyone," Manny said.

"People love the power of the law, not the law. Christians don't love Jesus, they love John Wayne. Kindness to the poor and the meek, do you see that happening? Turn the other cheek? And another thing—I can't let small-time assholes like this girl run over me and my family business. I let this go, then others will challenge me. Maybe those others will be a lot better than you two and some split-tail albino. You have to have some standards, you're going to run a business, especially my kind of business."

I glanced at my hand resting on the back of the chair, at my watch. It was just about that time.

If Jordan didn't fuck it up.

"We might be better than you think," I said.

"And you might not," Keith said.

"Listen," I said. "Let me ask you a question. Do you ever wonder what it's like when it goes completely dark?"

"What?" he said.

The generator lights went out.

35

Dead black.

Jordan had done his job, and on time. It was so dark you couldn't see an inch in front of you.

I heard Manny slip out of the chair, and then me and her started for the door, making our way by memory and feel. Shots were blindly fired. I could hear them hit the plasti-glass, but that stubborn stuff held, though it wouldn't for long.

Manny and I ran for it. I tried to charge through the doorway at the back and ran smack into the wall.

I heard Manny fall; I groped around for her, got her up. I reached in my pocket for the flashlight, brought it out, popped it on. We could see the open doorway and went through it. Behind us I heard the plasti-glass crack from more gunfire.

When we were through the door I made sure it was closed tight, put the chair under it, but Manny had a better idea. In the glow of my flashlight, she used the keypad by the door to lock it, then we grabbed up the guns and slickers and hustled toward the exit.

We got to where we could see the door that led to the generator. It was wide open. The flashlight showed no one was in there. Jordan had hauled ass like he was supposed to.

We moved to the other open doorway, one that led into the short hall that extended to the exit. We hurried along, and as we got closer to the end of the hallway, I turned off the flashlight, jammed it in my pocket.

We hit the exit door like a stampeding buffalo herd, and all of a sudden, we were outside in the coal-mine dark, the rain slashing us, the wind blowing our hair, cutting us like cold razor blades. It was so dark we couldn't see the steps under us. We couldn't see the bus. Hell, we couldn't see the parking lot.

“We’ll have to use a light,” Manny said.

I fumbled my long gun to her, and against my better judgment, I got out the flashlight. I turned it on, flicked the light toward the lot so we could see the bus. I got a glimpse of Leonard at the wheel, other shapes behind the wire-net-and-glass windows, and then we were moving swiftly, slipping a little as we went. Water was not so deep there, but it was deep enough to flow over our ankles. It was cold, and it took only a few steps before you could feel it seep into the flesh and chill your bones. It was so unsettling and uncomfortable, I think a polar bear would have taken his chances back inside the cop shop.

“I’m cutting the light,” I said, “keep going straight.”

I cut it. We kept plowing ahead. And then there was a shot. It zipped through the night and slammed into something, but thankfully that something wasn’t us. Next thing we knew, we were running up against the bus, feeling our way around it, making our way to the door. I could hear the bus motor humming, and then I heard the hydraulic door open. There was a dull green light on the dash of the bus, and that made it so we could see. Leonard’s face was softly painted by the light. He smiled green teeth at me.

“Good to see you,” he said.

“Likewise.” I glanced toward the back of the bus. Shapes. Except for Nikki—she was closer to the front—I couldn’t make out anyone.

“Everyone good?” I said.

Everyone agreed they felt good enough, then Jordan said, “Come on, man, let’s go.”

Me and Manny took seats, she behind Leonard, me on the right side not too far from the door. The door hissed closed.

“Grab your asses,” Leonard said. “Here goes.”

With that, he shifted a gear, the bus jumped a little, and away we went, straight for the locked fence gate.

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Shots were hitting the bus now.

"This thing is reasonably bulletproof," Manny said. "Tires are designed to take small-arms fire. It's built like a tank."

"Let's hope so," Leonard said, then he stomped the gas.

We hit the gate, and *bam,* I was nearly jolted to the front of the bus, and then I was thrown out of the seat and onto the floor. I hustled myself back into place.

The gate was knocked flat, and we rattled over it, rolling toward what looked like too much water.

Leonard turned right and climbed the hill toward North Street, away from the deep stuff, but water was running down the hill in a silver shine and splashing along the sides of the bus. Leonard turned the headlights on.

In the headlights, the rain on the road looked slick and snotty. It came down fast and looked like a beaded curtain.

We were near the top of the hill when the dump truck Leonard told us about charged out of the alley, its headlights off. It hit the right side of the bus with a sound like the crack of doom.

I heard people flying around in the back of the bus, and I was thrown across the aisle and splayed over the seat where Manny had been sitting and was now lying.

"Goddamn, Hap, get off me," she said.

The bus didn't spin, it just slid on a coating of water. The dump truck kept pushing. Soon we'd be across the street and smacked up against a building.

I grabbed the pole that was near the front of the bus, used it to guide myself back into my seat again, all of this performed as we slid in slow motion, pushed by that dump truck, its tires struggling to maintain traction.

Leonard jerked the wheel to the left, right toward where I feared we would collide, and gave it the gas. The front of the bus went left, and the back of it spun right. The back end of the bus hit the dump truck and made it slide, turned it so that it was facing the way it had come.

“Damn, you do that on purpose?” I said.

“Of course,” he said.

I could tell he was lying.

Leonard turned the bus around as adroitly as a professional stunt-car driver, and that was probably an accident too. He drove the bus left through an alleyway, and it looked like a clean escape, and then, damn, that garbage truck Leonard said had been parked out front of the cop shop with the dump truck was at the end of the alley, shiny white in the bus headlights. I could see that big killer I had shot in the hospital sitting behind the wheel. The way the lights hit him, he looked like an obsidian golem. Keith and his minions had planned ahead, moved the garbage and dump trucks into position to block the exits.

We were speeding toward a head-on collision.

Leonard slammed on the brakes. The bus slipped a little, made us feel like it was on wet grass. And then he was in reverse, gunning it back out of the alley, using the side mirror to plan his path. A precarious thing, since most of what he had for lighting were the now-busted backup lights. The garbage truck’s lights came on, and the truck roared and rattled after us.

“We’re all going to die,” the female dispatcher said.

“Possible,” I heard Manny say.

37

The lights from the garbage truck filled the bus like watery honey. I sat looking backward, the direction we were going. In the lights from the garbage truck, I could see the dispatchers clinging to the backs of the seats in front of them. Someone was praying. The others were cursing. Nikki was quiet, something not so surprising for a lady with a sore tongue. Manny and I joined her in silence. Leonard, inexplicably, had started singing “Mama’s Little Baby Loves Short’nin’ Bread.”

If that wasn’t bad enough, the dump truck was back in the game, and it had turned on its lights and was driving for us, trying to sandwich us between several tons of speeding metal. I was already imagining them finding me with a transmission up my ass, my teeth full of the windshield.

But Leonard had a bit of a lead on them, and he made it out of the alley before the dump truck hit our ass, before the garbage truck plowed our front.

He whipped the bus toward the hill that rose up to North Street and gave it the gas. It got traction easier than expected and started climbing. The dump truck looked certain to clip our ass, but it just missed.

Unfortunately for the dump-truck driver, he couldn’t slow in time to avoid the garbage truck. I looked behind me and saw them ram together, maybe six inches from the back of our ride. It was a hell of a smack and you could hear the brakes grinding on both trucks as they tried unsuccessfully to prevent a collision.

In the bus taillights, I saw the passenger door on the dump truck spring open, and then I caught the driver’s circus act as he was thrown out of the truck by the impact, into the wet street.

I blinked in amazement when he rolled and came up on his feet. It was that little kung fu fucker we had fought in the hospital. He looked devilish in the taillights. I had done martial arts all my life, and I didn't think people like that were for real, just in the movies.

He shot us the finger as we roared away and he disappeared into darkness behind us.

Same to you, I thought.

Leonard was no longer singing. He was whistling the shortening-bread tune.

On up the road we rolled, and then we were on North Street. We turned left, went two streets down, and turned right.

"Where're you going?" Manny said.

"Where am I supposed to be going?"

"Tyler, that's where we need to go now."

"I think I'm going to Hap's house."

"You're out of your mind."

Leonard turned his head sharply, looked at me. "Am I out of my mind, Hap?"

"No, sir, that's exactly where you need to go. I need to be sure they got out."

"Oh," Manny said. "Of course. I don't have a family. Even my dog died."

The bus went along that way and we passed some houses, and then we turned right, hoping we could get back to my place.

We made it all right for a while, and then it was obvious we couldn't continue, not in that bus, not the way we were going. We came to where a house had been destroyed and the wind and rain had pushed much of it into the street. To turn right was to drive into a vast pool of water and risk being stuck, and to go left meant we would be blocked by trees and lumber.

"Goddamn it," I said.

Leonard backed the bus into a driveway, turned it around without letting it slip too far into where water had gathered in an incline, and drove back the way we had come. He turned right, hit University, turned left on it. The road was open where it had been closed to us before, and where it had been open to us, now there were trees and cars and wooden debris. The water park and its water slides were gone.

Leonard made a few false starts, took a variety of roads, wove the bus through all manner of messes, ran over people's yards where they were clear, and finally made it to my place.

When we got there, Leonard sprang the door open, and I leaped out and ran toward the dark house. As I neared, using my flashlight, I noted that most of the roof was gone and a tree from somewhere, a large tree, had gone through the right side of the house like a spear.

I was going to use my key, but the door wasn't locked. I went in fast, the flashlight in my left hand, my right holding the pistol.

I called everyone's name, including Buffy's.

No one came.

I ran up the stairs with the light bobbing in front of me, and when I got to the top I pushed into our bedroom. The bed had collapsed under some fallen roof timbers, and the room was wet and smelled bad. I could see the dark sky through the hole in the roof and I could hear the wind and the rain. The world had gone to hell in a wet handbasket.

I checked the other rooms upstairs. They were intact. I went downstairs, shone the light around, saw the kitchen window had been knocked out by something. Air whistled through it like wind in a cave. It was then that I saw there was a note on the table, held down by a salt shaker.

I put the flashlight on it.

It said: *You know where, baby. Love, Brett*

I did know where. The first hotel or motel in Tyler that took dogs and was near the mall and Half Price Books. They had slipped away in time. I breathed a sigh of relief, shivered, and then I was okay. I went out to the bus.

38

We passed the one and only real hotel in LaBorde, saw there were some dim lights inside, most likely from a weak generator. Leonard pulled over there. We let out the dispatchers and the nurse. Manny and I got off with them, went inside, leaving Leonard at the wheel and Nikki still in her seat.

We weren't letting her out of our sight.

We found a clerk sitting behind a desk. The only light there was a small lamp on the side of the long desk. The nurse and the dispatchers bunched up close to us. Our shoes made little puddles and mud marks on the tile.

"Bad night," said the clerk. He was a young black man with a tight haircut, a tight necktie, and a condom-tight suit. He looked a little excited in the lamplight.

"Police," Manny said, and pulled out her badge. She gave the clerk some info, but didn't give him all the juice. The clerk explained they only had an old backup generator working. The facilities were inadequate. No elevator. No lights in the hallway. Limited light in the rooms. No room service, as if he thought we might be planning to order coffee and pie.

"It'll do," Manny said. "Bill the department."

We spoke in a comforting manner to the dispatchers and the nurse, told them to sit tight until they got word to leave.

The clerk started sorting out room keys.

"We should go," Manny said.

"Good luck," the female dispatcher said.

"Yeah," Jordan said. "Good luck."

"You done good with that generator," I said.

"I just flicked a switch."

“Still,” I said, “you done good.”

“I really should stay with you,” the nurse said. “The girl is my patient.”

“I don’t think that’s best,” Manny said. “We’ll take care of her.”

The nurse hesitated. I could tell she was torn between duty and common sense. “Here,” the nurse said, opened her purse and gave me a couple bottles of pills. “I brought these with me. She needs this one about every four hours. The other, well, twice a day.”

I took the pills and slipped them in my windbreaker pocket.

Manny said to the clerk, “Hey, you got a hotel van?”

“We do,” the clerk said.

“You better put that on the bill too.”

39

Nikki and I rode together in the courtesy van from the hotel, following the big white bus with Leonard and Manny on it.

"What are we doing?" Nikki said.

It surprised me when she spoke. She hadn't in a while. "We're going to ditch the bus, which is what they're looking for, try to get you to Tyler, to the cops there, some medical attention."

"Will that be any safer?"

"We'll be with you," I said.

"He may have paid someone off. That's what the Keiths do."

"Not all cops are like that."

"Only takes one."

"We're going to see that you're protected. Manny will be there too. You're her duty, and we're making you ours."

"I am such an idiot. I believed Pretty Boy, and I should have known better. No. That's a lie. I did know better. I wanted some adventure, a bad boy. Was that stupid?"

"Yes."

She made a kind of snicker sound. "Yeah. It was. What's with women and bad boys?"

"I have no idea. What is with them?"

"I had such a strange growing-up. My parents, they were fine, but me being albino, kids at school, they didn't know what to do with that. And there have been some health issues, and there was no sunbathing or swimming during the day, and during the summer I didn't go to camp… is this starting to sound like a poor-me rant?"

"A little."

"Yeah, I know. Everyone has a story."

"Where you are now is due to bad choices, Nikki, but it's not your fault that Pretty Boy turned out to be a big shit and a coward. I got a list of bad choices, girl. I have a lot of blood on my hands."

"Some of it was for me."

"A lot of it is for other reasons. I'm all the things I never meant to be. You got a chance now to move on, to get in a better groove. This is your break."

"You bet I'm going to try. But Keith—all the energy and resources being put out to kill me, doesn't make sense. I've already given enough evidence to get them in trouble even if I am killed. What's the point?"

"It's not all about you," I said. "It's about Keith's pride, about who's the big boss, and with the weather like it is, I think he feels more powerful, a real renegade. It's like the apocalypse, and it's everyone for themselves. Thing is, though, he's scared."

"Scared?"

"His big show of power is about hanging on to the spot he's got. Had his druthers, LaBorde would look like Juarez at the height of the drug war. Kind of guy that would decapitate folks and hang bodies off bridges and from trees. Knew some of the guys in the Dixie Mafia before him. They were trouble too. But they were mostly low-profile. It's Keith's posturing that will do him in. Or he'll run up against someone he can't handle."

"I hope so," she said. "I better be quiet. My tongue is swelling."

I drove with one hand and used the other to fish out one of her bottles of pills. "Can you swallow like a chicken, without water?"

"Yeah."

I gave her the bottle. "One pill," I said.

She took one out and gave me the bottle back. I put it back in my slicker pocket.

"I can't explain to you how grateful I am to you and Leonard. That's right, isn't it? Leonard. Manny told me, but I'm not sure I remember it right."

"Yeah, and just in case you don't know for sure, when it comes to me, I'm Hap."

"You didn't have to help me."

"Yes, we did."

Ahead of us, Leonard turned up a big hill with dark apartments perched on it, drove around a curve and then along a wooded road that was right in the middle of LaBorde. It looked like a country lane.

He pulled over to the side of the road and parked the bus so it was leaning toward a ditch.

He and Manny got out on the ditch side without falling into it, eased their way to us, and climbed into the van.

“Take us to Tyler,” Leonard said. “And don’t spare the horses.”

“Yes, boss,” I said.

40

It seemed simple enough, and I was starting to feel encouraged. All we had to do was drive to Tyler. Keith and his men weren't looking for a white van. We had already reached North Street again, and the path was clear enough to navigate. There were few lights on along the street, and everything was quiet and still. No other cars were on the road.

I checked the rearview mirror. Nope. No one was following us.

We rode on out until we were at the end of LaBorde, near where the old abandoned LaBorde Bowling Center was. We passed it and drove up a rise in the highway and came down on the other side, and there was a disaster.

There had been a bad pileup of trucks and there was a dead cow in the road. Trees that must have been two hundred years old had been uprooted by the wind and the rain and thrown into the pile of dead bovine and twisted metal.

We parked the van, and me and Leonard got out in the rain, left Manny with Nikki. The rain had slowed and the wind was mild for a change, but we still weren't much encouraged. We walked around and looked in the trucks, poking around with my flashlight, but there was no one there. It was obvious this had all happened some time back, maybe yesterday afternoon or last night, and whoever had been here had either walked off or been taken by ambulance to the hospital. At this point, there were probably no ambulances running, or they were running in a limited way. There was no way to call a wrecker to have this stuff moved. No way to do much of anything. And as far as the police went, well, the entirety of the available Laborde Police Department was behind us in a van.

I felt odd right then, how prehistoric man must have felt when the night came and storms stirred up. The edge of the road was mostly forest, but it looked like a black wall, except at the top where the trees sighed in the wind and the sky was a little fainter, but if the rain came back and the wind picked up, then it would be solid black up there too, like being inside a bag of shadows.

“You okay?” Leonard said.

“No.”

“Me either.”

“The bowling center,” I said.

“What?”

“We hole up there, park the van around back, wait until daybreak. Maybe the repair crews will open up the road, some cops can come into work.”

“In the old science fiction movies, they always called in the National Guard or the army.”

“That’ll work too,” I said.

“You know, it might even be the best plan. I don’t know about you, but I feel like I was whupped with a knotted plow line, buried in a bucket of shit, and brought back to life with a shot of electricity. I got the coffee jitters but at the same time I feel like I could lie down on broken glass and sleep.”

“Yeah. I’m getting a little weak, not to mention hungry.”

“Me too. My stomach thinks my throat’s cut.”

We went back to the van and told Manny our plan, which she eagerly agreed to. Truth was, we were all starting to slow down as the fear and excitement wore off. We drove back to the bowling center and parked behind it.

It was huge. There had not only been a bowling alley there but also a place for games, and there had been upstairs apartments where the owners lived.

The back door was locked, of course, and neither Leonard nor I had our lock picks with us. We had misplaced them along the way.

“Shall we kick it in?” Manny said.

I got a straight tire iron out of the back of the van and went over and stuck it into the edge of the door, worked it a little, and popped the door loose. Everyone but me went inside. I went back to the van and pulled it up against the door sideways, so I could open the door, squeeze a bit, and step into the bowling alley. When I was inside, I closed the van door and then the bowling-alley door and hoped the van door would be a bit of a barrier if it came down to it.

Right then, though, I felt snug and safe and thought it was highly unlikely Keith and his minions would find us. I felt that by that point, we'd shaken them.

Manny was bouncing her flashlight beam around the bowling alley, and the place was massive. I got my own light out, started moving it about. The bowling alley had been closed for at least ten years, and for a couple of years, there was talk that it would be reopened. A For Sale sign went up, but no one bit. There was a rumor that a fellow was going to buy it and turn it into a skating rink, but that never happened. The potential buyer probably decided if people didn't come to bowl, they wouldn't come to skate.

The air had been stirred by our arrival, and in the beam of the flashlights we could see dust moving, and the wood lanes were a muted gold, and the balls in the racks at the head of the alleys looked like little boulders.

I shone my light down one of the lanes, and I could see some bowling pins turned over inside the open troughs where the balls fell through. The pin rack was halfway down, but it hadn't picked up any pins, and I could almost hear bowling balls smacking them, like the story of Rip Van Winkle, where he discovered the old men in the mountains playing ninepins.

In the other direction, there was a long row of seats in front of the alleys, and there were a dozen alleys, and there were honey-colored couches where you could recline while waiting your turn to bowl. Behind those was a short wall, and you could see over that to a long rack of small shelves where you picked up bowling shoes. There were still shoes in those shelves, covered in dust and linked by cobwebs. There was a stairway next to the rack that led to the second floor.

I flashed my light on the stairway that went up, then turned left and out of sight behind a wall. There was a long row of windows above the stairs, and it was broken up by some wood frames at eight-foot intervals all the way across, and it was like that over the shoe counter and all along the top of the bowling alley, and the windows ran on two sides. That way the managers could be upstairs and look down on the alley through the long row of windows and make sure no one was walking off with bowling shoes or a bowling ball while they had gone upstairs to grab a sandwich or use the toilet.

Leonard came out of a doorless room next to the pin racks with his cell phone light on.

We all went in there for a look, and there were still snacks inside the machines. Leonard used his windbreaker sleeve to wipe the dust off the glass of the closest machine so we could see inside more clearly.

"Jesus," Manny said, "that stuff is as old as Methuselah's grandpa."

"I was hoping for a Twinkie," Leonard said. "They say those last forever, all the preservatives in them. I'm about ready to look for mice to eat."

"That you could probably find," Manny said, "and fresh, but that stuff in the machines, I wouldn't suggest trying it, otherwise you might end up blowing out your bowels."

With food out of the picture, we went upstairs and moved the lights around. It was spacious up there, and there were several rooms, and there was a toilet, but it didn't have any water connected to it, so that wasn't going to be a plus, and worse yet, just seeing it made me want to pee or take a dump.

After looking in all the rooms, we went down and gravitated without a word toward the couches. We laid our long guns on the floor in front of them.

Nikki stretched out on one of the couches, and when she did, the dust from it stirred up and spun in my flashlight beam. Manny stretched out on another, and me and Leonard sat for a bit, and then suddenly I felt all fired up again, got up, and went to where I could walk behind the lanes and look at the racks for the bowling pins. Leonard came with me. We are adventurers.

"You thinking about trying a vending-machine snack anyway," he said.

"Too much work to break into one," I said. "And I'm not so hungry I'm willing to chance it."

"Yep. You know, I bowled here a couple of times. Did you know this is where you could meet men if you were gay?"

"I bet it's where heterosexuals could meet folks too," I said.

"You know, you're probably right. Sometimes I wish life were simple like back then."

"You mean when you had separate water fountains and toilets?"

"No. After that. When I could come here."

"I'm not so sure those days were the sweet spot we make them in memory."

"You might be right," Leonard said.

We got bored and tired all over again, and we bold adventurers went back to the spare couches, chose one apiece, stretched out. I was asleep so fast, I don't really remember putting my head against the dusty backrest of the couch.

41

I wasn't out long before the wind woke me up. The rain was coming down hard again too. I could hear it running through the roof somewhere, dripping into the bowling alley.

I had gone from a dead sleep to being wide awake, and right now that wind and that rain seemed to be the only sounds in the world. I got up with my light and discovered that near the wide front doors, just over them on the inside, there was a leak. The ceiling had been taking a weather beating for a long time, and the rain was slipping in and running onto the floor, and the floor had warped slightly and that part of the place smelled of mildew and what I assumed from experience was rat turds.

I hadn't seen that leak when I was on the second floor. That seemed real important to me right then, like maybe I was surveying property I intended to buy. I guessed it had been leaking through the roof above the shower and draining along the edges of the shower, breaking open the ceiling over time. A few more years and that whole section would come down.

I thought I should try to go back to sleep, but then I heard something outside that wasn't the wind and the rain but a loud growling sound. I went to the wire-mesh window on one side of the door and looked out. There was a row of lights on top of something moving toward the bowling center.

It was coming up the long drive toward the bowling alley, splashing through the rain. I could tell the way the lights were set and the way it moved that it was the vehicle Leonard had described after looking out the front door of the cop shop. It came to a stop about fifty feet from the front door.

But how had they found us?

"Hey," I called out as I turned off my flashlight. "The assholes are here."

It took me a couple of calls to wake Manny and Leonard up, but when they were awake, they got their long guns and came over and stood near me and looked out the window.

Nikki didn't have a gun, but she came over too. I was glad I had forgotten to give her one of those pills that would knock her out. It was best we were all alert now.

"How the hell?" Leonard said.

And then the walkie clipped to Manny's belt squawked.

"Ah, shit," Manny said.

She pulled the walkie off her belt, touched a button, and a voice said, "You know, I have a tracker in the walkie-talkies to make sure I have all my men in place. I got the gear to track you without having to do anything other than climb inside my truck. This thing has a nice movie screen, impossibly comfortable seats, a winch, this bullhorn, and the nice spotlights you are currently experiencing. It even has a wet bar. Fact is, right now I'm sipping a glass of premium scotch. Anyway, I know you're in there. Look, send snow girl out, and we'll make it quick for her, and the rest of you, we let you go."

Manny clicked the walkie. "We been through this."

"Yeah," said Keith's voice. "I know you know I'm bullshitting you, but I wanted to see what would happen. I thought maybe you had turned stupid."

"Look, we're going to be generous," Manny said. "If you surrender to us now, no one gets hurt."

We could hear Keith laugh.

Manny dropped the walkie-talkie on the floor and put her foot on it and it snapped into pieces.

"Sort of figured he wasn't going to surrender," she said.

Now came a loudspeaker voice from a device attached to the security vehicle. It was louder than the walkie-talkie, and it was Keith laughing at us. He didn't say a word, just laughed like an idiot, and then there was silence.

"Seen too many James Bond films," Leonard said.

While we watched through the long glass window, the door to the vehicle opened on the right side, and a big man got out. He was the big black man who had been driving the garbage truck. He had a long gun of some sort. He was the man I had shot. He was a black Hulk. All he needed to do then was say "Me smash."

A moment later an SUV pulled up behind the security vehicle and five shapes got out of it. I couldn't make out any of them, really.

"See Kung Fu Bobby out there?" Leonard said.

"There's one guy smaller than the others, I think that's him."

"Yeah, could be," Leonard said. "What is that motherfucker, a cat? Ought to be in some kind of circus act or trying out for the Olympics or something."

"Maybe you can rep him?"

"Think I could make him and me a lot of money."

I saw the big black man raise his weapon. "Quick," I said. "Step away."

And step we did. The glass beside the door burst apart and the wire woven inside the glass was twisted. The bullet smacked something in the background but, fortunately, none of us.

We hurried to the couches. I'm not sure why, but it had suddenly become our gathering point.

I said, "They'll be coming in, and pretty quick. Maybe the front door, maybe the back, probably both. They'll hook the winch on that truck out there to the van and pull it away. It'll be easy."

"Upstairs," Manny said.

"I don't love that idea," Leonard said.

"Until you got a better one, I'm taking Nikki up there with me. I might be able to hold them off better from that position."

"Oh God," Nikki said.

"I'm going to do my best to protect you," Manny said.

"Her best is damn good," I said.

Nikki nodded, but she was beginning to tremble.

Manny headed for the stairs, Nikki following, Leonard and me pulling up the rear. When we got to where the stairs turned, me and Leonard stopped. I said, "I'll stay here at the corner, see if I can hold them a bit. Maybe you can find a way out up there."

"Yeah, we'll just turn ourselves to water and slip down the drain. Shit, Hap, we get up there, we might as well bend over and kiss our asses good-bye. Or there's always the roof. We might find a hole somewhere leads up there, but then they can climb up and shoot at us until they hit something."

"I'm sorry to say I'm not exactly full of fresh ideas."

"I got one," Leonard said. "You stay here, and I'll go down and get behind the pin racks, take a position in an opening. They might not expect that, and it'll give me some cover."

“You know I should do that, not you.”

“Why is that?”

“Because you can’t shoot like me. I need to catch the first ones in.”

Leonard sighed.

“Shit, you’re probably right. Hate it when you’re right. I’ll stay here at the stairs, maybe we can get them in a cross fire or some such.”

“Just don’t get me in that cross fire. I’ll be the handsome white man hiding in one of the pin openings. I want to stay handsome and alive.”

“You ain’t handsome.”

“Then let’s just make sure I stay alive.”

Manny came back down the stairs. “What the hell, boys?”

I told her.

She gave Leonard her long gun. “You’ll need this, and I’ll take your handgun to add to mine, maybe give one to Nikki. It might come to that.”

Leonard gave it to her. I reached for my handgun.

“Keep it,” Manny said. “I think you might need a lot of ammunition.” She gave me some of her ammunition to go with the long gun, and Leonard gave me some of his; all the sets matched. I had automatic rifles and a shotgun and a pistol now. If I only had crossing bandoliers.

“I’ll try to barricade upstairs, protect Nikki,” Manny said. “But that will leave you out here, Leonard.”

“I’d rather be where I can see Hap.”

“All right.”

“If you can get out with Nikki, get out,” I said.

“Believe me, I’d have no trouble leaving your asses behind, but I’m not sure there’s a way out. Nice knowing you boys.”

“Same to you,” I said.

Manny went back up and I slipped down the stairs and skulked to one of the wooden lanes and went down it with my body bent. I slid in on my side where a bowling-pin drop was open, wiggled on through.

When I was in the path behind where the pins were racked, I tracked along the openings back there, found one I thought best, one where I could see the front door. They came through the back door, they had to come along the side of the alley, and since I was in the center, eventually I would see them as they came forward. And Leonard would have them right in line for a shot.

I looked and saw Leonard’s shadow at the place where the stairs turned, and then his shadow slipped out of view behind the wall. I took a deep breath to calm my nerves a little, but it was the kind of calm that wouldn’t last, and the air tasted like the dust from a mummy’s shroud.

The truck lights went away and left the windows at the front of the bowling center dark, and then I heard that big damn truck rolling along the side of the building, and then it was at the back. A 747 could have landed with less noise than that mechanical beast.

And then I heard the sound of the winch out back being snapped into place, and then I heard it pulling the van away from the door, as I suspected they would do, and then the front door cracked and turned my attention there as wind and rain spilled into the room.

Someone was trying to be clever and push it open in the dark slowly, but I saw it.

I saw it all right.

But nothing happened, not right away. Damn, they were coming from both ends of the building, and soon the place would be swarming with them.

I took a deep breath, told myself, “I still live,” using the mantra of one of my favorite childhood fictional heroes, John Carter of Mars.

42

Things began to slow and I felt fear crawling along my spine like a centipede. I was tired and I was dealing with a lot of assholes, and I wasn't sure I could handle it from all angles, even if I had a fair view of everything. I placed the gun on the alley beneath the pin rack and waited. My hands were sweating and I felt warm, even though the air wasn't all that humid.

In fact, the front door was wide open now, and the wind and rain were coming inside, and it was a cool wind, I guess, but I sure wasn't cool. My blood was boiling with fearful anticipation. I thought: I have killed before, and I can do it again, and maybe I can do it too easily. All these goddamn guns, and all these bad places I put myself into, and no matter how I justified it, I was a goddamn killer. I had crossed the line a long time ago, and you can't uncross that line, and that's what's scary.

I wiped my damp hands on my pants, picked up the long gun.

I saw a shadow slip through the door, a shadow with an automatic rifle, I presumed. I had him in my sight, and I eased the trigger slowly as I gently let out my breath. I can't describe why I can shoot like I can, but I've always had the knack. I learned early on how to shoot, but there was nothing classical about it. I didn't really care for guns at all, but if you put one in my hand, it was like a natural extension. Where I pointed, I could quite often hit, and right then I was pointing at that shadow, and as my breath was eased and the trigger was pulled, I saw the top of the shadow, where the head was, become a black swarm like bees flying out from their hive. The shape collapsed in a heap to the floor and the shadowy swarm splattered against the wall.

And then the back door was slung open, and though I couldn't quite see it, I could hear them coming through. Three or four steps in, they would be visible if I angled myself a little, but now others were coming through the front door, and they were firing in my direction. I wasn't sure if they saw me or had seen the gunfire, but now I held the trigger down and let the sparks fly, filling that doorway with hot destruction.

I figured they had a plan to get me busy on one end, then take me from the other, but I knew Leonard was facing the back door from the stairwell, so I decided to forget about the back door, concentrate on the front.

There was fire from the stairway toward the back door, and the firing was loud. Leonard was at work.

I emptied a clip, and while I was reloading one of those Manny had given me, I dropped down behind the alley for protection, and when I did, splinters from the alley floor in front of the loading rack were knocked up by wild shots. Some of the splinters sprayed me. One of them stuck in my cheek, another in my forehead.

I crawled along the floor with my weapons, holding the long gun, the pistols shoved into my coat pockets. I was pushing the shotgun before me. All those shells in my pockets made me feel as heavy as a bag of bricks.

I inched down two lanes, came up there, poked the rifle through, let loose again. This time I caught someone coming in the front door, probably thinking he was safe, that I was pinned down and couldn't shoot.

He was wrong.

I cut him across the groin with one sweep, across the neck with another as he dropped to a knee. I thought I saw some sparks against his chest, where shots had hit his protective vest. The shooter fell over against the headless shadow already there, and I could hear him moaning, and it was a sickening sound. I wanted to shoot him again just to shut him up but knew I should save the ammunition. That guy, alive or not, was fucked, and good, and he was no longer a threat.

Leonard was breaking it down, shooting fast, flooding the back door like a fireman watering flames. After a moment, the firing stopped. It was clear Leonard had driven them back. I heard him click in a new clip.

We hadn't been as easy as they'd thought, not the way we were positioned. They thought we were cake, and we were poison.

Come on, motherfuckers, come on back, run at it again.

I felt the fire rising up in me. I felt the thing I feared about myself most. A kind of anger that could surface and make me red-hot and madly savage or coldly efficient; sometimes, it was a little of both. It was a thing that squirmed in the primitive part of my brain. It came loose a little too easy, but right then, I needed it. I was down to survival, not philosophy.

I didn't know how much was in the new clip, because the first one went pretty fast. I had held the trigger down on that one, like my finger was glued to it. I decided I had to be more careful. The shotgun was near me and I had the handguns. They were backup, but my best bet right then was the military-style weapon from the cop-shop armory.

I dropped back out of sight, my ears open for any sound. After a moment, it was all too much, and I slipped up for a peek.

No one was moving. The moaning was still going on. And then there was a burst and a bright burn of gunfire stitched across the night and the moaner was put out of his misery. They had killed their own killer.

That was one way to do it. At least it was quiet for a moment.

I knew one thing: Mercy from them was not an option, not if they cleaned up their wounded like that. I had a feeling when it came down to us it wouldn't be that quick. No way. Wilson Keith was a vengeful asshole. He was going to make it as miserable for us as he could manage.

I was trying not to breathe too loudly, but my breath was still a little ragged. It felt as if it were climbing out of my lungs wearing a sandpaper suit.

Leonard opened up again, fire jumping from his position. I heard the sound of hot lead smacking flesh and bone.

And then there was a ramming noise and the back wall moved, and then there was a crashing sound, and some of the ceiling came down behind me.

Keith's vehicle had slammed into the back door of the bowling alley, pushed forward, and stopped. I could see the nose of it. The tires rotated savagely. Keith's killer machine was stuck; it had broken the doorway apart, but the back end had hung up somehow. I could tell that by the black smoke wafting up from the front tires. There was a cracking sound, and the vehicle edged in a little more, its headlights bright, its row of lights on the roof brighter. The tires grabbed the floor and the truck broke completely free of the wall and came charging into the room like a bull looking to gore a matador.

A window was down on the driver's side, and a long gun was hanging out of it, and it was firing in Leonard's direction. Leonard jumped behind the wall, out of sight. The truck stopped and the driver got out holding his weapon.

It wasn't Keith. It was the big black guy.

The weapon in his hand looked like something out of a science fiction movie. He was crouched and ready, but he wasn't firing.

Then there was a loud blast followed by a crash and a tinkling of glass. The light from the vehicle was so bright that even though the big man was not in front of it, I could still see him clearly in its spreading glow, and in that moment, when the glass fell from on high, the top of the big man's head split wide open and his knees folded and he hit the floor with one leg twisted behind him in a way no one could naturally make his legs go, not even that kung fu son of a bitch, wherever he was.

I glanced up. I saw Manny briefly, she having been the one who'd made the shot that shattered the glass upstairs and split the big guy's head wide open. She darted into the shadows with her gun in her hand. The gunfire from the other side of the vehicle that was sprayed up there was way too late. They had lost one of their best men, and Manny was still an active shooter.

During all the confusion, with the glass shattering, Leonard had moved off the stairs and behind the low wall near the couches. There was a gap there so bowlers could make their way to the bathroom, get better shoes, or cross over to the vending-machine room. I discovered he was there because suddenly he was firing from that position, and whoever was at the vehicle wasn't firing back.

Leonard crossed from his spot toward the vehicle. At the same time, two people came through the front door; one went right, the other left. I shot the one on the left as cleanly as if he had been nailed to the floor waiting for it; it was another head shot. Like us, they all wore vests. Bullets we had might penetrate those, but I wasn't taking any chances now. I was no longer a butcher. I was a surgeon.

The one on the right was coming up behind Leonard, ducking along the low wall. I wanted to yell out at Leonard but didn't. I didn't want to alert the guy to where I was, because it was my guess he didn't know I was there. Seeing Leonard was just too much for him, like a hound after a rabbit. Worse, I couldn't see Leonard anymore, but I was pretty sure the shooter would be able to see him near the vehicle that had broken through the wall. Wherever our bad guy lifted up from behind the wall to fire at Leonard, I had to be ready. I began to sweat like a goat at a barbecue.

That's when there was another shot from upstairs. More glass rained down and I saw a rifle fly up from behind the short wall and knew Manny had nailed him.

Bless you, Manny.

I crawled through the opening in the pin rack, pushing the rifle in front of me, pulling the shotgun behind me.

I heard shots where Leonard had gone, near the vehicle, and I went there, discarding the rifle and carrying the shotgun with me, anticipating close work. When I got there, a dead woman was on the floor, the one I had seen with Keith back at the police station. Her face had been moved from left to right, or maybe it was right to left; it was such a mess, you couldn't really tell.

Leonard was standing there, looking pretty calm considering the circumstances.

"Okay?" I said.

"Yep," Leonard said. "You?"

"So far, but I may need you to wipe my ass later."

We were looking around all the time, watching for Keith or any remaining minions. I'm sure we both expected Kung Fu Bobby to show up eventually. I plucked the splinters from my face and flicked them away. I was trembling a little. I no longer felt warm. Now I could feel the cold air and it made me cold, and the wind from outside was ruffling my hair like an excited girlfriend.

I opened the door on the vehicle and looked inside. There was no one there. The motor was running and it was warm inside with the heater on, and the overhead light was bright enough you could damn near see the air crawl. There was a scoped rifle of some sort in the seat, and I had never seen such a weapon. It was silver in color and the stock was thick and the scope on it looked large and cumbersome, but when I picked the gun up, it was as light as a poor man's wallet. I took a moment to look through the scope. It was a nightscope and you could see shapes clearly in it, though all of them looked slightly alien and gold-colored.

I kept the rifle and leaned the shotgun against the truck, closed the door. We each took a side of the vehicle and made our way through the debris it had created when it slammed through the wall. Outside, in the wind and the rain, we didn't see anyone. I pulled the hood up on my slicker, and the rain rattled against it. Then we heard the SUV out front start up. We rushed back inside, and we could see headlights shine in through the open front door, and the lights began to move away, like two small, bright moons falling off a cliff. The SUV was backing out of the drive, down the rise of the road.

Now we knew where Kung Fu Bobby and Keith were. They were hightailing it out of there.

“Jump in,” Leonard said.

He rushed back to the armored vehicle, climbed in behind the wheel. I was about to climb in on the passenger side when I looked up and saw Manny standing at the edge of where the glass wall had been. Nikki was beside her. They were both holding handguns.

“Get him,” Manny said.

I got in, carrying the rifle I had taken and the shotgun too. Leonard backed us out with the vehicle making a lion-like roar, taking some of the remaining back door and wall with it for a few yards, and then he turned the wheel to the left, and away we went, around the back of the bowling center, around the side of it, and down the driveway, which had already been navigated by the SUV.

When we reached the highway, we knew which way they had gone, because the road to Tyler was blocked. Unless they had managed to come up with a cloak of invisibility or the SUV had the ability to fly away into the wet, windy blackness of night, they had to have headed back toward LaBorde.

Leonard yelled out, “Giddyup, Scout.”

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The security vehicle had swift and powerful windshield wipers. They slapped the rain away with the speed of a hummingbird's wings. The lights were phenomenal, cutting through the wet dark effortlessly. Our roaring ride began to catch up with the black SUV, its taillights revealed in our head beams.

A moment later we were riding their ass. Leonard bumped them lightly, then hit them harder. The SUV began to spin, and the wet streets made it worse. Leonard slowed, and the SUV wobbled to the side of the road as a tire blew and then it went skipping left toward a deep roadside ditch and a line of dark trees that were in front of a fenced-in pasture. I could see clearly because the morning light was beginning to slip through the sky.

The SUV's tires shed rubber like a snakeskin, and the rubber slammed against the windshield of our stolen killer machine and flapped away without so much as leaving a mark.

We had passed the SUV by then; it had stopped when it jumped the ditch, went off into the trees, and smacked against a big sweet gum. It had turned sideways, but not before a door had come open and dumped the contents of people out of it as fast as shit flying out a diarrheic goose.

Leonard stopped slowly, then turned Scout—as I now affectionately thought of the armored vehicle—around and headed back where the SUV had gone off into the line of trees.

He pulled to the side of the road and angled Scout a little so that the headlights and the overhead spots illuminated the scene.

We could see both Keith and Kung Fu Bobby climbing up out of the water-filled ditch. Kung Fu Bobby was up and gone into the woods so fast, I wasn't even sure I had seen him. Keith had lost his hat and ran out of steam. He clutched at the far side of the ditch, but the mud came away in his hands and he slid backward like a slug on teflon.

It was a deep ditch. The rushing water in it came up to his waist and it was moving him around. He caught hold of some roots sticking out of the side of the ditch and clung to them.

I pulled the rifle off the seat, and we got out. Leonard had the shotgun with him. I climbed on top of Scout's cab. I looked through the scope at the tops of the trees, and then I stood up on the cab and looked some more. I could see the trees and the fence and the field from up there, and the scope outlined Kung Fu Bobby climbing between the wires of the barbed-wire fence, then running like a goddamn cheetah across that field.

The wind was stout, and it was all I could do to stand there and not be blown off. I could feel it lashing my hair, so I knew from which direction it was coming and in which direction it would push my bullet. I judged the speed of the wind instinctively, guessed about how fast it would move my shot. I had killed others this night, and before, but this was different. I was homing in on a living human that couldn't harm me now and who was running away and had his back to me.

I hesitated.

And then I took a deep breath and kept Kung Fu Bobby outlined in the scope. I pulled my aim a little to the right, accommodating the blowing of the wind, and elevated the barrel slightly. I slowly let out my breath and gently tugged on the trigger. Kung Fu Bobby looked like part of a video game in the scope and that bothered me even more.

He tried to kill you and Leonard and Nikki, I told myself. He would kill you now if he thought he had the advantage. He might have been the one that killed the lady in the hospital. He certainly helped make it possible. He may be human, but he lacks humanity.

I told myself this as I looked through the scope, the very essence of inhumanity to man on my mind. I was surprised when the shot fired. The sound of it startled me a little, like when the proctologist finally sticks his greased finger up your ass.

I had missed. I had misjudged the rain and the wind. The shot carried past him and hit on his left side and I could see a small jump of dirt in the scope. I pushed my shot a little farther right. He was getting close to the barbed-wire fence on the far side, another line of trees. I had only a few seconds.

Still, take your time, I told myself. Don't get in a hurry.

I lifted the barrel slightly higher. I could barely see him in the scope, as I was having to give up so much of his view for the wind and the carrying of the bullet.

Once again, when the rifle fired, I was startled, but this time I saw Kung Fu Bobby stagger a little, go to one knee, come up again. By now he had reached the barbed-wire fence. He was slipping between two strands of it when he quit moving and collapsed on the bottom strand, like an oversize bird on a telephone wire. He lay still, his arms and legs dangling, and then he rolled off the wire toward the tree line. Only his left foot was still on the wire.

I took a deep breath, tried not to congratulate myself on being an efficient killer. I climbed down from the roof of the truck, went down the side of the road to the edge of the ditch.

Leonard was squatted there. He had laid the shotgun across his knees. I could hear Keith talking when I came up.

"There's no reason you should have won that firefight," he said. "None."

"Ain't life funny," Leonard said. "Reason we won is our secret weapon. Right, Hap?"

"That's right," I said. "We used the elephant of surprise."

"Listen here. I could use boys like you. And I mean for front work, lots of money."

"Do you have dental in your plan?" I said.

"Listen, now, I'm making a serious offer."

"And I'm going to give you a serious answer," Leonard said. "First part of that answer is you've done bad to a lot of people, and I'm sure you'll do more bad if I give you the chance. And the rest of the answer is even more simple: I see that gun you're reaching for."

Keith had been reaching, talking, distracting, looking for his moment, and he'd thought he had us.

Leonard swiveled the shotgun off his knees, and, still squatting, he shot Keith in the head, taking most of it away. Keith's gun fell out of his hands and into the water, and then Keith slipped down the slope and was caught up in a clog of brush for a moment. The flowing water moved the brush away from him, and he eased the rest of the way down. His body tumbled over a couple of times due to the power of the water, and then hung up in some exposed roots on the side of the ditch and stayed there, his feet swaying in the water but going nowhere. Parts of his head on the side of the ditch dripped down too. I could see this clearly because the sun was coming up red as a plum, and the wind was beginning to blow out and the rain went with it.

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When we got back to the side of the road, a figure came crawling out of the damaged SUV. It surprised us. We thought everyone inside had been thrown out. He stood and put his hands up.

"Hey, guys, don't shoot. I don't want nothing to do with this shit anymore." His hair was washed down over his forehead and he looked as pathetic as a drowning rat.

"You've decided to retire a little late," I said.

"I'm Larry Keith. Law wants me. For God's sake, take me to the law. Don't shoot me. Please don't shoot."

Leonard studied him. "Why not?"

"Because I want to talk. I want to tell everything I know about my father and his work. I want a deal. Was one of those shots…him?"

"Yep," Leonard said.

Larry looked toward the ditch. I doubted he could see his old man from that angle, but he looked for a long moment anyway.

"I didn't even like him and he didn't really like me, and still I feel bad. Good God. We used to go to the zoo."

"I hope you got to see the monkeys," Leonard said, "because you won't be going to the zoo again anytime soon. You'll be living in one."

The way Larry stood there, the way his head was hung, his wet hair in his face, his hands lifted, I felt bad for him. There was no reason to feel that way, but I did. Right then I felt bad about everything.

We found some rope in the back of the truck, tied Larry up with it, loaded him in the vehicle, bound him to the passenger seat. Leonard drove him and us back to the bowling center.

As we went, the red sun rose higher, and the thin mist in the trees began to melt. I saw birds flying over the tops of the trees, and before we had gone far, the red sun became gold, and the sky was absent of clouds and had turned a bright baby-blanket blue.

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I felt sad about Kung Fu Bobby, more than the others, until they went out to get his body and he wasn't there. That helped me out, in a way, because I didn't have to explain shooting him as he was running away. Not to anyone, even myself.

They looked where I'd said he was, and then they looked in the tree line and beyond, but they didn't find him. He hadn't got up wounded and wandered off and died. They didn't find any blood.

I knew then I had missed twice. Unusual for me. Maybe in the back of my mind I meant to miss. And maybe it was the rain and the wind. I don't know. But Kung Fu Bobby had fooled me, had taken a dive into that fence, and, in his acrobatic way, he had been convincing.

He was out there somewhere.

Larry Keith turned out to be a big ol' blabbermouth and he told everything, admitted he saw the murder of Pretty Boy but tried to distance himself from it, like it wasn't his idea at all, that he was just an observer, not the one who pulled the trigger. He knew singing loud and clear might give him a reduced sentence. It wasn't all that reduced. Twenty years. Not what he deserved, but what he got.

Nikki, when her tongue was well, gave her testimony, and if Old Man Keith had been alive, he'd have gotten the death penalty. Well, he got it anyway.

Leonard and I were cleared of any charges. Manny made us out to be heroes, and I guess we were. I hope we were. Thinking of it that way helps me sleep at night.

LaBorde was devastated by the storm. Downtown had stood pretty well, but along the streets and out in the country, the hurricane winds, the tornado spin-offs, and the high water had destroyed a lot.

We got declared a national disaster area, and already the town is rebuilding. That's the Texas way. We might have our faults, but we can get shit done if someone throws a barbecue with it.

Leonard's apartment fared fine, and so did our office, though the bicycle shop below us was washed out. Somewhere a large perch is riding a ten-speed.

Mine and Brett's house was easy enough to repair, and we had that done right away, thanks to the insurance, and after a few months had passed and Kung Fu Bobby hadn't shown up, I decided he had moved on. Practical. He wasn't the kind of guy, at least in my estimation, to stick to an agenda that wasn't paying. His loyalty was to the hire, not the man. I wondered where he was right then, what he was thinking. Probably learning to leap tall buildings in a single bound.

Wondering doesn't give much in the way of results, though. Months later I would still be wondering, though with less frequency.

Nikki came out fine, and when our house was repaired, we had a house-repair party, and she was invited. She came over wearing a wide-brimmed hat, a pretty yellow dress dotted with blue flowers, little tennis shoes as white as snow.

It was a bright day and cold, and we had cooked all morning. We had enough food to feed the proverbial army, and we had an army coming over. Besides Nikki, we had Hanson, minus his wife, who hated us, and we had Manny and Cason Statler, and there was Pookie, Chance, Reba, and Buffy the Dog, wearing a red-and-white neckerchief and new dog tags, and there was Leonard, of course.

The food was pulled pork and greens and cabbage, and there were hot dogs and hamburgers, fried chicken, dips and chips, and drinks of all kinds. And primarily for Leonard, there was banana pudding with vanilla cookies mixed into it. It was the one dish Reba had made.

We pushed the couch and the furniture in the living room aside, and in the kitchen, we added a foldout table and chairs, and at around two p.m. we attacked the food.

There was lots of talk and laughter, and that helped the storm and the killing seem distant and long gone and unlikely again. Manny said the city was giving me and Leonard some kind of award for helping law enforcement in a unique time of need. That was about as surprising as discovering a thousand-dollar bill in one of my socks.

Reba was really taken with Nikki's whiteness. She said, "You white as I am black."

Nikki stared at her, said, "But I burn easy and I'm not as pretty as you."

The color of Reba's skin didn't allow us to see her blush, but we could sure sense it in the way her eyes fell and her head turned.

"I ain't pretty."

"Yes, you are. But you might think about working on your hair a bit. I can help you with that later, if you like."

"I don't know."

"It's no trouble."

"You know about my kind of hair?"

"I might surprise you with what I know about hair of all sorts."

"Maybe," Reba said. "Where you get that hat?"

"Goodwill."

"Nah, you didn't."

"Did."

"Be damn. Looks like it high-end."

"It was at one time. But at Goodwill, it was my price."

When the talk became repetitive, Brett, beautiful in jeans and a black T-shirt and red slip-on shoes, pushed her long red hair back and bound it, turned on the CD player, put one on and others to follow.

"Runaround Sue" by Dion came up first, and Brett held out her hand to me while swaying her hips from side to side. It was an invitation impossible to ignore. I came in from the kitchen and took her hand.

She said, "Hap, let's dance, baby."

I used to dance well, but I didn't do it much anymore. But right then that music was beautiful and stirring, and I began to dance, and my body became loose and easy. I told myself I would never pick up a gun again. I would never get involved with anything where I might be hurt or I might hurt someone else. It wasn't the first time I had spoken to myself that way.

Brett dropped my hand and came in close and we rolled our shoulders and swung our hips, touched noses, then moved back and let the music take us.

Reba laughed, but then she and Nikki were out there with us, dancing together, clowning a little. Cason and Manny joined in, followed by Pookie and Leonard.

Leonard proved once again that the idea that all black men can dance is a myth. He had the rhythm of a broken clock. But Pookie, now, he had it, man. He could move.

Hanson kept his seat and clapped his hands to the beat.

Brett signaled to him, did it a couple of times. Hanson got up and came over. She grabbed his shirt and pulled him close and the three of us danced until Hanson’s bad leg sent him back to his chair.

More old music followed, the Beach Boys, early Beatles, Buddy Holly, the Sun hits of Johnny Cash, all the gods of rhythm and blues, rockabilly, and rock ’n’ roll. Brett turned it up.

As we danced, the day began to fade and the night began to crawl and the room turned dark.

Hanson turned on the lights. We all stopped and ate some more, had some coffee while some slow ones played, and then we were back at it when the fast ones came, dancing like fools. We did that tirelessly, late into the night, constantly replacing played-out sounds with unplayed sounds, and at some point, for no reason I could determine, there were tears in my eyes, running down my cheeks.

I looked at Brett and smiled, and she smiled back.

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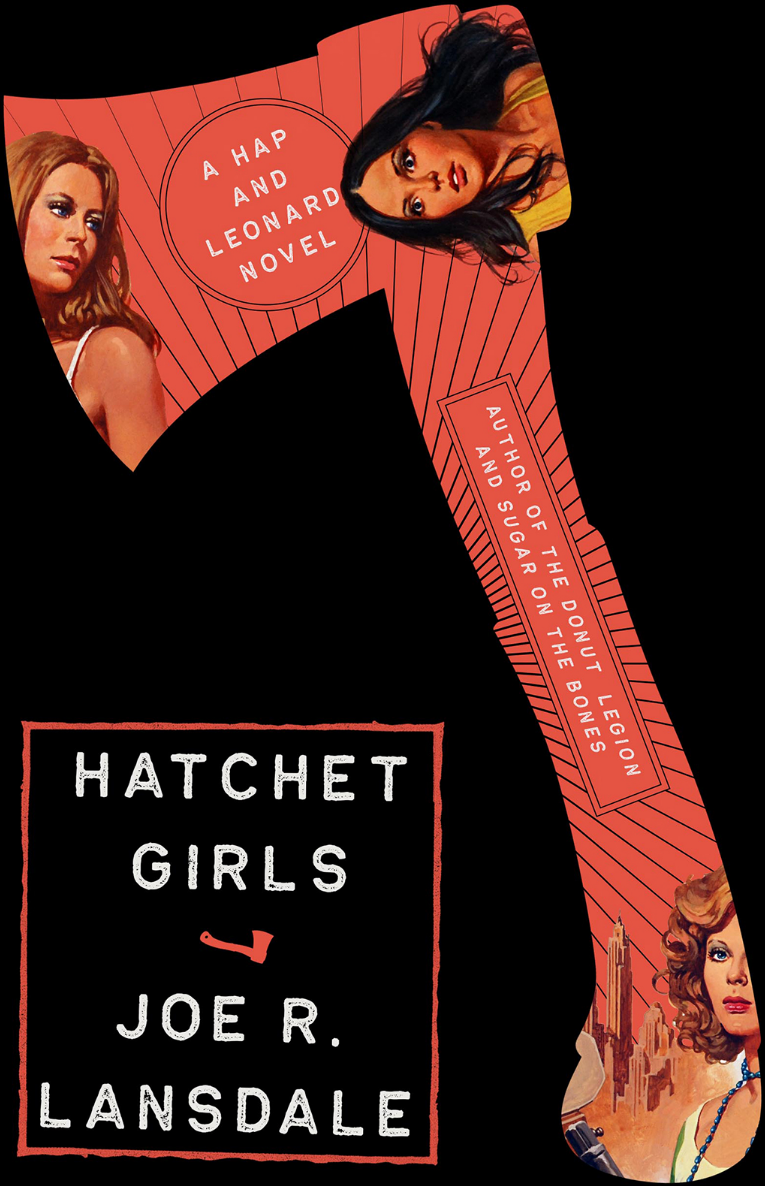

A HAP AND LEONARD NOVEL

AUTHOR OF THE DONUT LEGION AND SUGAR ON THE BONES

HATCHET GIRLS

JOE R. LANSDALE

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Even a blind pig finds an acorn now and then.

—Old proverb

Sometimes the truth wears an overcoat and a pulled-down hat, and therefore cannot be completely seen.

—Jerzy Fitzgerald

1

Wait a minute, now. You’re saying you want us to deal with a pig problem?” Leonard said.

We were sitting in the agency office, just me and Leonard along with an economy-size woman in a colorful flower-patterned muumuu and house shoes. She looked as if she might take a bite out of your ear. She had thick and bright false teeth and in my view wasn’t afraid to use them.

“It’s a hog. Sizable. Keeps attacking the family,” the woman said. “My kids, three of them. Another one, Sharoline, doesn’t live at home, so she’s pig-free. I hardly knew her father. I was pretty wild once. Used to drink a lot. But that’s a different story, and you don’t want to hear about that.”

She paused, perhaps hoping we did want to hear about it, but we offered no encouragement. I found a fly on Brett’s desk to watch. The moment passed for her story. The fly had had its moment as well and flew off.

She said, “All the kids are afraid of Porky. That’s what we named him. One time, Porky humped my leg like a dog. I had to let him finish because he wouldn’t let go. He was kind of soothed afterward, so I was able to escape with a wet leg and all of me still intact. Big as he is, wonder he didn’t push me down. But he’s quite agile and can stand on his hind hooves. He was more of a shoat then. He put on some weight since that lovesick moment. I bet that son of a bitch tops out at four hundred pounds. He still gives me the love eye when he catches me hurrying from the house to the pickup.

“The kids go to catch the school bus or come home on it, they got to run like wild horses to keep Porky from getting to them. Goddamn bastard ate my daughter’s cat, Tulip. And that cat was sizable and a scrapper. Seen Tulip whip a good-sized dog once. But that hog ate old Tulip like she was an ear of corn. Sometimes, to get the kids on the bus, Baby Darling, my youngest girl, owner of the cat, also the fastest of the kids even though she’s short-legged, will put herself out there first and run around the house, old Porky following. That gives the other kids time to run to the bus, and then Baby Darling will beat it to the bus just before the driver closes the door. She’s a brave little scamp."

"Lady, we're a private detective agency, not swine management," I said. "There's got to be someone else to talk to. American Pig Patrol or something. Besides, how much are you willing to pay for Leonard here to catch that pig and throw him in the can?"

"Leonard?" Leonard said. "I'm not catching no damn pig. If Jim Bob Luke was here, he'd catch him. He used to raise those things. He could teach it to drive you to work."

"He's not here, and he's retired from the pig business," I said.

"I have a little disability pension," she said. "I work cleaning houses, but it's not a daily job."

"Hog capture is not really our bailiwick," I said.

"So, no help?" the woman said. "Me and my kids have to live in terror from the neighbors' hog?"

"Officially," Leonard said, "I don't work here no more."

"You talked to the neighbors about it?" I said.

"Yep. Called the sheriff's department too. Sheriff's deputy came out and tried to herd it back into its pen, but he wasn't much of a herd dog. He got pulled in the mud and bitten. Understand he filed a suit against the hog's owners, the Planters—who are cousins of mine, by the way—but no action was taken that I know of. Like me, the sheriff is a cousin to the Planters, so he's a cousin to me. He's more closely related to the Planter family tree than I am. I don't know if he's a branch of it or a root. I think had he known the call came in from me, he wouldn't have done anything on account of that. I figure they've interbred enough, one could take a shit for the other. The other thing is we don't live close enough to the city limits for the city cops to take the matter in hand."

"The Planters being your cousins," I said, "couldn't they just do you a solid? Put the hog up."

"And they live next door?" Leonard said. "What are the odds?"

"It isn't because we feel great warmth toward one another. They're cousins quite a few times removed. I haven't got any pull with them. I'd just like to get the hog corralled and penned up and the pen made stouter. Planters are like a bunch of hillbillies from a cartoon. That hog goes in their house, and they let it. It don't bother them none. One time, I looked out my kitchen window, and my window's close enough to their house I could see through their big ol' living-room window. There they were on the couch watching TV, and that big-ass hog was sitting on the floor by them. For them it's a house pet. For us, it's a pork chop terror."

"Was the show they were watching *Green Acres*?" I asked.

"What?" she said.

"Never mind."

"I don't see how this is anyone's job but the Planters'," Leonard said.

The woman tapped her pocketbook on her leg. "I got two hundred dollars if you nab it, three hundred if you kill it. If you kill the neighbors or their kid, I can come up with something more, but I don't want it to look like I was involved."

"Damn," Leonard said. "The rural life is even more savage than I remember."

"Hell, we aren't all that rural," she said. "We live on the edge of town. Sit on the porch at night slapping mosquitoes, and we can see the lights from LaBorde. Or we used to sit. That hog roaming around, we stay tight inside now, look out the window to note if we can make a run for our transportation. Come on. Help a lady out. You pigging it up or not?"

I thought, Grab a pig, take two hundred. Do not pass Go.

Me and Leonard had grown up country boys and had been around a few pigs, some by birth, some by personal transformation, so we weren't without some experience in the matter.

I looked at Leonard.

Leonard looked away, adopted an expression that indicated he had heavy thoughts on his mind that had nothing to do with pig hustling.

"Oh, all right," I said. "But we're just nabbing the hog, not killing anyone. And that includes Porky."

"We?" Leonard said.

"I was just funning about all that killing," she said. "I just want it caught and put up, maybe sent to a good pig school or something."

I got the feeling she hadn't been funning.

She told us a little more about Porky and her situation. We took her name, Belinda Grant, got information and locations, took her check, and set about getting ropes at my house for pig-nabbing.

In my garage, while I was coiling the ropes over my shoulder, Leonard said, "What kind of low have we dipped to?"

"Brett Sawyer Investigations and Swine Control," I said. "I mean, hell, Leonard. We got nothing else going on, and with Brett gone for a while, we got to find something. Pay the bills, you know."

"Last gig got us enough money that we could hire someone to pay the bills."

"But we won't. That would be lazy."

"I'm okay with lazy," Leonard said.

"We took that woman's money, and I bet that was lunch money for her kids."

"You took it. I didn't. I never said I'd do shit."

"What'd she say? She had four children?"

“I wasn’t the one fucking her, so I’m short on feeling sorry for her,” Leonard said. “That many kids, little heathens ought to strip naked, put on some war paint, get some rocks and two-by-fours, hunt that hog down themselves. That’d save two hundred dollars and they’d have a nice supper. They wanted, they could sell some of the meat. I could give them a sauce recipe. Shit. Another idea is human sacrifice might appease it. A kid a day for three days to appease the hog gods. If they could get the grown kid home, Belinda could offer her up as well.”

I just looked at him. “Don’t do that, Hap.”

“Do what?”

“You know what.”

“Do not.”

“Look at me like I’m a heartless asshole.”

“If the asshole fits.”

2

Technically, Leonard no longer worked for the agency. He was teaching martial arts and boxing at a health club downtown, but Brett had talked him into sticking around part-time for another six months so she could decide if she needed to hire help when he left.

I was cherishing the remaining six months, even if he still worked at the health club some days and on the weekends.

He told me he was given a chance to buy the club and was seriously thinking about it. He wanted me to come in with him, be a kind of martial arts coach. He said when age caught up with me, which he felt was dwelling on my front porch already, I could maybe sort towels or some such.

It wasn't the worst idea in the world, but I didn't want to abandon Brett. I had to do a lot of thinking on that offered job. Brett was not only my boss, she was my wife.

Belinda told us the hog came out late afternoons and early mornings most of the time, but she also said Porky didn't wear a watch and could show up most anytime he took the notion. One time in the middle of the night she said she went outside to sit on the glider and take in the night air, and when she looked off to her left, there was Porky, partly in shadow, just eyeing her with a kind of "Surprise, motherfucker" attitude. She had to hustle back into the house. She could hear Porky climbing the steps and then the next thing she heard was him snuffling at the front door, like he could get her scent and suck her under the door, out of her house, and into his mouth.

We put the rope in Leonard's pickup, then we went inside and changed into work clothes. Leonard keeps some clothes at mine and Brett's house from when he lived there. He was already wearing a pair of lace-up boots, and he had a straw hat in the truck. The hat had a purple band with a short yellow feather in it. For some reason, he pushed the brim of it up in front.

Morning was gone, so we planned for the afternoon. We went to lunch at a hamburger joint, then drove over.

As we were riding in Leonard's truck, he said, "Someone always has to fuck it up for the rest of us country folk by fitting a cliché. Belinda could be central casting for *The Beverly Hillbillies* or *Li'l Abner*."

"I fit some of those clichés," I said. "Some of my relatives fit those clichés, and some didn't. You and I have risen above our clichés and are on our way to Nirvana."

"I do like fried chicken necks and greens cooked with bacon, though. I don't want to lose those stereotypes."

"And I can tear some crispy pork skins up," I said.

Both of us tried to eat better these days, but my mouth watered thinking about fried necks and pork skins. Greens without grease and bacon was a little too close to eating weeds. Grease and bacon rind fixed them up. Fixed that way, they tasted as if they came from the Garden of Allah. Also, it takes grease to make a turd.

It was a nice spring day and the houses and cars we saw were coated with a patina of yellow pollen. There were woods, but they were cut wide in spots, interrupting what should have been a solid strip of greenery. Still, the trees and the sky, blue with clouds as puffy and fine as the breasts of Hera, were soothing.

I had plenty to soothe. Leonard and I had spoken of it a bit, the loss of our friend Hanson, murdered before our eyes, shot by Kung Fu Bobby while floating in cold water, us spared by hiding behind moss and trees. Saying it out loud about him being murdered and it being partly our fault had only made it hurt worse, so we didn't talk about it anymore. At least not much.

There wasn't a thing we could have done, but it didn't always feel that way. Rachel, Hanson's wife, had been murdered at their home; they were starting a new life. He had retired from law enforcement, but his killers feared he might know something we could use to find them.

We found them. Vanilla Ride took care of Kung Fu Bobby, kicked him around like an empty cardboard box. The rest of them didn't survive either. One, Purple Eyes, might have gotten away or might be rotting somewhere in the Colorado woods. She took some damage. Literally ran off a cliff.

Bad fall, baby. Bad fall.

But we didn't see her body, so the possibility of her escape was tucked into the back of my mind along with all the horrid dreams of people I had killed in service of justice as I saw it.

Leonard wasn't bothered. His code was simple: Did they belong in this world? Were they dangerous? Did they plan to hurt people and would they? The answer to all those simple questions was yes, but a simple answer didn't touch well on my feelings about having become a killer. It got easier as I went. I satisfied myself enough most of the time knowing I saved lives, including my own, but taking a life from someone is the ultimate. I felt there were some people who deserved to die, but I wasn't happy that me and Leonard had become judge, jury, and executioner.

This was why something simple like capturing a hog seemed worthwhile. Wash away some of the nastiness of last winter with hog slop. It beat the idea of washing it away with blood.

As a side note: We hadn't been invited to Hanson and Rachel's funeral. Their family didn't care for us.

I didn't blame them.

3

When we found Belinda's house, it was extremely close to another with a large front window that took up half the house. That house had been nice once, but time and occupants had mistreated it. I assumed it belonged to the Planters, Porky's parents and Belinda's cousins. Belinda hadn't been exaggerating about being able to easily look from her window into their living room.

Today, however, the Planters' living-room curtain was pulled, and the blinds were down in Belinda's kitchen. There was a shabby slab-lumber pen between the houses, and part of it was broken down and spilling into Belinda's yard. There was a sizable storage shed not too far behind the pen almost tumbling into a creek.

Both small houses were coated with pollen, making them glow gold in the sunlight. Some of the pollen had blown up on the front porches of the houses, and lying facedown on the steps of the Grant house in a powder pool of it was Belinda. McDonald's bags were shredded all around her. Drink containers were draining their contents into the ground. The door to a car that might once have been blue was wide open. There were some French fries trailing from it to the disaster on the porch.

"Damn," Leonard said, and he was out of the truck.

We ran up to the porch. Belinda's head was bleeding and she had wounds on her arms and blood seeping through her muumuu and running down the steps. Leonard got her head lifted. She opened her eyes and looked at him.

"Porky ate my goddamn breakfast," she said.

"And a bit of you, it looks like," Leonard said.

"Got me in the hock and on the arm," she said. "A stray dog ran by and Porky let me go and went after it. That dog saved my life. I hope he can run fast. Damn, where in hell did you get that hat, fellow?"

"I forget," Leonard said.

We helped her to a sitting position.

"Better get us in the house before he eats us all," she said. "That bastard don't even leave bones."

We helped her to the door after Leonard recovered a sack of food that looked unmolested. I opened the door and we guided her inside. As I was about to close the door, I looked back and saw what looked like a hippopotamus rushing us at no less than the speed of a bullet.

We barely got inside and slammed the door before Porky hit it with a thud like a cannonball.

I glanced out the window by the door. It had been a hell of an impact. He had rolled off the porch and was now on his back kicking his short legs in the air, squealing. Then he rolled onto his feet and, in an insane burst of angry energy, took off running around the house and out of sight.

"Now you know my concern," Belinda said, standing at the kitchen sink, pressing a towel to her head. The kitchen was really just an open extension of the living room. No doorway, just a wide gap.

"I'll say," I said. "Are the Planters home?"

"They come home about five most of the time, but that's not set in stone. They have a wrecker business, but that isn't all of their business. They got some illegal things going on, you can count on it. You can hear them coming in that goddamn wrecker from a mile away. Sounds like a train that's got a cold or some such. It's smoky too. I thought three or four times it was on fire, but no such luck."

"Reckon all that was left of your lunch is this bag of fries," Leonard said. "Hog stepped on the sack, but they look all right. Out in the yard, I saw a couple of Big Mac containers, maybe part of a burger left in one, but I wouldn't recommend it."

"Maybe I'll take a look at it later, when or if I feel it's safe. So what are you boys gonna do?"

"I recommend we shoot it, and tell the Planters next door that God shot him," Leonard said.

"Think that would work?" she said. She sounded like she thought it might be a viable tactic. She might have hit her head harder than I'd thought.

I went to the kitchen window and looked out. Porky came whistling by, darted around the corner of the house, and was gone. I waited a few seconds, and he appeared again, still galloping at full speed, circling like a hyper–pork shark.

"He is not slowing down," I said.

"Raised around livestock, never seen anything similar," Belinda said.

I tried to come up with our next move. While I did, I looked around the small house. It had quite a few shelves with knickknacks: colored glass angels and little statuettes of gnomes and bears and deer and such. There was even a big souvenir back scratcher on the wall. It had a thick wooden handle with a slightly bent long metal rod poking out of it, and the scratcher had elongated prongs on it. It could have been used to comb briars out of an alpaca’s fur. Burned into the handle were the words “Hot Springs, Arkansas.”

“Ropes are in the truck,” I said.

“I’m not going out there,” Leonard said.

“We can’t stop him if we don’t make an effort.”

“This isn’t *Hatari*,” Leonard said.

“You got my two hundred dollars,” Belinda said.

“We can give it back,” Leonard said.

“He bit me on the leg,” she said. “Ain’t bad, but could have been. My arm got a nip too.”

By this time Belinda had found a soft chair and was eating the fries.

“Come on, man,” I said to Leonard. “We can’t leave her to this.”

“I’ve got a revolver in the glove box. You should shoot it. You don’t miss.”

“Sometimes I do.”

“Not often.”

I paused for thought. “I say we let it wear itself out, then sneak out and get the ropes and try and capture him. I don’t like shooting a poor critter. How would you feel to come home and find out your pet four-hundred-pound hog was shot and dead?”

“Relieved,” Leonard said.

4

I'm not sure how many rounds Porky made, but his speed didn't slow until his last lap. He edged around the house and out of sight. I went and looked out all the windows. That wasn't hard; it was a small house.

Out the bedroom window I could see that he was lying on his side in an existing wallow, breathing heavily. He looked like a beached whale.

I called Leonard and he came and looked.

"I think you can slip out now, get the ropes," I said.

"Who can slip out and get the ropes? Hell, man. He could be fooling. It could be a trick."

"He's a hog," I said.

"He might be a smart motherfucker. Hogs are smart."

"Not that smart…I don't think."

"You find out how smart he is," Leonard said, "I'll be here waiting on you. Get the gun."

I slipped out the front door and eased over to the truck, got the ropes out of the bed, and slung them over my head and shoulder. I went around and tried to gently open the passenger door, but it creaked. I heard a hog grunt from the other side of the house.

I took the revolver out of the glove box. It was small enough it fit into my front pocket. Gun that small and small of caliber might not be any use against our hippopotamus. When I was little, I used to call it a hippy-potty-mouse. The thought came to me and rattled around in my head like a BB in a boxcar.

Focus, Hap. Focus.

I began to slip back to the house. When I stepped on the top step, it made a sound like a mouse squealing. I heard the grunt again, opened the front door, and so help me Smokey Bear and all his rangers if that hog didn't appear suddenly on the right side of the porch. And if I'm lying, I'm dying—that meaty monster leaped onto it. I wouldn't have thought he could have gained that height if he had the power of levitation and a gyrocopter.

I beat him inside, slammed the door.

I said, "Okay. We're ready."

Leonard was looking out the side window. “Shit. I’m not going out there. You couldn’t haul me out there chained to a hand truck.”

Then I heard a rustling on the porch, and damn if that hog didn’t drive his head through the window glass next to the front door, causing Leonard to jump back.

Belinda, accustomed to hog fighting, came forward with a broom and whacked the hog on the head a few times; it was little more than a scalp massage to that impossible monster. He was tossing saliva from his mouth left and right as he jerked his head. What was left of the window glass was falling out of the frame like solid rain.

“Gun,” Leonard said.

No sooner had Leonard said it, then the hog pulled his head away.

“I don’t want to shoot him,” I said.

“That’s okay,” Leonard said. “I’ll do it even if you are the better shot. I’ll be glad to do it.”

“What we do,” I said, “is we wait until he wears down again, then we sneak up on him, loop his head with one rope, a leg with the other, pull both ends tight, then sort of yank him sideways toward the pen.”

“Which is broken down, mastermind,” Leonard said.

“I think there’s another way. I’ll raise the window so he can easily stick his head through. I’ll loop his neck. You go out the door and slip the other rope over a back leg. We’ll pull him your way. I think the window is high and wide enough I can step through after him when you get him going. We pull him to the truck, tie him off to it, fix the pen, and waltz him into it.”

“That sounds like a really bad idea.”

“It does sound stupid,” Belinda said.

“We keep the rope taut. I used this method years ago with a friend of mine who raised hogs.”

“How many years ago?” Leonard said.

“I was in my twenties. It broke out of its pen. It was a bad hog, too, though nothing like this one. This one is just plain weird.”

“Did it work?” Leonard asked.

“Ended up shooting it,” I said. “But I think it can work.”

“There’s some confidence,” Leonard said.

“I’m wiser now,” I said.

“So I’m pulling him toward me, and you’re following.” Leonard shook his head. “I don’t know, man.”

“I’ll switch with you. You take the head and I’ll take the leg.”

“You boys are crazy,” Belinda said. “I should have just shot it. Thought you boys could handle it.”

“Why didn’t you shoot it in the first place?” Leonard asked.

“It’s not like me and the neighbors, my cousins, get along that well as it is. Besides, I don’t have a gun. Kids and all.”

“You got anything a hog likes to eat?” I asked Belinda. “Besides us.”

“The man with the plan,” Leonard said.

5

Belinda took a thick slice of coconut cake out of the refrigerator. She gave it to me on a paper plate. It looked store-bought and maybe old enough to be hazardous. I went to the window with the cake. I had my rope on the floor next to me. Leonard had his rope coiled in his hands and stood by the door with it slightly cracked open.

If the hog stuck his head through the window, I would offer him the cake, rope him, and Leonard would rush outside and rope Porky's nearest hind leg. Then he would hurry toward the truck, pulling, trying to tumble Porky off the porch, and I would follow. Then we would get him sideways between us, and waltz him out to the truck. Tie him off to it.

"Everybody's got a plan until it don't work," Leonard said. "Tell you right now, that hog's smarter than you are."

"We'll see about that," I said.

"You might ought to listen to Leonard, hon," Belinda said. "I'm beginning to think Porky might be smarter than all of us."

Porky was no longer running in circles around the house. He was ambling, having decided he was the new sheriff in town. As he came up to the porch steps, I yelled out at him.

"Come on, Porky, you ignorant pig. Come get me, stupid."

Beady eyes focused on me. They looked like little gun barrels loaded with hate.

I said, "Uh-oh."

By the door, Leonard said, "Why 'uh-oh'?"

Belinda had already decamped to the bedroom. I heard the closet door in there close.

Porky was practically rolling up the squeaky steps, hitting the porch boards with a cracking sound, and then he came right through the window into the house. The window frame came loose and was around his head. I was knocked back on my ass, covered in coconut cake, holding a forearm against his throat. It was like trying to raise the *Titanic* with a two-by-four for a lever.

Leonard tried to grab his hind leg. That saved me. He turned on Leonard.

"Run, brother, run!" I said.

Leonard was off at a gallop, his rope clutched in his hands. Couches, chairs, and the kitchen table were toppled as Porky rushed after him, losing the window frame around his neck in the process.

Leonard hiked a foot up on the kitchen sink and clambered onto the top of the fridge, and let me tell you, that was a tight fit. He had to lie across it, his legs jutting out. Porky jumped at him, rocked the fridge, then rose on his hind legs and leaned against it. His snout almost reached Leonard. Porky did a little hop back and forth on his hind legs as if he were doing an ancient swine war dance.

"When you have time, Hap, ol' hoss, get your goddamn ass over here and help me."

As Leonard said that, he dropped the rope over Porky's head and pulled on it. This caused a squealing loud enough that the window over the sink shook. Porky danced more vigorously than before, and the cabinet doors swung open and dishes fell out of the shelves and smashed on the floor. Knickknacks were dislodged from shelves and fell and shattered on the floor. The back scratcher slid under my feet.

I grabbed Porky's hind leg as he was dancing a step, hooked the rope over it. Porky launched himself backward, knocked me down, bowled over me. It wasn't quite as bad as having a truck roll over me. I was able to get up. I tried dragging Porky with the rope. He took off. This, of course, jerked poor Leonard off the fridge and into the counter. But he still clung to the rope.

"Awww," he said, then the power of the hog pulled him around the counter and across the floor. One side of his straw hat was crushed.

We both had Porky, but we damn sure didn't have him between us or in any kind of way that was helpful. Our ropes might as well have been kite strings.

I was able to hold him long enough for Leonard to stand up. Then Porky was on me. His impact knocked me across the floor—I slid on that slice of coconut cake—and against the front door, which he banged open, then tumbled down the steps. This meant Leonard, not a quitter, still clutching the rope, was jerked over me. He slid on his belly across the porch and was pulled into the yard.

I heard him say, "Shit."

By this time, I had let go of the rope.

Realizing the cowboy-roping plan wasn't working, Leonard sprang to his feet and made a mad dash around the house.

I got to my knees, edged down to the porch steps, sat, inched the pistol from my pocket.

And here came Leonard, leading into the homestretch minus his hat, but Porky, formerly and presently hatless, was moving to the outside, dragging ropes. That wily hog looked sure to overtake him.

If I were a betting man, I would have bet on the hog.

I got to my feet just as Leonard ran for the pickup. He jumped inside of the truck bed. Porky rose up on his hind legs and leaned into the bed, trying to scramble himself inside.

Leonard bravely reached under Porky's neck and grabbed the rope that was over Porky's head. I stuck the pistol back in my pocket, ran, and grabbed the rope on Porky's leg. When I ran, it felt like someone was shaking a martini inside me. Porky had probably bruised a rib.

I tugged on the rope. Porky turned and went after me, jerking Leonard out of the truck as easily as lifting a minnow out of the water with hook and fishing line.

6

It took some real work, but Leonard clung to the rope and, after sliding along a bit, was able to get to his feet. I clung to my rope, and eventually, just missing some hog bites, we got him between us and sideways and walked him back to the truck. I slipped my end of the rope around the trailer hitch and tied it off, and Leonard hooked his over the front tire and axle, pulled it tight, and secured it.

We wobbled over to a spot on the ground and sat and watched Porky froth at the mouth and effortlessly shake the pickup.

“Poor Porky,” I said.

“Damn, Hap, that fucker is crazy.”

“I think we don’t say ‘crazy’ anymore. It’s offensive. I think what we say is something more medical, though for the life of me I can’t remember it.”

“Fuck you.”

“That’s not it.”

We went into the house. Belinda was sitting in the only chair left intact. It was a big fluffy thing with the ugliest pattern that could possibly be created. She was a sad lump in a muumuu. She was crying. She had placed her false teeth in her lap.

I felt sorry for her in a deep way. I had sort of looked down on her that day she came into the office. The reason was simple: I was having a bad day and she represented a lot from my past. Except for a few twists in life, there was a good chance both Leonard and I could still be in that place, stuck working day labor and so on. Now I had a home, insurance, a dental plan, and some serious money. As well as a fine wife.

Her mass of broken cheap furniture and shattered knickknacks hadn’t been worth much from a money standpoint, but for her, they’d been a rise in position equal to that of a billionaire buying his first Maserati.

My guess is she didn’t have insurance of any kind. It would take a long time to replace the stuff she had lost. Even if she did most of her shopping at a thrift store and boosted furniture that folks put on the curb for garbage pickup.

“That two hundred dollars cost me a lot,” she said. She looked around. “Damn near everything I have is smashed up.”

“Bathroom and your bedroom are untouched,” Leonard said as if that might cheer her up.

“That bedroom is for all of us. Youngest sleeps with me, another at the foot of the bed, the other on a pallet on the floor.”

“You get the two hundred back,” I said. “And another thing, I’ll buy you all new and better furniture. Give you some money to pick out other things you might want.”

For the first time in my life, I could do that sort of thing for others.

Leonard said, “We’ll both pay. And we’ll clean up here after we fix the pen and put Porky away. We might get him into some kind of job program or some such.”

Belinda lifted her head, fitted in her dentures. She looked at us like we were Tooth Fairies.

“You’d do that for me?”

“Yeah,” I said. “We will.”

“I don’t mean the job program for Porky,” she said.

“No,” Leonard said. “The rest of it.”

“Hap,” she said. “You got coconut cake on the seat of your pants.”

“I know,” I said.

7

Leonard drove into town to get a hammer and nails. I gave Porky a head of lettuce from Belinda’s refrigerator. It was blackened in spots. Porky didn’t mind. He ate it with a vicious chomp.

He had calmed down considerably. Something odd about that. He wasn’t a wild boar. He was a domesticated hog, mixed Yorkshire, Hampshire, Duroc. A real blood-and-bone of a domestic hog. Yet for a while, he had been as nutty as a squirrel’s winter storage.

When Leonard got back, we realized the remaining boards on the side of the pen that Porky had broken out of were in terrible shape and not recyclable as part of the pen. We didn’t want to spend the rest of the day running to town, so Leonard used the hammer to beat the storage shed’s door open, then knocked the door off its hinges.

“Porky’s parents are going to be mad,” I said.

“Fuck ’em.”

He brought the door over and took hold of one end. He put some nails in his teeth and put one in place with his left hand as he used his palm to hold the door. I kept my end tight and even.

Leonard drove a nail swiftly, then another. He came down on my end and put in two more. He gave me the hammer.

“Now finish it up.”

I got some nails and reinforced Leonard’s work. Now the door filled most of the gap. There were still weak spots in the pen, but that door was solidly in place as part of the pen’s wall.

Leonard went into the storage building and ripped some boards out of the wall with the hammer, and I carried them out.

We nailed them tight in the weak spots and made the pen solid. The swinging gate with a latch was a little feeble, so we tore more boards out and placed them in such a way as to strengthen it.

More boards were needed, and this time I was the scrounger. I moved toward the rear of the shed where it had been dark but was now illuminated by the light coming through the gaps in the walls Leonard had made.

There was a long table back there. There were jars and heating devices and a whole lot of cold medications in a cardboard box by the table. There were chemicals in bottles and an electric cookstove plugged into a floor outlet. There was an old-style tin-shade lamp hanging down on a precarious cord with a chain pull. I pulled the chain. The light came on and lit up a spot about the size of a dinner platter. The table had burn scars on it.

I grabbed my phone and took a photo. It was dark. I pulled some more boards off the shed wall and more light came in. I took the photos again. When I finished, I put the phone in my pocket.

“Leonard, I’ve found a meth lab.”

8

I called the sheriff, but I also called the LaBorde police and spoke to the chief, a guy named Justin who was a recent addition. We weren't friends, but me and Leonard had helped him on a matter he would never admit to.

He owed us one and probably feared we might tell what we had done and that it might put some stink on him. We wouldn't have said anything, but he didn't know that. It's nice to have a hole card.

While we waited for the bastions of the law to arrive, we got our rope ends untied from the trailer hitch and the axle, and, with Porky between us, we waltzed him into the pen, whipped off the ropes, and closed the gate. He found a muddy wallow right away and rolled in it. He lay there silent and still as boulder. We knew now why Porky was so manic—somehow, he had gotten some of that meth. I wouldn't put it past his family to have shared it with him.

Leonard pulled a large bag of hog feed out of the back of the truck and flung it over his shoulder. He went to the side of Porky's fence, hung the bag over the top rail, used his pocketknife to cut it open, and let the pellets fall into the trough below it.

"Nice of you to pick Porky up some chow," I said.

"Isn't it? Sooey," Leonard said.

Porky slapped his curly tail once in the mud but didn't get up. It was a kind of save-it-for-later message.

The sheriff arrived first. He looked like a sea turtle had died under his shirt. His feet splayed to the sides in cheap cowboy boots, and his hat was the nicest-looking thing about him. White and crisp with a brown band. He looked like a guy who had once been handsome, about the time the last mammoth died off.

When Leonard saw him and noted his hat, he said, "Shit. Lost my hat."

I assumed it was somewhere on the runner's path he and Porky had created.

Another sheriff's car pulled up and two deputies got out. They wore similar outfits as their boss without the sea turtle under them. They looked just smart enough not to shit in the street.

The sheriff came over and looked at us. "I'm Sheriff Doolin."

“You have a nice hat,” Leonard said.

“Thank you. Well, sirs, you called?”

“We did.” I gave him our names. “Did you know your cousin has a meth lab in that shed? You are cousins, right?”

He looked a little pale.

“What happened to the goddamn shed? Looks like beavers been at it.”

“Industrious beavers, I assure you,” Leonard said.

“That door on that pen come off that shed, didn’t it?” the sheriff said.

“It took some work to get it loose, but yes,” Leonard said. “I may have bumped my thumb with the hammer once.”

“Are you trying to be a smart-ass?”

“I don’t think so, though I don’t have to try that hard.”

“Fuck the shitty shack,” I said. “There’s a meth lab in it.”

I told him the whole story about the hog, how I thought he had been methed up. He said, “Nah, Porky is just a bit hyper.”

“A bit?” I said. “He ran so fast, he almost traveled through time. Hyper, my ass. He was high on the crap in that shed.”

“Let me have a look at that,” the sheriff said.

The sheriff went inside what was left of the shack. After a moment he came out. He looked at one of his deputies. “Get rid of all that shit.”

“You mean take it into evidence,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said, “that’s what I mean.”

I didn’t think that’s what he meant. The deputies brought the stuff out, making numerous trips, and put it in the trunk of their car.

“That doesn’t seem like the proper way to handle evidence,” I said.

“What the fuck do you know about it?”

A LaBorde police car pulled up slowly and parked. Chief David Justin got out of the car on the passenger side. He looked tall, dark, and handsome and just a little annoyed. Maybe it was because he didn’t want to lose the crease in his blue suit pants to the rising heat. He wore a blue tie that shimmered in the sunlight.

From behind the wheel, Leonard’s fiancé, Pookie, just as tall, built like a bombshell and with a head so smooth, the light almost gave him a halo, stepped out. He was newly a detective. He had on an ugly turd-brown suit and shoes by Walmart.

“My baby,” Leonard said.

Sheriff Doolin looked where Leonard was looking, said, “Baby?” Analyzed for a moment, then said, “You queer?”

“Oh,” Leonard said, “you have no idea.”

Doolin stepped back, perhaps fearing he might get some queer on him, turned, looked at Justin, said, “Kind of out of your jurisdiction, ain’t you?”

“We were out for a peaceful drive in the country,” Chief Justin said. “Saw you here, thought you might need help. Especially with these two.”

“You know them?” Sheriff Doolin said.

“Who in law enforcement doesn’t, except you?”

“I was just elected.”

“And I was hired recently. So we’re even. All right, you guys give me the story.”

“So they called you,” Doolin said. “You weren’t just driving by?”

“Little of column A, little of column B.”

It was all of column A, but I didn’t say anything.

By this time, Belinda had come outside and made her way over. It hurt to watch her waddle. Had diabetes, I figured. A disease anyone could get but one that the poverty-stricken had more than others due to lack of medical care, lack of insurance, and a diet of white bread, day-old cake, Yoo-Hoos, and Ding Dongs. Also burgers and French fries when a hog didn’t get them.

“Well, cuz,” Belinda said. “Congrats on coming up in the world. Whose dead body did you have to step on to get your promotion?”

“I’d be willing to step on yours if needed.”

“I bet,” Belinda said.

After the loving cousins finished snotting at one another, we introduced Belinda to Justin, then told our story, including the destruction of her house and all of us being attacked by Porky. When we finished, Leonard said, “And I lost my hat.”

Nobody cared about his hat.

“You telling me,” Sheriff Doolin said, “you let a piggy chase you about?”

“We did indeed,” I said. “When he’s rested and gets another dose of meth, you get in the pen and pet him.”

“Jesus,” Justin said.

“I wish Jesus had been here to help,” Belinda said, and sounded as sincere as a church choir.

Sheriff Doolin said, “Reckon you boys need to come with me. We got some mediocre food served at the jail, and you can wipe your asses on your shirttails.”

“What about the meth?” I said.

“What meth?” Doolin said.

“The meth in the trunk of your deputies’ car.”

“Ain’t no meth in the trunk of their car. Just a spare tire.”

“We watched your deputies carry that shit out, limp nut,” Leonard said.

"Open the trunk of your deputies' car," Justin said.

"I don't have to do that," Sheriff Doolin said.

"A law enforcement courtesy," Justin said.

"I don't feel that courteous," the sheriff said, hands on hips, his sea turtle shifting a bit.

"I can bust it open," Pookie said.

"What gives you the right to do that?" Doolin said.

"He's bigger than you," Justin said. "Get a tire tool and bust their trunk open."

"You will not," Sheriff Doolin said. "That's lawbreaking."

"And your cousin's hog destroyed this lady's house and tried to kill these two, which is an understandable goal—"

"Hey," Leonard said.

"But alas, folks own the hog are responsible for keeping it penned up."

"Not your goddamn jurisdiction," Doolin said.

"And you're hiding evidence. I think the judge will understand my need to investigate, considering you're supposed to be upholding the law. We'll call in the drug task force—they can cross jurisdiction if needed."

I wasn't sure that was right, but I remained silent.

"We were hauling in what we found as evidence," Sheriff Doolin said. "We just thought it was our place to make the report."

"Figured it was something like that," Justin said, then nodded at me and Leonard. "These two idiots will go with me. After your bullshit with the meth, Doolin, you might not want to argue. Have your boys put that stuff in the trunk of my car. My officer will open the trunk for you. Tell your nitwits to wear gloves."

"Who's he calling a nitwit?" one of the deputies said.

"It's self-evident," I said.

"Careful, buddy, or I'll bend the barrel of my pistol over your head," the deputy said.

"You'll shit and fall back in it," Leonard said. "That's what you'll do."

"Boys, put your dicks back in your pants," Justin said. "Apologies, Miss Belinda."

"Quite all right," Belinda said.

"Where are your cousins that own the hog?" Justin said to Doolin.

"At work, I presume," Sheriff Doolin said. "I don't keep up with them."

"And what is their employment?" Justin asked.

"Day labor. Wrecker service. Bit of this, bit of that."

"Meth dealers?" Justin said.

"Not that I know of. That stuff in the shed, it could be hers."

Belinda made a noise that sounded like a dog bark.

“Open the trunk,” Justin said.

Leonard and Pookie smiled at one another. Pookie went with the two deputies out to load the stuff from their car into Justin’s. He gave them disposable gloves to wear.

At this point, Sheriff Doolin ceased to argue. He was nervous enough that he was unconsciously playing pocket pool with his balls.

The school bus rolled up, and three anxious children got off—Belinda’s family. They all looked pink and plump but had the attitude of trained runners. One, a short kid on stout legs—probably Baby Darling—leaned forward in case she had to distract Porky while the others darted to safety. They saw Porky in his pen and all of them relaxed.

Leonard looked at Belinda. “We’ll get back to you on that furniture.”

9

Chief Justin didn't arrest us. He and Pookie rode in the cop car, and me and Leonard followed in the truck.

"I don't know how I let you get me into this kind of shit, but every plan you have has stink on it," Leonard said. "I ought to know better."

"That's your problem. You don't know better."

Justin led us to a coffee shop and asked much of the same stuff that had already been asked and answered. I sat across from Justin, Leonard across from Pookie. They made goo-goo eyes at one another.

"One thing we didn't mention," I said. "I have photos of the meth lab. All of it on the table before they removed it."

I pulled out my phone and showed the photos to Justin. He had me email them to him.

"Having these photos can't hurt," Justin said. "I don't like that fucking Doolin. Another guy that missed an inch or so being a turd. And a cousin with a meth lab? Knowing that and that the sheriff stole evidence, I could really cause him some problems. May yet, if I want to."

"Ah, come on," I said. "You know you want to give him problems. Fuck those two deputies over too. They deserve it."

"And what do you two deserve?" Justin said.

"Hog Wranglers of the Year awards," Leonard said.

We talked a bit more, then Justin said they had to put the drug stuff in evidence. He told us to go home. Leonard drove us to my house. Brett had been out of town on a case, and now her car was parked in front of the garage. For some reason, she didn't like putting it inside where mine was. As always, when I knew I was about to see her, be near her, my heart beat a little faster.

Inside, Brett greeted us, and Leonard went about making me and him sandwiches as Brett was already eating a salad. She told us about her trip. Nothing special. A bit of observational reporting in a divorce case. When she finished, we told her about our hog adventures.

She laughed. We explained about the furniture. She didn't laugh about that. She marched us out to Leonard's truck, and, with her following in her car, we drove over to Belinda's.

Belinda and her kids were all sitting on her porch, grouped together as close as grapes. Brett introduced herself.

“You look like a movie star, honey,” Belinda said.

“I know,” Brett said, and laughed.

But she did know.

We all went inside and Brett looked at the house. She studied it. “I’m so sorry,” Brett said. She peeked into the bedroom and saw the blanket pallet laid out from the night before.

Leonard handed Belinda two hundred dollars in tens and twenties. “Here’s a start. Your money back.”

“Hap, you and Leonard and the kids stay here and clean this place up,” Brett said. “Me and Belinda are going furniture shopping. And, Belinda, furniture is on us. This hardly turned out to be a positive experience.”

“In our defense,” Leonard said, “we were just trying to help.”

Brett looked at Belinda. “Sometimes their help is like giving gorillas a china tea set and a ball-peen hammer.”

10

Me and Leonard and Baby Darling walked out to Porky's pen and looked at him chomping on the feed Leonard had poured the day before. Baby Darling said the Planters had not returned last night, and no supplies had been parachuted into Porky's pen by plane or drone. They had pretty much left the old boy to fend for himself, as if he had job interviews and was expecting employment.

Porky seemed somewhat docile today, and it was probably due to being cut back on his meth. If the morons who owned him were giving him a daily hit as a kind of family activity, it was wonder his heart hadn't played out.

We got the long water hose that was hooked to their house and let Baby Darling fill his water trough. Leonard poured him more feed. We stood at the pen watching him drink and eat.

"He really ain't such a bad piggy, but he's been influenced by his parents' rough ways," Baby Darling said, looking through the slats in the fence.

"I assume you mean the Planters and not Mama Hog?" I said.

"That's right. They have what I've read is called a negative-enabling lifestyle. Porky's not a psychopath by birth or choice, but he's very much influenced by his environment, and part of that is a lot of meth. Otherwise, I think he is a calm and centered kind of pig. Though he did eat my cat."

I looked at Leonard. He looked at me.

I said, "How old are you again?"

"How do you measure age?" she said. "There are many factors, you know. Mental and emotional as well as chronological considerations."

"You seem the perfect age, then," Leonard said.

"My mama said sometimes it seems I'm from Mars, because the rest of the kids, though not slow, are on the normal track to careers as hairdressers, nail technicians, or wiping asses in old folks' homes."

"That's okay work," Leonard said.

"Not if I had to do it," Baby Darling said. "My mom says I'm precocious. I read a lot."

"I assume it is not *Goodnight Moon* or *Go, Dog, Go!*" I said.

“Oh, heavens, no. Not that kid poop. I read real books. We have a bookmobile comes out here, and I have a library card at school. I may try and get a card in LaBorde, but you have to have a city address. And we mostly don’t go any farther than McDonald’s or the Dollar Store down the road. Most of their stuff costs more than a dollar, you know.”

“What is your career choice, Baby Darling?”

“I haven’t quite decided. I have time to consider. I’m young. Possibly an anthropologist or something to do with literature, though a career in mathematics has its appeal. I’m good with numbers.”

“That’s a good point,” Leonard said, “you do have time. I advise you to stay away from rose field work. It didn’t prove profitable for us.”

“My whole family has pecked shit with the chickens for years. Don’t tell Mom I said that. I want to remove us from that low and desperate lifestyle when I go to work. Right now, college looks questionable due to money, but I’ve got some thoughts on the matter. Do you think most people get away with filling-station robberies?”

“I don’t believe they do,” I said. “That wouldn’t be a good way to grow a college fund. What’s your real name?”

“Baby Darling.”

“Oh. Gotcha. Well, Leonard, let’s go clean out the house.”

Baby Darling beat us to the house, running on her trained legs. Leonard said, “Either that kid is a genius or I’ve forgotten what it was like being a kid. I don’t think I was that smart.”

“Not even having been there when you were that age, I assure you, you weren’t.”

11

Leonard found his straw hat. It had been run over and mauled by Porky. Leonard took it out to the pen and fed it to him as a kind of sacrifice.

The kids swept up the busted knickknacks and stuffed two black garbage bags with them. A few of the knickknacks were still intact, so they were saved. The back scratcher was all of one piece, and when I picked it up, it felt hefty and impractical, more like a medieval weapon of war. Definitely a tourist item. I put it aside for Belinda to reshelve or rehang. Next, we filled the bed of Leonard's pickup with those bags and the broken furniture. When that was done, Leonard took the first load to the dump.

I drove the second trip to the dump while Leonard stayed with the kids to clean and sweep out the house. When I got back, I thought it looked pretty good.

A truck from the furniture store arrived. Behind it, in our Prius, came Brett and Belinda. The furniture guys had an air about them that assured you they had done this a lot. That made me watch them more carefully. An overconfident person will actually be more likely to fuck things up. And sometimes what appears to be confidence is indifference.

Belinda was beaming when she came into the house, followed by Brett.

"That's a quick delivery," Leonard said.

"Brett is persuasive," Belinda said. "She doesn't let up."

"I know that's right," I said.

"Hap," Brett said, "would you mind bringing in the groceries?"

"Not at all."

Leonard went with me. There was a boxful of goods and two large cloth bags as well. We brought them in and put them where Belinda told us.

The furniture men studied the size of the doorway and went back to the truck and brought in the furniture, managing effortlessly to take the couch inside. Turned out their confident appearance was justified.

Belinda showed them where to place stuff as they made trip after trip. It wasn't the most expensive furniture in the world, but it was nice and well beyond what had been there before Porky's rampage.

When the furniture truck was gone, me and Leonard went to work on the window, and Brett and Belinda and the kids made some sandwiches.

I was glad of that. I was hungry.

We finished the window, though it needed new glass. We put some cardboard over the empty frame and made note to have someone who could do that work properly come out and put the glass in. We thought that after our lunch of pressed ham and cheese sandwiches and potato chips, we'd fix the squeaky boards on the porch and steps.

Our lunch was interrupted when a wrecker appeared and parked in front of the Planters' house by the hog pen. Porky grunted and ran to that side of the fence. Poor guy. He thought they were his family, although they most likely had plans later in the year to take him on a ride to the slaughterhouse and return later to pick up rump roast and pork chops.

There were three people in the front seat, two men and a woman. One man with a shaved head sat in the back of the truck near the lift device. He climbed down slowly. He was thick, like a boxer that had given up the sport. When the people in front got out, I noted one of the men had a heavy-lidded look that made him seem sleepy. The other one had an expression of perpetual amusement, like the joke was on him and he knew it. The woman was gaunt and stringy-haired. Turned out there was another person in the truck, a young boy about Baby Darling's age. He was a good-looking kid but had a little potbelly and his hair looked to have last been combed by a nurse at birth.

They had a way of moving that was hard to pinpoint. A lot of poor, desperate country people have it. It's as if they're expecting trouble and are constantly prepared for it. Light on their toes, quick to bluster, even quicker to flee.

The sleepy-eyed guy was wearing an old-style western six-gun in a holster on his hip. It wasn't illegal in Texas to do that, but it made me nervous to know a meth dealer had the right to carry a firearm. I bet he had a record as long as I am tall and still had access to weapons. Texans' love for guns borders on the psychotic.

The guy with the shaved head stayed back near the wrecker. He was the only one that looked truly alert. He was wearing clothes that were marginally clean.

The other two looked at Porky and the shed, then at us. Leonard walked over to his truck, opened the passenger door, and after a moment closed it.

Sleepy Eyes crossed in front of the pen and moved into Belinda's yard. Baldy maintained his position by the wrecker. The smiley man went inside the open shed, and the woman went into the house, pulling the kid in after her.

When Sleepy was in front of me, he turned his head and looked at the storage building. He formed a smile at the corner of his mouth that climbed his right cheek and spread to the other side. Nerve damage, I presumed. His teeth were yellow and brown, meth-violated; a few were nubbed. He had some red splotches on his neck that he scratched at. He was in his bluster moment, but I assumed fleeing might not be far behind.

"We seem to have had our door and boards rearranged," he said.

"Carpenter fairies," I said. "If you put out a hog and a bowl of milk, they sometimes show up."

"Would you and your friend be the Carpenter fairies?" Sleepy asked.

Leonard was back with me. He stood close to the man near his gun-holster side. I could see Leonard had put the revolver from the glove box into his belt so it could be seen. "Hell yeah," Leonard said. "We hammer the shit out of things. We are sometimes known as the fuck-up-stuff fairies."

"What gave you the right to hammer apart my shed?" Sleepy said.

"Carpenter fairies do what we want," Leonard said.

"The union does have some restrictions, however," I said. "We don't work if they say not to. But the dental plan is amazing."

"Look like a couple of retards to me," Sleepy said.

"You boys have been out of touch," I said. "We saw your cousin the sheriff. Now, that fellow is one charmer, I assure you. But Chief Justin of the LaBorde cops took your meth lab with him. Gonna think that might have repercussions for you. Ought to plan on a vacation in a galaxy far, far away, and immediately."

Sleepy's body slumped a little. "You, buddy, don't know what you've done—to us and you."

"I think we do," I said. "Let me tell you something. Your hog, after you were asked to pen it properly by your cousin and neighbor, wasn't. Porky smashed up Belinda's house, furniture, at least three dozen glass angels, and I think a unicorn. Maybe it was a thin rhinoceros. When we get it all added up, we'll be back with a bill for you to pay."

"That ain't happening," said Sleepy. "It ain't me you're going to have to deal with in the long run, it's our benefactor and manager."

"Benefactor?" Leonard said. "That sounds like a big word for you. I'm surprised your mouth can carry it."

Sleepy gave Leonard a look, but not for long. In a game of stare, Leonard generally wins.

"Sheriff Doolin?" I said. "He's your benefactor?"

"This big boss is called the Benefactor or just Benefactor. He's not someone you want to mess with."

"Wasn't aware we were messing with him," I said.

"And even then, we don't give a flying shit," Leonard said.

By this time, the other one, Sleepy's brother, I assumed, had ceased to wander around in what was left of the storage building and came over. "Stuff's gone."

"Just heard. Seems we're in trouble."

"I don't mind some trouble," the gooney one said. Most of his teeth were nothing but blackened wrecks, though one front tooth stood firm and white at the bottom of his mouth like a tombstone for tooth decay. "'Sides, we know the sheriff."

"That fat-ass motherfucker couldn't pull a duck out of a well with a hoist and harness," Sleepy said. "He's just a worker bee. Like us. A cousin who got elected on bullshit and payoffs, some of them from us."

"You ought not say things like that out loud," Gooney said.

"Like cuz has done anything to protect us," Sleepy said. "We're messed up now and it's that goddamn hog's fault."

"I'm going to shoot his ass," Gooney said.

"No, you're not," I said.

"Bzzz-bzzz," Leonard said. "Though you may think I'm imitating a bee, that's really the sound of two carpenter fairies who would like you to go home before they hammer your bones flat and make hacky sacks out of your balls."

They considered taking a chance. Gooney bowed up a bit. Smiley let the tips of his fingers touch the handle of his gun. I almost wished they would come at us but was glad they didn't. Leonard might have killed at least one of them, which would have forced me to kill the other.

Sleepy said, "I'd be careful whose hog you mess with. And whose meth you fuck with. Benefactor wouldn't like that."

"Oh, snap," Leonard said, and his face was close to Sleepy's face when he said it. There was a little tremor in Sleepy's shoulders, but he turned out to have a smidgen of common sense. He and his weird brother stilt-stepped back to their house and slammed the door like angry children.

Gooney looked out the window at us for a moment, then went away. Whoever the Benefactor was, they seemed seriously frightened of him.

The bald one by the wrecker kept his spot for a moment. He didn't seem to be trying to stare us down. He actually nodded at us like a student passing a teacher in the hallway. He followed them inside and closed the door gently.

“Porky strikes me as the smartest in the family,” Leonard said. “Probably had more schooling than they did.”

12

Realizing we didn't really want to do it ourselves, we hired a carpenter to straighten up Belinda's porch and put in window glass. Belinda owned the place, had inherited it from her father, who'd had an unfortunate farm accident involving a tractor, too much beer, and a sizable rock in the middle of a row of potato mounds.

We paid to have a large room built onto the house, then decided we wanted them to divide it into two smaller bedrooms. The kids still had to share but not as tightly as before. It took about two months for the carpenters to get it all done, so we spent some time with Belinda and her kids. I bought them a few toys, including a Frisbee that they threw and chased about the yard like they were in an Olympic event. We bought the family a nice TV and had it mounted on the wall.

Baby Darling was amazing. I enjoyed talking to her. She knew a lot about a lot of things, just didn't have the depth of experience to understand it all in the way she would in a few years.

The other kids were nowhere near as sharp, but then, compared to Baby Darling, neither was I.

As for the next-door neighbors, a few days after our introduction to them, their house was empty, front and back doors left open. A mattress was in the front yard, probably making it that far before the neighbors abandoned it. They should have. It looked oily and nasty, like a combustion engine had chosen that spot to puke.

Porky they left, and pretty soon Belinda and the kids had taken over feeding him. Without the meth, he became quite docile and could even be let out of his pen to come in Belinda's house after a hosing and toweling from the kids. It was kind of weird, but neat, the former enemies washing and feeding their old nemesis. Leonard and I hired the same carpenters to build him a deep and high shed inside his pen where he could get out of the elements.

Concerning the meth business, Chief Justin said the Planters had disappeared, and no one knew where they had finally decamped to, but he figured, as we did, they would show up before long, making more meth and with less teeth and even nastier dispositions.

Justin had heard of the Benefactor, or Benefactor, but his identity was a secret. He ran most of the meth-makers and dealers through intimidation—actually, force—and by supplying them with the goods to make that crap.

One day I went over to the abandoned Planter house. I put on some disposable gloves from a box of them I kept in the car. I roamed around inside their place. The electricity and water were both off. The kitchen sink was rusty-looking, and the refrigerator was full of rotted food that almost made me gag. The bathroom had a nice hunk of well-formed turds in the toilet bowl and no water in it. Most likely they had ceased to pay their water bill and it had been cut off before they left, leaving a loving memory in the toilet bowl. I used my foot to push the lid down on it.

The bedroom had a bare set of box springs and a few dead roaches and a scattering of rat turds. There were paper cups and fast-food wrappers strewn around the house. The living-room couch was gouged up and had some stuffing coming out of the cushions. It smelled like assholes. I could see where a TV had been pulled off the wall, leaving some dangling wires.

White Trash Central with furniture by Shit Anywhere You Like.

When we felt we had Belinda and her crew straightened out, we hired her to clean our office once a week. Due to a number of fortunate financial breaks over the past few years, we could afford it.

About this time, I learned the old safe house Hanson had loaned us was up for sale. Me and Brett wanted it. We needed a change of location. That place came with quite a bit of land and a barn that needed work.

Hanson's people might not have been fond of us, but they were glad to take our money. We closed out the property deal and made plans to move. We weren't exactly sure what we would do with our old house.

Life seemed copacetic.

For me and Leonard, the way things looked frequently turned out to be less than met the eye.

13

Not long after we bought that house, a man and his son parked their pickup off the Trinity River bridge and, carrying rods and reels and a tackle box, found a narrow trail that looked like a good path to the river, and they thought it might lead to a nice spot to set up for a day of fishing. The trail proved long, and there were a lot of broken limbs on either side of it where the trees had been hit by something large. At the end of the trail, where it broke out to show the river, parked on a spit of sand that poked out into the water was a large, blackened, smoke-stained wrecker.

It was obvious the wrecker had been set on fire. One door was partly open. The fisherman pulled the door wider, and a dust of dried ashes floated out along with a wad of buzzing flies and a toasted stench. There were bodies crammed tight inside the cab, all charred. Three adults and one child. He could tell that much, even though the bodies were also chopped up.

His son wanted to look, but he wouldn't let him. The man and his son walked back to their pickup and drove away from there and went for the police. Pretty soon there were cops and sheriff's people crawling all over the place. I read about it all in our local online paper, which had surprisingly improved from the rag it had been for a while.

The Planter family had been found. Their commercial-meth venture had ended. They had been playing grab-ass in a pretty ugly profession with pretty mean people involved in both purchasing and selling. Considering Sleepy's comments about Benefactor, it was conceivable they had gotten too sloppy, and Benefactor, whoever that was, had given them their pink slips.

Baldy wasn't one of the victims. Or at least, he wasn't in the wrecker. Where was he? Of course the news didn't even know he existed. But it was easy to tell from the report there was one short, due to our inside knowledge, and my guess was Baldy was the one that wasn't there. Maybe he was the one that killed them, decided to take over the business. It could be all kinds of ways.

The sky turned blood red that evening, then a shadow grew over it and there was crackling electricity in the air as well as deep bass thunder. The lightning jumped so quick and fast against the heavens, it seemed radioactive.

Brett and I snuggled in our upstairs bedroom and flinched a bit as the lightning popped and thunder rolled. Soon there was a loud cracking sound and the outside night-light went dead, which meant the electricity in the house was out. With the air conditioner shut down, it gradually grew warm in the bedroom. I got up and opened a window to let wind in through the screen. The air was nice and cool and brisk. Some rain blew in with it, but that was okay. It felt good on my skin.

Looking out, I thought I saw a strange misshapen shadow push itself out of the lighter darkness and flow toward me, but when I tried to focus on it, I found I was in bed, and though I had in fact opened the window, I had dreamed the part about the broken shadow.

14

Come morning, when the rain had cleared and the sky had blued and the birds sang happily from the trees, a call from Baby Darling darkened things up.

I called Leonard and told him that Baby Darling wanted us over there right away. Something was up, and from her tone, I didn't think she wanted to discuss physics, though she might have been able to.

I reset the clocks that had been sent blinking by last night's break in electricity. I had a cup of coffee and a toasted English muffin and poured Brett a second cup of coffee.

Leonard came by and picked me and Brett up in his truck. He was wearing a red baseball cap with a white feather in it.

No idea. It was Leonard.

When we got there, Porky trotted over to the side of his pen, poked his snout through the slats, and grunted at us. He looked a lot calmer and happier. I was glad he had a house to go into.

Baby Darling and the other two kids were on the new porch, sitting on a glider. It looked like a gathering of sick pigeons.

When we walked up, Baby Darling dropped out of the glider, trotted down the steps, and hugged me, then Leonard, who absently patted her on the head like a puppy. She hugged Brett. She had been crying. Fact was, they had all been crying. And now they were all off the porch and taking turns hugging us.

"What happened?" I asked.

All the kids started to talk at once. Baby Darling put up a hand. "I'll explain," she said.

Baby Darling wiped away a tear with the back of a plump hand and said, "Mama's in the hospital. She had some kind of spell."

"Spell?" Brett said.

"A fainting spell and such," Baby Darling said. "I believe it has to do with her heart and diabetes. She didn't have any signs of stroke."

I didn't doubt that Baby Darling was well read enough to know the signs of a stroke, but still, she was far from a specialist.

Baby Darling had called the ambulance, which came and hauled Belinda away, leaving the children there as if they were feral.

That part pissed Brett off.

Baby Darling took my hand, said, “Can I talk to you folks alone?”

We agreed, and like a commander of invading forces, she told the other two kids to wait there. I hate to say it, but about those other two, I didn’t have ten cents of knowledge. Even now I think of them as Kid Two and Kid Three.

We walked out to the truck and stood by it.

“It’s what she found that set her off,” Baby Darling said.

“What did she find?” Brett said.

“Rain flooded last night, washed little June’s plastic car into the ditch out back. It’s big enough for her to pedal and drive. She loves it.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Mama could see part of it from the window this morning, at the edge of the ditch, and went out to get it. I went with her. She found something along the edge of the ditch. I think I ought to show it to you. It surprised her. It surprised me.”

Baby Darling, leading me by the hand, took us out back of the house and we looked down into the ditch where she was pointing. The furious rain had washed the earth apart during the night and had collapsed mud into the center of the ditch. The water was still running brisk. The collapse of the dirt on the sides of the ditch had revealed something.

Coming out of the wet earth on our side, back behind where the meth shed had stood, were some skulls and bones and rotting clothes, and in one case there was still enough facial skin with mud-colored hair left on one skull to recognize it as the remains of a woman.

15

Turned out Sheriff Doolin was no longer in charge. He had been put out to pasture over his actions with Chief Justin, and a fellow we had never seen before, named Jim Crank, was now sheriff. He was black and had a slightly hooked nose that gave him the appearance of a hawk about to dive down on a rabbit. He gave you the feeling you were the rabbit.

The deputies we had met were also gone. He didn't bring anyone else with him in their place. We found out all of this from Crank and Justin talking, because, as before, I'd called both departments because I thought Doolin was still there. I was trying to get the right folks in and cover our asses at the same time. Crank and Justin had some sort of relationship, and though they weren't bosom buddies, the connection helped roll things along.

We looked at the bodies for a while, then Crank and Justin sent us up to the house. A few minutes later, they came up. We settled in the living room, which smelled of new furniture and fresh paint. What served as the county's forensics team were on the way. Probably someone with a toy doctor's kit and a bottle of alcohol and a lot of good intentions.

Brett had Baby Darling herd the kids into the back bedroom. She did it smoothly and without much sass back. Not only was Baby Darling smart, she looked like she might be scrappy if it came down to it. It had already been established that she was a hell of a runner. I bet she had a good right cross.

Sheriff Crank stood at the kitchen window with his hands behind his back, looking out. He said, "That is one big-ass hog."

"Yep," I said.

Crank had us fill him in on what Justin already knew, and my guess was it was what Crank already knew as well. The law likes to ask the same question a lot, looking for holes in your story. We told him about Belinda, how we had gotten involved, and how we had found the meth lab. And we suspected the same as he did about Doolin: that he was nipping a bit of the profit from his cousins for keeping quiet about their meth activities. We mentioned Benefactor, but there wasn't much to say there. Crank had heard of Benefactor, but if he knew more than we did about him, he didn't let on.

Leonard said, "But, all things aside, Doolin has a nice hat."

"Yeah," Crank said, "but what the kind of hat you got there with a feather in it?"

"I think it's festive," Leonard said.

"Do you, now?" Crank said.

"What about the bodies?" Brett said.

"Those bodies have been there a while," Crank said.

"Ah," Leonard said, "a Sherlock Holmes moment. And by the way, they're dead."

Crank gave him a look that seemed to say, "Hey, man, respect the law." Leonard just grinned at him.

"One of those bodies," Justin said, "has not been there as long as the others. Not fresh, but not ancient. That seems worth noting."

"Noted," Crank said. "Forensics will figure that out easily enough."

"I'm going to guess this is connected to the Planters, the family who were burned up in their wrecker," I said.

"Could be," Crank said. "You know as much as I know. I'm new. I was the department's token hire, to be honest, a deputy. But I deserved that job, and now I'm the sheriff because I can read."

"When we saw the Planters," I said, "there was one other person with them, bald guy. Looked like he might actually have a few brain cells."

"Did you get a name?" Crank asked.

"No," I said.

"Well, that's some help," Crank said.

A blue van with four people in it pulled up out front. Forensics. We went out on the porch to greet them. Three women and a man dressed in white suits with footies and hoods got out and walked up. They were all carrying cases. Crank went with them to show them the location of the bodies.

The rest of us went back inside. Justin looked out the window at Porky, then turned and looked at us. "Crank—I wouldn't trust him too much."

"Yeah?" Brett said.

"We were both cops in Houston. He didn't get fired, but he got walked, ended up here. He's been a deputy for a while, and now he's sheriff. He's smarter than the rest of them, but I don't think trustworthy and honest are high on his personal list of job requirements. He always seemed to be a guy that kept an ace up his sleeve. Played both sides of the fence, not unlike Doolin, only shrewder."

"We all play both sides of the fence," Leonard said.

“Yeah, but for the greater good, right?” Justin smiled. “Crank, I think, does it for personal gain. The rumor in Houston was he had some envelopes to pick up every week. Listen here—I don’t like it much, but while their mother is in the hospital, the kids have to go into foster care.”

“We could have them at our house,” I said.

“No,” Justin said. “It’ll sort out. For now, they have to go. It’s the law.”

Brett called the kids out of the bedroom and explained to them what was about to happen. Right off, Baby Darling asked if they could stay with us. She looked weepy but didn’t cry. I told her we had suggested that, but the law wouldn’t go along with it.

A white van arrived and parked by the blue van. Two nice ladies talked to the kids and soothed them and put them in the van and drove them away. I felt like they were being taken to the pound.

16

Brett came home late after going to the hospital to check on Belinda. I was waiting up for her in the kitchen, having a glass of milk and some animal crackers. Leonard had long gone home, and the truth was, I enjoyed my time alone in the kitchen slowly eating my animal crackers. I seemed to really have it in for the monkeys and would search through the big bag, find a monkey, and bite its head off.

Every time I did, I said, “Gotcha.”

Brett came into the house, saw me sitting there, said, “I want some animal crackers.”

“Sounds like a personal problem,” I said.

“I’m going to make it really personal if you don’t hand me that bag.”

“The monkeys are mine,” I said.

She ate an elephant. Then she poured a glass of milk and sat down across from me.

“How is Belinda?” I asked.

“Not really that bad. She’s not in great health overall and seeing the bodies hit her hard. Minor heart episode, the doctor said. Luckily, she has insurance. Poor as they are, she’s managed that. Who’d have thought. I remember when my insurance was a box of Band-Aids and a bottle of Tylenol.”

“So, a heart attack? That doesn’t sound minor.”

“No, not a heart attack. A heart episode. She has a leaky valve or some such. Basically, she was shocked and her blood pressure dropped and she fainted. She’s worried about her kids. Come morning, I’ll shake things out and see what’s going on, see if we can get everyone back together. They’re supposed to let Belinda out sometime tomorrow. What do you think about all those bodies?”

“I don’t have any idea, but it certainly could be as suspected, connected to the numb-nuts next door. I think those bodies have been there a while, except for one I saw. Could be people came and partied and died, and the Planters decided to tuck them up tight in the ground and out of the way. Seems like the kind of stupid and simple plan a bunch of tweakers would make. They might have murdered them, I guess, but I bet on the former. Hey, that’s a monkey.”

Brett bit its head off.

“You’ll live,” she said.

17

Next morning Brett went to help Belinda check out of the hospital, locate her kids, and have them returned.

Leonard called and invited me to meet him at the health club—or gym, as he preferred to call it—said he was going there to check it out, box a few rounds against the hanging bag. Said he had a surprise for me. I think he was needing some space from the wedding plans.

I put on my gray sweatpants and a blue T-shirt that really made my eyes stand out, but not like a crazy man's. My eyes were gray, blue, or green. The color shirt I wore dictated how they looked to others. I wore my green tennis shoes that were designed for comfortable walking or running, grabbed a change of clothes for after the workout, and drove over to join Leonard.

When I came in, the place had been altered by carpenters. It had a new coat of beige paint on the walls. The desk was new, mahogany and horseshoe-shaped. Behind it there were shelves with T-shirts and other gym goods for sale.

I knew without asking that Leonard was buying the place. It had his touches. Another clue was the previous owner, who was generally behind the desk, seated on a tall stool, was gone. So was the stool.

Besides the shelves with goods and the mahogany horseshoe-shaped desk, there was a young black man. He didn't have stool. He had a smile that made me feel life was full of promise. It was a nice smile, but the feeling it gave me didn't last. I told him who I was and that Leonard had invited me.

"I know," he said. "I'm Michael." He had a deep voice. He pointed to the gym area.

I walked in there.

I found Leonard in the back pounding a hanging bag. It wasn't one of the real heavy ones; it was smaller and less hard and he was giving it a bit of this and a bit of that. I liked the sound it made when he hit it.

The boxing and kickboxing ring had been revamped with a better matting for the floor. It was no longer roped but had a kind of fencing around it, though the lower parts of it were lined with rubber. The air smelled good in there, not like the usual pasty smell of sweat and farts. I was a little disappointed in that because the familiarity was gone.

Leonard saw me and quit hitting the bag. He grinned at me. "What do you think?"

"You don't hit as hard as you used to."

"Fuck you. The gym. What do you think?"

"It's really nice," I said. "Really is. You're going to tell me you bought it."

"Buying. Think I'm making the right move?"

"Yeah. I do."

"Given any more thought to joining me? Nice job to come to every day. You might actually be able to stay in shape. There's still a weight and exercise room, but I'm adding better equipment."

"Still thinking about it," I said.

"Meaning you're afraid to mention it to Brett."

"Pretty much, yeah. But I'll get around to it."

"Which means you do want to do it?" Leonard said.

"Giving it serious thought."

"My buying the place isn't your only surprise."

"What's the other surprise?"

"That's for later," he said. "Work out or shut up. You're distracting me."

"Is the surprise you're going to hit me when I'm not looking?"

"Just work out for a while."

There was another hanging bag, also light, so I pulled on some bag gloves and went at it. I started slow, dealing with the injury I had acquired trying to capture Porky. It was sore, though there wasn't any deep damage. I could override that as I warmed up. I picked up the pace. Sweat from my body flew out and glowed briefly in the light like tiny bath bubbles. I was trying to tap the primal part of me. I always did that. That's where the truth was, down deep in the reptilian brain.

Soon I was really going at it. I felt disappointment at so many things in my life, and I tried to knock them out of me and into the bag with every punch.

I thought of Belinda, her poverty, and I remembered my own. I thought of Baby Darling working in an aluminum-chair factory with a fat, wife-beater husband who made sure any money she might want to spend on books went for beer. It was all clichéd poor-people thinking, but the reason there are clichés is that many are rooted in truth.

The bag began to swing a little more, but it had a rope at the bottom that was fastened to a hundred-pound barbell weight to keep it from swinging all over the place.

I swayed and dodged an imaginary opponent and added in kicks.

They weren't high kicks. Lately I had lost some of the elevation I had possessed. I had traded high kicking for kicking inside and outside of the legs, ribs, the stomach and sternum. A low side kick if I was being overwhelmed and could find the position.

I could kick hard going low, but the fact that I could no longer kick high and hard made me a little angry. I put that anger into more kicks and punches, added in elbows when the bag swung back my way, and I don't know when I would have stopped had Leonard not put his hand on my shoulder.

"Okay, champ," he said, "let's get some water."

18

There was bottled water in a cooler in the front room near the desk. We both had a bottle, adding plastic waste to the environment. I was mad about that too. I was pretty much, in that moment, mad about most everything. I might have kicked a puppy. Certainly a kitten.

"Looked like you needed that," Leonard said.

"I was thirsty."

"I mean knocking hell out of the bag. You even scared me."

"Now you know I can still hit hard."

"I was scared because I was thinking you were going to slip and fall and wouldn't be able to get up."

"Ha-ha."

Right then, two young men came into the gym. Leonard knew they were coming, which was why he wanted me to come in. They were my surprise.

They were in their twenties. One white, one black. The white kid was an avid weight lifter. His name was Ernie. The black kid was leaner and lighter. His name was Nemo. He'd told me he was named after the fish in the animated movie. They both were nice-looking kids, injected with eagerness and optimism. We had met them here at the gym before Leonard owned it. They had some training. We had boxed a few rounds with them now and again, showing them we weren't quite as worn out as they'd suspected.

We all went to the main gym, and Leonard climbed into the ring with Ernie. The boys knew a few kicks and had some good basic training in boxing. Later we'd get to locks and grappling and raw ass whipping.

"Boxing instructor we had, before he moved, said boxing was the superior art," Ernie said. "That a good boxer could get in on a man and prevent him from kicking."

"Depends on the man," Leonard said. "There are no absolutes, as Hap will tell you."

"That's right," I said like a Greek chorus.

"All disciplines have their place," Leonard said. "It's best to be well rounded or at least understand what other styles are trying to accomplish. Tell you what—how about I only use kicks and you slide in on me to keep me from doing it."

"Okay," Ernie said. He seemed to have forgotten the lessons we had given them. He had slept and now he was the toughest motherfucker that had ever peeled back his weenie to pee.

"Protect yourself at all times," Leonard said. "It may be a real self-defense situation one day, and you'll want to have your mind where it ought to be. Real thing, you can't just throw your hands up and ask for a stool to sit on. Hear me?"

Ernie nodded. They touched gloves. Ernie threw a quick jab. The jab didn't quite reach Leonard's forehead. The cross that followed had a lot of heat on it, but Leonard stepped to the right and kicked with a left round kick inside Ernie's left leg. The kick made a slapping sound and lifted Ernie's leg off the mat, and down he went. He tried to get up but couldn't. He tried to hold his leg, which was hard with the gloves on. He was moaning.

"Kicks, they got their place," Leonard said, gloves on his hips. "You can reach farther with them, and if you know where to kick, and you've got the aim and the accuracy and know how to throw them with power, they can end a fight before it starts. Right now, state you're in, if I wanted to, I could whip you like a galley slave. You would have a hard time doing anything back, because your brain is distracted by pain. By the way, that was a lesson. Another part of that lesson is there is a difference between pain and injury. What you got there is pain."

I sparred with Nemo after that. He was more cautious than Ernie. He moved back and outside, trying to lure me in. I just kept my spot. I didn't stalk him. Finally, his youth got the better of him—my holding back had made him bold.

When he came in, continuing Leonard's lesson, I kicked. My shot was different, though. I hit him on the outside of his thigh, about where your fingers would hang if you put your hands by your sides.

He went down, said, "Fuck a duck."

"I'd rather not," I said.

He rolled around for a while. Bang that nerve with a kick, and it really stays with you. I knew from experience.

"Now," I said, "you guys get yourself together, and let's go again. Light this time, so the lesson will last a little longer."

19

It felt good to work out and teach something physical, and doing it made Leonard's offer more appealing. It might be a way to reset my life, to slide into old age more comfortably.

I had stocks and dough in the bank and some cash that was in bills in shoeboxes. To stay cool, all I had to do was avoid buying yachts and enormous mansions.

As for growing older in this job, well, if need be, when I couldn't teach, I could, as Leonard suggested, fold towels.

After a few more, lighter rounds with the boys, I left Leonard to it, showered, and drove over to the office.

Since Belinda hadn't been able to clean that week, I swept and gathered the trash and so on.

I was thinking how in this very room Vanilla Ride had killed Kung Fu Bobby, who up until that moment seemed invincible. She'd killed two others here as well. She saved my life. Then the Sisters, as they were called, were invited in. Jim Bob arranged for them to do their thing.

I never saw the Sisters. They came from Houston in a white van with a house cleaner sign on the side, but what they cleaned up was the blood and scattered brains strewn about the office. They took care of the damage and eliminated DNA, fingerprints, and ruined furniture. They came and went like ghosts, leaving the place looking better than before. I'd never seen the bathroom toilet so clean. They also made some serious money for doing it. I know. It came out of the business's bank account, disguised as repairs.

I was brooming a cobweb out of a ceiling corner when the door opened and in walked the former Sheriff Doolin. He was dressed in a khaki shirt and pants and had on his nice hat and cheap boots. His face hung loose as an empty sack.

"Sheriff Doolin," I said, leaning the broom in the corner.

"Not anymore."

"Not Sheriff Doolin, then." I said this like I didn't know he had been shown the door.

"Come on, man, don't make me feel worse than I do."

"You here for a reason?"

"I wanted to talk to you about hiring you and your partners."

"I find that surprising."

"So do I," he said.

I sat down behind the desk and Doolin sat in one of the client chairs. He took off his hat and placed it on his knee. Except for a few strands of hair the color of dung-tinted straw, he was bald.

"I found out more about you," Doolin said. "Looked you up on the Google. You and your buddy are detectives. My cousins the Planters, I want to find out who killed them. See if the killers can be brought to justice. That should have been my job, but I kind of shit in my oatmeal."

"I have some guesses about what happened," I said. "I assume their boss, the Benefactor, whoever that is, did them in. They might have played their hand too broad, got into trouble over a hog and their meth stash. Maybe they tried to take off with some money they owed their boss. I think a lot of things but don't actually know a goddamn thing."

"Any of that could be. The Benefactor, if we're naming him that. He runs things, and that's that. You pay him tribute or you don't work in the meth business. But I don't really know him. I heard he once hooked up someone skimming his share to a couple of trucks with chains and pulled them apart. Might be a legend. But I'm all about me right now. I may face some charges for putting that shit in the car trunk, but I was trying to help my cousins. Keep them out of jail. That was a stupid move on my part, and I know it. They were family, after all, and I guess I should try and do something about what happened to them."

"I don't know I care who killed them," I said. "They were a menace, and that hog of theirs, they were feeding it meth, making it crazy. Animal abuse, buddy. It was causing Belinda and her children more than a little distress. She's your cousin too, what about her?"

"She isn't as close a cousin. The Planters, I grew up around. We played together. Got in trouble together."

"And you were making money from them."

"Also true, as long as we're not talking outside this office. I want you to find who killed them because this is more of a mess than it seems. I know I'm not the brightest light in the woods, but I wanted to be a good sheriff, just couldn't shake my upbringing, family loyalty, that kind of thing."

"You made your choices," I said.

"I did. Still, this whole business is complex."

"Complex in what way?"

"Being complex is what makes it complex. If I could figure it all, I wouldn't want to hire you. I know about those bodies found in the ditch out back. That wasn't something my cousins would do. What I do know is I'm worried about me. I'm not staying at home, I'm hid out, in case the Benefactor thinks I know something from my cousins that I definitely don't know. Then again, in that line of work, you make a lot of enemies. Could have been someone else."

"Them being cousins made it so you couldn't or wouldn't arrest them? Made it so you just had to take money from them and cover up for them?"

"It makes it what I did, and I can't undo it. I don't want to spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder. I want you to find out what's going on and keep me out of it."

"You're not giving me much," I said.

"Don't have much. Just that my cousins were part of a drug ring in East Texas, and they were doing all right in that world of commerce until they started dipping into the goods. Then they didn't know their assholes from a water well. It was all about the drugs for them after that. Cooking up in the shed behind the fucking hog pen. Can't get dumber than that."

"Was the bald guy with them a cousin?"

"Just a worker they sometimes hired. They called him Junior. He was the only one didn't dip into the meth for personal use. But he got paid in meth from time to time. They let him sell some of it on his own."

"And what does he do to get paid in meth?"

"Wrecker work," he said. "A bit of this and that. Helping them sell meth."

"Seems like they were creating their own competition," I said.

"State they were in, it was easier to give him meth than money. They had plenty of meth. The money they spent like it didn't matter. Bought stupid shit with it."

I picked a pen off the desk and used it to tap out a drumbeat of sorts. Doolin watched me drum. I don't know if he was impressed with my natural rhythm or not. I considered switching to a pen-and-desk version of "Wipe Out" but put the pen down instead.

"And you can pay for our services?" I asked.

Doolin reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a wad the size of a baseball. It was held together with a thick rubber band. "I got some money I saved up. I can give you a thousand to start."

I wouldn't have thought Doolin would have had five hundred, let alone a thousand dollars.

He peeled a thousand dollars off his wad and pushed the bills across the desk at me. "We in business?"

I straightened out the money and left it on the desktop. That was a lot of money for an ex-sheriff to pass as a partial payment. My guess was it was money from the Planters. I said as much.

He shook his head. “I gamble, and I’m good at it. One of the few things I’m good at. I mean, I got some money from them, all right. They arranged for me and a gal worked for them to have some fun once. That was one way they paid. But I didn’t really make that much from them. A bit here and there, a snatch of ass now and then.”

“A bit here and there really isn’t any different than a lot here and there when it’s crooked money. Who was the gal you were with? That your cousins supplied you? I might find something through her.”

“I think her name was Cherryline. I don’t remember exactly. Wasn’t with her long enough to remember. She hung with my cousins for a while, then she was gone.”

I didn’t let him know I thought he meant Sharoline. Technically, if he had sex with Sharoline, they were committing incest, though if they were cousins removed as many times as he and Belinda suggested, that might be moot.

“Surely you can give me more information than you’ve given,” I said.

Doolin though for a moment.

“Elda Seabrook.”

“Who’s that?”

“A name I heard my cousin Beauford mention. I think she was some kind of contact. I don’t know any more than that, but the name came up a few times when I was around them.”

“Which one was Beauford?”

“One looked like he was about to take a nap.”

That would be Sleepy. “I find something out, how do I contact you?”

“I’ll contact you. Don’t want anyone, not even you, knowing where I am. These people, they can find out things if someone knows something they want to know. Wouldn’t want you letting them know where I am. Just find out if they’re looking for me and, if so, what I can do to shake them off my tail.”

“Who’s ‘them’?”

“Whoever’s after me. Benefactor, someone else. That’s for you to find out.”

“This might take some time, and time means money. More than you’ve put down.”

“I can come up with it. I can gamble at the boats in Shreveport.”

“All right,” I said.

I put the thousand in the desk drawer.

Doolin didn’t shake hands. Didn’t hang out. He was on a mission.

He put on his nice hat, went to the door, opened it, and looked out as if he thought his enemies might be sailing in on hang gliders.

When he was certain they weren’t, he stepped onto the landing and pulled the door closed.

When he was below, I went to the window and looked down at the parking lot and watched him walk rapidly, checking left and right, before climbing into a yellow car and driving off.

The thing I noticed about him in the bright sunshine before he closed his car door was that he looked smaller than I remembered, and his face looked as white as whalebone in the sunlight.

20

I don't want nothing to do with that business," Leonard said. "I don't care who killed them."

Leonard had on his stupid cap with the feather. He pushed the bill up a bit so that the hat was cocked back on his head.

"One of them was a kid, Leonard."

"Not my kid."

It was afternoon, and we were at our new house. It was furnished, though not well. In the old days, I wouldn't have cared if it had apple crates and a milking stool as furniture. But I had gotten persnickety in my old age.

Brett definitely didn't want to keep our old couch, but I liked it. My butt loved it. Leonard helped me move the couch to the bed of his pickup, and we drove it over to the barn on the new property and put it inside against the wall, next to the wooden bench that was already there.

We sat on the couch as a reward for moving it.

Leonard said, "If you're lucky, there's a cave underneath here. You can rig up your Batmobile to rise on pullies and you can drive out of here at night to do Batman stuff."

"You can be Robin."

"Fuck you. I don't want to be Batman, let alone Robin. I just want to get married, own a gym, and be left alone."

"Look for a pod under your bed, because you've certainly changed."

"Only thing under my bed is common sense. Used to be it was dust bunnies, but now I got common sense under there. I'm telling you, come work for me, and let's grow old at the gym and forget all this shit."

"I've told you, I've considered it," I said. "I'm still considering. If I were to go in with you, I don't know how Brett would feel about running the agency by herself."

"I hear that."

We sat quietly, letting the minutes tick by. Eventually I decided to tell Leonard what was on my mind. After I'd explained about Doolin, I said, "Just ride out with me to where the wrecker was and take a look around. You don't have to get involved beyond that."

"The wrecker will be gone by now. Clues will have been found or stepped on. What's the point?"

"You never know till you know," I said.

"Oh, Yoda, your wisdom makes my ass hurt."

It took a bit more cajoling, but soon we were riding in his pickup out to the spot where the wrecker had been burned up. Leonard called and got directions for the location from Pookie, who was not only his fiancé but our inside man at the cop shop.

It was windy that day, and we drove with the truck windows down. The breeze was a little cool, and the tops of trees were swaying as if in a dance contest.

Finally, we came to the Angelina River. Once upon a time, just before the trail from the long bridge into the woods, there had been a small, greasy strip joint with the stink of an open sewage line out back. The place was a noted drug den. Meth. All manner of pills. The Planters might have done business there.

Politicians and LaBorde law were always trying to close the place down, mostly near election time. It was noted for having a one-armed stripper. She was said to have two pussies, and neither of them were cats. They said she saved one for her boyfriend and used the other for paying customers. She was said to be careful about which was which.

Our agency was once hired to look for a couple of guys who hung out there and owed child-support money. One guy I found, the other I didn't. I didn't see a one-armed stripper. The floor inside was sticky as molasses and my shoes made a sucking sound as I walked across it. The band wasn't any better than if you had handed four lobotomized chimps random musical instruments and let them go at it.

Eventually, the cops and politicians did close the place. The one-armed stripper had swung her last time on the dance pole, and no longer were curious customers trying to figure out what was up with her extra vagina.

Had she considered it for small storage?

Not long after, as the joint sat there lonely and without paint, the ghost of many a lap dance living inside, it somehow caught fire. By the time the fire department bothered to get there—and word was they went to a Dairy Queen drive-through first and ordered ice cream cones—the fire had licked the wooden bones of the place clean and eaten the carpet, leaving only the concrete flooring and a scorched sink and toilet where the bathroom had been.

Nothing left but some sweet redneck memories.

Two pussies indeed.

21

Deep down in the woods there were a number of trails that shot off the larger one we were bouncing along on. One of the trails had broken limbs on both sides of it, and that fit the idea of wrecker being driven down it. Leonard took that one. Water dripped off the leaves and limbs, and the earth was soft with drying mud. Mosquitoes smashed against the windshield as if on suicide missions.

We rolled our windows up in self-defense.

Had one of the tweakers driven there, not knowing what was about to happen, or were they forced to drive there? Or were they killed first and chopped up and their bodies shoved into the wrecker at the riverbank, then set on fire?

The trail filled with light and ahead of us we could see an opening, and beyond the opening was a sandy bank and the brown Angelina River rolling along, carrying leaves and small limbs.

When we came out of the woods and onto the bank, the sky was bright blue with a scattering of white clouds that looked like pulled biscuit dough. Leonard parked us close to the water. We got out and walked about, crunching gravel. There was a spit of thick sand that jutted out from the bank, well into the water. That would be where the wrecker was found. There were still blackened spots on the sandbar where the fuel used to burn the wrecker and its human contents had leaked onto the sandbar. The air smelled of decay. A dead animal somewhere in the woods, most likely.

Across the gurgling river there were thick, green woods, and looking downriver, I saw more of the same on both sides. Looking the other way, I could see the Angelina bridge in the distance and hear cars roaring over it, see fragments of light and metal flashing by.

"Probably brought them here at night," Leonard said. "Too easy to see them down here otherwise. Did what they did, went away in a different ride."

"The fire would have been easy to see."

"But they would light it and go like pyro-bats in the night."

I stood there and looked out at the sandbar and tried to imagine how anyone could be so cold as to do what was done to the Planters. The Earth wouldn't miss them, and they hadn't been doing anyone any good, not even themselves, but still, they were human. And the kid never had a chance. He had been bushwhacked by life.

These days, I often thought about an African antelope I had seen in a film. It was in the water near a riverbank, and hyenas were onshore trying to grab it. They wanted to take the antelope to lunch, so to speak. The antelope used its horns to fight them off and was doing fine because the hyenas didn't want to get in the water, and the antelope knew it was in a good position.

When the hyenas gave up the fight, the antelope took off along the edge of the bank, trotting, almost smiling, having handled itself courageously and honorably.

And then a crocodile rose out of the water and bit the antelope on the hind leg and took it down beneath the water. The antelope's bravery and intelligence were of no importance then.

That was life. It was always waiting to bushwhack you, and it seemed it often did the deed when you were feeling at your best, like the world was your oyster. A moment later, you were the crocodile's oyster and you didn't even get left with the shell.

The moral of the story is: Watch for crocodiles.

We looked around for clues. There was an empty cigarette pack. The cops hadn't bothered with it. It was an odd brand of cigarettes. Red Circle. I looked it up using my phone. They were expensive, and supposedly the tobacco was first soaked in bourbon before it was dried and made into cigarettes. The mouth end of each cigarette had a red band around it. They were starting to be popular up north, but down here in East Texas, they were rare because they cost too much for the average joe to buy.

"What you looking at?" Leonard asked.

I pointed it out to him.

"Could be something, might not be something," he said. "Pack could have washed up here from anywhere."

I leaned over and took a photo of the pack where it lay, then pinched the pack at the top, turned it over, and took another photo.

We looked around a bit more, but there was just more of the same to see. I took the empty cigarette pack with me, put it in a plastic sandwich bag I had brought with me from the house just in case a magnificent clue presented itself. Or maybe a cigarette pack.

Hap Collins, Ace Detective.

We drove away just as the mosquitoes found us and tied on their napkins. When we were back on the highway, Leonard said, "Do you think Belinda, Baby Darling, and those kids are in any danger?"

"Thought about that," I said. "I can't see how they would be. It's not like they've actually done anything. I think they are out of it because they haven't been in it."

We passed a car with a big and beautiful German shepherd in the back seat looking at us. He might have wanted Leonard's baseball cap, and had he asked, I would have suggested Leonard give it to him.

"Looks like Rin Tin Tin," Leonard said.

"The descendant of the original Rin Tin Tin was the one on the TV show we used to watch. Or so they say."

"Yo, Rinty."

"He wasn't very smart."

"Oh, shit. Don't ruin my childhood, Hap. I mean, it's already ruined, but don't shit on the garbage pile."

"That Rinty only did close-ups. He wasn't smart enough to get in out of the rain. He had stunt doubles. I don't remember their names—Bill and Jake will do. I think one of them, let's say Bill, had one eye. You know when they saw Rinty getting his close-ups they were pissed and jealous. They knew they were the ones going to be in the long shots, running into burning buildings, leaping off high rocks, dragging people to safety, some of those people being heavy grown men. The real Rinty was waiting in his trailer being groomed and blow-dried."

"Wasn't just one Rinty?" Leonard said.

"Nope. Jake, the stand-in, probably said, 'Look at that shiny-ass motherfucker getting all those close-ups. He ain't smart enough to lick his own ass.' So now Bill, the other stand-in, one with the eye patch, says, 'No, he isn't. That's your job.'"

"Hap, I worry about you. And please, don't bring up Rin Tin Tin again unless your comments are glorious beyond reason. Let me have my little mythologies of magical dogs."

"The original Rin Tin Tin was truly a genius of a dog. Did you know that?"

"I assumed."

"He didn't have stunt doubles. He had to lick his own ass."

"Kind of like us."

"Without the genius part."

22

We stopped by the office. Brett was there, looking cool in a white shirt, blue jeans with the bottoms rolled up, white tennis shoes without socks. Her red hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail from which strands of hair escaped, likely arranged that way by Brett herself.

I took Doolin's thousand dollars from the desk drawer, placed it on the desk in front of her, told her how I had been hired by Doolin. But except for a name he had given me, Elda Seabrook, I had nothing.

I told her what me and Leonard had done and that we hadn't really learned anything. I showed her the bag with the empty cigarette pack in it.

She took it and put it in the desk drawer. She said, "I'm trying to sort some problems out for Belinda. I learned some things, and one of those things concerns me."

Leonard and I sat down in the client chairs.

"Belinda's older daughter, Sharoline," Brett said.

"Yeah, she mentioned her," I said. "And Doolin mentioned her. Where is this daughter?" I asked.

"Last seen a few years back when she was eighteen. She was arrested a few times for prostitution, drugs, et cetera. Belinda said Sharoline, unfortunately, had the intellect of an unfertilized houseplant."

"Her mother said that?" Leonard said.

"She did," Brett said. "Sharoline was unpopular in school, overweight, needed some dental work, was a shoplifter, and came to think the Planters were her friends. Spent a lot of time with them. She lost weight on the meth diet, got pregnant, had an abortion, which, considering her circumstances, was a blessing. Next thing you know, Sharoline was running dope with her fine friends. She actually cut a few people with a razor for reasons unknown. Belinda said she wouldn't be surprised if she'd killed someone."

"Damn," I said.

"Then she disappeared," Brett said. "Tweakers said she said she was going up north and find a job. Belinda said there wasn't anything she could do up north that she couldn't do here. Not like she had a big skill set. And the body Belinda found out back of her house in the wash—due to the bits of skin and clothes and the hair, Belinda thought it might be Sharoline. That's what made her ill."

I called Justin to see if they could get DNA from Belinda, compare it to the body with skin and hair. I had the phone on speaker so Brett and Leonard could listen.

Justin told me they would. Said, "There used to be a really old black cemetery there until someone bought the land. They bulldozed the headstones and churned up some of the graves, ran cattle there for a while. Now it grows weeds. Meaning it could be an older body that was somehow reasonably well preserved. But I doubt it. My gut tells me Belinda is right. It's Sharoline."

When I ended my phone call with Justin, I said to Brett and Leonard, "The tweakers could have killed her."

"Yeah," Leonard said, "or she and Porky the Party Pig really got ripe on the product one night, and she didn't come out of it. The tweakers, having the brains of a dog turd, might have just buried her, thinking that was the easy answer, and then the flood washed her up."

"We might be filling in things that seem to fit," Brett said. "But it's clear there's a lot more to this whole shebang than we know."

"Like not seeing the alligator but hearing the splashes," I said.

"Do we leave it alone?" Brett asked.

"I'm really not part of the 'we,'" Leonard said. "Not anymore."

We just looked at him.

"What?" he said.

We just kept looking.

Leonard sighed. "Hell, I'm in."

23

I would like to say we rushed out of there ready to crack the case, but that didn't happen. Leonard had to go by the gym and supervise the minor construction work being done. He was having plumbers and carpenters come in to make some changes. He dropped me off at mine and Brett's new place and rolled away.

The day was bright and the sky was clear and blue. The doughy clouds were gone. The sun felt warm on my neck but not uncomfortable. The field where the barn sat had high grass and an old stone bench setting on it. I made a cup of coffee (in my Batman cup, I might add), went there, sat and sipped.

After a while, I reminded myself that the property was almost fifty acres and that the line of woods at the side of the property was something neither me nor Brett had had a look at. We had bought it for the location, the house, and the barn, and we had plenty of woods we hadn't looked through.

I left the cup on the bench and walked to the woods. The grass was thicker near the trees and a little damp. I went into the shadows of the woods, and I could hear water running. There was a stream only a few feet into the trees; it was clear water rolling over white pebbles. I walked up the creek a bit, found a natural rock wall about ten feet high. The bank on either side left a path that could easily be climbed.

The rock wall had a wound in it made by nature. The wound was the source of the little creek's water. It was spurting out like a fountain. I climbed the hill made by the creek bank, maneuvered myself on top of the flat rock, and lay down on the green moss there. I reached down to touch where the water came out. The water was ice cold. I cupped some in my hand and tasted it. When I was a kid, there were lots of springs like that, and not everyone was crapping into the water supply. This water was direct from the Earth's own wells. It was clean and cold and tasted sweet. Some might say water has no taste, but it does. Clear spring water is the most tasteful of all.

I lay on my back on the rock and looked up through the tree boughs. There was some full-on sunlight in spots, but there were mostly shadows from the trees. I felt sleepy.

I closed my eyes and felt more comfortable than I had in a long time. I was one with the rock, the shadows, and the trees. Well, not entirely; my feet sloped somewhat, so I had to readjust myself. As I sat up, I looked down the creek. The water was shiny where the sun crept through and touched it.

Along the bank were a few small uprooted trees, pulled up or knocked over by erosion or storms. The roots were like big fat worms frozen in time, dirt clods hanging from them.

In that moment I had such a deep feeling of nostalgia for my childhood days running the creeks and woods. Sometimes I acquired leeches on my balls from wading in darker and deeper creeks than this one, and I was even nostalgic for the leeches.

I hadn't yet killed anyone back then. I hadn't had to worry about bills and relationships, the idea of growing older and losing one's powers. I hadn't lost mine altogether, but these days it sometimes took more effort to put them together than it once had. I had had such dreams.

Life had offered a number of roads for me to walk down, clear roads full of sunlight and hope, but instead I beat my way through metaphorical briar patch after briar patch with a dull machete, mostly arriving nowhere.

I wanted to go back to being a child, a primitive. I felt like that old Kinks song about how the singer wanted to be an ape man, live in a tree with his ape-man woman and eat bananas all day. I wondered if Brett liked to climb trees. So far in our relationship, it hadn't come up. I was pretty sure she liked bananas.

I watched a small turtle crawl into the water, swim along in the flow of it, around a bend of dirt and trees, and then it was gone. I watched where the turtle had swum for a long time. Birds sang. Water gurgled. There was a wisp of wind blowing through the trees, carrying pine smells and earth smells. The woods were as soothing as a nice bath with fat aromatic pine-scented candles placed on the rim of the tub.

I wanted to lie there until I died.

Maybe I just wanted to die. As of late, my worries and past were almost too heavy to tote.

But I didn't die.

I took a deep breath and climbed down off the rock. A few birds fluttered, and a squirrel yelled at me. The wind sighed once real hard and went silent, like a hospice patient breathing his last. I leaned out and had another handful of spring water and walked back to the bench to get my coffee cup and take it into our new house.

I had no idea how ugly things were about to get.

24

Over the next few days, I tried to find some connections for the tweakers—the Planters, to be exact—but most of their relatives, except for Doolin and Belinda and even more distant cousins, seemed to have passed on to the great shithole in the sky. As for friends of theirs, I couldn't find any. I damn sure couldn't find the Benefactor. I might as well have looked under my bed for answers.

It didn't surprise me that the Planters' relatives had died of drugs, gunshots, car wrecks, and one of the more stupid ones, a fellow named Guy Planter, had died of complications due to sticking his dick in a hand vacuum. I guess he thought it would suck him off, but instead it tore the skin on his pecker, which became infected. By the time he went in for aid, it had grown green and diseased and it had to be amputated. The dick's owner, the aforementioned Guy Planter, trotted off into the void not long after, hoping, I suppose, to recover his dick in the afterlife and superglue it back into place. What a story he would have to tell around the celestial campfire. He could look Jesus straight in the eye and say, "I was expecting something different."

But it didn't take much for me to find Elda Seabrook, the person Doolin had mentioned. She answered the door without caution, opening it wide. She turned out to be a pleasant-looking middle-aged woman wearing a loose blue pantsuit, living in a nice but not fancy house on the outskirts of Nacogdoches, Texas, with six cats. She had gray streaks in her shoulder-length hair. She looked as if she might have spent her life in academics. But when she moved, I noticed that there was a panther-like grace to her; muscles coiled and stretched under the plain outfit she wore.

She spoke politely, and after I told her why I was there, she let me in.

The house was haunted by cigarette smoke. We went through it, cats trotting almost under Elda's feet, and on through the sliding back door.

We sat at a table in her backyard, which had a tall brick wall around it. The yard was actually a garden and was filled with beautiful flowers and plants, large and succulent-looking. I couldn't help but think of Triffids, or perhaps Audrey Two in *Little Shop of*

Horrors. I noted there was a roll of thick plastic on top of the wall, and it could be pulled over the entire garden if one wanted to bother. Even out there, the air smelled of smoke. The cats probably had lung cancer from the secondary smoke. Elda didn't smoke while we talked, so I was grateful for that. I didn't even see a pack of cigarettes. As we sat there, her prettiness seemed greater than it had at first. There was something stern and thoughtful about her that had tucked her beauty away, but now that she was relaxed, I could see it.

She was baffled by my telling her Doolin had mentioned her. She said she knew Doolin, but only because he had been married to a friend of hers some years back, a lady named Sue Alice Doolin, formerly a Dalton. Being a western history fan, I found that mildly amusing. The Daltons and the Doolins.

She said they didn't have a happy marriage, and she felt Sue Alice had married Doolin because she didn't have many prospects. She wasn't attractive, wasn't a great conversationalist, and was a forty-year-old virgin when she met Doolin. Doolin had been nice enough in the beginning, not bad-looking before he packed on pounds, but, thin or fat, he soon turned into a first-class asshole. Elda was shocked to hear he had been elected sheriff and less shocked to learn he had been removed. He was shady, she said.

Sue Alice Dalton?

Keeping the long list of tragedies I had encountered consistent in their rottenness, Sue Alice had died of a fall from the scenic outlook near Tyler, Texas. It wasn't like that place was much of a cliff or a mountain of great height, but fall off it she did, in the middle of the night. How she ended up there no one knew. No car. Not even a bicycle or an Uber ride. The fall had broken her neck and crushed a small blue glass elephant statue in her coat pocket. Elda suspected Doolin had something to do with her death due to an insurance policy, but Doolin turned out to have an airtight alibi. He'd caught his arm on fire during a backyard cookout and spent a couple days in the burn unit in LaBorde. Elda said the devil was giving him a preview.

It seemed to me the whole mess of these people were cursed.

I was beginning to think good old boy Doolin wasn't telling me all he should be telling me if he wanted me to find something out about a thing he couldn't or wouldn't identify. What the hell was his real game?

And maybe I was just a rotten detective.

We talked a little more, and then I left, leaving Elda, the cats, and the specter of cigarette smoke in the house.

I would have loved to have had Leonard's take on Elda and the stories she told about Doolin and Sue Alice, but he wasn't available. I won't lie to you, it saddened me. Not having him around was like someone had cut off one of my legs.

When I got back to the office, no one was there. I used my key to let myself in. I stood at the window and looked out. The blue sky was fading away as dark clouds rolled in like tumbleweeds. The wind licked the oak next to the parking lot. The leaves on it did the shimmy-shimmy-shake.

I got nervous waiting. I made a phone call to Justin to see if he would tell me anything about the DNA on the woman from the ditch. He surprised me by being forthcoming without my having to get down on my knees and beg. As suspected, it was Sharoline, the daughter of Belinda. They also found out how she'd died: a blow to the head by an unknown object, something with a clawlike shape. She had been buried in the side of that ditch for quite some time, though far less than the other bodies, which had been there for years.

I sat in the office on the couch and thought all manner of thoughts, none of them useful.

When the room darkened, I drove to our original home.

The night was windy, but without rain. The wind slapped the trees on our street around. We still had our bed upstairs, but most of our stuff was now at the new house. Tomorrow the movers would come back for the bed and we would completely relocate to our new location. Leonard was supposed to meet up with me next morning to move things around in the new house. I had yet to tell him about the rock and the spring, but I would, and I'd tell Brett, of course. They would appreciate it. I could still feel its cool shadows and the moss on the rock and I could hear the water shooting out of the rock and splashing in the creek, babbling away.

That night, Brett and I lay in bed under the covers and cuddled. We listened to the wind blow wild and woolly outside the house, whip around the corners squealing as if in pain.

I said, "I don't think there's a real case for me to find anything out about Doolin's fears. He may just be paranoid. Doolin seems to be one of the only relatives of the Planters alive, and he's not actually a close cousin. He's a distant cousin. Elda was friends with Doolin's ex-wife."

"In East Texas, cousins are cousins," Brett said. "And sometimes the cousins are brothers and fathers and uncles and nephews all at the same time."

"Don't be mean." I said this knowing I had thought exactly the same thing earlier—how distant were all those cousins?

"Hap, I'm so tired of seeing ignorance as a profession. Stupidity as a part-time job. After all these years, the mouth-breathers are winning. On both sides of the equation."

"It just seems that way."

"You know why it seems that way?"

“Why?”

“It is that way.”

“Question is, what do I do next for Doolin?”

“I’ll tell you what I would do,” Brett said. “Give him his money back.”

25

Couple days later, I decided to deal with something that didn't have anything to do with Doolin or the dead Planters. I talked to people at a nice petting zoo and they came out to Belinda's to look at Porky. Without his drug habit, he was as passive as a piece of unbuttered toast. The petting-zoo folks patted him.

"We could give him a better home, Mr. Collins."

"He's sort of an inherited pig, and you'd need to talk to the lady in the house there and her kids, but I think if you say how it's best for Porky, they'll be on board."

They did that, and though the kids cried a little and Baby Darling clung to my hand hard enough to rearrange my knuckles, Porky was loaded in a trailer and rolled away, leaving us with nothing more than a satisfied grunt and a whiff of pig shit from the pen.

"You think it's better this way?" Baby Darling said.

"I do. But I left it up to you and your family."

"He'll have a better place to stay, won't he?"

"A porcine paradise," I said.

"Did you know there's a kind of insulin, porcine insulin, obtained from a pig pancreas? Doctors also do porcine skin grafts, skin taken from a pig. I read about it."

"I didn't know either of those things."

"They won't be doing any of that to Porky, will they?"

"Nope. He'll be fine. He'll be better than fine."

Belinda came out and invited me into the house. When we were seated at the kitchen table, glasses of ice tea in front of us, kids out of earshot, I said, "Finding the body must have been quite a shock. But I need you to buck up and be prepared for what I'm about to tell you. The body found out back belongs to your daughter Sharoline. No easy way to say it."

She nodded, her head moving as if heavy on her neck.

"Did Justin already tell you?" I said.

"No."

"She's been buried there a few years, and would still be there had the water not changed course and washed out that ditch."

"Right out back of the house," Belinda said and looked off into some place I couldn't see. "Figured it might be her when they took my DNA. And that bit of hair on the body, it looked like her hair, and the orange tennis shoes. How many people are wearing those things? It's why I ended up in the hospital, thinking it was her. And now I know it was."

Belinda didn't yell or faint or have a heart episode now. One dark surprise and a hospital visit had been enough. She took the news stoically.

"Sharoline was a problem child," Belinda said. "Aggressive. Always stoned or drunk. Started that when she was thirteen. I had her too young, not like the others, and between you and me, I shouldn't have had all them kids. Love them, but I can't take care of them very well. Best thing happened to us was that hog wrecking our house and you, Leonard, and Brett stepping up for me. The kids are not anyone's fault but my own. Never could tell my husband no, and for a long time I thought it was God decided on pregnancy. If my tubes weren't tied due to the last one, I'd be taking pills, and now I support women's right to choose. I never did back then, you know. Killing babies and all that."

I didn't say anything. I just let her run her clock down. Her voice was as flat as the tabletop. All the life had been beaten out of her and laid out to dry so it could turn to dust and blow away.

"I admit to you, Hap," she said, "and I say this sadly, as a Christian woman: I haven't missed her a bit, because anytime she was around or next door with those horrible people, she brought a big tow sack full of drama with her. I loved her, but I didn't like her. She was all wrong in the head, and I don't mean crazy. Just cruel, self-centered, and mean. She spoke to me in terrible ways, made threats.

"When she turned eighteen, she gave me the finger, called me a fat ol' bitch, hit me with a rolled-up magazine, and moved in with them. I looked up one day and she wasn't over there no more and hadn't said anything to anyone about where she was going. Well, up north, they said, but that was it."

It seemed far-fetched, but I decided to ask Belinda something.

"Does the name Elda Seabrook mean anything to you?"

Her face sagged like a soaked washcloth. "Yes. She's the sister of Sue Alice, my cousin's wife."

"The cousin being Doolin, of course."

"Yes. And there were rumors about Doolin and Elda."

"He was cheating on his wife with her sister? Elda? I spoke with Elda. She said Sue Alice was just a friend of hers."

"Sisters," Belinda said. "I can't tell you a lot. I only knew through the grapevine."

"Elda described Sue Alice as shy, retiring, and kind of homely."

“None of those things,” Belinda said. “She was outgoing, gorgeous, and would screw a stick shift while driving around a hairpin curve.”

“So let me be certain of this,” I said. “Elda and Sue Alice were sisters, not friends? And they weren’t even friendly sisters—they hated one another?”

“That’s right.”

The whole business Elda had fed me made me feel like a big donkey’s ass.

26

I was glad we had the money to pay people to move us in the new house, but some of that moving was still going on. I'd thought we were done except for the bed, but nope, Brett reminded me there was stuff in the garage.

Used to be, me and Leonard did all the moving, and there were times when I wanted to just stack some of it up and burn it by the side of the road. Or at least leave it like the old pioneers did when, during their travels, they started up steep inclines and the piano that was to bless their home with music became too heavy in the wagon bed, the chifforobe too cumbersome as it slid from side to side, the iron stove so weighty it pulled down an ascending wagon like a giant hand.

Once, me and Brett went on a vacation in Alaska. We took a horse-riding tour up a long trail in the mountains, a path the old Alaska pioneers had taken, and off to the side of that trail were old wood-burning stoves and rotted possessions. The pioneers couldn't live without these things until they couldn't live with them.

I drove my car out to our new house, a lot of confusion rolling around in my head. I was having a hard time keeping all the stories straight and thinking they might have been more crooked than straight in the first place. Other questions came to mind that I wished I had asked Belinda, but for now they would have to wait.

Brett was already at the new house. She was telling the moving people how the hoss ate the apple, as we used to say. The movers were grumbling, but they were doing as told.

I walked through the house after the movers went out to their truck to add up our bill so far. As I said, there was more to come. It was starting to look nice. The house held more than I thought it would. And as I've noted before, it was bigger than it seemed at first glance. The new furniture smelled like plastic wrap.

It was our plan to turn the barn into a gym and storage area. It was already that way, but we wanted to do more, bring in more exercise equipment. There was enough room in that old thing to build a decent gym, an office, and an aircraft hangar, but only for small jets and helicopters, of course.

Brett said, "Did you give Doolin his money back?"

"I don't know where he is, but when he contacts me, I will."

"You don't sound like you mean it."

"I think I mean it, but maybe not. The whole thing has taken on some new dimensions."

She lifted an eyebrow.

I explained to Brett the new dimensions.

"Maybe that's all the more reason to give him his money back."

"I think I might be too much into it already. You know what I'm wondering? There was this other guy at the wrecker with the Planters. He hasn't turned up again, so he may be dead or he may be in hiding. He might know something about whatever something I need to know about. If I only knew what I needed to know and where that guy was so I could ask him some questions."

The movers came back in, and we signed some papers and gave them a credit card. They stuck the card into an electronic device, gave it back, then drove away in their van.

"Let's you and me go christen the new bed I bought," she said.

"What happened to the old one?"

"Gave it to Goodwill."

"I liked that bed."

"You'll like this one, I promise. I mean, I'm going to be in it."

"That's a very good point," I said.

She was right. I did like the new bed just fine.

27

Come morning we decided not to open the office. We lay in bed and cuddled for a while, then that led to other things. Brett went back to sleep and I got up, pulled my pajama pants on, made coffee, and was scrambling some eggs in butter spray when I heard the flame-haired lioness roar a little. It was Brett's coming-awake roar.

Brett came into the kitchen in her shorty pajamas and a big T-shirt, her hair all ruffled, no makeup. She looked great.

She sat at the table as I put bread in the toaster, then went back to moving the eggs with the spatula. I put the eggs and toast on a plate and placed it in front of her. I got her a fork and knife, put a jar of fig and jalapeño jelly on the table, then fixed my plate. Lastly, I poured two cups of strong coffee and put one at each of our spots, and we sat and smelled the aroma of the food and coffee. It was nice not to be in a hurry.

"Thanks, baby," Brett said.

"If you want, princess, I can chew it for you, spit it into your mouth like you're a baby bird."

"I can handle it from here."

We drank our coffee and had our eggs and toast. Nothing seemed as important as sitting there in silence listening to the morning birds while having our breakfast.

I was looking out the window at the gray morning with wind moving in the trees, thinking it might rain, and in that moment I had a flash of internal lightning.

Nothing real bright, but a crackle of electricity within the brain cells.

I turned and looked at Brett, said, "Why would Doolin tell me about Edna if she was going to tell me he had been married to her best friend who turns out to be her sister? Why would that matter? He acted as if he just knew her name and it might mean something important. Edna suggested he might have killed his ex-wife. He had to have some idea that if I found and talked to her, she would tell me that. That doesn't seem helpful to him. It's not hitting me right all of a sudden. And if Edna lied about who his wife was, didn't admit to me it was her sister, I have to ask why."

“It’s perplexing. Could she have just been stalling?”

“For what? Doolin said to find out if the druggies, or their leader, I guess, were looking for him. He’d know the answer to that without me doing a thing. He’s in hiding, so he has a pretty good idea. I think he wanted me to stumble over something bigger.”

“I’m here if you need me,” Brett said.

“When I figure out what it is I need, then we’ll do it together.”

“You could ask Leonard too.”

“He’s trying to go in another direction and I feel I ought to let him.”

“If you think you two are splitting up, I can assure you, you are not. One way or another, you’ll always be up each other’s asses.”

“I don’t want in his ass, and he doesn’t want in mine.”

“I’m going back to bed,” she said. “You be you.”

28

I put on some sweatpants and sneakers and a ragged T-shirt, and went out to the barn just as the early morning light swelled.

I went in to work on the hanging bag. I got pretty warm. I pulled off my T-shirt and without bag gloves punched the bag. Not hard, but steady. It made my hands hurt a little.

I could feel every blow in my shoulders, and my hips jarred when I hit. I was getting old and not liking it one goddamn bit. The dust that was on the bag filled the air, and sweat was flying off me as I picked up my pace. I hooked the bag over and over, just working on the hooks, no other punches, and then I heard:

"You do all right for an old fart."

I turned and saw Leonard in the doorway of the barn. He looked big and magnificent to me, standing there with the light at his back, the sunlight sliding over his broad shoulders and nestling in the creases in his cowboy hat. Even from that distance, his eyes stood out. No one had eyes like Leonard. They could be scary or amused or, more often than not, both at the same time.

"Brett called. Said you couldn't make it without me."

"Did she?"

"Did."

"Don't see how that could be true."

"She said you were crying your little eyes out."

"You know that ain't right," I said.

"Maybe she didn't put it quite like that, but same thing."

I took a deep breath, threw another low hook, and stepped away from the bag. I pulled on my T-shirt.

"You're looking pretty good there," Leonard said. "You've cut some weight."

"A few pounds."

"I see you still like to throw a hook to the hip area."

"Hurts and immobilizes," I said.

"Or you can break your fist on a hip bone."

"Not so far."

"Want to go up to the house and have a cup of coffee? I can tell you what you're doing wrong."

"Damn, I'm lucky you're here."

"Of course you are."

Brett was out of bed and dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, barefoot, when we came in. She had coffee going again, and some vanilla cookies on a plate for Leonard. She had some animal crackers for me and her.

We sat down and had coffee and cookies. As was his manner, Leonard pulled the plate of vanilla cookies close to him. I've never known anyone that liked anything like he liked those cookies. If I ate them like he did, I'd weigh three hundred pounds. That was all right. I had my animal crackers, but I didn't go to bed dreaming about them, though the bears were kind of cute.

Brett said to me, "Tell him about what you don't know."

"He knows most of it," I said.

"Tell him the parts he doesn't know."

I did that.

"Well," Leonard said. "You know what the answer is."

"No."

"The elephant of surprise."

"Who am I surprising?"

"Doolin."

"Just said I don't know where he is."

"He's not Casper the Ghost," Leonard said. "Though he is pale enough. He went somewhere to hide from someone he thinks wants to kill him?"

"That's what he said."

"You are a detective," Leonard said.

"Not a good one."

"Oh, I don't know," Brett said. "You have your moments, baby. Remember, you found your missing sock under the bed."

"That's true."

"Okay," Brett said. "Truth is, you're both pretty lousy. But you are determined."

"I'm retired from the detective business, except when I'm not," Leonard said. "Why don't you and me go back and see Elda. Elda worried Doolin. Why? What can she do to him? And she lied to you. Why?"

"It may be because she's used to it," I said. "Lying, I mean. She's certainly good at it."

"Which, considering what you know now, all the connections she and Doolin have, that is some hot bullshit fresh from the bull's ass."

"Been thinking the same," I said.

"Let's see if Elda is up for a visit," Leonard said. "Confront her on the sister stuff. It might throw her off her line of crap, and she might even tell you some truth."

"Sounds like a plan," Brett said. "And I'll go with you. Elda might prefer talking to a woman."

"I got another plan first," Leonard said.

29

After coffee, me and Brett put on some better clothes, and the three of us went over to Belinda's in the Prius.

It was Saturday, so Belinda's kids were out of school.

We knocked and were invited in. Baby Darling came close to us, said, "I'm so glad to see you."

She was such a little grown woman, I almost felt like crying. All that potential. I certainly hoped she'd have a chance to use it.

What Leonard had planned was a trip to the petting zoo. We took two cars, ours and Belinda's. Baby Darling rode with us, the rest with Belinda. We drove there and saw the animals, including Porky. The kids loved on rabbits, goats, a Shetland pony, a loudmouthed donkey, puppies, and kittens. It was soothing.

I liked seeing Baby Darling acting her own age, excited and giggling and petting the animals. I guess if she never got to use her extraordinary intellect to bust atoms or search the solar system, she could run her own petting zoo. At least animals were honest and deserved love.

We spent a couple hours there, and by that time every critter in the place had had its fur creased and stroked by all of us.

"Them's some happy brats," Leonard said.

We took everyone to Dairy Queen for hamburgers and ice cream. The kids ended up wearing ketchup and mustard like war paint, and my heart really felt good to see it.

After the kids and Belinda were dropped off, full of animal love, burgers, French fries, and ice cream, we drove over to pay Elda a visit.

30

When we got to Elda's, Leonard and Brett stayed in the car. I went to the door. I knocked, and when I did, the door swung in and I was looking into the darkness of the house. I could smell something that made the hairs on the back of my neck rise up. It was the biting, coppery smell of drying blood.

I tapped the door wider with my foot and stuck my head inside.

I glanced toward the Prius and saw Leonard and Brett had already eased out of it. Brett had her ASP baton in her hand, her purse slung over her shoulder like an ammunition pack. As for Leonard, his weapon was him.

I heard a rustling, then someone moving through the house; a door creaked. I blindly went in and fell over an ottoman tucked up tight in the shadows.

I got up quick at a tight crouch. My eyes were adjusting to the dark. I pulled the pistol from under my shirt and started moving toward where I had heard the sounds.

On through the house I went, banging into things, out to the back garden where me and Elda had sat. I could see there were marks on the fence where muddy boots had scuffled to get over it.

I jumped, grabbed the top of the fence, and pulled myself up. I hung there and looked in both directions. It was broad daylight so the view was clear. A dirt alleyway with a few small wild trees growing up against the house. Two trash cans circled by flies.

Whoever had just climbed over that fence was gone. It was like they had turned to air.

I dropped back into the garden. Leonard was there by then. I heard Brett say, "Oh, boys. You'll want to see this."

I wasn't sure I did.

Me and Leonard went swiftly through the house and came into the bedroom just as Brett was dropping the ASP into her purse.

On the bed was a bloody mess wearing bloody clothes. At first it looked like a sex doll full of strawberry jelly had exploded. There wasn't any face left. Blood was on the ceiling and sliding off the walls. A shiny blue automatic pistol lay on the floor with an amputated hand still holding it. Elda had pulled the gun from an open drawer in the nightstand but was a little too slow. She had had her hand chopped off by something. Sword or ax or very sharp knife. Whoever had done it had been quick. The rest of what happened to her body came later.

If that wasn't enough, the closet door was open and Sheriff Crank was sitting in it on top of some clothes that had fallen down. His hat was in his lap, and it was filled with gore and brains. The top of his head was missing. It hadn't been shot off but chopped clean. He had a look on his face like "Now this is certainly a surprise."

His hand was on the gun in his holster. His legs were stretched out and his ankles were crossed.

"There's more," Brett said.

We looked into the bathroom off the bedroom. The tub was full of water and the water was full of dead cats, un-chopped.

"What if this fucker is still in the house?" Leonard said.

There was a creepy ticktock moment as time took a vacation. I felt chill bumps pop up all over.

"Perhaps we should step outside," Brett said, pulling the ASP from her purse and snapping it out to its full length.

We cautiously made our way out of the house, stopped outside, and leaned on the Prius. Took in some air that wasn't filled with blood. Still, the smell inside had given me a coppery taste on my tongue and I felt as if the stink of it had been poured over me out of a slop jar.

"What the hell is Sheriff Crank doing here?" I said.

"That is the question, brother," Leonard said.

"And a more important question," Brett said. "Why are they chopped up? And what's with the cats that aren't chopped up?"

"We could just leave," I said.

"Surely some neighbor has seen us," Brett said. "They identify the car, that will make it look worse for us. We have to call it in."

Leonard called 911.

I called Justin directly.

We waited. No one with an ax or a sword came out of the house. The killer could still be in there, but those dirty boot marks on the back fence suggested otherwise. Still, way those bodies looked, there might have been more than one, and maybe they all didn't go over the wall, and one of the killers was in fact hiding in the house. Thought of that made my skin crawl again.

Justin showed up with a crew of folks. Some of those folks were Nacogdoches law. Justin was out of his jurisdiction still, but he came when I called. He could help the Nacogdoches cops, as he had some experience with this case. It all had to be connected, right?

He came over and looked at us. Brett collapsed the baton and put it in her coat pocket.

Justin watched her do this, then said, “You assholes armed?”

“What, us?” I said.

Justin gave Brett the side-eye. “I saw you close your weapon,” he said. “I was going to let it go, but I better not. Give it to me.”

Brett took it from her pocket and handed it to him. He pulled on a disposable glove.

“All right, what kind of messy bullshit have you people stepped into, and why?”

I told him. After all, Doolin was my client and coming here had been in service to that.

“That’s just swell,” he said. “And now you’ve messed up the crime scene. I could have you arrested for that. Breaking and entering too. Nacogdoches cops would gladly clap your asses in their jail. I hear it’s very nice.”

“Door wasn’t locked, was partially open, and I had a feeling something was wrong.”

“A feeling?” he said.

“Call it experience,” I said. “And a smell like a slaughterhouse.”

“That’s wonderful,” Justin said. “You three find bodies easier than flies.”

“Buzz-buzz,” Leonard said.

“That sounded a lot like the carpenter fairies,” I said.

“No,” Leonard said. “It’s a smaller buzz, but similar.”

31

We spent a lot of time at the Nacogdoches police station, through the day and into the night. We had plenty of experience with police stations, but at least the Nacogdoches one was arranged different.

As for the LaBorde station, I felt we frequented it enough, we ought to have had our own chairs with our names on them and our favorite snacks on hand.

I don't remember how many times they separated us and had us tell our stories, always saying to each of us that the others had told a different story.

We knew better than that. Standard cop trick.

Justin and the Nacogdoches cops conferred with one another. I could see them through the open door standing in the hallway talking. It might have been a stunt to make me nervous.

They left me alone so long one time, I got on the table and took a nap. It wasn't a good nap, but it was a nap. It might have been better had they not awakened me so soon after I fell asleep and made me get off the table.

When they let us go, the sun was coming up. I thought it looked sort of tired, like it might want to sleep in and have breakfast in bed.

Outside the station, Justin followed us and took time for some more mean words and insults. Leonard said, "Let us know if you find anything so we can solve it for you."

"Fuck you, smart-ass," Justin said.

"All of me is smart, not just the ass."

We got out of there without Leonard getting us pulled back in for a long day behind bars. They even gave Brett her ASP back. I didn't think those things were legal, but I didn't bring that up. I mean, hell, you could walk around with a machine gun, but an ASP, maybe not.

As Leonard drove me and Brett home, he said, "Call me a curious guy. I was thinking this was about a simple bunch of tweakers, but with what we found today, I'm not so sure. And I got to figure, something like this, with you being old and dilapidated, Hap, old buddy, you might need me to save your ass."

"What about me?" Brett said.

"Not worried about you," Leonard said.

“Oh,” Brett said. “Well, okay. That sounds right.”

32

That afternoon, as I sat at the kitchen table talking to Brett, wondering what was next, some of it got answered for me. My phone buzzed. It was Doolin.

"It's him," I mouthed to Brett. "Where are you, man?" I asked.

"I'd rather not say." He sounded as if he had a gun to his head.

"One thing you better well say is what this is really about. You better say that for sure. You hired me to find out if someone is after you, and you already know there is. Got to be more to it. And Elda. Hell, man, you knew Elda. You were married to her sister."

"You found Elda?"

"Yeah."

"I see," he said.

I tried to decide if he was being coy or just stupid. Maybe he was a bit of both.

I told him what had happened, what me and Brett and Leonard had found.

He turned as quiet as a stuffed and mounted parakeet. I looked at Brett, who was waiting for me to tell her the results of the call. I wanted to put it on speaker but thought that might scare Doolin off. A moth in a jar beating its wings might scare him off.

It took a while, but he finally spoke.

"Elda is dead?"

"Got to figure she's not coming back from that," I said. "So, yes. Dead. You better have something you can tell me. More than you have, or you can come by and collect your thousand. Fact is, I prefer you do that and leave me out of this business, whatever it is. It seems to involve people dying. And don't give me that line about 'I was trying to help my sack-of-shit cousins.' I don't think you'd help an old lady across the street if she offered to blow you."

"What does the old lady look like?" Doolin said.

"Fuck you."

"I don't want my money back."

"Then you better bark like a big dog, buddy."

"What I tell you, I'd like to know you'll keep it close to your chest."

I had already mentioned him to Justin at Elda's house. But fuck him.

"Depends on what you tell me. I'm not making you any promises. Not one at all. I'll say this, I'll do my best to be quiet about it if I feel I can. Best I can offer. Looks bad for me, I'll blab until they have to gag and sedate me."

He gave me the stuffed-parakeet routine again.

Brett reached out and patted my hand. She knew I wasn't particularly patient. Getting better as I aged, but no one was going to confuse me for the Buddha on a meditation retreat.

"Look, man," I said. "Tell me something or get the fuck off the phone. I got laundry to sort."

He took a while to answer. "Can we meet at your office tonight?"

"We can."

"I can sneak better at night."

"Sneak there just after dark. I'll be waiting. I advise you to use throwaway phones if you really think some bad folks are following you. But you do you."

When I hung up, Brett said, "I'll be there too."

"He sounded odd," I said. "Almost like someone was feeding him lines."

"Think so?"

"Not sure."

I called Leonard, told him what Doolin had said.

"I wouldn't trust him."

"I don't. Why I called you."

"I'll be outside the office waitin in case it looks wrong. I can park out back, then walk around to the side, hide behind the edge of the building. I'll be carrying a gun. You might want to do the same."

"Bet Doolin parks out back," I said. "Maybe you should park down the street and walk up. Otherwise he'll see your truck, and he's seen it before. He's seen you."

"Better plan, for sure. Hey, y'all have any vanilla cookies around? Pookie, that cocksucker, ate mine. The wedding might be off."

"I'll bring some," I said.

33

The wind was still and the night was sliding down softly when me and Brett started out. She had her ASP. I had a .32 revolver in my coat pocket. It was too warm for a coat, but I often wore a light one because it gave me extra pockets. I had a box of vanilla wafers with me.

We arrived when it was solid dark. There was no one that we could see. If the night had been any more still, we'd have been in an oil painting. The parking lot had enough lights to make me feel a little secure.

A little.

We got out of the car and I led upstairs, Brett holding the box of cookies. I slipped the .32 snub-nosed revolver from my pocket, hoping I wouldn't have to shoot anyone, but if I had to, I was kind of hoping it would be Doolin.

I didn't see Leonard anywhere, but that didn't mean he wasn't around. Maybe out behind the dumpster near the bottom of the stairs. He was reasonably stealthy if he didn't trip over something.

I climbed up and checked the doorknob. Locked. Of course, but if someone were really sneaky, he could have picked the lock, gone inside, locked it back with the push lock. He could be sitting on our couch with a shotgun or maybe even a small antiaircraft gun.

I unlocked the door, put out my hand to hold Brett back, pushed the door. It swung into the dark. I flipped on the light.

Nothing.

All right, then.

We slipped inside and Brett closed and locked the door. I looked in the bathroom and the closet. Nothing there other than what should be there. I made a mental note to put another roll of toilet paper in the bathroom, as that one was looking low. When I was nervous, worried, or scared, my mind picked up minutiae, like needing toilet paper, and there wasn't a thing I could do about it.

"Do you really think Doolin might be up to something?" Brett said.

"He could be."

I was thinking about how he sounded on the phone. Trying to pass a few cute lines but sounding as if the lines were bumping over potholes.

I turned on the desk lamp and turned off the overhead, eased to the curtains, pushed one of them aside. I rolled the blinds open. Nice well-lit parking lot with one car in it. Ours.

I looked left and right. If there was anyone out there, they were ghosts. I pulled the curtains closed.

We sat on the couch. I looked at my watch. Still early.

While we waited upstairs, Leonard could be wrestling a racoon in the parking lot. Fighting a possum for something from the dumpster. Maybe he was peeing into the hedges that separated us from an apartment complex.

Beneath us was an empty store that for a long time had been a bicycle shop owned by a lady who wore very short blue jean shorts most of the time and looked good in them.

She eventually sold out. Several businesses had passed through that space without sticking anywhere near as long as the bicycle shop. I wondered if jean-shorts lady had opened another shop. Or had she gone into high finance? Maybe she was married with a kid now. Maybe she had moved to Arizona. I hoped she still had her blue-jean shorts and they fit her.

All of this was something to play around in my mind while we waited. I heard the slight noise of a motor. We slipped over to the window and I looked out one side while Brett looked out the other. There was a car parked beside ours. It was baby-shit yellow. The lights from the parking lot were bright enough for me to see it could use a full run-through at the car wash.

A white Ford van hummed into the lot and parked behind it. A young woman got out of the baby-shit yellow car and walked out to meet the van.

Three young women, athletic in a shot-put-tossing kind of way, got out of the van. They were all wearing dark jeans, T-shirts, and sneakers. They had their hair pulled back and had black greasepaint stripes on their faces. They were heading toward the stairs. Two were carrying hatchets, one an ax. I doubted they were freelance volunteer firewomen.

We could hear them coming up the steps. Then there was a pause; I could almost feel their weight on the stairs. Brett and I moved to stand in front of the couch.

Someone knocked politely.

I looked at Brett and shook my head.

“Of course not, they have axes,” she said.

There was a tremendous sound as something hit the door, then we heard the stairs shake. They were rushing back down. I peeled back the curtain, looked out the window. The women were getting in the van. The one that had had the ax no longer had it.

The Ford van went away, gliding as slick as if it were sliding on greased Teflon.

I opened the door. The big ax was stuck in it. There was a note between the blade of the ax and the door. I pulled the note loose. The parking-lot lights let me see it clearly.

It read: *It's best to leave this one alone.*

My cell rang. It was Leonard.

"Had my eye on them," he said. "I'm back in my truck, following them now. You brought the cookies?"

"Yes. Stay focused. They looked like they meant business, so be careful."

"Don't forget to take the cookies home with you. I'll be looking for a reward for finding out where they're going. I'll meet you at your house. Maybe you could make sure you have milk. Know what I'm saying?"

"Yeah," I said. "You want cookies and milk."

"My man," Leonard said.

34

We took a peek in the baby-shit yellow car. The back seat had a naked body on it. It was chopped into chunky pieces and they had loosely been put back into position, as if about to be sew together. The body was on top of several black trash bags. Blood had run down the side of the bags and onto the floorboards. The car smelled like a butcher shop.

There was enough left of one side of the body's face to tell it was Doolin. His dick was in his mouth; his balls dangled on his chin. His body was so gory, I didn't realize at first that his skin was missing. There were a few rags of flesh still hanging off him, like poorly stripped wallpaper. I would have hated to be the lady who drove that car, way it smelled. I think I would have called in that I had a headache, maybe gout. Told them my driver's license had expired. Anything to stay out of that car.

Of course, driving that car beat being Doolin.

"I guess we get to keep the thousand," Brett said.

"Guess so."

We called Justin. He came out himself with none other than Pookie. Pookie was in plain clothes, as his new detective position warranted. He nodded at us.

"There's a body in the car," I told Justin as he walked up, hands in his pockets.

"Ah, my body magnets. So good to see you."

He and Pookie looked in the car. Justin said, "Friend of yours?"

"You know him," I said.

Justin pulled on gloves, opened the back door on the passenger's side, leaned in, scrunched up his nose, and studied the face in the parking lot's lights.

"Oh," he said. "Cowboy Doolin, mostly peeled with a mouthful of his own dick. Very Deep Throat."

"Yep."

"Someone killed him and just happened to leave him and his dick in the parking lot next to your car?" Justin said.

"Not exactly."

We told him why we were there. I didn't hide anything. I told him

I'd thought I was meeting with Doolin. But most likely the Hatchet Girls had arranged it, had found Doolin, had him call and ask me to come to the office so they could warn me off things. Maybe they meant to kill me, but the locked door gave them a bit of pause. Of course, before they arrived, they had trimmed Doolin up a bit. I told Justin there was an ax in the door and a note if he'd like to look at it.

By this time, other law and secondary help had arrived. They were carefully removing the body and placing it in a meat wagon while others hooked Doolin's car to a wrecker. A lot of photos were taken.

The four of us went up to our office. Me and Brett sat on the couch. Pookie stood nearby, hands clasped in front of him. Justin sat on a corner of the desk, legs crossed, showing us a well-polished shoe sole. He took our official statement. We told him the same thing we told him in the parking lot. He recorded us this time, with our permission.

Justin didn't bother to take us in for questioning. He'd had enough of that.

Not for a moment did I think Justin thought we killed Doolin. He might have thought we knew more than we did, but us murdering Doolin, putting his chopped-up body in the back seat of his car, then calling the law seemed unlikely.

"Just go home," Justin said. "If you decide to move out of state, that would be nice."

Justin went out. He took the ax and the note with him.

Pookie followed. He paused at the door, looked back, and nodded. I gave him a little wave, said, "Leonard isn't here," and let it go at that.

Brett and I sat for a moment and stared at each other. I don't know if we were confused or relieved or what.

We locked up and went downstairs, watching carefully for women with hatchets. Brett had her ASP extended and ready to go. I had my hand on the revolver in my pocket.

Nothing, thank goodness.

35

Me and Brett were sitting up half-assed watching a television show, worried about Leonard, waiting to hear from him, when he called. He sounded a little shaky. Said he was almost to our house, and if we were minus pants, we might want to put some on. We had pants on.

I felt relieved. I couldn't have told you what we had been watching on TV if my life depended on it. I was so deep in worry for what the hatchet ladies might do to Leonard should they catch him, I couldn't concentrate on much. But perhaps I should have been worried about them.

I turned off the TV and moved into the kitchen. I had Leonard's box of vanilla cookies out. Brett made hot chocolate and put our cups on the table an instant before Leonard arrived. We had milk too if he still wanted that.

When he came in, his head was bloody, as were his shoulders. The blood had soaked into his clothes. He was walking all right, but damn.

"What happened to you?" Brett said.

"Girls with hatchets. Turns out there were more than three. There were five. Now they are back to three."

"Sit down," I said. I told him about us finding Doolin in the back seat of his car, skinned and chopped up.

"That's some gory shit," Leonard said.

Brett got a hand towel and a bottle of alcohol and used them to clean a wound on his face. He had a thin cut from the bottom of his ear down to his chin. His shoulder was bleeding. Brett put the towel under his shirt and pressed against the wound.

"That's pretty deep," Brett said.

Leonard said, "Yep. Feels that way."

As he ate cookies and sipped hot chocolate, Brett, without saying a word, cut his shirt off of him with scissors, removed the formerly white but now red towel, and looked at the wound. Once upon a time she had worked as a nurse.

"It's a mess," she said.

"Packed some mud on it to help stop the bleeding. Makes it look worse than it really is."

She cleaned the wound with water, then alcohol. Leonard took no notice of it, having his true love at hand—vanilla wafers.

"You need to go to the hospital," Brett said. "I've done all I can do with what I have."

"That might be a bad idea," Leonard said. "How do I explain this wound?"

"Freelance lumberjack thought you were a tree?" I said.

"Don't see that flying," he said.

"You didn't do anything wrong," I said. "You followed them. You are a private detective sometimes, and we wanted to know who was coming to see us. You followed and were attacked. That flies fine."

Leonard sat silent for a moment. Then: "There's a bit more than following to it. If you go out along Highway Seven, take a turn at Seven-Two-Four, go down that road a good bit, and on the left, there's a barn and an old house. There's a cattle guard and a pasture full of dead coastal hay. Behind the barn is a water drain. A ditch, essentially. One of the Hatchet Girls is lying there with a gunshot wound in the head. I was aiming for her chest, but either way, it worked out. I go to the hospital, Justin starts nosing around, finds out I shot her with an unregistered gun, things could get sticky, even if it was self-defense. He might be fine with it in the long run, and then again, maybe not."

"I don't know they care one way or the other about registered or unregistered guns these days," I said.

Somehow what he said about leaving one in a ditch hadn't fully registered until a heartbeat later. I was too deep in worry about that shoulder wound.

"Had to. Wanted to. Would do it again. Listen, Jim Bob's veterinarian, one that works off the books, isn't far from here. You remember, we used him before. You know the one I mean. Place smells like a tobacco barn. I think I'm going to need him. I'm feeling a little weak, even though I'm sustaining my magnificent body with vanilla cookies. Vanilla heals wounds."

"I don't think so," Brett said.

I stepped over and looked at Leonard's wound. I couldn't tell if it was as bad as I first thought or worse. Even though Brett had cleaned it, there were still mud chunks in the wound.

"At least you stopped bleeding, but it still looks messy," I said.

"I can do only so much with a damp towel," Brett said.

"You did fine," Leonard said, "and I appreciate it."

"How did you end up being a chopping block?" I asked.

"Those bitches outsmarted me. I followed them and thought I had them figured out. Reckoned I'd find where they hung out, then we'd have their location known. But it was me that got snookerflaugened."

"What the hell is snookerflaugened?" Brett said.

“German word for messing up,” Leonard said.

“You just made that up,” I said. “Only word you know in German is ‘bratwurst.’”

“Maybe, but its meaning is clear. They turned the tables on me.”

“Hold that story,” Brett said. “We need to call that vet. You’ve started bleeding again.”

He had indeed.

“It’s beginning to smart a mite since the adrenaline wore off. Besides the one I shot, I hit one of them so hard, I knocked her through a door and into another room. Small woman. Lost some teeth. I felt bad about it for about three seconds. She was the bitch that chopped me. Frankly, I wouldn’t have cared if she was eight years old, weighed twenty pounds soaking wet, was in leg braces, and had to stand on a stool to hack me. I hope I hit her so hard they have to replace not only her teeth but her face and buy her a new personality.”

I called the vet. He coughed for a while before he said yes, he was Flannagan. I told him who gave us his home number, which was Jim Bob. He said it would cost us.

Of course it would. Everything did.

36

When we heard the car come up, I went to the door and held it open. Flannagan came out of his car with a cigarette dangling from his mouth, coughing a little. He was carrying a black bag like an old-time doctor. He was nearly bald, bony, and slumped. He walked like he had rocks in his shoes. He had a face like fifty miles of bad road that ended at a bomb crater.

Just before coming through, he thumped his cigarette into the dirt. He flowed into the house like a wraith. He smelled strongly of tobacco and slightly of alcohol—and I don't mean the rubbing kind.

He went over and glanced at Leonard's wound. "Uh-huh," he said. He washed his hands at the sink and set the doctor's bag on the table.

"Had a German shepherd with a bad cut not too unlike this. Got in a dogfight. Damn Chihuahua was relentless. Shepherd got hold of that bastard by the ear, but that little dog just shook like a maraca, landed on its feet, and attacked again. Shepherd was traumatized. I bet he never had another day when he could hold his head up. A big rat whipped his ass. Let's see. Ax wound, right?"

"You got good eyes," Leonard said.

"Lots of experience."

"Wait," I said. "So you're saying the big dog had an ax wound on account of the Chihuahua used an ax on him?"

"That's some funny shit," Leonard said.

Flannagan said: "I've seen real ax wounds. Humans aren't exactly my prime example for who should survive a nuclear war. Dogs and cats should rule the world. Well, dogs. Cats are a bit too pragmatic. I've seen some nasty stuff humans do. Once sewed the head back on a poodle. I mean, it was still attached and the throat was good, but I had to do a lot of work. That was an ax wound. His master did that on account of the dog crapped on his new carpet. Took it outside, tried to chop its head off. Jim Bob knew the guy in passing, was coming to his house to get back his lawn mower the guy had borrowed. Jim Bob seen what was happening, took the ax from the guy, beat him like he was the French army, saved the dog, got him to me just in time. He was so pissed off, he went back to the guy's house, kicked in the door, and beat him again. The law was not called.

"When it was over, Jim Bob could say, 'Hop like a frog,' and that asshole would have said, 'How high, master?' Guy wasn't going to be calling any cops or borrowing Jim Bob's lawn mower again. When Jim Bob got the mower, he started it up and mowed down the fellow's flower bed. Said the guy just stood at the window and watched him like he had hired him to do it.

"Found a home for the dog. Dog lived another ten years, just couldn't look over its shoulder on the left side. Needed a wing mirror."

"Am I going to need a wing mirror?" Leonard asked.

"No, but you're going to be sore as all get-out for a while."

"I heal fast," Leonard said.

"Then you got that on your side," Flannagan said. "You put this mud in the wound?"

"Did."

"Not a smart idea. I'm going to need to clean you up really good before anything else. Strong enough to take a shower?"

"Strong enough to tell King Kong to wipe my ass and make sure the job was done," Leonard said.

"Go shower. Use warm water and soap."

"I'll find you a shirt and pants," I said, "though they won't fit so good."

When Leonard came out, Flannagan was telling us about the time a fellow brought in a puppy he'd found and wanted to keep it. Turned out to be a little bear cub. It survived and ended up in the zoo, which was better than in that guy's bedroom, him trying to teach it to sit and play fetch.

"At first and second glance," Flannagan said, "it did look like a dog. Shit, even I was fooled for a while."

Leonard had on a pair of my sweatpants, which fit better than I'd expected, but he had yet to put the shirt on. He was barefoot. The doctor had him sit, then went back at the shoulder. He gave him a shot to numb the area and started sewing Leonard up. Brett and I found something to do in the living room. I hate seeing people sewed up. I once sewed myself up, but that doesn't mean I liked it. I did what I had to do.

The doctor was there another hour or so, making sure all seemed good. When he had Leonard sewn up and bandaged, he gave him a couple of pills, then sat and drank a cup of coffee I made for him. By this time Leonard had on my shirt and we were all sitting at the table. The doctor helped himself to some of Leonard's cookies. I could see a dark cloud move over Leonard's face.

I said, "So, Doc, how much do we owe you?"

"Call it a thousand."

“How about we call it five hundred and that cup of coffee.”

“I’m working illegally. I’m not even a human doctor. I could do jail time for this, lose my vet license. I’m also leaving him some pain pills. They aren’t cheap. I have a feeling you boys might need me again. I get that feeling from knowing Jim Bob. I got you on my list. You’re on my list, I show up when you need me. One thousand smackers.”

He left with eight hundred smackers. I keep some bills stashed in the cookie jar for just such emergencies.

Me and Brett wanted the rest of Leonard’s story, but the pills Flannagan had given him were starting to kick in. We waltzed him to the couch. He went to sleep almost immediately. Brett put a blanket over him.

I called Pookie. I told him what we’d learned, knowing it wasn’t going to go to Justin.

“I’ll come get him,” Pookie said.

“If you like, but he’s fine here.”

“Except for getting chopped in the shoulder with a hatchet.”

“There’s that. My advice, it’s late, let him sleep. He’s had some pills and is out like a light. Can you come get him in the morning?”

“After ten, I can. I have to look at a wedding venue at eight. I’m off work tomorrow.”

“I’ll watch over him.”

“I know you will. Give him a kiss for me.”

“Not happening.”

37

It was closer to ten thirty the next morning when Pookie arrived. He brought with him a very large, unhealthy box of doughnuts.

Leonard had gotten up before we did. He was sitting at the table. The box of vanilla cookies was gone. He either ate all of them or tucked them away somewhere. Maybe in his pickup. Vanilla cookies were definitely his kryptonite. Dr Pepper was a close second. I like both, but not together.

Pookie put the doughnuts on the table, gave Leonard a kiss. "You had me worried. But you look like the same asshole as always."

"I assure you, I am, and I have the same asshole you know in the same place."

"Oh, a queer joke," Pookie said. "Very good, Leonard. Snap."

We ate some doughnuts and Leonard told us in greater detail what had happened to him.

"I was peeking out from behind a dumpster, swatting at flies and mosquitoes. I was starting to consider changing positions, then I saw the women with hatchets show up, go upstairs, then I saw them running back down the stairs toward their car. I ran to my truck. Had it parked down the street a ways. I drove in the direction they had gone and pretty soon caught up with them.

"They went out of LaBorde on Highway Seven. They turned right at a blinking yellow light and rode along on that road for a while. Took a left off the road, across a cattle guard, toward a barn about the size of the one here. A few weak lights came on in a couple of windows.

"Being sneaky, I stopped outside the pasture and watched as they drove their van behind the barn. I got my pistol and walked from there. It was a pretty good hike. I wanted to know what kind of setup they had.

"When I got to the edge of the barn, I peeked around the corner and a hatchet came whizzing toward me. Jerked my head back enough it missed. Just barely. They had been onto me all along.

"Looked back around the corner of the barn. The girl threw the ax, black girl with dreads, pulled a pistol from her belt, shot at me as I was moving toward her. She missed. I didn't. She rolled in front of their van, down a hill, and into a ditch.

"The door at the back of the barn was open. I looked in. The place had been fixed up with rooms. Someone had turned it into a rough home. I slipped inside. That's when Miss Chops a Lot came out of the shadows yelling. She hit me in the shoulder with the hatchet. She was a solid girl with enough meat on her to generate a solid strike. I almost went to the floor but somehow kept my footing. I like to think the reason was my extreme manliness.

"I hit her with a left, knocked her so hard against a closed door, it came off the hinges. She went tumbling into the other room. I was going to shoot her but paused when I saw she was out and her nose was on her cheek. I stepped inside the room, saw an open door that led outside.

"When I turned around, the one I'd hit was being pulled away by her feet. I couldn't see who had her, just saw her pulled around the corner. I fired a shot for the hell of it, hit the wall by the door. I heard some scuffling in the other room. Fired another shot so they didn't think I was napping.

"I waited a few moments, watching to see if a head poked back in. It didn't. Made my way to the open door where I had come in. They were in the van, blew by me on their way out. An older lady was driving. Not real old, but older than the girls. Can't say as I got a really good look at her.

"By the time I pulled myself together, I wasn't feeling so good. I walked down to the ditch and saw they hadn't found the one I shot. She lay facedown in shallow water. Her dreads were spread out and floating around her head. I got over close, used my phone light. My shot had gone out the back of her head, made a hole I could have put my fist through. I didn't roll her over, but she looked really young, early twenties maybe.

"I scooped a handful of mud, put it in my wound, walked down to my truck, and came here.

"For the record, I don't think that old barn was where they were staying. I didn't see much in the way of furniture or goods. But there was electricity. I figured the barn was a place they knew, lured me there to kill me. But they didn't know what a badass I am."

38

Poor baby,” Pookie said.

“Am I going to get some sympathy loving later?” Leonard asked.

“Absolutely,” Pookie said. “After you shower and use a lot of soap.”

“Since you didn’t get a good look at the inside of the place,” I said, “I think I should drive out there and check it over.”

“Probably safe now,” Leonard said, “but they could come back. I’m going with you.”

“You’re bandaged up,” I said.

“Hap’s right,” Pookie said. “You should give it a rest.”

“Does that sound like me?” Leonard said.

“No,” Pookie said. “But it might be time for it to start sounding like you. Time to start resting more.”

“Don’t play the old-man card on me. I can still fight and fuck and eat cookies all night if I took a mind to do it. I’d just be a little more tired come morning.”

Pookie knew he was defeated. He said, “Hap, watch over him.”

“I will,” I said.

“I’m going too,” Brett said.

“I’d go,” Pookie said, “but as a cop, if I was found out, I could end up with my dick in a vise. I’m better being your eyes and ears in the department. I’ll see if there’s anything on these Hatchet Girls.”

“That would be nice,” I said. “I’m still trying to figure out why Elda and Sheriff Crank were killed. The Hatchet Girls seem responsible, but the question is why. And who was the older lady you saw, Leonard?”

“Damn sure wasn’t Mother Teresa risen from the grave,” he said.

“Girl Scout leader?” Pookie said.

“Hell of a night they had if they were selling cookies,” Brett said.

39

Brett bounced the car over the cattle guard and drove up behind the place. No vans were present.

It was windy. Shingles flapped in the wind like gossiping tongues. Boards squeaked. The back door was open.

“Let’s check for the body,” Leonard said.

We made our way to the ditch and looked. No body. But there was an imprint in the mud where someone had lain and drag marks from where they had been hauled up the hill.

“They came back for her,” Leonard said. “Points for loyalty.”

“Here,” Brett said, and handed us each a pair of disposable gloves. We put them on, then we put on paper footies. She had come prepared. “And we should wipe down any places you think you touched, Leonard.”

Inside the house, sunlight slipped through gaps in the boards and decorated the floor with strips of gold. Dust floated about. I had to clear a spiderweb out of my hair.

Leonard stood by the entrance, said, “This is where that girl put the hatchet to me.”

“We can put up a shrine on that spot,” I said.

“Would you?” Leonard said.

We looked where Leonard had knocked the Hatchet Girl against the door. It was a goodly distance. The door he had punched her through lay on the floor. There were a couple of teeth and some blood on the flattened door.

We split up to check out the rest of the place. Leonard used a wipe Brett had given him to clean all the areas he thought he had touched.

Brett called to us from another room. Me and Leonard found her in a bedroom that had nothing but a bed frame. One of the walls was gouged with gashes and splinters.

“They’ve been practicing against the wall,” Brett said. “Throwing hatchets.”

I looked into the next room, the kitchen. The sink was full of empty Red Circle cigarette packs and cigarette butts. I leaned over and studied the cigarette packs. Same as the one I had found on the bank of the Trinity River, near where the burned bodies of the Planter family were found. That's what I call a clue. I told Brett and Leonard.

"Maybe they just smoke the same brand," Brett said. "Though it is a pretty big coincidence."

"It's a rare brand," I said.

In another room there was a cardboard box with a half a dozen hatchets in it. There were also a few skinning knives and a meat cleaver. They were crusted with blood.

There was a plank table off to the side of the room, near a window. The table was glazed with dried blood. The blood was decorated with large bluebottle flies. They rested and buzzed on the gore and on the blood-spattered wall, which looked like a Jackson Pollock painting. The room smelled like a dead armadillo rotting in the deep woods. There was a pile of clothes at one end of the table, some nice boots, and Doolin's once nice hat. Now it was dappled with blood.

"They killed him here," Brett said.

"Deep-tissue massage gone wrong," Leonard said.

"There's a strip of skin nailed to the wall," I said and pointed to it.

A long ribbon of fly-covered skin. It looked to have been stripped from hip to foot. That had to hurt. They might have nailed it there for him to see. What were they after? Information or just a bit of entertainment?

I looked a little closer. At the end of the skin was a pinkie toe. In a cardboard box near the wall there were more strips of skin and half a face that had been peeled off Doolin's skull.

"Shit," I said, and they came and looked.

"Shit indeed," Leonard said.

"I don't think they were living here," Brett said. "But I think they came here from time to time. Maybe just to throw hatchets and cut Doolin up. We should see who owns this land. That might reveal something, give us some kind of connection."

"Good idea," I said.

We checked the place out a little more, but there was nothing else to be found. We didn't call Justin. We didn't call anyone. We went outside and took off our gloves, and Brett took them all and slipped them into a plastic baggie. A few flies followed us around just to stay friendly.

As we climbed into the car, we remained quiet. My right hand was shaking a little. I was nauseous. Whenever I thought I had seen the worst humans could do, there was always something to top it. The torture—it could have taken hours if they wanted to be slow about it.

Even someone who deserved killing ought to go quickly. Not stripped and chopped and humiliated.

Did they talk to him while they mutilated him? Did they laugh?

Certainly if he wasn't gagged, he must have screamed. His body in our parking lot, that ax and note in the door, they were letting us know what happened to him could happen to us.

That was an ugly thing to consider.

I could have let it go. I had Doolin's money. Leonard was hurt. And we had been given a severe warning. It could be a threat worth heeding. We could duck out of this without guilt.

Then again, you have a client and someone kills him and in such a horrible manner, you ought to do something about it. You ought to at least know why he died.

As Brett drove us away, I rolled down my window and let the outside air fill the car. As we moved along, the wind hit my face and I breathed it in deep. It helped. Under the circumstances it was better for my stomach than the air-conditioning.

40

When we were home, I pulled one of our toss-away phones from a drawer and called Justin's number. I put my hand over my mouth and said where the barn was and how bloody it was and said he should have a look. I didn't give my name, of course. I was talking in a gruff voice behind my hand. I was one sneaky son of a bitch.

Justin said, "Hap, you got a cold?"

"Goddamn it," I said.

"I think I better come see you after I look in that barn. What the fuck, man? You've found more dead bodies than the population of Rhode Island."

I dropped the false voice and said, "I thought I did a good voice. I didn't think I sounded like me."

"You were almost good, but then again, I gave you my private number. Few people have it. Fewer sound like you with a pound of shit in their mouth. Where are you?"

"Home."

"Go to your office and sit there, and after I have a look at the address you gave me, I'll come see you."

"All right."

Leonard and Brett were standing near me.

"And the master of voice impressions shows off his skills, and we are not impressed," Leonard said.

"Told you it was a bad idea," Brett said.

We went to the office, ordered pizza for a late lunch, and waited on it and Justin. The pizza came first. It was a little like cardboard coated in ketchup, and the melted cheese was so greasy, if you turned the pizza too fast, it would slide off the crust.

It was quite a while before Justin showed. Pookie wasn't with him this time. Some other cop was; he looked like he had just graduated from kindergarten and had been given bigger pencils.

Justin sat on the couch. The cop stood.

"This is Officer Tom Weller," Justin said. "We looked at the barn, house, whatever it is. I'm going to make a leap here and say the skin on the wall and in the box belongs to Doolin. I know that was his hat and clothes."

"That's why you're chief," I said. "Your ability to find out things after we tell you."

"Don't push it," Justin said. "I could run you in for hours, lock you in a cell for going over to that place. Tramping around in a crime scene."

"We wore gloves," Brett said.

Justin didn't appear impressed.

We didn't mention that Leonard had killed a Hatchet Girl the night before and given another a punch so hard, she might have to drink her meals through a straw. Neither did we mention he had a wound and was probably in more pain than he let on.

"Once upon a time," Justin said, "I let you guys run a little wild because you could do what I couldn't. Meaning you could be a little illegal. I could give you some more room again."

He waited for us to be impressed and relieved.

Justin said, "What if I tell you some things you don't know, and you look into those things in your inimitable way?"

"I'm thinking we might want to be out of this one," I said. "Bodies keep showing up. Next time it might be ours."

Justin nodded. "Tom, will you go out to the car for a bit?"

"Yes indeed," Tom said, and away he went, not wanting to be in on what could be an illegal conversation.

When Tom was gone, I looked at Justin. "All right."

"The dead lady in the house, one on the bed with Crank in the closet—it wasn't Elda."

"You messing with us?" Leonard said.

"Nope," Justin said.

"All right," I said. "I'll bite. Who was she?"

"Doolin's ex-wife."

"Wait," Leonard said. "How many ex-wives did he have? One jumped off a scenic overlook."

"After you told me that, I looked into it. Someone did jump from there, but it wasn't his ex-wife. It was a downhearted woman named Ellen May who found out she had six months to live. Turned out later, the doctor had been looking at the wrong chart. It wasn't hers. She was healthy as a mongoose."

"Did she have a small blue glass elephant in her coat pocket?" I asked.

"She had a pocketful of blue glass is what she had," Justin said. "It was a nice detail you were told, but anyone could have gotten that off the news. Woman you talked to used that woman's tragedy to give you a story. The jumper had a thing for elephants. Her son had given her the elephant for Mother's Day when he was a child. She cherished it because he died young."

"That saddens it up," Brett said.

"Uh-huh," Justin said. "I know something else. Behind the barn there's a ditch. In that ditch are drag marks and blood. Like a body had been pulled from it. There's also a boot mark in the mud that fits those boots you're wearing, Leonard. Other shoe marks are down there. Some might even match your shoes, Hap. Yours too, Brett."

"You're just fishing," Leonard said.

"No, I'm not."

We were pretty sure by then he wasn't fishing.

"I could take those prints, put them into evidence. I could do that and tie them to you three, maybe prove your presence at the barn, for sure in that ditch where a body had been."

"I hate someone that actually passed the sergeants' test," Leonard said.

"I even have a college education," Justin said. "And, not to brag, just to lay out facts, I was number one in all my classes at the University of Texas."

"Can I see your diploma?" I said.

He smiled at me. It was the kind of grin a wolf gives a rabbit just before it bites the little bunny's throat out.

"I don't want you to quit this case. I want you to keep digging. I think, clumsy as you are, you can find out some things, because you tend to do that by sheer hardheadedness. You can keep pushing until you know enough to tell me something that matters, then you can drop out. Or I could put all these bodies you've found together and cause you trouble. Might not prove you did anything, but it would be time-consuming. Would make you three look bad."

"That sounds a whole lot like blackmail," Brett said.

"Ah, you're the smart one. But I'll deny it if I'm asked. I'll just say there's enough evidence out there to make me think you three did all this."

"Why would we do any of this?" I asked.

"I don't have your motive figured out yet, but I can make up something if I need to," Justin said, and he offered us the wolfy smile again. "I'll repeat this. Take note. Elda wasn't in the house. It wasn't an ex-wife of Doolin's that jumped off the scenic overlook. Where the hell is Elda, and what, if anything, does she have to do with this? Why was Doolin's ex-wife chopped up and left on the bed? What was Crank doing there? Find some answers to some of my questions and you stay loose and free, won't have to go through a circus where people think you did it. Even if it's proven you didn't, they don't remember that. Once you're branded, rightly or wrongly, it leaves a mark."

"Helping you out could get us killed," Brett said.

"That is a possibility," Justin said. "And I promise, that happens, I'll look into it."

He gave us his magazine-model smile, which was sweeter than the wolf smile.

I really hated that guy.

41

When Justin left, Brett said, “We don’t have to do a thing if we don’t want to. In spite of his threats.”

“I think what he knows about us is we don’t like to quit,” I said. “And if we solve a few things, he gets the gravy.”

“Just don’t like being bullied by a slick asshole,” Brett said. “But you’re right, we’re in, and we’ll stay in. It’s personal now.”

Back at our house, Pookie was waiting. A black cloud floated over him, rolling thunder, flashing lightning.

“Justin is a prick,” Pookie said, and kissed Leonard on the cheek. It was one of those rare times when Leonard looked vulnerable.

“We’re all in agreement,” I said.

“Tom, he told me Justin sent him outside while he talked to you, but Tom could already see the drift of the conversation. He didn’t like it, and I don’t like it.”

“We’re not exactly ecstatic,” Brett said.

“I’d like to see him fired,” Pookie said. “He’s sort of ignored me since he realized me and Leonard are getting married. He only wants me to know what he wants you to know.”

“So that’s why Tom was with him,” Brett said. “He’s your replacement.”

“That’s right,” Pookie said. “I get the shitty jobs. Domestic disturbances, that sort of thing. I was promoted to detective, but I’m doing rookie work. For the record, Tom, he’s all right, just green as grass. But not so green he wanted to be in on that conversation Justin had with y’all.”

“Justin wants us to do what he can’t, and that gives us a lot of latitude,” Leonard said. “We got him by the short hairs as much as he has us.”

“Only you three are more likely than him to be the ones that get killed,” Pookie said.

“It’s a crummy trade-off,” I said.

“Since I know you’re going to stick with this,” Pookie said, “I got some stuff for you. Police been on the Planters’ trail for a while. I pulled up some computer files and read them. Learned some of the major flies buzzing around the central shit pile. The sheriffs are a line of corruption; in that county, it's like a law enforcement tradition. They all get a bite of the cake the major criminal groups bake. Meth money especially. Money like that, there can be a lot of it, and the meth suppliers can spread it around for protection. Law enforcement there makes more money from payoffs than from their salary. If you aren't worth a shit, you're willing to play that game, and they pick and choose enablers, because that money trickles down to deputies, community officials, and so on."

"What about Crank?" Leonard said. "He in the same tradition?"

"Jury's still out, but word was he could be tough and maybe a bit more than tough. Before he was sheriff, he was known as that kind of deputy. Had a chip on his shoulder. I got that information from some cops used to work in the sheriff's department. They didn't like him much. Thought he might be taking graft. For all I know, they were taking graft too but didn't like him because he got a bigger chunk.

"But let me tell you about Elda. I did a deep dive on her, talked to some of her friends. I want you to appreciate the work I've done here. It's a series of suppers you owe me. Elda was popular in school, but everyone I talked to, about five former students who knew her, felt that behind the smile and helpfulness was a bitter woman just waiting to let her mean out. I found the students in an old yearbook I tapped into online. With them all being in the marching band with Elda, I believed they must have gotten to know each other a little. Another word was she was a bit self-righteous. She wasn't a musician. She was a baton-twirling expert. Fact was, give her anything she could twirl or juggle and she'd make a show of it. She did cool demonstrations at football halftimes. She was also a cowgirl. Did rodeo, popped whips, threw knives, and excelled at all of it. They said she was all right, but at times she was distant, 'like she was tuned into a radio station on Mars'—exact words of one of the female friends. She could have sudden bouts of anger when things weren't perfect.

"She went on to be a first-grade teacher in LaBorde for about fifteen years. She was the pride of her community. Always helping to do this or that, trying to set a good example. I tracked down a couple of the teachers who worked with her, both still teaching. One of them said Elda was a seeker of perfection, but she was also a bit strange, and the real reason she left teaching wasn't for a change of weather. A female student put gum in her chair, and it stuck to Elda's pantsuit. Elda found out who the kid was and paid two older boys she taught in another class—paid them quite well—to beat the shit out of the gum girl off school grounds and stick some well-chewed Dubble Bubble into her hair when they finished. They carried it pretty far, gave her a severe thrashing that landed her in the hospital. One of the boys felt bad about it, admitted it to his parents, and word got back to the school. They quietly fired Elda after she paid the little girl's parents some considerable money, which she had plenty of, as her husband had enough money from his oil business to buy a small country. Teacher told me that Elda was always certain she was certain and was all about good deeds and Christian living, at least verbally, but there was a hole in her moral wall and sometimes the real her leaked out of it and it was ugly to look at.

"Then Elda's husband died, shot himself in his office late at night. Was the only one in the place. Decorated the wall with brains and blood. And the daughter, Beth, didn't turn out the way an outside viewer would've expected. But considering who her mother really was, it might have been hell for her at home. And her father dying when she was a teenager, and by suicide, it had to affect the daughter, of course. Beth took to drugs like a fish takes to water. She had it so bad she was called Meth Beth. I got that from a couple of cops worked vice and murders back then. They work the couch and *Gunsmoke* reruns now.

"But the cops' thinking was the husband's arms had to be a lot longer to do what he did. It was thought he was shot from across the room, but nothing got proved, so it was ruled a suicide."

"Were they thinking Elda did it for the money, maybe blamed him for how things had turned out in her life? In Beth's?" I said.

Pookie said, "It was a suspicion. We cops always think the spouse did it because it usually is the spouse. Eventually, Beth was so hooked on the bad stuff, she sold herself into prostitution. Her reward for hauling older men's ashes was meth. She was one of several young women doing the same thing. By that point the women would have fucked a donkey and carried it back to the pasture on their backs for a big bump of the good stuff.

"Beth eventually had a clear moment, grew a conscience, got clean, and began informing on her suppliers to the sheriff's department. Her mom, Elda, despite their personal problems, was helping Beth do that, perhaps trying to make up for being a shitty parent. Whatever, good or bad parent, she loved her child. Sheriff's office had Beth listed as an informant, but I got a look at those files, and there wasn't anything there that seemed to be ace information. It was all general."

"Do you buy that?" Leonard asked.

"What I'm thinking is the information was getting a little too close to the sheriff at that time. Sheriff probably took some of it out. Could be he tells the bunch she runs with, bunch he's getting his kickbacks from, 'This bitch has to go.' What's certain is Beth's body turned up in a junkyard behind the wheel of a rusted Cadillac. They figured she had been dead for a couple of days before they found her. Cause of death: too much meth. But there were marks on her body that indicated she might have been held captive, although there wasn't enough to draw solid conclusions. Maybe she slipped back into her old lifestyle, let someone tie her up for a fetish fuck, then later crawled up in the car, took a big dose on purpose or by accident, and died. But why go to the trouble to screw in an old car in a junkyard and then overdose?

"Elda had a nervous breakdown after Beth's death. Bad one. She was already broken, and then that happened. She'd doted on her daughter, even though they had their issues. She always thought Beth was destined for great things. Elda had to be institutionalized for a while. When she came out, she was no longer about putting up a perfect front. She felt the community, law enforcement in particular, had failed Beth. There were three major players among the dope sellers Beth ran with, all men. Possibly the ones responsible for her death. Elda thought so. She told the law about them and where to find them. They lived out in the county. Sheriff's department didn't do a thing. Then the dealers turned up dead."

"Are you suggesting Elda did it?" Brett asked.

"Can't say, but she was asking a lot of questions, and people who knew her said she seemed to be hanging by a thread. After those three dealers were killed, all of them shot and ax-chopped, the sheriff decided whoever did it might also consider him part of the drug problem, which he was, so he retired and moved to Seattle. A new sheriff came in and it started all over again, the sheriff taking a bite of criminal rewards. He was Doolin's predecessor. I was told he had break-ins at his house, had his car vandalized, got threats in the form of dead animals. You'll like this: They were chopped up and put on his porch."

"Hard to believe Elda could have done such a thing," I said.

"Note her bathtub was full of dead cats," Leonard said. "She was ready to move on, so she got rid of them. Left someone else in her bed, Crank in the closet."

"Quiet, unassuming Lizzie Borden one sweet morning took an ax to her father and stepmother and made pudding of their heads," Pookie said. "So I'm going to say yes, she could have done any of it. One more piece of information. Elda's friend Sue Alice, one married to Doolin. She's the body in the house. Justin says she's Elda's sister."

"Justin told me that much," I said.

"Here's something you don't have," Pookie said. "Solid rumor is Sheriff Crank, when he was a deputy, had a fuck-buddy relationship with Doolin's wife before she was the ex-wife. It seems to have continued, and that just might explain why they were found together in the bedroom, chopped up like stew meat."

“But why would they be in Elda’s house?” Brett said. “And none of it explains where Elda is now or why she told Hap her friend jumped off a scenic overlook with a glass elephant in her pocket.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Pookie said. “I got a little bit more, though. Elda worked in a women’s shelter after Beth died. She had enough credentials for the job. Lots of girls came there, some of them dopers and forced hookers, others trying to escape domestic violence. Some of them were deeply disturbed by what they had been through. Lady runs the shelter told me Elda was close to the girls, that she served as a kind of den mother, confessor, and therapist for them. Elda left, and some of the girls went with her. Matron there said one of those girls, Marion, came back.”

“Interesting,” I said.

“The shelter is called the Holloway House and is in downtown LaBorde. That’s all I got, but I’m proud of myself. That’s quite a lot, isn’t it?”

“You been a busy little Pookie-boo, haven’t you,” Leonard said.

“You know I have,” Pookie said. “I wanted to help my little honey pup finish this case and start running his gym.”

I poked my finger in my open mouth and made a gagging sound.

“Ah, now, Sugar Bear,” Brett said, hugging on me. “Don’t be rude. Pookie and Lenny are being sweeties and it is so enormously precious. Especially that honey-pup part.”

I stuck my finger in mouth again.

“Fuck you, Sugar Bear,” Leonard said.

“Fuck you back, Honey Pup,” I said.

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Next morning was humid and bright, and me with a pistol under my shirttail and Brett with her ASP in her light lavender coat pocket went over to the Holloway House to speak to the matron there.

Honey Pup wasn't with us. He was at his gym, but we had plans to meet up later.

When we got there, I put the pistol in the glove box. Brett kept the ASP in her pocket.

Holloway House and its large front and backyard were wrapped around by a metal bar fence with a spear point at the top of each bar. There was a tall and impressively built gate made of interwoven twists of metal at the front of the house. It was a few feet from the street, and there was a call box next to it. The house was an enormous two stories with lots of windows upstairs and downstairs and the vibe of a bed-and-breakfast version of Hill House.

The porch that went around the house was wide and comfortable-looking with cloth-covered gliders, all of which clashed with the rather Gothic look of the rest of the place. When I was a kid, I would have loved to sit out there during a thunderstorm pretending I was on a ship confidently crossing the ocean, and damn the weather because I was a fearless pirate. Later, my mom would supply lunch.

We buzzed the speaker on the post by the gate, and the matron talked to us from it with a voice as soft as a goose-down pillow. Yet underneath that goose down, I sensed a Rock of Gibraltar firmness. There was a video screen in the speaker, about the size of a credit card, and we could see her face in it, though the screen was warped some and looked as if someone might have put out a cigarette on it.

The matron was named Jewel, and we said we were there with the hope of speaking to Marion. I thought Marion, having left with Elda and then coming back, might have information for us.

On the screen Jewel looked a little warped and shiny with cotton-candy hair, silvery as a new-minted dime. I guessed her to be sixty or so.

She wasn't overly pleased that we wanted to speak with Marion. The idea of the shelter was to keep everyone out except for the abused women who stayed there. It was an understandable reluctance on her part. You never knew who might be there to convince an abused woman to go back to her husband so he could apologize and then, shortly thereafter, abuse her again.

We showed Jewel our driver's licenses to prove who we were, and Brett even had a grown-up private-eye identification. Brett talked to Jewel for a few moments, explaining we were hoping to solve an important case and Marion just might have information that would help.

It took some serious talk, but Brett did good, and Jewel buzzed us through the gate. We came to the porch, we saw the door into the house had metal netting over the slit of window glass running down the center of it. When the door opened, there was Jewel, looking much better in person than she looked on the surveillance screen.

Jewel let us in and led us to her office but not to Marion. The office was large and had a desk you could have played table tennis on, leather chairs, a leather couch, a rocking chair, and a swivel chair behind her desk. Two comfortable-looking cloth-colored chairs were in front of it. A healthy-looking fern sat on a round table near the picture window. The curtains that went with the large picture window were pulled aside. You could see the side yard through the window. It was nice and green and cut as evenly as if it had been done blade by blade with nail clippers.

Jewel settled in behind her desk. We sat in the cloth chairs that weren't as comfortable as they looked. We went over what we had already told her and she took it in. The sunlight behind her brightened her silver hair.

"You must understand why I'm reluctant to let you see her. There are the other girls as well. I call them girls, though several are middle-aged women. Husbands and boyfriends come here trying to get in to hurt someone or convince them that whatever happened won't happen again. It will, of course. Sometimes the ladies do leave and return home, and sometimes they end up dead, or back here, or somewhere else. It's my job to take care of them."

"Marion may be able to help solve some crimes we're investigating."

"A nice policeman was here already," Jewel said. "He hinted at the same thing."

That would be Pookie. We told her we knew him. We didn't go into the crimes we felt Elda was involved in, because in truth, we didn't know for sure that she was. She could have been a victim, but that's not how I was feeling it.

"Elda used to help here," Jewel said. "She was a teacher and a counselor. She volunteered. I thought she would be a real aid, and she was at first, but in the end, it didn't turn out quite like I expected."

"How's that?" Brett said.

"Elda was charismatic when she wanted to be," Jewel said. "And she could be as bland as a concrete slab if she chose. She had a way of twisting the truth. I didn't notice it right away, but over time I realized it. She had a lot of the girls depending on her. I thought maybe I was starting not to like her because of my ego. You know. The girls relying on her, not me. And this bunch, they were all girls, by the way. Not a one over twenty-five. At my age, I consider them girls if they're under fifty."

"Hear that," Brett said.

"She formed a little clique. The girls talked to her, told her what had happened to them, cried a little, laughed a little, and pretty soon she had them in the palm of her hand. She had answers for them, or claimed to."

"Marion too?" I said.

"Yes, but Marion came back not long after she left. I guess Elda was here for about eight months, then she left with some of the girls, them trailing behind her like little ducks in a row. I will say they did seem emboldened, less frightened. I give Elda that. Anyway, Marion returned. I was able to give Marion her old room back. I tried to find out what had gone on with Elda and the girls, but Marion was tight with her experience. I don't know the whole story, because Marion didn't offer it, but I can tell you this: Whatever Elda was selling, in the end, Marion wasn't buying. She seemed nervous and cautious and maybe it was more than nerves. Might have been fear. I think that's why she came back here, where she's locked in and they're locked out. She asked me not to let any of the former residents back in, because they had bad intentions."

"Bad intentions?" I said. "How?"

"I think she wanted to be loyal to Elda because she had liked her but now feared her. She was short on details. It may have been nothing more than her feeling of discomfort. For Marion, that can feel like a lot more than it is at times. I didn't push. She's fragile. Why I'm not crazy about you talking to her, pushing at memories that might be too harsh, might not be good for her."

"What she knows might be harsh for her to consider," Brett said, "but if we can get her to reveal a few things, if she has anything to reveal, it might help us keep people from being hurt. Hurt in a way that's more than harsh."

Jewel said, "Hurt?"

"Some have already been hurt," I said. "All I can say at this point is we think it might be due to Elda, and Marion might know something about her that would help keep others from being hurt."

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That did it. Jewel left us in her office and went out into the hall. I heard her punching buttons on a doorway pad, and when she punched them, they made little beeping sounds, and then I heard the door open and close.

"I like that she's no pushover," Brett said. "She really protects her wards."

"Seems that way," I said.

We waited for what seemed like enough time for the construction of the Tower of Babel, even with the language problems, and finally we heard the opening and closing of a door, and then the office door opened and in came Jewel.

"She'll see you," she said. "She prefers to speak to you in her room. She feels more comfortable there."

"That's fine," Brett said.

"You can both go up, but I think it's best if Ms. Sawyer does the talking."

I nodded at that. A moment later we were following Jewel out of the office. We stood at a set of double doors while Jewel punched in numbers, hovering over the keypad in a way that would keep us from seeing the entry code. Then the doors unlocked, and we were pushing through into a wide foyer. There were stairs across the way, climbing up to the second-floor landing. The foyer and stairs were well lit.

Jewel went up the stairs and we trailed behind her. On the second floor, she turned left and went down the carpeted hall to an open door on the right. She didn't go inside the room.

"Keep it pleasant," Jewel said, and she walked back along the hallway, quiet as a mouse, and down the stairs.

A small voice in the room said, "Come in."

It was a dark room for a bright day, but the brightest part of the room was a window that was letting in sunlight, and the light was resting on a woman sitting in a rocking chair. She was dressed in jeans and a loose white blouse and she was barefoot. She had her hair pulled back and pinned up.

We went over and introduced ourselves. No hands were shaken, and Marion didn't lift her head to look us in the eye. She was a pretty girl who had the air of someone born to hide.

There was an old-fashioned window seat with cushions, and without asking, Brett and I sat there. I could feel the warm sun on the back of my neck.

“I don’t know I should say anything,” Marion said.

“Understood,” Brett said, “but let me put it like this: You may have information that could save lives.”

The next few minutes ticked by without response from Marion or commentary from us. Brett was a master of waiting for someone to respond.

When Marion finally spoke, she was hard to hear, and her little voice was cracked and raw.

“Elda said if I said anything, it could turn out bad for me,” she said.

“Who’s to know that you’ve told anyone anything?” Brett said.

“It might not matter if she knows or doesn’t know. I think I’m marked. I think my time is coming.”

“Why is that?” Brett asked.

“I went with her and the girls when they left this place, but I came back. Left one step ahead of obsession turning into dark actions. I know how melodramatic that sounds, but I believe that was the case. I truly do. At night, lying in bed, I think I hear them creeping about in the room, and I’m terrified. I feel certain they’re coming for me.”

“Can you tell us about Elda and why you believe you should be frightened?”

“I suppose I need to tell it. I think getting it out of me might help. Good for the soul, as they say.” Marion looked at Brett. “Do you think?”

“It’s a kind of therapy to get things like that off your chest. And you may help others avoid what you fear could happen to you. You can be safe. We can arrange that. But we need to know what we’re dealing with.”

“Could you close the blinds a little?” Marion said. “Not all the way, but a little.”

I got up and closed them to where it wasn’t completely dark, but the slanted blinds made bars of shadow, and now there were long shadows striping the bed, and on the back wall there were darker slat shadows and far less light.

Marion lifted her head but didn’t look at us. She looked over Brett’s shoulder at the thin slits of light coming through the blinds.

She took a deep breath.

And she began to talk.

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I wanted to be a teacher and a poet," Marion said, "but instead, here I am, sitting in a dark room, my mind floating, held loosely by a frayed kite string that could break at any moment.

"I went to college, you know. Graduated with high marks, have a degree in literature, a minor in creative writing. Then I met Junior, and the future I'd planned jumped off a cliff with an anvil under its arm. My degree might as well be on a toilet roll.

"When Elda came here as a kind of assistant matron, I had been here for quite some time already. Jewel lets us stay for as long as we need to. She only turns women away when this place runs out of rooms, and it has a lot of rooms. Right now, there are only a few girls here. Many of them left with Elda. Did you know in the early 1900s this was a hotel?"

"No," Brett said.

"It was."

Marion paused. The air was still.

"I'd been here hiding from my boyfriend. He knew I was here, tracked me down somehow, and tried more than once to come inside, climbing over the fence, reaching the porch, trying the door. I feared he would break a window and come in that way. All the lower windows and doors have alarm systems, and the police station isn't far away, so that's some comfort. But Junior—that's his nickname—can be determined."

Junior, I thought. The guy at the wrecker that was yet to be found was called Junior. Another piece of the puzzle snapped into place.

"I was so afraid of him, I hired a big man to have a conversation with him, and the man I hired was good at what he did. He put Junior out of commission for a while, and I am ashamed to say I sent him a bouquet of dead roses when he was in the hospital. But in the long run, it just made him more savage.

"I felt a little safer here, because Jewel would shoot him, of that I have no doubt. She has a gun license and a gun or two to go with it. I hate guns, but in a place like this, I'm glad she has them. I live on pins and needles. Beatings and tongue-lashings eventually wear a person down, you know, and I'm worn almost to the floor."

Marion took slow breaths. It was as if she had turned heavy as a bundle of stones in her chair. Brett reached out, touched her hand, held it. Marion seemed to like that. She started talking again.

"Jewel has us prepare our own meals in the big kitchen downstairs. You have to work with the other girls to do it, and if you don't help prepare food, you don't eat. There's a small movie theater and other services. Has a college-campus vibe.

"Sales from the Holloway House thrift store downtown go right back into this house. Jewel has money of her own. Investments. Property. Along with what the thrift store makes. But she finances a lot of this place right out of her pocket.

"But about Elda. She came and stayed awhile. She was confident, attentive, and she knew how to ask the right questions and how to listen, so even when you had no intention of doing so, soon you are telling her all about yourself. I let go of some things I thought I'd hold on to forever. Not nice things. I told her what Junior had done to me. I won't tell you what I told her. I'll just say it wasn't nice, and my self-esteem was so low, I did as he said, and what he said is something I won't repeat.

"What I didn't get then was Elda was merely taking his place. She had a kinder touch, a sweeter voice, and when she looked at you, you were the only person in the world. It gave you confidence but then she took it away from you again, packed it up for her keeping. It was something she would give back to you from time to time. But after a certain point, you knew it was on loan. You had to depend on Elda to get a taste of it. She knew how to work us. Gradually she became our everything. I woke up thinking of her, went to bed thinking of her. It was like a religious conversion. Like falling madly in love when the pheromones are high and your need for attention is astronomical. Elda was everything a cult leader is. I would say she was a top instructor in Cult Leader 101. She was damn near a god to me.

"Every male became the enemy. Every male was toxic. Every move they made was poisonous. It was easy to be convinced when the males in your life—Junior, specifically—were just that way. Junior could raise toxic to new levels. He owned you. But so did Elda. She bought you on a gentler installment plan.

"She had an unusual perspective on drugs. She hated them. She told us how they had killed her daughter, Beth, and how Beth had been pimped for a taste of the stuff. How she had been corrupted. How men took advantage of her. Then, when Beth tried to get away from it all, tried to get them arrested, she ended up dead, overdosed on the front seat of a car in a junkyard. Discarded the way the cars were, but without usable spare parts, Elda would say.

"Elda remembered her husband as controlling. Said he made her count her pennies, spend exactly what he allowed, although he was rich as King Midas, she said. He hit her, abused her, denigrated her intelligence.

"When her husband died, and she inherited the money, she felt free. When Beth died, she felt less free. But then she had a revelation. God sent an angel to her and told her she had to rid the world of those toxic men who sold drugs, and I think, though she never said it directly, she had already started doing just that. She said women and children that got in the way were the men's concubines and enablers. This seemed in conflict with what she said about the women being used, but I couldn't see it that way at the time. I sit here now in this room and I think about all she said, and I can't quite understand how it all made a kind of sense to me then. Some of the girls worshipped her more than I did, but I revered her enough that it took away my ability to think as clearly as I can now. And I'm still not as clear as I need to be.

"And then she told us we should go with her. That we should live with her. That we should join her mission, because she knew what needed to be done, and she would lead us.

"She had been recruiting all along. I went away with her, along with the other girls, and we lived in her house for a time. It was a big house full of cats, and we camped out in the spare bedroom and the living room. Every day we had sessions. Elda had us group up in the living room, and she told us what she had planned, and then we had individual sessions with her. Not so much come-to-Jesus meetings as come-to-Elda meetings. I realize now Elda needed our praise as much as we needed hers, and what we gave her was real, and what she gave us was false. Mostly. I can't let go of some of the good things she said. The good moments she gave me before she took them back and held them hostage.

"She would take us out to an old barn she owned and have us throw hatchets. She was very good at it, and she said it was a form of therapy, that to throw the hatchets and become accurate with them empowered us. Some people punch pillows. We threw hatchets. We were handling what could be a deadly weapon and learning to control it.

"Most of the girls took to it like Peking duck on a platter. I took to it myself. It all seemed so odd. And then she took that big turn. Elda said we who had been abused, many by drugs, some specifically by meth, some by a family called the Planters, ought to flip the script."

"Elda said we should take over the manufacturing and selling of the drug, take it out of the control of abusive men. Get them out of the picture one at a time. Flip it all on its head. She said there was someone called the Benefactor that was head of all the operations, and the Benefactor had to go. I wasn't sure what she meant. Who and what was the Benefactor?

"The girls embraced the idea and I almost did. And that's what scared me. I almost did. I realized Jewel, who Elda had dismissed as a warden, was better for me than Elda. I don't know why I couldn't see it before, but one morning I got up and it was as if Elda's spell was a bubble that had popped and dissolved. Suddenly she didn't make any sense at all. I tried not to let on that my mind had changed. Kept it to myself, waiting for my moment to escape.

"Elda's right-hand girl, Heaven, had been with the Planters for a while. Had been so hooked on drugs, she said she would have made a bestiality tape with a horse had they asked just for one night of meth ecstasy. She was easy prey for Elda. Heaven was hot to get even. She was so far up Elda's butt, she couldn't have been extracted by a winch truck and a promise to God.

"One night Elda said she would help Heaven get even and that the group would begin their transition to drug dealers; the current dealers were the evil ones with money and power. But they lacked intelligence, and Elda assured us she was smarter than them all and that we would be forming our own kind of cartel.

"At the barn Elda owned, the girls loaded the van with hatchets and full gas cans. Elda took a gun and gave one to Heaven. Knowing I was wavering, Elda said all I had to do was be a lookout while they took the family from their home with a brutal execution in their future. No one seemed to blink at that plan. Heaven delighted in it.

"I didn't like the dealers, but I had learned they had a kid with them, and the woman in the Planter group, as described to me by Heaven, was just as much a victim as the women with Elda. The men had grown up in a family as raw as poison ivy blisters. They operated a string of low-level meth factories run by a variety of morons who now and then blew themselves up. The cookers and dealers did this for the Benefactor. The Benefactor arranged sales and equipment and so on. All the Planters were addicted to meth and no telling what all else. But Elda and Heaven didn't care about any of that. Collateral damage was discussed. They meant the woman and the child.

"I ended up so close to being part of Elda's plan, I could almost smell blood. And now Elda was talking about slaughtering humans. With hatchets and gas cans, she had more in her plans than just shooting them in the head, which was bad enough. She was out to make a brutal point.

"I had never been hooked on meth like the others. My problems were self-esteem and boyfriends, especially Junior, who himself worked in meth. The girls had turned their addiction from meth to Elda. She was their high and partly mine.

“When we were at the barn preparing, I said I had to pee, slipped away into the woods. I found a place not too far from the barn, a place where I wouldn’t get lost in the night, trip over a log, get bit by a snake. I hunkered down and looked back at the lights glowing jack-o’-lantern-like in the barn windows. I saw their shadows move across the lights. I almost went back to them but didn’t.

“In short time, they missed me. They came outside and called for me. It was hard not to answer. Especially when Elda’s voice called. I was used to obeying.

“You could tell they were growing frustrated. By then they knew I had bailed. I heard Heaven say that I was going to turn them in.

“‘I don’t believe so,’ I heard Elda say. Then she called out to the woods: ‘Marion. You better come out. You don’t, then I’m going to assume you might tell someone what we have planned, and I wouldn’t like that, Marion.’

“The girls came into the woods, slashed about in the bushes with their hatchets. I lay down in a thick grove of brush and trees and tried not to breathe too heavy. Heaven walked right by me. And I mean right by me. The edge of her tennis shoe pinched the flesh on my forearm. But she didn’t see me.

“They searched for some time. Heaven was yelling into the woods, cussing me, standing right beside me, hatchet in her hand, and it was all I could do to control my breathing and not cry out.

“Finally, Elda called them in. I could see her standing near the barn, the yellow barn light over one shoulder, the moon on her face. When the girls were back at the barn, Elda yelled out at the woods, ‘Remember who I am and what I’ll do, Marion. Remember that. You’re always welcome back if you keep your mouth shut, and I believe you will. Am I right?’

“Once again, I nearly answered, that’s how deeply I felt her power, because it was power. Cold power.

“I heard her say to the girls, ‘I’ll talk to her later.’ I doubted there would be much talk. Finally, they turned out the barn lights and went away in the van with their hatchets and cans of gas, and even then, I waited, and that was good, because in fifteen minutes or so, the van came back and the girls got out quick, and Elda, who was driving, got out as well. They stood looking out at the woods, and they called my name again, and of course I still didn’t answer.

“Elda held a pistol and she was patting it against her leg as she looked out. I watched her a minute, then put my head down on the ground again. I almost feared that, like an owl, she could peer into the dark and see me. Elda and the girls waited around a few minutes, climbed back in the van, and drove away.

“I stayed where I was awhile, then finally got brave enough to come out of the trees and brush. I walked out to the road. A couple cars came by, and they scared me. I thought it might be Elda and the girls coming back, but it wasn't.

"I made it out to the highway, and before morning broke, I caught a ride with an old couple who were sweet but wanted to bring me to Jesus. I had had enough of authority figures who knew the 'truth.' I just wanted to get back to Jewel and the home. And that's what I did.

"But I don't feel as safe here as I used to. Jewel knows all my concerns, and the two girls left here do as well, so we are all on high alert. One of the girls is moving out next week because the whole thing has spooked her. I told Jewel I would move out to keep the place from being like a haunted house waiting on the ghosts to arrive, but she wouldn't have it. I can't believe I thought, even for a short time, that Elda was the good in my life, and Jewel wasn't. I'm deeply ashamed of myself for that."

"It's easy to get turned around in life," Brett said. "We've all done it in one form or another."

"I suppose," Marion said. "But there's a difference between being turned around and spun around, and I was spun around, and I let myself be.

"And then, when I looked at the news feed on my phone next day after I left them, I saw about the murders of the Planter family, and of course I knew it had been Elda and the girls. For them it was the beginning of a new way of life. More to come, you can bet on that. Soon Elda will run the meth business, all of it, and her girls will be ready to chop.

"I should have told the police, but I didn't. I thought maybe if I stayed out of it, Elda would leave me alone. Naive, I admit, but my thinking was way off. Maybe it still is."

"Seems to be clearing up," I said.

"Another reason I said nothing was a few days after, I got a series of photos on my phone. They came from a cell number unknown to me, a throwaway phone, I suppose. Looking at the photos, I knew they came from Elda. They were daylight photos, quite a few of them. They were taken from different positions. Front, sides, back. They were of a dead body, a man squatting in the woods, no clothes, his skin peeled off, his body dark with blood. Flies were all over him. His head was mostly a bloodstained skull. There were patches of sunlight in the photos, and through gaps in the trees and brush, I could see the river, and I could see the burned-out wrecker from the news, the one stuffed with the burned bodies of that family. I couldn't tell who the squatting man was until the last photo. It wasn't another photo of the squatting body. It was a photo of a skinned face hanging on a limb. I was shocked and sick. I recognized the man's face.

“It was Junior.”

45

The cops hadn’t discovered Junior out there because they weren’t looking for him. The wrecker packed with crispy, chopped, and gunshot folks seemed to be plenty enough for them to find.

Marion took out her phone and showed us the photos, and it was as she described. That face dangling from a limb was limp and messy, but it was identifiable. It was the guy we had seen at the Planters’ that day, trying to look cool, leaning against the wrecker. Now he looked like something out of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*.

It was easy to put together now. Junior had been Marion’s abusive boyfriend. Even so, man, that wasn’t a death I would have wished on anyone.

Well, I don’t know. More I thought about it, I might could think of a few exceptions.

Marion said, “I couldn’t figure why Junior was there at first, but it came together in time. Junior worked in the drug business, if ‘work’ is the right term. Stood to reason he would know the Planters. Stood to reason that when Elda and the Hatchet Girls came to the Planters’ home, Junior was there.”

My guess was they took all of them out to the river and shot them. But the shot to Junior wasn’t so good, didn’t put him down right away. Junior made a break for it. Made it into the woods and collapsed. They caught up with him, skinned him. Alive, if the bullet hadn’t killed him. They placed him on his knees to humiliate him. Didn’t bother to burn him like the others. Maybe they were out of gasoline. I didn’t mention any of this to Marion, but some things and some people were beginning to fall into place.

“Elda knew what Junior looked like,” Marion said. “I showed her a picture when we were both here. When she saw him, after me running away from her the way I had, for her that was nothing but gravy. A way of punishing me. I shouldn’t say it, but that didn’t hurt me as much as she’d hoped.”

“I’d like to give you my email and have you send those photos to me,” Brett said.

Marion got the email and sent the photos, then we talked a little more. But it was obvious Marion was winding down, sinking into the dark. The sunlight had changed and the light coming through the blinds was different. We stood up to go.

“You’ll stop them, won’t you?” Marion said.

“The police should do that,” Brett said. She said that like she meant it.

“Of course,” Marion said. “That’s their job. That’s not your job. I shouldn’t have asked.”

Brett patted Marion’s shoulder. “We’ll contact the police for you.”

“I feel so silly and lost,” Marion said.

“You’re not silly or lost,” Brett said. “Listen, don’t leave here until we can get some things straight. Okay?”

“Okay,” Marion said.

We said our goodbyes and went downstairs.

“Oh, yeah,” Brett said when we reached the bottom of the stairs. “No use spreading it around, but we’re going to stop them one way or another, aren’t we?”

“Absolutely,” I said.

46

When we reached the hallway and started toward the door that led to Jewel's office, Brett said, "I believe I understand what happened to Crank and Elda's sister."

We stopped walking and Brett said, "Crank was getting his regular taste from the meth sales, and then he wasn't. Elda killed his supply. He might have had others, but the Planters seemed to be a major source. I think Sue Alice, maybe through Sharoline, knew about the meth bit, and she knew Crank was peeling off some bills, and she wanted in or she wanted him out. Think about it. The whole family and a string of sheriffs have been in on the sweet-treat train for a long time, and it seems likely Sue Alice wanted to do something to end it all or profit from it. Could be either way. Elda doesn't strike me as a loving sister. I think her daughter was all that held her to the ground, and when she was gone, she lost her footing. After that, she was about control, power, and she felt she should call the shots, not be intimidated by a sister and the sheriff.

"Anyway, it caused a stir in Elda and her troops. She invited Crank and Sue Alice over, maybe to tell them they could both do better if she was head of it all, the program she'd laid out to her girls about taking over the business. They came to see her to talk terms, and the girls were waiting. They might have let Crank and Sue Alice spend the night to get their defenses down. Crank had a gun, of course, and if I understand right, he was sizable."

"That's right."

"Next morning, after Crank had dressed and maybe Sue Alice is still lounging in bed, the Hatchet Girls jumped them. Took them by surprise, but not with breakfast in bed. They were there when we got there, or at least the last of them were. They went over the back wall. It could have been a sharp time had we arrived a few minutes earlier."

"Fits," I said. "Crank almost pulled his gun, but 'almost' doesn't matter. And I thought I heard someone going over the garden wall, and that ties with your idea. I think it's close enough."

We pushed a button on the pad by the doors leading into the office area, and before long we heard Jewel on the other side, punching buttons. There was a snick sound. The doors came open.

Jewel was standing there looking at us with a slight grin on her face.

"I'm truly surprised Marion talked to you that long," she said. "That may be the longest conversation she's had since she came here."

"She was ready," Brett said.

We went into Jewel's office and assumed our previous positions. I said, "I think we need to get Marion a guard. It would be a good idea for everyone here. I don't think Marion's enemies distinguish that hard between who's who."

"We have the fence, we have cameras and alarms, everything is locked up."

"I don't think they would have trouble scaling the fence," I said. "They would come prepared. Over the fence, break some glass, they're in. They'd chop down doors if needed. They'd be in and done by the time the cops put their doughnuts down."

"I have my gun," Jewel said, "and I'm a crack shot."

"Don't doubt it," I said. "But it may not be enough against more than one assailant."

I took a moment to explain about Elda and the Hatchet Girls. I told her more than I should have, but I wanted some protection for Marion and whoever else might fall into the path of the Chop-Chop League. I felt it was necessary to convince her.

"Oh," Jewel said. "That's more than I expected."

"It's more than anyone expected," Brett said.

"I suggest we talk to the police, see if they'll put a guard on things," I said. "They would be the proper ones to do it. Legal and all. That way, you might not have to shoot anyone and you could avoid a bunch of questions about self-defense versus murder."

"So far I haven't had to shoot anyone, and I'd like to keep it that way," Jewel said.

"There you go," I said. "Look, we should set up something now. We'll talk to the chief of police, see if we can get him to swing it."

"Do you think these Hatchet Girls are inevitable?" Jewel asked.

"We do," Brett said.

Jewel nodded. "All right, then. Do what you can."

47

Justin was sitting in his office, and so were me and Brett. He had a nicer chair than Hanson had owned. He rocked back in it and put both hands behind his head, his lips pursed, and looked at us as if he were a principal about to decide our punishment for skipping school.

"I understand we have the same goals," he said, "but if what you told me is right, the shelter is well protected by a fence and an alarm, and the old lady has a registered gun. And Marion may not be telling a straight story."

"You're pulling my wiener," I said.

"I don't think I am. No. I'm sure I'm not."

"After all your talk, now you're saying no. You know, same as we do, that these women are dangerous, and you want the meth business stopped as much as it can be stopped, and I'm sitting here with Brett, and we're telling you that this lady, Marion, has been threatened, that she has evidence, most of which we've explained to you, and you're not willing to put a guard on the shelter until the situation changes?"

"I know it's a bad answer, but we actually work other cases, and a lot of cops are involved in those cases, and some of what they are doing relate to this same case. Besides, as long as they're chopping up meth dealers, I'm not crying. I have to look at priorities."

"Priorities?" Brett said. "Marion is a priority. She's not a meth dealer. She's an abused woman that's possibly being hunted by a psychopath and her henchwomen."

"'Possibly' is all you can honestly give me."

"The threat is more than implied," Brett said.

"Or so you see it," Justin said. "And she has protection of a sort."

"Of a sort," I said. "A fence, some locks, an elderly lady with a pistol, and your best wishes. That's not protection."

Justin pursed his lips again. He paused long enough to take his hands off the back of his head. He settled the chair, put his hands on the desk. They were nicely manicured hands.

"Fair enough," he said. "I got two offers. Maybe I can find some officers willing to do some spare-time work, but we can't pay them for it. They have to volunteer. Or maybe you and your agency can provide security at your own risk."

"You're one sweet fellow, aren't you?" Brett said.

"I like to think so."

I said, "Maybe you got a police dog can watch the place and run back to the station if something goes down. Come on, man. We need something solid."

"I will ask. All I can promise."

"We need them day and night," I said.

"I don't work for you," Justin said. "I don't respond to your every whim."

"Yet you tell us you need our help, and if we don't help, you're going to put us in a frame."

"I merely said you people show up where there are dead bodies. A lot. A whole lot."

The guy was exasperating. I thought he was being difficult just to be difficult.

We had been saving the icing on the cake, validation of Marion and her story.

"Here's how you can believe Marion's story," I said. "Go out to the lake where the Planters were found in their wrecker, face the river, and go right, up into the woods some. You'll find a skinned body if animals haven't eaten it. You can probably find it by the buzz of the flies laying eggs in the meat."

That got Justin's attention.

"Also," Brett said, "photos of the body were sent to Marion's phone."

"Could be because she was in on it," Justin said. "Why would Elda send pictures like that if she's such a mastermind?"

"She's no mastermind," I said. "But she thinks she is, like most criminals do. She wants revenge for what was done to her daughter, Beth. She might have seen Marion as a kind of replacement for Beth, but Marion didn't work out. She had too much of a conscience. She wants revenge on meth dealers, and stealing their business is her idea of it. She plans to become the main supplier by killing the other dealers. Including a person called the Benefactor. She's decided if she can't beat them or join them, she'll eliminate them. That being the case, you should protect your only good witness, and that's Marion."

"I'll send someone out to see if the body is there," Justin said. "As for them taking over all the business in East Texas, that's a big dump truck to fill."

"I think they can fill it," I said.

"Some rough customers in that business," Justin said.

"Yeah," I said. "The Hatchet Girls would be at the top of those tough customers. They killed, chopped, burned, and skinned some folks, and that didn't seem to cause them a lot of trouble."

"The dealers they hit were surprised."

"That's what they do, Justin," I said. "They surprise people."

"As for Marion, help or no help?" Brett said.

"Again, I can ask."

"When will this asking happen?" I said.

"Soon as you leave my office."

We went out to the car and didn't get in. We talked across the roof of it to each other. It was hot out there and you couldn't put your hands on the roof for fear of the hot metal cooking them like breakfast ham. East Texas weather can be weird. Windy one moment, still as Mount Rushmore the next, wet as the ocean, then dry as the desert, if the desert had trees.

"Think he'll ask?" Brett said.

"Probably."

"We can talk to Pookie and Leonard, ask for their help," Brett said.

"We can. We will."

48

We drove over to Leonard's gym. It was cool inside. I could feel the sweat drying on me. I love air-conditioning.

Leonard was in the back room with Nemo and Ernie. The boys were on opposite sides of the same bag, working it with punches. Leonard was encouraging them. They looked pretty good.

Leonard said, "Okay, boys. Go cool off with some walking around the ring, say ten minutes, then shower. See you tomorrow."

The boys nodded at me, smiled at Brett, and quickstepped to the boxing ring and started walking around it.

I said, "And there he is, Honey Pup his own self."

"Fuck you, Booger Bear. I have a feeling you're not here for the gym. Neither of you are wearing workout clothes, and Hap, you have that constipated look on your face that always spells trouble."

"It's Sugar Bear, by the way," I said.

"I distinctly remember it as Booger Bear," Leonard said.

"How's the shoulder?" I said.

"Sore, but it's healing fast. So, give. What is it? I know you two think I can't deny you whatever you want."

"Of course not," Brett said. "Look how cute and charming we look."

"And if this isn't enough," I said, "we'll go home and put on matching outfits and sweet little hats and come back. That'll cinch it."

"No outfits necessary. Can I assume this has to do with the Hatchet Girls? Already said I would help, so, you know, I'm in."

"We're going to need you to talk to Pookie," I said. "This might require reinforcements and long nights or long days or both, depending on who and how many we get and what time they have available. We'll need at least a couple of badasses. Whatever we do, we should do it as rapidly, because if we don't, I believe there could be an ugly outcome."

I filled Leonard in on what we had learned from Marion.

"What about Nemo and Ernie?" Leonard said.

"You've dealt with the Hatchet Girls," I said. "Do you really think we should put those two against them?"

"I suppose they are pretty green. We could get Jim Bob," Leonard

said.

“Words I never expected to come out of your mouth,” Brett said.

“Changing times,” Leonard said.

“I think we can depend on local talent as long as some of that talent is you and me, the others as backup,” I said.

“You got a plan?”

“Yep.”

“Lay it on me,” Leonard said.

49

By next morning, Pookie had volunteered to do some side work, as had Tom, the cop we had met with Justin. Tom was trying to grow a mustache, but so far it just made his upper lip look dirty. Tom parked across from the shelter house. Justin had allowed him to use a squad car.

Justin had come around a bit. Might have had something to do with them finding Junior where we said they would find him. Tom told me Junior's body had fallen over on its side, but animals, insects, and humidity hadn't totally destroyed it yet. The face on the bush had been severely pecked by birds.

The police car sitting across from the shelter house was conspicuous. That was the plan. We wanted Elda to know the house was being protected. Tom had a bunch of bananas on the car seat that he planned to eat before the night was over. That car, him sitting there him eating bananas, could be all the deterrent we needed to keep Elda from bothering Marion.

But I doubted it.

Of course I had no idea what Elda planned to do. By this point Elda and the Hatchet Girls might not have cared what Marion knew. But my guess was it mattered to Elda. She was long past allowing anyone to disobey her.

Pookie took the inside shift, pulled up a chair, and sat in the foyer where the stairs were, a shotgun across his lap. He had a thermos of coffee next to the chair. The ceiling light made his bald head look like a vanilla-colored bowling ball.

A female cop named Jillian Solomon was upstairs in Marion's room. She was in plain clothes. Jilly had been on the LaBorde police force for only a few months but had been a cop for a few years in Dallas. She had a no-nonsense expression that rarely wavered, and her dirty-blond hair was pulled back and fastened so tightly, I bet when she blinked, her asshole pulled in. I think she volunteered when Pookie asked because she liked the idea of doing something other than giving tickets, even if helping at the shelter wasn't going to result in payment.

She sat in the room with Marion, who by this time had gone from scared to terrified. That wasn't my intent, but it couldn't be avoided.

Jewel stayed close to her office. She had a couch in there, some blankets, and had been sleeping there for quite some time, since her help quit and went away. Elda being that help. Jewel didn't like leaving her ladies alone, so the couch was the logical choice as far as she was concerned. She kept her pistol near her.

"I don't understand why I couldn't see who Elda really was," Jewel said.

"She fools everyone," I said. "Right now, I think she's through fooling."

By that point, I thought Elda might consider herself invincible.

But Elda wasn't invincible. Neither were me and Leonard or Brett or anyone associated with us. We were in the danger business. Oh, shit. I liked that. We'd have to put that on our cards: WE ARE IN THE DANGER BUSINESS. Or DANGER IS OUR BUSINESS. Or DANGER IS US.

Maybe not.

The other ladies had left at Jewel's insistence. She'd found rooms for them in a motel in the next town over. She gave them money for food. She called them daily. They weren't the target, but we agreed with Jewel that they didn't need to be in the house in case things turned nasty. The exact reason for them being removed from the house wasn't explained to them. The idea was they were to remain safe, not reengage with abusive boyfriends or abusive husbands or, in one woman's case, an abusive wife.

I brought a big rolling suitcase into the shelter. I asked for Marion to come downstairs. When she did, Jilly came with her. I opened up the suitcase and placed it on the floor.

I had explained the plan to Marion, so she was ready. Ready and scared. She took a deep breath and crawled into the suitcase. She was petite, and the suitcase was large.

"You'll only be in there a short time," I said.

I zipped up the suitcase but not all the way—I left it partially open for air—stood it up, and rolled it out of the shelter and to my car. It was easy.

I opened up the back hatch lid, and without blowing out my hip or knees or getting a hernia, I boosted the suitcase containing Marion into the back of my car. It wasn't an old-fashioned car trunk, but there was space there, enough for a large suitcase, not enough for a pygmy elephant. The suitcase went up against the back seat. The suitcase wiggled a bit.

I didn't see anyone around, but taking Marion out in the suitcase seemed like a precaution that was worthwhile. I had to hope if there were Hatchet Girls watching, they would merely think clothes or some such were being taken away.

For now, I wanted them to think she was still in the shelter. If they decided to leave her alone because the shelter had a cop out front, all the better. I doubted they had seen Pookie and Jilly, but they could have, and they might have seen me roll the suitcase in and out. They might have seen that and had some idea what I was doing. But where would they be hiding? In the pecan trees in the park, dressed as squirrels?

I drove Marion to our house. I rolled the suitcase inside, and me and Brett helped her out. She unwound and stretched her back.

“That was awful,” Marion said.

“You’ll be safe here,” I said.

“Elda, she’s crafty,” Marion said.

“So are we,” Brett said.

I wasn’t so sure how crafty we actually were.

50

Next few days, when I was home, when I slept, I had night sweats, tossed and turned, dreamed of young women yelling and wielding hatchets, chopping at me, holding me down and skinning me with the sharp edges of those hatchets, hacking off my dick and balls and shoving them into my mouth.

When I awoke, I brought back with me a baggage of dread. I could almost taste my balls on my tongue. No, I didn’t have experience, but I had ideas about the taste, fleshy and sweaty, bloody and raw.

Marion had taken it on herself to get up early and make coffee for us. We’d told her that was unnecessary, but she did it anyway. It wasn’t like making coffee required much, though. Some water in the plastic container, a Keurig pod, and we were off to the races. But it was nice of her.

I wasn’t always there to partake of the coffee, and sometimes I slept only a few hours before swapping out with the others on guard at the shelter. Between Tom and his daily bananas, Jilly, me, Leonard, Pookie, and Jewel, we had someone at the shelter just about twenty-four/seven. We weren’t overly sneaky, because if they knew we were there, it might discourage them. Same with the squad car parked across the street.

I was starting to think Elda wasn’t interested in Marion. That was good. Also good was that Brett and Marion got along well, which really helped Marion settle into our home and feel slightly more confident. Brett instilled confidence. I think she enjoyed the female company.

After a few days, I wondered if it was time for us to call off the vigil. Elda didn’t seem inclined to take the bait; I had no idea if she was even considering it. There was no way to properly know. I knew a lot about what we didn’t know, and we didn’t know a lot.

We decided to give it a couple more days, then Marion could go back, or she could stay with us awhile. As another alternative, we could put her up in our old house, which we had put up for sale. We could pull guard duty there if the trap at the shelter house didn’t work.

Once we were able to determine Elda was no longer a threat, perhaps Marion could move on. Write a few poems. Get a job she liked. If she wanted to be a poet, that job part mattered. No one read poetry much, not even poets. I could understand that. Ever been to a poetry reading? It's frequently like having your bare feet dipped in salt water and licked by a goat.

One late morning, after a shower, a cup of coffee, a bowl of oatmeal, and some brief conversation with Brett and Marion, I started off for the shelter. I wasn't far on the road when Leonard called.

All he said before hanging up was "We have a major problem."

51

When I got to the shelter, I saw Leonard’s truck parked behind Tom’s squad car. A cop I didn’t know was standing beside the car. He looked as if he were having a hard time holding his head up. The glass on the driver’s-side window was knocked out of Tom’s car, and I could see blood on the inside windshield. It was odd to hear birds cheerfully singing in the trees, see bees buzzing about their business in the yellow and red flowers planted around the edge of the park. It seemed as if it ought to be a dark day with no birds, no bees, no flowers, and rain on the horizon. I hoped things weren’t as bad as I feared they were, but an ambulance was driving away slowly. Not a good sign.

There were three cop cars on the shelter side of the street, parked all along the curve. Chief Justin was inside the fence by the gate. Leonard was standing near him.

When I got to the gate, Leonard stepped over and opened it.

I looked at him. “Bad?”

“Yeah, buddy. Bad as bad can be,” he said.

“Pookie okay?”

“Wasn’t his time or mine on the clock,” Leonard said. “He’s home sleeping. He doesn’t even know about this. Only Jilly and Tom and Jewel were on guard.”

“Another of your brilliant ideas turned to shit,” Justin said.

“Not that you did a fucking thing to help,” Leonard said.

“Two of my officers are dead. I provided them.”

“They provided themselves,” Leonard said.

I knew then Tom and Jilly had not survived. They were the only two officers on this gig.

Justin turned to me. “Jewel says you have Marion.”

“We have her in hiding,” I said.

“I hope you don’t mind keeping her for a while,” he said.

“It’s fine,” I said. “How’s Jewel?”

“See for yourself,” Justin said.

We went into the shelter. Jewel was sitting behind her desk. Her gun was on top of it. The window behind her was broken out. There were a few shards of glass hanging in the frame and the rest was sprinkled around a like chunks of ice. There was a bandage wrapped thick around the top of Jewel's head. She looked like the attack had aged her another decade.

Justin told me and Leonard to sit. He sounded like a dog trainer. We sat, but no treat followed.

"I'm letting these two in on it," Justin said to Jewel. "Ought not to, but they're already responsible for two deaths, so I want them to hear what you know."

"They're not responsible," Jewel said. "They're trying to help. Wasn't for Hap, Marion would have been here and she'd be dead now. I lucked out."

"I'll decide what they've done and haven't done," Justin said. "Let's hear it again, what you know, how it went down."

"I've told you what I know."

"Tell me what you know again. I like hearing a story time and again in case one time it's different."

Jewel almost snarled at Justin. "You have one hell of a bedside manner."

"Work around it," Justin said.

I wanted to jump up and punch him in the head, but to tell the truth, in that moment, I was so upset, I wasn't sure I could get out of the chair. The heat wafting in from the broken window made the air feel heavy to breathe.

52

This is the story as best I got it from Jewel. Some of what Jewel said was guesswork. I've added in my own guesses to make more sense of it.

I believe it happened something like this.

It was less than an hour before daylight. It had been a warm night. The air was still. They came dressed in black pants and shirts and tennis shoes. They came from up the street, where they had parked the van. One of them crept up and busted the window of the law car. One or two smacks, and the window was done. The Hatchet Girl then struck inside at Tom. He was found clutching a half-eaten banana in his left hand, his right hand resting on the hilt of his gun. Before he could pull it, the Hatchet Girl had leaned inside and chopped him across the forehead. The hatchet blade was buried deep in his skull.

It happened so fast—one, two, three—Tom's taste buds were probably still embracing the taste of the banana. The windshield was cracked from the inside where the killer had drawn the hatchet back, busting it before giving Tom the coup de grâce.

Finally, the Hatchet Girls ended up in front of the shelter. One girl tossed a long, segmented metal pole with a hook on one end over the fence. Then they scrambled over the fence like windblown wraiths, hatchets in their belts. Elda was with them. She was older, but she had an athlete's body and was up to the task. She wouldn't want to miss personal vengeance.

On the other side of the fence, one of the girls picked up the metal pole with a hook on it. She ran under the fire escape, pushed the pole up the side of the house, hooked the fire escape ladder, and pulled it down.

They went up the ladder single file and swiftly, vibrating it only slightly. My guess was Elda was right behind the lead. They came to the escape landing and used hatchets to smash through the window glass that led into Marion's bedroom.

They slipped through the shattered window, a shadow at a time.

Jewel, sleeping on the couch in her office, heard the breaking of the glass, picked up her gun, and rushed out of her office into the foyer that led to the double doors. She punched the buttons. The doors opened. Jewel stepped into the larger foyer near the stairs that led up to Marion's room, where, instead of Marion, there was Jilly.

Upstairs a gun barked; there was a shriek followed by lots of horrible sounds.

At the bottom of the stairs, Jewel, scared out of her wits, looked up, saw the door to Marion's bedroom flung open so hard, the knob knocked a hole in the drywall. Out and down came the girls, Elda second in line, the whole of them bouncing on the stairs like angry kangaroos.

The girl in the lead had a metal rig on her face, kind you wore if your jaw was broken. She had her mouth slightly open, and Jewel saw she was missing some of her teeth.

The girl raised her hatchet, and just as she threw it, Jewel fired and hit her, and the girl tumbled down the stairs. But the hatchet glanced against Jewel's head, and by the time Metal Mouth hit the bottom step and came to rest, Jewel was near boarding a boat to the River Styx herself. She stumbled back and fell down.

The lights from houses on either side of the shelter came on, throwing brass-colored beams through the windows and into the foyer. Elda must have yelled for them to get gone. One of the girls paused at Jewel's open office door and tossed a hatchet over the desk and through the large window, reason unknown. An anger expression, is my guess. The window glass exploded.

The women banged the keypad and the door lock with their hatchets. The door came open. They hurried onto the porch, down the sidewalk, over the gate, and were gone.

Justin said his cops asked the neighbors what they had heard and seen. One lady said she'd heard a gunshot. Turned on the lights, stepped onto her porch, saw women running along the sidewalk in front of her house. A slightly older woman was in the lead, brandishing a hatchet. The woman shook the hatchet at her as they ran by. The sound of their feet, soft and in sync, was heard for a moment, then, like a bad dream, they were gone. The neighbor heard a motor hum to life, then growl away.

Jewel's trip down the River Styx was delayed. She awoke with a headache, a bloody forehead, and the pistol clutched in her hand. She managed to stand up and, holding the gun before her, went up the stairs and into Marion's room.

She switched on the lights. In the dark, perhaps they thought they had killed Marion. Both Marion and Jilly were petite. Jilly was chopped and hacked, broken and bloody. Jillian's gun was on the floor. She had drawn it and shot at her assailants, but even though she was prepared for them, she hadn't thought about anyone lowering the fire escape. But Elda and the girls had lived there. They knew the layout. They came at Jillian so fast, she was only able to pull her pistol and pop off one shot. As good a shot as she was, under pressure she'd snap-fired, and the bullet buried itself in the wall next to the windowsill.

And then the Hatchet Girls were on her.

Sick to her stomach, Jewel went back down the stairs. Lying on the bottom step, Metal Mouth moaned. Jewel kicked Metal Mouth off the stairs. The metal rig was bent in front. Jewel's bullet had hit it instead of the wired-up Hatchet Girl. The impact must have vibrated through that girl's head like an earthquake, and out she went, her nose bloody, either from the impact of the bullet on her mouth rig or from hitting her face on the stairs.

She was waking up now. Jewel kicked away the hatchet Metal Mouth had thrown, made the girl get to her feet, and marched her at gunpoint into her office. There she got a pair of handcuffs out of a drawer, left over from her probation officer days, spun Metal Mouth around, and cuffed her. The girl hardly knew where she was. She tried to say something, but blood bubbled out of her mouth and she sat down rapidly on the couch. She wasn't one of the girls who had stayed in the home. Jewel didn't recognize her. The girl oozed a nasty attitude.

Jewel dialed 911.

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I’m the one found Tom in his squad car,” Justin said.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and meant it.

“He was a good kid,” Justin said.

By now, Pookie had arrived. Leonard had called him after I showed up.

Pookie didn’t say anything, but his face said a lot.

“Jewel,” Justin said, “going to need you downtown. Got some questions.”

“I just answered everything.”

“I know, but we need to put it in a report.”

“You really believe I had anything to do with this?”

“No. But you might remember something more with a bit of space between you and where it all happened.”

“I can’t just leave the place,” she said.

“No one here to be hurt now,” Justin said. “Besides, before I talk to you again, we need to run you by the hospital. We promised the EMT, remember?”

“She was sweet, but I know how hard my head is,” Jewel said. “I’m fine.”

“We’ll go to the hospital first anyway,” Justin said. “You might see the sweet little girl you shot in the face, one with the metal apparatus.”

“That has to be the girl I punched,” Leonard said. “I certainly hope so.”

“Bullet hit the metal so hard, it broke her jaw again,” Justin said.

“Good,” Leonard said. “I must be getting old. I was trying to kill her and just broke her jaw.”

Jewel said, “Let me call my insurance company. I got to get this window closed up.”

Justin let her. Leonard, Pookie, and I went outside, stood by the gate.

“Leonard,” Pookie said, “I want you to know, I don’t appreciate you calling Hap first, then me. Is that how it’s always going to be?”

Leonard hesitated only a moment. “Probably.”

Pookie shook his head. He opened the gate, walked to his patrol car, and drove away, to the cop shop, most likely.

“In some cases,” I said, “you should learn to lie.”

“Wouldn’t keep me from calling you first.”

“I don’t need to be first in line for something like that.”

“I’m picking out china or some such shit, I’ll ask Pookie first. I’m dealing with this kind of shit, it’s me and you.”

“He’s capable of dealing with things. We know his experience, how tough and loyal he is.”

“I know, brother, but it’s a hard thing to shake. For so many years it’s just been you and me. Maybe I would have called Pookie on another day. I can’t explain it. But not this one.”

“For the record,” I said, “I probably would have called you first too, Honey Pup.”

54

We stood in the shelter's yard for a few more moments. Leonard wasn't eager to go anywhere near Pookie. He said he didn't feel like the gym either. He was considering my advice that there were indeed times to lie.

"I'm wondering if there will still be a wedding," he said.

"Give it time. There will be," I said.

We met again at the new house and filled Brett and Marion in on what had happened. I knew Marion was fragile, but this wasn't the kind of thing that would go away or that she wouldn't find out about.

"It's my fault those police were killed," Marion said.

"No," Brett said. "That was Elda's fault. Even more than the girls she's brainwashed. Not that they should get a get-out-of-jail-free card for being gullible and stupid, no matter how rough their backgrounds and experiences. You still make your choices."

"Smart people get bamboozled," I said.

"Hear that all the time," Leonard said, "but how fucking smart are you to fall for that kind of horseshit. It's worse than a bunch of Holy Rollers waiting to be sucked up to Jesus. At least they aren't killing people with hatchets. Well, most of the time they aren't."

"She's like an evangelist," Marion said. "She gets in your head, and if your head isn't just right at that time, you start to listen, then you really start to hear, then you begin to believe, and before you know it, you're throwing axes and wanting to kill anybody that proves to be a problem, especially men."

"Got to tell you," Brett said, "I like men. I like my man. It's just assholes I don't like, and assholes come in all sexes, shapes, and colors."

"Leonard, aka Honey Pup, is proof of that," I said.

"Jealousy is an ugly thing," Leonard said.

"And there's this, Marion," I said. "You didn't succumb to that shit. It might have tugged at you, but you tugged back."

"I suppose," Marion said.

"What I'm wondering," Leonard said, "is in the dark, in your room with Jillian there, did they think Jillian was Marion? That it was her they killed?"

“Could be,” I said.

“Either way, you’re staying with me for now,” Brett said to Marion. “I got a few work things to take care of, but I can do them by laptop and phone.”

“I don’t think they know about this place,” I said, “but let’s keep the doors locked at all times.”

“But you are going out, aren’t you?” Marion said.

“Me and Leonard, yeah. We want to find Elda and her crew. I doubt they’ll be using the barn, since you were there, and they might think you told the cops instead of us. But they know Leonard was there. And now we have told the cops. Any idea at all where Elda and the girls might be hiding out?”

Marion thought for a moment, shook her head. “Sorry. No. Her house and the barn was all I knew of. But she had a lot of properties all over the place. In town and out, close by and far away.”

Me and Leonard got in his pickup and drove to the hospital in LaBorde. As we drove, Leonard said, “You do know if Elda wants to find where you live, she can. Computer shit. It can count your pubic hairs, so it can certainly find your house, new ownership or not.”

“We have it listed under an LLC not connected to Brett’s agency, so it might take some time for them to find that out. But they can find out. It delays their search a little, nothing more.”

We arrived at the hospital, and the lady at the desk didn’t offer to let us know what room the Hatchet Girl was in. We thanked her, stepped outside in the hall. Leonard finally broke down, walked away, and called Pookie.

“Was it civil?” I said when Leonard came back.

“It was like dropping my dick in a bucket of ice water.”

“That would have to be a deep bucket.”

“You got that right. He says she’s on the third floor and we’ll see a cop sitting outside the room.”

Lo and behold, sitting in a chair by the captured Hatchet Girl’s room was Pookie.

“Ah,” Leonard said. “That was sneaky.”

“Hello, dickhead,” Pookie said.

“Damn, Pookie, I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings,” Leonard said. “Truly.”

“I’m still mad, but I know that you didn’t,” Pookie said.

“I love you, Pookie.”

“I know that too, but you need to give me some time. Which means stay out of my face for a few hours.”

“Noted,” Leonard said. “Does this mean I’m not going to get any ass tonight?”

“Really, Leonard,” Pookie said.

"Yeah, Leonard," I said. "Really. Timing, my man. Timing."

"Anyway, yeah," Pookie said, "that's exactly what it means. And you're on the couch tonight."

"Just checking," Leonard said. "Sheesh."

"Can we see her?" I asked.

"Technically, no. But I'll let you slip in for a few moments. She may still be under. They had to redo her jaw."

"I can't tell you how happy I am about that," Leonard said. "My shoulder is still stiff."

We slipped in.

She lay in the bed, propped up so that her head was elevated. She was awake, but her eyes were narrow and her face was swollen. She had chipmunk cheeks and a broad piece of tape over her nose. She had a cuff on her right wrist with a long chain that was fastened to the bed. She had another cuff and chain on her ankle. Both cuffs were lined with brown padding.

Leonard hopped around and threw a few punches in the air.

Hatchet Girl trembled slightly.

"Hi, baby," Leonard said. "So good to see you again, you hunk of pig shit."

"So that's the one you hit for sure?" I said.

"Yep. Right in the kisser. Or the jaw. Whatever. But, boy, did it fuck her up. Of course, she tried to kill me."

"That could make anyone mad," I said.

"Ain't that the truth."

We were beside her bed now. I had brought a small pad and pen with me. I pulled the pad out of my back pocket, the pen from my front shirt pocket.

"Why don't you tell us where Elda is, and things might go better for you. We know the chief of police, and we could really paint a bright picture about your cooperation."

That was unlikely, but I didn't mind lying to the bitch.

She held out a hand. I handed the pad and pen to her.

She held it rested on her chest, wrote on it, handed it back.

It read: *Go fuck yourself. Him too. Especially him.*

Leonard, looking over my shoulder, read it. "Oh, girl, that's not nice."

55

How did it go?" Pookie asked when we came out.

"Very well," Leonard said. "She gave us some nice life advice that involved an anatomical impossibility."

"Look at you, using big words," I said.

"Just one, I think. 'Anatomical.' I've used 'impossibility' many times."

"Not good, then?" Pookie said.

"Nope," Leonard said. "Not really. So, the no-ass and the sleep-on-the-couch rules haven't changed?"

"It's only been about five minutes, dumbass," Pookie said.

56

Marion stayed with us for a few weeks, and she was a good guest, but I must admit, I was looking forward to her leaving so Brett and I could get back to normal.

Our house was a good place to be, though I didn't stick to the house, and neither did Brett. Marion did. A cop was assigned to her. Justin didn't need to be pushed this time to provide a guard. No matter how much he blamed me, he knew he was also responsible. We left Marion with her cell phone and a seasoned lady cop named Wilson. When we came in for the night, Wilson went home.

Funerals were held for Jillian and Tom, and they were announced in the newspaper. We were able to convince the editors not to mention how they'd died. We hoped Elda and the girls wouldn't know Marion was alive, but I didn't know how long the newspaper would maintain its silence. It was a pretty juicy story. I was just hoping Elda didn't pay attention to online papers. Justin convinced them to keep it off the local TV news.

I guess you could say so far, so good.

Jewel was recovering from her hatchet graze, and though no one but her was in the shelter house now, she insisted on staying there alone, not believing she was in Elda's sights. I thought there was a good chance she was right.

One thing for certain, Elda was taking over the meth business. Dealers were being found chopped and skinned and sometimes burned. Her pyro tendencies seemed to ebb and flow, but her love of the hatchet did not abate. Her twisted view of how to handle the death of her daughter and her vendetta against drugs that led to her selling drugs was beyond weird, and I had a feeling being male didn't exactly put someone on her Christmas list either. She'd stop anyone in her way, but she might go out of her way to get a man that had ticked her off. I felt people like me and Leonard fit perfectly in her sights.

After supper one night, Marion having gone to bed in the guest room, and us in our bedroom, cuddling, Brett said, "So you want to quit the agency?"

"What? I never said that."

"Not to me you didn't, but Leonard told Pookie, and Pookie called and told me. He's a blabbermouth."

"Look, it was just a thought. I was asked, and I politely said I would consider it."

"You mean do it."

"I haven't committed."

"Listen, love. I want you to be happy."

"I'm here to support you. You need me."

"I do, but at the agency, maybe not. I'm thinking I want to avoid the kinds of messes we get into and do less heavy work. Just simple stuff, basic divorce cases, that sort of thing."

"How many times has a simple job fooled us," I said. "We didn't know until we knew. Think about this current business. It started with a drugged pig."

"That's true. Another thing—Pookie said he's leaving the cops."

"What?"

"He hates Justin. Pookie is supposed to be a detective, but Justin has him doing grunt work like before. Pookie wants to go to work for me, Hap."

"At the agency?"

"No, I'm starting a lawn service. Yes, the agency."

"I see."

"I'm thinking since Leonard is leaving, and you're considering it, he might be a nice addition, along with me trying to pull back on the more dangerous jobs."

"I'll be there if they turn dangerous. So will Leonard."

"I know. But I think the gym is a good idea for you, Hap. You are being eat up by all the death and sadness, and the world isn't just about that, though it seems like it sometimes. Believe it or not, there's a bright side out there."

"What about you?"

"I like the business. I might stay in it for a long time. I might not. But right now, I like it, even the dark side of it. I like being boss. I admit I don't suffer much angst. And Pookie, he's a good man to have on the payroll."

"He is. When is he quitting the cops?"

"Not sure," Brett said. "I told him I'm not in any big rush. I was giving you time to make up your mind about the gym, and I think you already have."

"I was trying to decide when to tell you that I was seriously considering it."

"You can tell me anything anytime, Sugar Bear."

"I know. Just wasn't sure how to tell it. We'll finish this out with Elda, make sure Marion's safe, and then we'll talk about it again."

"You should do it. You're not old yet, but their fifties are when people start to top out. Your hair has a lot of gray in it, and it’s not just you. I know I look damn good, but the other day I discovered I had a gray pubic hair.”

“Can I see?”

“Not right now.”

57

Metal Mouth turned out to be a young woman named Charlie Norwood, known among the Hatchet Girls as Heaven. After a few weeks, her jaw was healing. She was still in the hospital under guard, but she could speak a little.

Justin, who hadn't found out anything from her since the shelter incident, was desperate, so he allowed me and Brett, with Pookie—the cop representative—to interview her.

We thought about bringing Marion to talk to Charlie but decided that was a bad idea times two. Charlie hated her, plus she might still think she had killed Marion—or at least that Elda and the Hatchet Girls had. It would be to Marion's advantage to be thought dead.

Leonard said he'd pass on the visit as he'd just want to punch her again, and besides, she didn't want him in the room. She didn't want us in the room either, but we came anyway. When we stood by her bed, her eyes narrowed and what could be seen of them looked like little black rabbit turds.

"Fug oo," Charlie said around the metal rig in her mouth.

"Fug oo back," I said.

"Hap, be good," Brett said.

"I was just returning her greeting."

"I ade all oo," Charlie said.

"We hate you too," I said.

"Hap!" Brett said. "Sorry, Charlie."

That reminded me of an old commercial about a stupid tuna named Charlie that wanted to be caught so he could be made into tuna fish. That fish's parents needed to give him a real talking-to and maybe some therapy for self-esteem issues.

"You're in serious trouble," Brett said. "You could make it less serious by talking to us. We have an officer of the law here with us to make it official if you want to talk."

"That would be me," Pookie said.

"Fug oo," Charlie said.

"Do you ever stop and think how silly and horrible all this is?" Brett said. "The things you've done at Elda's request? You've killed people. Chopped them up, skinned them, tortured them. Is that something you saw yourself doing as a little girl? Growing up to be a murderer?"

"Ad ed gumming," Charlie said.

"What?" I said.

"I believe she said, 'Had it coming,'" Pookie said.

"Oh," I said.

"The meth dealers, maybe they weren't the best, but shooting them, chopping them up, and burning them, that seems excessive," Brett said.

"Fug 'em," Charlie said.

"And now you're selling the same shit that messed a lot of you girls up," I said. "You can see that's not only ironic but downright nut balls?"

"Fug oo."

"Talk to us, and we'll go to bat for you," Brett said. "Say you were cooperative. It won't get you off, but it will get you a lighter sentence, I think. Some kind of tit for tat."

"Hell," I said, "they might give you immunity. You might be the horrid little shit that goes free while the other shits get flushed."

"I don't think that sounds as positive as Brett is trying to sound," Pookie said.

"Fug oo," Charlie said. "I won el oo it."

"What was that last part?" Pookie asked her.

"I won el oo it, mugerfuger."

"Let's see, six, maybe seven words," I said.

"Fug oo, weese of it."

"That one I got," Pookie said. "'Fuck you,' which we've already established, and the rest, I'm guessing a bit, but I think she called you a piece of shit, although the reference may have been broader to include all of us."

"Ad ight."

"She said that's right," Brett said.

"That confirms it," Pookie said. "She was referring to all of us."

"Oh, snap," I said. "I got it. What she said earlier that I couldn't understand. Charlie? Was it 'I won't tell you shit, motherfucker'?"

"Ad ight," she said.

"There you go," I said to Pookie. "You just have to get in her fucked-up frame of mind and pretend you too have been punched in the mouth by Leonard."

Charlie glared at me with her rabbit-turd eyes.

"If you decide you want to talk," Brett said, "want to consider talking to us or the cops, making some kind of deal about where Elda and the girls are, just reach out. We'll do what we can for you, within the realm of the law."

"Fug oo," Charlie said.

"At least she's consistent," Pookie said.

"Ask for me," Brett said. "Brett Sawyer."

Brett took a pad off the nightstand by Charlie's bed, pulled a pen from her purse, and wrote her name and information on it. She gave the number we use for the office. She carefully placed the pad on the nightstand. "There it is if you change your mind," Brett said.

"Fug oo. I ob er ut ack stigs to er laig."

On that mystery, we left.

We passed her guard in the chair. Chief Justin had certainly become more serious now. He had a plainclothes cop downstairs and another in a chair near the elevator. Just in case the Hatchet Girls decided to rescue her. Then again, did they know Charlie had survived, been captured?

Out in the hallway, waiting on the elevator, Pookie suddenly snapped his fingers and raised his hand like a kid in class about to ask if he can go to the bathroom. "Got it," he said. "I know what she said. She said, 'Fuck you. I hope your nutsack sticks to your leg.'"

"That's not very nice," I said.

"No, it isn't," Pookie said.

"At least I don't have to worry about that," Brett said.

"You got that going for you, baby," I said.

The elevator arrived.

58

That night, I read the online hometown newspaper and felt a knot tie itself in my stomach. Someone had leaked more details to the paper. Wrote that a lady had survived an attack on the women's shelter. It didn't mention her name, but it would be obvious to Elda who it was. It mentioned that police officers were killed in the attack and that one of the attackers had been wounded and was recovering under guard in the hospital.

This was all stuff Elda might already know, but now it was out there. It would be on the TV news in a short time.

Maybe between all the chopping and meth dealing, she might not have noticed. Even angry hatchet killers and drug poisoners need a rest now and then.

The article was written by a reporter named Markie Chambers. The newspaper had held back for a few weeks, but perhaps fearing other news outlets had the story, they didn't want to be scooped, so they went with the information. It really sucks when a scoop is more important than protecting someone's life. It wasn't like we hadn't explained the importance of silence to them.

We felt we should tell Marion about it, let her know she could still be a target. We told her at the kitchen table after a lunch of tuna fish sandwiches with crumbled potato chips and thinly sliced apples all mixed into the tuna with mayonnaise and smeared on wheat bread. It's better than you might think.

"I feel terrible staying here and keeping you in their sights."

"What they did is not your fault, and we want you to be safe," Brett said.

Later in the day, Leonard came over to visit. He too had seen the news. Pookie told him that Justin wanted to put Marion up somewhere in Houston with friends of his. He wanted her out of LaBorde. He was damn sure double cautious now. Me and Leonard went out to the barn and worked the bag. We went at it slow, but we threw hard and accurate punches. Leonard was trying to loosen up his shoulder, so on his wounded side he didn't throw as hard.

As we worked, I told Leonard that Pookie was a blabbermouth, that he'd told Brett I was thinking of leaving the agency.

“That gossip,” Leonard said.

“Yes, but Blabbermouth Pookie got that information from Blabbermouth Leonard.”

“He’s my soon-to-be spouse. I should be able to share things with him without him sharing with everyone else.”

“He and Brett are friends too. What I will say is I’m leaving for sure. Brett thinks I should. She knows I want to. But not right away. If Brett needs me, I’ll be there no matter what I’m doing.”

“Same. But I’m wanting to move away from it, just be a gym owner and husband, and we may adopt a kid.”

“Adopt? You, a dad?”

“I’m thinking about it. Pookie is all in.”

“It’s good to see you finally settling down.”

“I’m thinking of adopting an underprivileged white kid from an Aryan Nation family that hates queers.”

“That sounds perfect.”

Leonard chuckled. “Don’t it? I hope I can do this marriage business. People sure divorce a lot.”

“They do. I think being able to have a marriage work is less about working to make it work than it is about being lucky and finding the right person. Brett and I have had a few moments, but on the whole, we get along well.”

“I watch you two. I’m trying to learn how to make my marriage work.”

“It has to do with couples being able to understand that people are who they are, and they aren’t going to change much. But they have to be willing to change some. Still, I think if it’s like a part-time job or full-time job to maintain, you’ve got the wrong person. It’s better to be alone.”

“That actually sounded about half-ass wise,” Leonard said.

“Just call me guru.”

“I’d rather not.”

“I will say this. You shouldn’t jump into anything blind, and you’re not, but it’s better, as the old adage goes, to have loved and failed than to not loved at all. I think I bungled that line up.”

“That business with Raul still hurts. I damn sure picked wrong there.”

“I still hurt from Trudy now and then, but not much. And Raul, he wasn’t like Pookie. He wasn’t a particularly good fit for you.”

“He was not. Neither was Trudy for you. I never liked her.”

“I know. She knew.”

We hit the bag for a while longer. We stopped talking and started hitting faster. Leonard was letting his punches come a little quicker, a little stronger, even on his injured side.

I was taking out my frustrations with Elda and her girls on the bag. I felt I was as much responsible for Jilly's and Tom's deaths as anyone other than Elda and the girls themselves. It had been my plan to set protection up there, and it hadn't been enough.

When we had decided to go out to the barn and hit the bag, I ran water into some metal water bottles after putting ice chips in them. We had those to drink from when we finally wore out and were heavy with sweat. It was really too hot to be doing what we were doing, but it felt good to have worked out. The water was satisfying. It made me think about the good water coming from the rock in the creek in the woods.

I considered showing the place to Leonard, then thought I wouldn't. Not yet, anyway. I had other plans.

59

Marion was taken away by Justin and a cop, and they drove her to Houston. They didn't tell us where she would be located. That was all right. We didn't need to know.

We remained on high alert, however. We tried to talk to Charlie again, but it didn't go any better than it had before. She was gaining the ability to talk better. There was less guesswork when she insulted us.

More meth dealers were being taken out and more customers were being poisoned by fentanyl, and Pookie was pretty certain one of the Hatchet Girls had been executed by someone else in the business, perhaps the Benefactor. They had killed her, decapitated her, shit in her mouth, and left her in the woods. The head was found on a stump with a meth pipe tucked in her crap-filled jaws. It definitely seemed like a message.

A needed rain had blown in earlier that day and had cooled things off by nightfall. I told Brett I had something to show her. She said that was good and she had something to show me.

She pushed down her shorts to display where her pubic hair had been. "I decided I didn't like the gray hair and shaved my pussy. I know you like it fine with the foliage, but it's my pussy."

"I think it looks very nice bald. Which is something I think I should say even if I already miss the carpet."

"I thought if I tried to dye it the same color as my hair, I might burn something down there."

"Something?"

"You know what I mean." She pulled her shorts up. "Now, what do you want to show me?" she said. "Did you shave your balls?"

"I did not. Let's get a few blankets and a pillow."

"What for?"

"Wouldn't be a surprise if I told you."

I also got a flashlight, as the light on my phone wasn't bright enough. We took pistols with us, knowing we were not yet out of the woods with Elda and the girls. I guided Brett with the light out of the house, across the pasture, into the woods, and to the bank of the creek.

“This hasn’t got anything to do with devil worship, does it?” Brett asked.

“No.”

“Snipe hunt?”

“No.”

I kept leading her along the bank, and finally we came to the rock with the water leaping out of it. I shone the light on the rock. That and moonlight slipping in through breaks in the trees gave it a silver, molten-lava glow.

“Found this place and was waiting for the right time to show it to you.”

“After you showed, Leonard.”

“No, you’re the first.”

“That’s nice, Hap.”

I spread the blankets on top of the rock and put the pillow in place. We took off our clothes and climbed on the rock and lay down on our blankets. The moonlight gave Brett’s long red hair a coppery appearance. She looked like a goddess that had come down from Olympus to hang out with an unworthy mortal.

We lay on the rock and listened to the water gurgle, felt the wind on our skin made cool from the rain. We kissed and made love on the rock, and it was good, but it was also a hard rock, blankets or no blankets.

Brett said, “I loved that, but I don’t want to do it twice. When I was on top, it was all right, but on bottom, that was a bit of a bitch.”

“You should have said something.”

“Didn’t say I wasn’t enjoying it. It’s a nice surprise, Hap. Beautiful out here.”

“It’s beautiful in the day too. Nice the mosquitoes stayed home. I was worried they might be thick here.”

“I’m sure sometimes they are,” she said.

We lay in each other’s arms for a while. The wind was still cool, the water still gurgled, the moonlight was still silver. I felt young in that moment and wiped clean of the mistakes I had made in life. Something that would obviously not last. But the joy of being with Brett would.

“You know,” I said, “nice as this is, I prefer our bed.”

“So do I,” Brett said.

We put on our clothes, gathered our goods, and with me leading with the flashlight, we headed back to the house.

We went inside and went to bed. We made love again, and this time it wasn’t so hard on the back.

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As the weeks passed, we continued to visit Charlie in the hospital. We were trying to wear her down. Justin kept her there because there were problems with her leg. It wasn't healing correctly. She had some kind of infection and they were pumping her full of antibiotics. They didn't want to move her to jail facilities because the things the docs needed were not easily available there. They had increased her guard. Now there were four cops guarding her. Two downstairs instead of one.

Charlie was not friendly, but she did seem to appreciate the few magazines and books we brought in. Turned out she was a reader. Who knew a Hatchet Girl would like a good mystery and a *People* magazine?

One late morning, me and Brett were there with her. Leonard was still on Charlie's shit list, and it was my belief that there he would remain.

I felt that Charlie might be loosening up some. Time away from Elda and her propaganda might not have cured her of her cultish beliefs, but I think it had taken the shine off of them. She could speak pretty well now, but she still wore the metal mouth, though certain screws had been adjusted.

Brett said, "Charlie, I know you are dedicated to Elda, but really, what has she done for you besides turn you into a murderer and a prisoner? You've been punched, shot, and generally messed up by all this. What do you gain by supporting Elda? She has moved on from you, girl."

"You don't know that," Charlie said.

"I know she sees you as a liability," Brett said.

"You don't know that."

"Okay, guesswork, but I think that's the case."

A nurse came in carrying a black bag. She was pretty, dressed in a blue uniform, and when she came in, Charlie sat up a little.

The nurse smiled at Charlie, then at us.

Brett said, "I used to be a nurse."

"Oh," said the nurse.

"I've never seen a nurse that carried a bag like that."

"It's a new idea. We carry things for checking the vitals in the bag. Much easier to move it around from patient to patient."

Brett studied the nurse. "That's unique."

"I don't know when you were last a nurse," the nurse said, "but there have been a lot of changes."

"I see," Brett said. "It has been a while."

"It might be good if you two could leave. Some of this needs to be private."

"I see," Brett said, and stood up.

I stood up too.

Still standing, Brett said, "I think we'll stay."

"You can't. Hospital policy. I have to check places she might not want you to see."

"That's all right," Brett said. "We'll look away."

The nurse started to argue, but then didn't.

"Okay, then," the nurse said, opening the black bag. Her face became bland. She looked at Charlie. "Actions have consequences."

"What actions?" Charlie said.

By then I understood what Brett had understood first.

This was no nurse, and what she was pulling out of her bag was no stethoscope.

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Lissie, don't," Charlie said as the nurse pulled a hatchet from the bag and raised it to strike Charlie in the head.

Brett leaned over the bed and grabbed Lissie's wrist but Lissie got free and swung the ax sideways at us but missed. I put a knee on the bed when she came back with the hatchet, caught her wrist.

I kept crawling over Charlie, trying to get a better grip on Lissie, but it was hard work. That girl was strong. She too had put her knee on the bed so she was better able to control my efforts. Charlie was trying to get out of bed, but with both me and Lissie on top of her, the cuffs, and the messed-up leg, she wasn't making any headway.

By this time Brett had made it to the other side of the bed where Lissa was. She grabbed Lissie's shoulder, pushed her so that her side was exposed, and began to hammer punch after punch into Lissie's kidneys. She had found her target, and she didn't let up or change her fists' destination.

I bet Brett hit that girl ten or twelve times. Quick rabbit punches. Lissie made a puking noise but didn't puke. Out from under her nurse dress, she peed on the bed, a yellow, ammonia-smelling stream. She kept peeing. It was like a dam had been opened. Now there was a bloody wet spot on the bed from those kidney punches. Lissie leaned forward enough that I was able to punch her in the face and twist the hatchet from her hand.

Lissa struggled off the bed and put her feet on the floor. She was less than a foot away from Brett, who in that moment, moving quick, her red hair swinging around her head, looked like a Valkyrie.

Brett slapped both her hands over Lissie's ears. Lissie cried out.

In response, Brett slapped her hands over Lissie's ears again. This time Lissie screamed and the door burst open and in came the cop from the chair by the door and not far behind him the lady cop that had been seated by the elevator.

They grabbed Lissie and threw her facedown on the floor and cuffed her. I saw the cops wrinkle their noses.

"She had a big wee-wee," I said.

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The cops took Lissie away, and Charlie, still in the pee-stinking bed, said, “I thought she had come to save me, but she hadn’t.”

“Elda sent her,” I said.

“I don’t know that’s true,” Charlie said.

“You should,” I said. “She convinced them you would talk. Probably told tales that she didn’t really trust you. Maybe you were trying to gain power, take over. She could have said anything, but you can bet Lissie didn’t decide to do that on her own. She thought she’d come in as a nurse, chop you, and escape. She didn’t expect us here, but once she was on the mission, she couldn’t stop and went for it. They may have called you Heaven, but now you’re Hell to them.”

“You don’t know that,” Charlie said.

“I know this,” I said. “She was going to part your hair with that goddamn hatchet.”

By now the two plainclothes police from downstairs had come in and not long after that Justin showed up in all his spit-shined glory, and then some legitimate nurses came in and Charlie was moved out of her bed and onto a gurney. One of the male officers went with them, and you can bet after the fiasco, he was on his toes.

Justin glared at him as he walked by with the gurney being pushed by the nurses. The officer tried not to look at him. He was probably wondering if he could manage a night watchman’s job somewhere. I actually thought he had responded as quickly as possible. That nurse outfit had duped him.

We went out with Justin, walking behind the gurney, the nurses, and the officer. They put Charlie in a bigger room and moved one cop inside; the other, the one that had walked with the gurney, was placed outside the door. Justin said no one, not even a nurse or doctor, went into her room unless they could prove who they were. Information on the doctors and nurses that would tend to Charlie were to be given, and the cops at the door and elevator were to be changed later in the day. By tomorrow the original guardians might all be looking for night watchmen jobs. Or night watchwoman, in one case.

We hung around downstairs because Justin asked us to wait for him. After some time, he came down and had us ride up with him again.

On the ride up, Justin said Lissa wasn't talking, but then again, she couldn't hear to talk. Brett had busted her eardrums. The girl's equilibrium was messed up too, and she couldn't stand up without falling over.

When Justin told Brett that, she said, "That's some tough shit."

Now Lissa was in the hospital as well, and Justin put guards on her, and without his former reluctance. Charlie had been trouble enough, but now he had another and he was determined to cease the screwups.

When Lissa didn't come back, I was pretty sure Elda would determine that trying to kill Charlie in the hospital was no longer a good plan. The one good thing about it was another Hatchet Girl was down and Elda would have no idea if she had reached Charlie before she was taken down. I think Elda by this point felt the Hatchet Girls were expendable.

But how many were left? Could she gain new recruits in a short time? I thought not. The girls she had were ones she had indoctrinated at the shelter. She may have started with some bold plan to eliminate the meth dealers and the sex traffickers, but that had gone to hell in a bucket of shit, and now she was just a meth dealer and a murderer. She had become a kind of female Charlie Manson. Would she pretty soon let the girls take meth to control them even more, the way the male meth dealers had done?

Inquiring minds wanted to know.

The hospital loaned Justin an office, and that was where he was taking us. He even asked politely if we would come in and sit with him. He played with a pen on the desk and doodled on a notepad for a few minutes. We sat and let him. I watched the light dance on his shiny hair. Then, to pass the time, I did multiplication tables in my head. I was surprised to find I didn't really remember them that well anymore. Was it due to age or lack of usage? As you get older, you start wondering if everything you used to do and can't do now is due to age.

Finally, Justin put the pen down, pulled the paper off the pad, and threw it in the wastebasket. He said, "You think Charlie was cracking?"

"No," I said. "But now she might. Being away from Elda, the other girls, she might be starting to think for herself. If just a little. She was Elda's second in command, and now she's got to be thinking she isn't exactly thought highly of. Nearly being chopped by a former comrade may have cleared her mind some."

"What I'm wanting to know is why Elda would plan such a thing," Justin said. "Trying to kill someone in a guarded hospital doesn't seem smart.”

“Lissa almost did it,” I said. “Brett saw through her.”

“I don’t doubt Elda planned it,” Brett said. “She knows when the girls get away from her, they have room to think, and doubt. She’s worried one of them might reveal where they stay or the places they stay, how their business works. Seems clear to me she planned for Lissa to kill Charlie, then walk out before anyone discovered Charlie dead. Me and Hap being there put Lissa in a crisis, but she was so programmed to follow orders, she went ahead with what Elda wanted. Probably thought she’d take us all out. It’s a stupid plan. Elda is paranoid. I don’t think she’s thinking so smart as she was at first. If she were any more mentally ill, she would be an entire asylum.”

Justin nodded, did his lip-pursing thing.

“You’re still talking to us,” I said, “so I figure you still want us in the loop and maybe to do things you can’t do, as always.”

“I didn’t say that,” Justin said.

“You don’t have to,” I said.

Justin gave us his wolf-smiling-at-a-rabbit look.

“No. I don’t have to.”

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Now that Marion was safe somewhere in Houston, we decided we had hidden out enough.

We were still being cautious but not entirely secretive. Me and Brett started going to the office. Leonard showed up every morning, just in case someone arrived with a polished hatchet and a bad attitude. He had the gym set up well enough it practically ran itself. Besides, Leonard said, “It’s only temporary, then I’m out of here.”

One morning, Brett said, “By the way, Belinda has stopped working for us. She got a better night job, working at a nursing home.”

“Good for her,” I said.

“I agree,” Brett said. “Not much here we really need her for. And it’ll save money.”

I had a package of peanut butter crackers. When I finished eating, as I was trying to explain to Leonard why Batman, not Spider-Man, was the coolest of heroes, as if this should require explanation, four men came through the door in a row, like ducks on their way to the pond. They were dressed in casual clothes and desert boots; they looked like they all shopped at the same store.

Well, three of them were dressed that way. The fourth, guy in the lead, wore a Hawaiian shirt with a variety of bright surfboards on it, as well as some tropical trees leaning left and right as if they were reacting to brisk winds competing with one another. The base color of the shirt was green. He wore a green ball cap that he took off as he entered the office. His blond hair was close cut. He had bright blue eyes.

He was about six five and was slightly pink-faced from shaving. He held his cap with both hands, wore a gold necklace with a cross on it. He didn’t really look like a fellow who loved Jesus. He looked as solid as a brick wall.

One of the men with him had yellow nubs for teeth and greasy hair and was skinny as an earthworm. He kind of bounced on one foot, then the other, like he had to pee. The other two guys were husky, bright-eyed, and angry-looking. Unlike Skinny they appeared to wash their hair and maybe even use shampoo. I was certain they were tough enough to wipe their asses with a wire brush.

They all looked ready to fight. I hadn't even had my coffee yet.

Brett opened her desk drawer. There was a pistol in there. She kept her hand close to it.

Leonard said, "Has anyone ever told you guys how cute you are?"

The big man laughed. "Constantly."

"What can we do for you, or to you?" I asked.

"Mind if we sit down?"

"Not at all," Leonard said, and stood up from the couch and sat on the edge of the desk, but not in the way of Brett's aim if she had to shoot someone. I was already standing, about to make coffee. I kept at it.

The big man sat down, but the others stayed where they were.

"I got some people know some things, and they came to us and told us stuff," the big man said.

"Hot damn," Leonard said, "a stuff meeting."

"And you've come here to tell us that stuff?" I said, watching coffee pour into my cup.

"I think I might."

"Why so many of you?" Leonard asked.

"Oh, we travel in packs. It's habit. There's guys and girls don't like us, right now mostly girls. We thought who doesn't like us might interest you guys."

"You thought that, did you?" Leonard said.

"I think all kinds of things, not all of them decent. I see that lady there, and my mind kind of wanders."

"Don't let it get lost in the weeds," I said. "I might have to get mad about it and mow your goddamn grass."

"Naw, it's cool," the big man said. "Cool, right, boys?"

They all made a noise that sounded like agreement.

"We have a business," the big man said. "People call me the Benefactor."

Ah, I thought.

"Could your business be illegal?" Brett asked.

"It could be, a little bit."

"How about a lot of bit?" I said.

"Fair enough. We got the biggest business doing the business we do here in East Texas, but that business is a little smaller than it used to be."

Things were starting to click.

"Could it have to do with a few lumber-jills with shiny hatchets?" Brett said.

"It could have to do with that," he said.

"Can we get an amen on that?" Leonard said. "Does it or doesn't it?"

Big man nodded. "Yeah. Who'd ever think some guys like us in the business we're in, selling go-juice and pussy, would be afraid of some little girls and a middle-aged woman, but I got to say, it's kind of come to that. Sales are down. And there's that fentanyl shit. It's killing the customers, which is slowing our business down even if we're not the ones selling that shit. We all get lumped in the same pile."

"Because you only use good ol' meth without the fentanyl," I said. "Sort of the health-food version."

"You might say that," the Benefactor said.

"Of course, it's just a slower death, like Skinny there," I said. "He's jonesing so hard the floor is vibrating. Or maybe he wants to try out our restroom."

"A family hire," the Benefactor said. "Whatcha gonna do? But these witches, they sell shit they know will kill, make some money, but mostly they're trying to kill our business with theirs."

"Can't you take care of them?" Brett said.

"We don't know where they are exactly. They show up now and then, kill our people, chop them up. You probably heard about the bodies popping up."

"Good to see you're concerned about your employees," I said. "Or at least the money they make you."

"You're like lawyers or priests, right?" the Benefactor said. "I tell you something, I have confidentiality."

"Not like that at all," Brett said. "That's a TV myth."

"Well, that's disappointing."

"What I can tell you," I said, "we're not blabbermouths about something you tell us in confidence. We get our tits in a wringer, we'll squeal like a teenage girl on a roller coaster."

The Benefactor sat silent and his lips moved around like they were trying to find a comfortable place to lie down.

"I guess we can leak a little and keep a little back," he said.

"That's up to you," I said. "Thing I want to know is, why us?"

"Doolin was our inside man," Benefactor said. "Kept an eye out, so to speak. Told us how you had a run-in with our people, the Planters. At first, Doolin thought it might be you three doing the chopping and burning, but about five minutes of research got rid of that idea. We thought the girls might be a myth. Doolin was checking into it. He found out they weren't no myth. They fucked him up, way I hear it."

"We saw what they did, and yes, you could call it fucked up," I said.

"Then solid word got around about the witches, what they were doing. They don't really hide what they're doing. My take is they want to bring me out in the open, cut my business off at the head. They've had more girls join in with them. I guess they got a team of ten now."

That was news we didn't know. More disenfranchised women joining the nut brigade. Not good. I hadn't expected her to recruit that easily.

"What you're saying is you're afraid," Leonard said.

"We ain't afraid," Skinny said. "Not of no women."

I ignored Skinny, said to Benefactor, "So you guys aren't afraid, but you've come to us?"

"We just want to hire some side help," he said. "We're running our business, a good business, and these girls show up with hatchets, surprise my people, skin them, chop them up, sometimes burn them. Then they take over the juice. That isn't good for business. No one wants to get skinned. These fucking women have become kind of like booger bears. Scaring our customers, killing our customers. We want that to stop. We want you to help us find them."

"Haven't you looked?" I said.

"Yes, but no cigar. We're not detectives. We're your local drug dealers. I got to get business right again. I hear you guys know how to get rough."

"Only if we need to," I said.

"Oh, I don't know," Leonard said. "I was born rough. Need to be or not, I'm rough. I got skin like an alligator, a dick like a corncob, and I'm vicious as a badger with turpentined balls."

Benefactor laughed. The others laughed because he did. Skinny laughed last, like he was the only guy in a theater.

"I guess you people will do," said Benefactor.

"Didn't say we'd do it," I said.

"Well, we need you because you can detect and already probably know a few things about them, but we can decide to make your life uncomfortable."

"We don't want your drug money," Leonard said. "And as for making us uncomfortable, I can make you more uncomfortable. Listen here, Benefactor. I'll stick you up one of those big guys' asses, then the other up his ass. By then, Skinny, it might be too tight for you, so I'll just stomp a mud hole in your ass."

"That's a lot for one man to do," Benefactor said, standing up.

"Oh, I got backup if I need it."

I smiled at Benefactor. Brett cocked her revolver. She did it while it was still in the drawer, but everyone in the room knew what that sound was.

Benefactor and the others had sour expressions, like they had mistaken a turd for a cookie.

They stood there awhile. No one moved.

"All right," Benefactor said. "Tell you what. We'll let it go, but if you change your mind and want to make about thirty thousand, I'm going to leave info. This number only works on one phone. Call it, you get me. I don't keep the phone long, so it's got to be pretty soon."

"No plans to call," Brett said.

"Just in case," Benefactor said and took a little booklet out of his back pocket, a pen from the front of his Hawaiian shirt. He wrote down a number, tore out the page, placed it on the desk.

"We'll go now."

"You do that," Leonard said, "unless you want to try some shit."

"Not today," Benefactor said.

They went out the door the same way they came in, like ducks in a row. They left the door open. I went over and closed it, but before I did, I watched them get into a big black 4Runner and drive away.

64

We were back on our toes again. I didn't think the Benefactor would bother us, not when he was hoping for our help, but you never knew with people like that. Truth was he wasn't the big shit after all, and he was scared. Elda and her crew by this point weren't amateurs. They had turned their kind of murder into an art.

There was a bit of potentially good news, however. Charlie, aka Heaven, had sent word through the police, the messenger being Pookie, that she wanted to talk to me and Brett. Leonard still wasn't invited. As for Lissie, we got news she wasn't doing so good. Those slaps had shattered her eardrums, or at least messed them up, and she couldn't tell if she was standing or lying down. She would heal, but she might need a hearing aid or to play her music loud.

Me and Brett drove over to the hospital. The guards knew to let us pass. In Charlie's room, the bed was raised and she was raised with it. She had been showered. She had some color in her skin and her hair was combed out. Before it had looked like a briar patch with a rabbit in it. Her injured leg stuck out from under the sheet. It had a wrap on it.

She had a tray on a stand that went across the bed. It had food on it. The hospital food was the sort only starving people ate, then after eating wished they had starved to death. Her utensils were made of plastic.

There were two chairs by the bed. Brett and I sat down in them. The overhead lights in the room were sharp, and the blinds were split and more light came in from outside.

When we were seated, Charlie said, "I been thinking."

"Yeah," Brett said.

"Yeah. Maybe you're right. Maybe Elda doesn't trust me so much. Not that I've given her reason not to."

"I doubt she really trusts anyone," Brett said.

Charlie nodded in agreement, then sat silently for a moment.

The moment passed. "She tried to have me killed."

"Did indeed," Brett said.

"I don't deserve that."

I wasn't so sure, but I kept my mouth shut.

"What hurts a little is Lissie couldn't tie two strings together and they sent her to kill me."

"Maybe she was easy to convince," Brett said.

"She was always jealous."

"That's probably it," Brett said.

"Has to be, but Elda could have sent someone good. Sending Lissie shows what she thinks of me."

"Sent someone good, you might not be here enjoying that wonderful meal in front of you," I said.

Charlie looked down at her tray. Only a bite or two had been cut out of a Salisbury steak. It looked like a tumor that had been pressed with a laundry iron.

"Elda has lots of money. She moved us around. She finally bought a place using a false identity. She has a lot of those. It's a nice place and was supposed to be for some kind of business retreat for bigwigs, but the business that built it didn't last through COVID. It was for sale and Elda bought it. It's off the beaten path. We mostly stayed there.

"I'm thinking I ought to tell you where it is, but I got to wonder if maybe Elda came after me because she was misinformed. Thought I wasn't loyal. That I did something I didn't do."

"Informed, misinformed," Brett said, "she was quick to think you were disloyal. She didn't give you much room for consideration. Seems to me that shows she never did trust you. All she was concerned with was the possibility. She thought Lissie would kill you, but she also thought Lissie might not walk out of here. Good chance she would end up shot full of holes. I think if Lissie got away, good, and if she did get shot up, that was good too. Both of you were expendable as far as Elda was concerned."

"I thought Lissie might have come on her own."

"Do you think she'd do something like that without consulting Elda?" Brett asked.

"No. I don't think so."

"There you have it," Brett said.

"Guess I'm going to tell you where she stays, then. Guess I will."

We waited to see if she was just guessing or meant it.

"That place I was telling you about," she said. "I don't know an address, but get me a pen and paper and have them take away this tray of swill, and I'll draw you a map. And remember, I do this, you're going to talk to the law, right? Say I cooperated."

"We'll talk to the law," Brett said. "We promise you that. Pinkie swear."

They didn't actually wrap their pinkies together.

I went to get paper and a pen.

65

We met Leonard at his gym, showed him the map, told him what Charlie had said.

"You're going to give this to Justin?"

"Seems the way," I said.

"You trust Charlie?"

"Not all that much," I said.

"I don't see it would do her any good to lie about this," Brett said. "I think she's starting to see the light and realize a train is behind it."

"She wants to not spend her entire life in prison," I said. "I don't know if the law will do what she wants, but it'll do better than she expects. Better than she deserves even if they only cut a week off her sentence."

"You've gotten more hard core than me," Leonard said. "Almost."

"They chopped my friend."

"I'm doing fine," Leonard said, "but a truck ran over her, I wouldn't bother to scrape her up if she was in my driveway. I wouldn't want her on my shovel."

"It's agreed," Brett said. "Nobody likes her."

"There's something wants me to hesitate here," I said. "Maybe not tell Justin right away."

"Is that something holding you back the Benefactor?" Leonard said.

"Ah," Brett said. "I see this coming. We tell the Benefactor first and let his people collide with the Hatchet Girls, but we don't mention that to Justin."

"What I'm thinking," I said. "Then we tell Justin a slight bit behind telling Benefactor. Tell Justin there might be some serious shit going down, so be extra-ready. We don't want them to walk into more than they expect, but we want the Benefactor to get there ahead of him and let those jackasses do to each other what we'd like to do."

"It wouldn't bother me if they did a bit of tribal warfare," Leonard said. "Maybe we end up there too. Armed and vengeful for Tom and Jilly and for chopping at me. I really don't like them, Hap. I really don't."

"Not a fan myself, but as to ending up there, no need."

"But maybe we do, as I'd like to see that shit go down," Leonard said. "It's more than a little bit personal. I want to bust some heads and crap down some necks."

"I'm saying we stay out of it, or we might get cross-fired by Benefactor, Elda, and Justin. No need for us to take chances at all, and maybe the law will get justice instead of vengeance. I'm tired of being the Angel of Death. We get both groups squeezed by the law, we've done a good thing and none of us get hurt. You've got a wedding to attend, Leonard. Best to not show up dead."

Brett drove us home. I was feeling worn out. The world kept getting heavier and I kept getting weaker. I wanted to sleep on the water rock in the woods. I wanted to sleep there when it was night and the cool wind was blowing and the leaves were crackling and the limbs were shaking and the water was splashing and gurgling. I wanted to sleep there on thick blankets with Brett. I also wanted to be twenty years younger and twenty pounds lighter and, just to throw it in, I needed a haircut.

I looked in the wing mirror while Brett drove. A car was close behind us, blue, a Prius. A woman was driving. I started to wonder if we were being followed. Then, as we passed a middle school, the car pulled in line behind other cars waiting to pick their kids up.

Okay, Hap. Here we are possibly on the tail end of all this crazy business, and you're starting to get paranoid.

"You okay, Hap?" Brett said. "You look a bit pale."

"I'm fine. Brett, are you happy?"

She grinned. "Yes. I'm not euphoric every second of the day, but I'm okay at my worst moments and really good at my best. You?"

"I don't know," I said. "You make me happy."

"Of course I do," she said. "I'm me."

66

Next morning, I woke up a little late. There was a note from Brett. She had gone to the office and had let me sleep. The note said she thought I needed it. To take my time.

She wasn't wrong there.

I made a cup of coffee and decided to get my mind off things. I read awhile, then walked down to the rock in the woods, but this time I wasn't as filled with wonder as before.

Too much on my mind. In fact, there was something at the back of my brain I couldn't quite identify. It felt as if it were surfacing from a deep pond, like a bloated, drowned body.

I walked back home, sat on the couch with the book again, and when I looked up, midday had passed and the book was nearly read.

I called Benefactor and told him that tomorrow he should take a look at the address Charlie had given me. Ought to go early tomorrow morning, before daylight. I said that way he could catch them napping. To keep him from smelling a trap, I told him he could give us that money he promised, that we wanted it.

He said, "What I'm thinking is my posse is kind of watered down, and from what I hear from survivors of their attacks, my employees, so to speak, the girls have added members and given them brand-new hatchets. I would go in if I had some help. I'm thinking that money I promised goes with that. You and Leonard coming in on it. I don't know about your lady. I think she looks too soft for that."

"You're wrong," I said. "But we never said anything about going in with you."

"Why I'm thinking maybe you ought to, to put some skin in the game for the dough."

"I can slide out of this any way and anytime I want. I gave you what you wanted, where they are and when they can be surprised. I said tomorrow morning before daylight because they change residences a lot. I know where they are now, but maybe not in a day or so."

"Still not to my advantage with the number of men I got to go in after them. They're a bunch of women, but they're crazy women with guns and hatchets and probably some full gas cans. They got the numbers on us, so I'm saying thanks but no thanks."

I could tell he was scared of those women and trying to find excuses despite wanting to put them down. He had come to appreciate their deadliness.

"That's up to you," I said.

"The money stays with me."

I didn't want the money, but I wanted him to think I did. It made it seem more real.

"I should have gotten the money before I told you the address," I said.

"That's right. You should have."

I let him think I was considering his plan. I watched the clock's second hand move around the numbers. After thirty seconds I said, "We can meet you there tomorrow morning, say four a.m."

"And then you no-show? No, thanks. We meet up and go in together."

"Let me ask Leonard," I said.

"Ask him. This money, this deal, has an expiration date."

What he didn't know is neither me nor Leonard wanted his money or his deal. Well, maybe Leonard would have gone through with it. In spite of his retirement talk, gym owning and being a husband and having plans to adopt a kid, I could tell earlier at the gym that he was ready to fuck someone up. At the back of it all, he was addicted to action of all kinds; it built up in him like boiling water and then it would boil over. He was on the right track with his life. And I didn't want to be an enabler when it came to violence.

I would first talk to Brett about it, then Leonard, then we'd go to Justin. We could plan a meet with Benefactor, have Justin arrive instead. But to do what? Benefactor and his boys wouldn't be caught making or dealing drugs, just assembling. And the way Texans were about guns, no one would be legally bothered that they were armed to the teeth. They could just say it was their right to tote guns without permits.

I had guns myself, but I had avoided a love affair with them.

Still, I was a hypocrite, and it pained me. Like Leonard, and even Brett, I was a killer. A self-righteous one, but a killer.

I thought over my plan and how Benefactor had thrown a monkey wrench into it. Decided we had to play it his way, at least for a while. I needed someone else to improve on my flawed idea.

It was late afternoon by the time I drove into town to tell Brett and Leonard how things were, see what they could add to the idea of meeting up with Benefactor and his boys. When I was about fifteen minutes out, I called Brett to tell her I was on the way, then Leonard. I told them what the Benefactor's plan was about and how we needed to talk and consider.

I was starting to feel paranoid. Saw the blue car again, same one I thought was following me before. Or maybe it was just another blue Prius and not the same car.

The car pulled over at a Dollar General. I glanced at it in the rearview mirror. A young woman got out and went inside the store. There were others in the car.

I let my breath out in a relieved sigh and drove on.

Random thoughts jumped about.

Did they know where I lived? Was that Prius following me and had they dodged into the store to trick me? I was no longer relieved.

How could they follow me if they didn't know where I was coming from? I considered on that, pulled over to the side of the road by an abandoned filling station. I got out and crawled under the car and used my phone light to look around. There was a little beeping light. I took hold of the source of the light and pulled at the magnet that held it to the frame of my car.

A tracker. They had probably put it there the night they had come to the office to bury a hatchet in our door. It had been quick and easy. Drop down, stick it on, then drive away in their van. Maybe another time when we were at the office one of them had cruised into the lot and put the tracker there.

They had known where we were all along. Just waiting for the moment. But I wasn't going to give them that moment.

No, sir, not me.

I wiggled out from under the car and stood up facing it, dropped the tracker on the ground, and crushed it under my heel.

A shadow fell over me. I turned, and there were three women with hatchets. The blue car was nearby with three car doors open. A Prius, its engine quiet as a mouse in house shoes. The one that had stopped at the Dollar Store. They had pulled up on me while I was under the car. They were stealthy bitches, that was for sure.

The first I kicked in the crotch and made her stagger. She went down and grabbed my legs, knocking me off balance. I went for my gun in a holster clipped under my shirt at the back of my pants. I managed to get hold of it but dropped it.

Nice.

The one holding my legs had one hell of a grip. As I was losing my balance, one of the other Hatchet Girls swung the back end of her hatchet at my head.

I tried to duck, but I was a bit late with that plan.

I swear I could hear the wind whistling just before the flat end of that hatchet caught up with me.

67

My head hurt so bad, I thought something angry was living inside of it, kicking the furniture about, tossing the dishes. Then I was suddenly wet and chilled and then the chill went away and I opened my eyes.

The room was full of light and women with hatchets. Six women, anyway. I recognized a couple of them from the time they had been in our parking lot and from when they had attacked me and nabbed me. One was the woman I had seen go into the Dollar General, accomplishing the equivalent of a head fake.

Then I realized there were seven women, counting Elda, who was standing close to me with a plastic bucket in her hands.

I had been splashed awake. Water dripped from my hair and down my shirt front.

Elda looked leaner than when I had seen her last. Her hair was tied back so tight the flesh in her face was pulled taut as a boat sail in a hurricane wind. The bones in her cheeks were sharp enough to use for letter openers. There was something about her eyes that appeared different. They seemed darker and deeper and merciless, like the eyes of a shark.

The windows outside showed me that it was solidly night. I had been out for a while. To my right, one window looked out over a yard, and there was a yard light that gave the grass an emerald appearance. Beyond that was a patch of trees, and the trees were thick and shadowy.

“I thought you’d be harder to corner,” Elda said.

“Me too,” I said. My voice seemed way too loud and rang in my head like a church bell.

My arms and legs were widely spread. My wrists were fastened to a wall with cuffs that were screwed into the wood. My ankles were secured the same way.

I had what you might understatedly call a bad feeling.

Elda moved close to me, her face almost touching mine. I did everything I could not to seem scared, as I felt that would delight her. It would be like throwing gas on a fire. But that doesn’t mean I wasn’t scared. I was terrified.

“What do you think, big shot?” she said.

"I think you have a very nice place."

"Does your voice tremble, Mr. Pine?"

It had indeed.

One of the girls, thin and anxious, dressed in jeans and a loose shirt, said, "This is Collins."

"Oh, my mistake," Elda said. "One man is the same as another to me."

"Poor experiences?" I said.

"Oh, you are precious. Poor experiences? There's not enough bandwidth to list them all. When you walk down the street and a woman is approaching you, do you fear she might attack you, rape you, perhaps strangle you? Of course not, but women feel that way when men approach. They know who the aggressors are. They know who the users are. They know who thinks they are less than human because they are female, not male."

"I agree with all that," I said. "Secondhand, of course."

"Agreeing doesn't change things, Collins. Women will always be a pretty package to your breed. Something to open like a Christmas present and then discard. Someone to control and do their bidding. But today, Collins, we are going to open you up and throw you away. Like my daughter was thrown away."

I didn't think a few words on how I wasn't like those men was appropriate. Her mind was made up that all men were vermin. But I wasn't anxious to be a stand-in for her empowerment or the empowerment of her Hatchet Girls. The whole speech was designed to torture me mentally and emotionally, make me anticipate the part that was coming, the physical torture, followed by slow death, cut and peeled, eventually chopped, possibly burned like an old tire.

It was effective. I felt like I was about to pee on myself.

Therefore, I couldn't believe what came out of my mouth. "You do what you must. It's bound to be better than a fucked-up villain lecture."

Elda turned her head to the side. "Do you not see you are the villain, little man?"

"Not that little. Six foot even," I said.

I think I'm actually just short of that without boots or shoes, but hey, what the hell. I figured what was about to happen was going to make me somewhat shorter anyway.

"Men's egos," she said. "You just had to let me know you're a real man with an adequate height. Do you want to talk about your dick size?"

"I don't want to say complimentary things in front of it. It already has a big head."

Elda tossed the plastic bucket aside.

"I can guarantee you it will fit nicely in your mouth. Darla, will you bring Mama a hatchet?"

Darla was the thin nervous girl. She came forward and gave Elda her hatchet. The light winked off the blade as Elda turned it over and over in her hands. She had the itch to use it, and I was absolutely certain she was about to scratch that itch.

She tossed the hatchet up, and the light made a shadow of it and the shadow was big on the wall, and when the hatchet fell, Elda caught it almost without looking, and she swung it behind her back and pushed her other hand behind her to take it, and now she was swinging it with that hand, over her head, between her legs. She flipped it and caught it a few more times. As she did this, my dick and nutsack tried to crawl up inside of me.

"I was a twirler at football games, exhibitions. Quite good. I did it for my daddy, who liked the twirlers and cheerleaders and liked me too, but not in a good way, as they say these days. My mother died young. My father decided I should take her place in all things that he deemed female.

"I twirled for him, and I twirled for them. The boys in the stands. I tried to express sex appeal as I did it. That was my job. My father always told me that was my job. To look pretty. To be sexy. I tried so hard to be pretty. Perfect in my little shorts and tight top and sequins and boots with fringe at the top. Fortunately for me, he died before I finished high school.

"And then came the knives and axes. I saw a TV show with a female knife thrower. She had axes too. And she could hit a penny from across the room by throwing either an ax or knife. She had a male assistant. And he was fastened to a spinning wheel, and she could throw weapons so close, she pinned his clothes to him but didn't touch him. Before I had only seen women targets. That's what they called them: targets. Seeing that, something in me said, 'You can do this,' and with lots of practice, pretty soon I could. But I confess to you, Mr. Collins, I didn't want to miss my male targets. I wanted to end my act by splitting open the bastard's head. I thought about that a lot. I used to watch my abusive husband sleeping in bed, and I had a butcher knife, and I thought what it might be like to stick him, maybe stand back and throw it at him. Poorly balanced knife, though, so sticking was more practical. I didn't do it, but that's okay, he died and I inherited his money. So much money. Hard for a woman to earn that kind of money, not being able to talk shit with the boys and such, swing a dick around.

"Being good with deadly weapons felt good. It gave me a power I hadn't had before. I went back to practicing with them after my husband departed, and I hope he went straight to hell where the devil will skin him and burn him with the help of female demons. I dreamed many times of chopping and sticking men, the ones who make this world sour as curdled milk. And when my daughter was killed, eventually I saw how that might happen. I've taught my girls. My young women. Some are better than others. All are lethal, Mr. Collins. Shall we see what they can do?"

"I don't guess that's truly a question," I said.

"It is not."

"What I thought."

"I believe you do not understand the glory on which I stand. The empowerment I give to myself and other women."

"A handful of murderous women with hatchets isn't the kind of empowerment that means anything more than death or life in prison. Most women go through whole days not chopping somebody and being glad for it."

"That's a simple way to look at things, Collins."

"It is indeed."

"Assemble," she said.

It was like she was the head of the Avengers from the comics. And in a way, I guess she was. Except these characters were not made of paper, ink, and colors. They were flesh-and-blood and angry, a cult of vengeance against males. They were not without some justification, but in my view, not enough for this.

I considered, just out of spite, screaming, "I love pussy," but I didn't see that as constructive.

The women made a line along the back wall. The one in the lead stepped forward a couple of feet and slapped her hatchet in her hand a few times.

"When you're ready, Eloise," Elda said.

And before I could imagine Eloise moving, the hatchet was in flight, tumbling over and over, and to me it looked like it was heading straight for my head.

68

There was a thud as the hatchet blade stuck in the wall. I could feel a sting on my ear, and then there was warm blood rushing across my cheek, rolling down my chin, dripping onto my shirt. I could smell the blood.

"Eloise is pretty good," Elda said. "Some, like Darla, have promise, but sometimes Darla misses the target. If she tries to throw a hatchet between your legs, she might just take your balls with it. But how else will she get practice?"

"A paper target?" I said. I wasn't being brave. It was one of those things that had cursed me since youth: a big mouth. But it wasn't like pleading would help. This deal was done. The Comanche warriors used to taunt their torturers to show their mettle. But I was no Comanche warrior. Just a frightened bag of flesh with a smart mouth that I couldn't help using.

"Darla?" Elda said. "Just nip him if you can."

Darla stepped forward. She was grinning as she moved into place. She had a shiny hatchet blade with a red handle. She wore an oversize yellow T-shirt that said YOGA IS A WAY OF LIFE, shorts, and heavy brown boots with white socks poking out at the tops.

She shook her ass a little, adjusted her feet. The grin was gone. She narrowed her eyes.

Elda had moved to the side and back of the room. She said, "Aim for someplace so that if you miss, it may not kill him. Right away anyway. I like for us cats to play with our mouse."

I tried not to flinch. It wouldn't help, and if she truly was trying only to wound me, it would be better not to move even a little bit. Still, pinned to the wall as I was, staring at a face that had shifted its expression and appeared fiendish, I could put all my hopes into a sack and throw them over the fence and down a canyon. Now or later, they were going to do horrible things to me. Maybe it would be better if she didn't just wound me and got it over with.

The ax was thrown so quickly, the movement surprised me. It tumbled over and over and dropped low, and the blade caught my pants leg inside near my groin and pinched my flesh, and once again, I could feel warm blood trickling, this time in my pants leg, running quickly down to my shoe and inside it, dampening my sock.

Elda laughed. “Too low. More practice. Charm. Your turn.”

Charm was a stocky woman with a flat-top haircut and no expression. She could have been sawing the head off a puppy or buying toilet paper; you couldn’t tell with that face.

She stepped into position and looked at me and took a deep breath.

Elda said, “Take one of the ears off this time. By the way, Collins, Charm can do it. She’s the best I’ve got. Almost as good as me. Take the left ear. Can you do it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Charm said.

I got the feeling Charm would do anything Elda asked, from sticking an electric toothbrush up her ass to eating a live mouse dipped in dog shit.

I waited for it.

Charm leaned back a little, readjusted her feet, lifted her arm. I hadn’t turned my head, but out of the corner of my eye I saw a shadow move in the light in the yard, and then the shadow lifted something and the window blew out and Charm’s head blew off.

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Parts of Charm's head moved apart fast and splashed on one of the Hatchet Girls and some of it hit the wall, including a piece of her scalp with her hair attached. It slid slowly down the wall like a creeping animal. Charm was on the ground with her ankles crossed. She lay there oozing blood and brains out of what was left of her skull.

The door was kicked in. It slammed against the wall. Leonard glided into the room like Dracula. He had a twelve-gauge pump shotgun. He said, "Howdy, asswipes. Drop the fucking hatchets."

Hesitation on their part.

Leonard blew a hole in the ceiling.

"That will be my only wasted shot," he said and lowered the barrel of the shotgun at Elda.

Leonard was being measured. Normally he would have come in shooting, cutting everyone down until he was out of ammunition.

Elda moved as if to pick up the hatchet Charm had dropped. "Don't shoot, Leonard," I heard Brett say. "This one's mine."

Brett was at the window poking a double barrel through the gap. Jagged glass protruded all around the frame. The Hatchet Girls dropped their weapons. The axes thudded onto the floor.

"I got one more barrel just for you, you brain-dead cunt," Brett said, staring at Elda. Brett looked like a Viking berserker as she stood at the shattered window poking the shotgun inside. Her flaming-red hair framed her face like frozen blood.

While she pointed her shotgun, Leonard came over and jerked the wrist-cuff screws out of the wall like they were darts. The ankle ones were more difficult. He tugged at them, then stood up and threw the barrel of the shotgun over his left arm and aimed it at Elda with his right.

"Come up with a key or I start shooting, bitch."

"See how easy it is to call a woman a bitch," Elda said. "Or a cunt."

"Just solid identification in this case," Leonard said.

Elda dug in her pocket, produced a key. She came over to Leonard and handed it to him. He took it in one hand and with the other he poked the shotgun's barrel into her chest and pushed her back.

Brett moved away from the window and a moment later came through the door Leonard had kicked down on the opposite side of the room.

Leonard placed his shotgun on the floor and used the key to unlock the ankle cuffs while Brett pointed the barrel of her gun in the direction of the women, who had now bunched together like sheep.

When the ankle cuffs were free, Leonard picked his gun up off the floor and stood up. He gave me the key to finish with unlocking the cuffs on my wrists.

I did that; the cuffs and the short chains and attachment screws clattered to the floor.

Headlights shone through the woods. They were coming closer, dancing around the tree trunks like will-o'-the-wisps. The lights kept moving, circled into the driveway, stopped. The lights were pointing at the house, which was lit up like an operating room.

Leonard said, "I hope you clowns can run fast or you got guns somewhere, 'cause you're gonna need them."

The three of us hustled through the broken-down door and moved across the back of the property and into the trees. We found spots in the woods not directly behind the house but off to the side of it. In that position we could see the cars and trucks in the yard, beams still pointing at the house. Doors slammed. Shadows moved in front of the vehicle lights.

One of the shadows was easy for me to identify.

Benefactor.

70

Elda and the Hatchet Girls did in fact have guns stored somewhere, and they seemed to find them just in time. They started firing out windows, but there were too many men, and they were all men. They came around the sides of the house. Elda went out the back door and stumbled onto the bit of grass out there.

She had been hit. A clean shot through a window, or perhaps the wall had been breached by heavy-duty ammunition. She had a gun in one hand, hatchet in the other.

Benefactor came around back. When he saw Elda, he lifted a pistol and fired at her. Elda jumped a little but still stood. She fired at Benefactor and the bullet appeared to miss. Then she threw the hatchet as he fired again. His bullet hit her solid and she doubled over, then moved toward the woods.

Benefactor had a hatchet between the eyes. He dropped his gun and walked a few paces, stopped, tried to pull the hatchet out of his head. That didn't happen. He fell face-first, driving the hatchet in deeper.

Elda staggered into the woods. She came along the trail we had used to get to the side of the house. She walked right up to us and fell over.

I eased over to her and looked at her face in the dark. I couldn't see well enough to describe the expression on her face. She said, "If only…" and then was silent.

Everyone was now in the yard. The women died quick. Too many guns on the men's side, not enough on the women's side.

Pretty soon the guns stopped firing and the night went quiet and still. There were two of the Benefactor's men left. They were going to be leaving a lot of cars and trucks. They still had their guns. One of them was Skinny. I didn't see the other guys who had come to our office. They were probably lying on the ground with mouths full of dirt. The one with Skinny was new to me.

Skinny had an injured arm and had stuck his hand into his shirt front to support it.

The men looked about, as if surprised any of this had happened. They looked at Benefactor lying facedown on the ground. The man that wasn't Skinny used his foot to roll Benefactor over. The hatchet was buried deep now. Benefactor was well beyond a remarkable recovery.

Skinny fell to one knee. The other man helped him up. They went to the front of the house and got in a car, backed it up, and drove away.

The other headlights shone bright in the night.

I could hear sirens in the distance.

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Brett led us through the woods and then out of them and finally into another patch of trees that broke open onto a narrow clay road. Leonard's truck was parked there.

The house had certainly been off the beaten path.

Leonard and Brett slid their shotguns behind the seat. Leonard got behind the wheel, Brett slipped into the middle, and I rode shotgun. Considering I was the only one without a shotgun, that was slightly ironic.

I turned and looked over my shoulder. At the mouth of the road where it hit a blacktop, a cop car whizzed by with the lights flickering colors, and then it was gone.

The law wasn't exactly sneaking up on anyone.

Leonard waited awhile, then turned the truck around with the lights off. Once turned around, he eased down the road toward the blacktop. It was hard to see, but he was managing.

When we were within fifty feet or so of the blacktop, Leonard parked, got out, walked to the blacktop, and carefully looked both ways.

He came back, climbed into the truck, and drove us out of there. We were pretty far down the blacktop before Leonard turned on the headlights, and we cruised home as if we had merely been out for an evening drive.

72

At the house, my ear wearing a Band-Aid, I sat at the kitchen table watching Leonard eat vanilla cookies like a cookie-eating machine. Brett told me how things had gone down and why.

"When you didn't show up, I got worried, of course. I tried calling and texting. But I have a tracker on my phone. I called Leonard and we went to where the tracker led us.

"We found your car and the crushed tracker and your phone where you dropped it. Seemed obvious you had been Hap-napped.

"Since we had talked about the Hatchet Girls' place with Charlie, it seemed likely you had been taken there. They wouldn't know we knew where it was. Or at least I didn't think so. It was iffy, but we were right."

"You were right," Leonard said. "I just agreed with you it was likely."

"We drove out there, and on the way, hoping you were there, I called Benefactor, told him that you and I talked and we weren't going to help him, but if he wanted them, he ought to immediately go to the address I gave him. We had intel they were packing up. Benefactor said he didn't want to give us the money unless we showed up there. Said he had put together a larger crew than he'd thought he could, but if we came on, joined him, we could profit financially. Pretty sure he planned to get us there and kill us after we helped him take down the women. I told him we wouldn't be there. Me and Leonard thought we could find you, and if you weren't chopped up in a bucket, we'd take you away and let Benefactor and Elda deal with each other."

"If you were chopped and in a bucket, we'd bring the bucket home and bury what was left of you in the flower bed," Leonard said.

"That's nice of you."

"But it worked out just the way Brett planned. Got any milk?"

"Where do you think milk would be if we had any? The oven?"

"Right," he said, got up, and pulled a carton out of the refrigerator.

"You know where the glasses are," I said. "What about the law? How did they know to show up?"

"Just before we pulled up, I called Justin, told him I heard Elda and Benefactor, the dope kings, were about to have it out, and here was his chance to get them both. I didn't mention we were going to be there."

"All very nifty," I said. "Of course, I'm sure he's wondering how you knew all about that little rendezvous."

"I got answers for that," Brett said.

"Bet you do," I said. "For God's sake, Leonard. Don't choke on the cookies."

"I've been deprived at home. Pookie only allows so many boxes a week. I mean, hell, I work out. I'm not fat. He says it's too much sugar, not good for me. Thing is, vanilla cookies make me happy. I get through with these, I'll top it off with a Dr Pepper."

"Don't have any," I said.

"You Philistine," he said.

73

Justin invited us out for breakfast and coffee at a little diner that looked to be on its last legs. I had forgotten it existed. It smelled like fried eggs, grease, melted sugar, and a poorly kept hospice.

I had two scrambled eggs and two strips of bacon, coffee so weak it wore a back brace. Me and Brett, Leonard, and Justin were seated at a back booth that gave us some privacy. There were three others in the place, and they looked disappointed with themselves for showing up there.

Justin said, “Do you have an idea why I invited you here?”

“You love our company?” Leonard said.

“No,” Justin said.

“Eating here is part of our punishment?” Brett said.

“You wanted me to show you my dick,” Leonard said.

“Again, no and no.”

“Because you want to talk to us about something you don’t want to say at the police station?” Brett said.

“That’s it.”

I stirred my fork around in my eggs, managed to get the last runny bites to settle on top of the tines, and ate it. It wasn’t good but I was hungry. By the time we had arrived at nine a.m. I could have eaten the ass out of a menstruating horse.

“There was some activity on the Hatchet Girl case,” Justin said.

“Really?” I said.

“You three can stop acting innocent. Brett, you told me something was going on and where to go, and when we got there, there were nearly enough bodies to cover the lawn like a carpet. Shot and chopped people lay all over the place.”

“How big was the lawn?” I asked.

“Again, don’t act innocent.”

“We knew about the place from when we talked to Charlie. We didn’t tell you about it because we wanted to check the address and see if there was a house there, and there was. We were sneaky.”

We hadn’t done this, but I thought it was probably the right thing to say. Even if Justin was some kind of ally, not letting him know we were there was most likely a good move.

"So you knew this was going down how?" Justin said.

"Some things Charlie said gave us an idea it might, and soon."

That was an enormous lie.

"Look, a fly," Leonard said. A big fat one landed on Leonard's cleaned plate and skated in the grease. A fly Olympian skating for the gold.

Justin sighed.

"I'm saying I know you three were there. I know that as sure as I know how to point to the sky."

"You know what I learned recently," Leonard said. "They squeeze dogs' anal glands and it's good for them. It's not random anal-gland squeezing."

"What the hell?" Justin said.

"You can tell they need it because they get stinky breath and smell like someone overturned a tuna boat. I didn't know that. I've had dogs a lot of my life and never once did I do any anal-glad squeezing and wasn't aware if my veterinarian stuck his hand up their butt to do some squeezing or not. I'm going to ask next time I see a vet."

"What?" I said.

"Yep," Leonard said. "It's a real thing."

"It is," Brett said. "Jesus, Hap. Didn't you know that?"

"My dog has had it done," Justin said. "But to get back to why you're here, it would be helpful for me to know a few things about that night."

"You just hope we were there so you have another thing to hold over our heads, blackmail us with if something new comes along and you need us to break the law for you," Brett said.

"You think I'd do that?"

"Absolutely," Leonard said.

We found out more from Justin than he got from us. Bottom line was the Hatchet Girls were all dead and so were all the members of the drug gang. Of course, Justin didn't know we had seen Skinny and one of the members of the gang drive away.

What had happened wouldn't end drugs being sold in and around LaBorde, but it would put a dent in it for a while, and it had certainly disrupted the Hatchet Girls.

Justin, obviously frustrated with us, had the tired middle-aged waitress fill his coffee cup again. The fly had finally finished its skating performance. It settled in the waitress's hair as she walked away.

"I wonder if we humans need our anal glands squeezed," Leonard said. "I'm going to see if Pookie will squeeze mine."

"Trying to have breakfast here," Justin said.

"I wasn't talking about him doing it here at the table," Leonard

said.

Justin, realizing that he was getting nothing from us, drank his coffee with a frown on his face and called for the check.

"Why, thanks, Justin."

"I'm just paying mine," Justin said. "You're on your own. You can go when you want or squeeze anal glands here in the booth after I'm gone. Come on, though. Were you there? Did you see if anyone escaped?"

We said nothing.

The waitress brought the check over. Justin gave her his credit card, said, "They'll pay theirs."

She went away with the card and bill.

Justin said, "Don't expect any favors from me."

"And expect none from us," I said.

"Well, I got none from you."

"Exactly," I said.

"Actually, depends on how you look at it," Brett said.

The check came back and Justin filled out the tip amount and signed it. I could see he went for 10 percent. Cheap bastard.

"What about Charlie?" I said. "She gave us the information we gave you. We told her you might put a good word in for her."

"Brett gave me a call and we went out there. That's slight."

"Bullshit," I said.

"Shit, hang her," Leonard said. "And there was another little skank, wasn't there?"

"Lissie," Brett said.

"Noose her up too."

"They don't use nooses anymore," Justin said.

"Bring back that custom is what I say," Leonard said.

"Don't listen to him," I said.

"I don't."

"Mark my words," Leonard said. "You get a dog, you'll be glad I told you about anal-gland squeezing."

Justin ignored Leonard.

"I'll tell the DA Charlie gave me valuable information through you. He'll do what he does. It's not like we owe it to her. You weren't in any position to make a deal for her. Maybe I can take execution off the table and she can spend her life in prison without parole. The one tried to kill her will get a harsher sentence. You know, I could tell the DA another thing, that you withheld information you got from Charlie."

"But you got that information," Brett said. "Once we were sure the place she told us existed, you were told."

"That's splitting hairs," Justin said.

“Why should we want you to go on a wild-goose chase and waste the time and money of our valuable police department?” Leonard said.

“That’s weak,” Justin said.

“Oh, I don’t know. I think it’ll hold up pretty well,” I said.

I could tell from Justin’s expression that he actually thought it might.

Justin got up to leave, stood by the table looking down at us. He said, “I really hate you guys.”

When he walked away, Leonard said, “That wasn’t very nice, now, was it? I mean, ‘hate’ is a strong word. Right?”

“Right,” Brett and I said at the same time.

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Now that the business with the Hatchet Girls was out of the way, the thing that had been bothering me for quite some time tried to resurface. I was beginning to see pieces of it and they were large enough to take hold of and I was starting to click them together. But there were still gaps.

On an afternoon while Brett was at the office, I went over to the gym and officially agreed I was coming in with Leonard, but first I was going to take a week off.

“So you’re in, but first you want a vacation?”

“I haven’t started yet,” I said. “I’m telling you I can start a week from now. Make that eight days.”

“Hell, Hap. Make it ten, and maybe I can give you a bonus for the delay.”

“Just got some things to do.”

“You’re having your anal glands checked for squeezing, right?”

“See you later, Leonard.”

I drove over to Belinda’s, asked if she and the kids wanted to go to the petting zoo. They did. All except Baby Darling rode in Belinda’s car.

At the petting zoo Belinda wanted to make small talk. I wasn’t up to it. I still had things on my mind. I went over to Porky’s spot while the kids and Belinda loved on goats, rabbits, and the like. Porky was preoccupied with the food in his trough.

Finally, Baby Darling came over.

“I like science,” she said out of the blue.

“That’s good.”

“I like so much science, I don’t know which kind I prefer.”

“Study as much of it as you can. That ought to sort it for you.”

“Mama said going to college might not be in the cards due to money.”

“Perhaps you could get a scholarship if you do well in school. You got time. You’re still a kid.”

“I know. I don’t feel like one, though. Still, Mama can’t see where the money is coming from.”

“You might get a job when you’re older, in high school, stick enough back to get going. Scholarship on top of it, which wouldn't be hard for you, you'd be cruising."

"Think?"

"I do. You've got what it takes, kid. You can do it."

She nodded, but I could see she was doubtful. That wasn't an unreasonable position to take.

Porky finished up his chow, recognized us, and trotted over, snorting. I reached through the wide board fencing and patted him on the head, scratched his nose. Baby Darling patted him too. He grunted with pleasure.

Baby Darling joined her siblings and they went all in on a bunch of sheep. I watched them for a bit, then turned back to Porky.

"You know something bad, Porky, do you think you should always reveal it?"

Porky didn't seem to have an opinion on the matter.

When all the animals were well patted, we left. I drove Baby Darling back and dropped her off with Belinda and the kids. I told them goodbye and drove away, still thinking about some things that were bothering me.

I had to make a decision.

Before I made a definitive decision, I decided to go to Half Price Books in Tyler, Texas. I bought a Stephen Graham Jones novel. I went across the lot to a Thai place and had some spicy soup. I sat there and sipped and thought.

When I was finished with that, I drove over to Barnes & Noble. I looked around. I didn't buy anything and at that moment in time there didn't seem to be anything I wanted. I went into the little bar where they served Starbucks coffee, had a venti decaf with soy milk and two artificial sweeteners that I'd heard might cause a cancer. There were painted images of famous writers on the wall. I sipped my coffee and tried to see if I knew them all.

I did.

The coffee was good. I took my time and drank it slowly.

I went out and sat in my car, turned on the air conditioner, and read some of the Jones book while I was in the Barnes & Noble parking lot.

After a while, I drove to a clothing store and bought some socks. I didn't need socks and could have bought them in LaBorde.

The puzzle pieces I had been considering were now all present and they clicked together.

* * *

It was just falling night when I got to Belinda's house.

The house next door was still empty. Porky's former home, the pen and the shack we had built for him, looked ready for a new resident. I parked in front of Belinda's place and got out.

The air had turned coolish. I walked up on Belinda's porch and stood in front of the door. I could hear the TV going. Sounded like a game show. Someone had just won a car and there was much clapping and playing of loud music. I stood there on the porch until the music and clapping went away, and then I stood there some more and listened to some talking on the TV.

Finally, I knocked.

Belinda came to the door in one of her classic muumuus. This one was blue with large yellow flowers on it. It looked new. She had lost a bit of weight.

"Hap. I wasn't expecting you."

"I know. But I needed to talk to you."

"If it's about me going to work somewhere else, it's not personal. I just needed more money."

"It's not about that at all," I said.

"Come in."

"The kids here?"

"They're having an overnight with friends in town. They are making more friends, doing good in school, and Baby Darling is killing it. They moved her into a gifted class."

"As they should. Can we sit on the porch and talk?"

"Let me turn off the TV."

She did that. I went and sat on the glider and waited for her.

She came out, closed her new door gently, seated herself on the glider.

I said, "Let me say it right out. When they found your daughter out back. You said she had on orange shoes. Right?"

"That's right."

"She had been killed by blunt-force trauma. Something clawlike hit her head."

"How I remember it. Yes."

"When you found the body, and when me, Leonard, and the others went out and looked at it down there, slipping out of the ditch wall, it came to me that I didn't see any tennis shoes. Her feet were covered in dirt. You said you saw them. You made a point of it. But you couldn't have."

"I could have imagined it. Expecting it. Knowing she wore them all the time."

"I suppose that's possible."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that Sharoline had gone rogue, and you and her had a dreadful argument. You got mad, grabbed the tourist back scratcher off the wall, and struck her with it. Hard enough to kill her. Might have been a lucky shot, but that's my take. You buried her. You remembered the shoes and assumed they would be seen. That's because you knew she was wearing them because you were the last one to see her while she was alive. Right before she died."

The glider moved slightly as Belinda shifted.

"You're calling me a murderer?"

"Here's the thing. I doubt you did it on purpose. But you did it."

"She was definitely a sociopath," Belinda said.

"You killed her and buried her because you feared she might hurt your other children, and I can understand that. If that's true. I just have your word for it. And a few stories here and there about Sharoline from others."

"Are you going to try and prove I did it?"

"Thought about it. I did. I really did. I'll put it like this. You maybe did all you knew to do to protect your kids and yourself. That's what I'd like to believe. Don't speak, please. Listen. I'm setting up a college fund for Baby Darling. I'll have it arranged to go to her when she turns eighteen. If she goes off the rails before then, I can cancel it, but there's no reason she should."

"Meaning you don't think I'm going to kill her with a back scratcher."

"Listen to me, Belinda. I'm going to go away and will never say I told you this. I didn't tell my wife or Leonard. I haven't told anyone. Don't make me regret this choice."

"I'm a good mother, Hap."

"Except for that whole killed-one-kid-with-a-back-scratcher-and-buried-her-in-a-ditch part."

"Except for that. But I swear, she gave me no choice. She was going to hurt me, maybe kill me. She shoved me against the wall and I grabbed the back scratcher, swung it, and caught her upside the head. She went down and didn't get up. I panicked. I buried her out back. Poorly, because I was in a hurry. I meant to go and bury her better, but I couldn't make myself do it. I loved her, Hap. But I didn't like her. I knew in the end she would do something really bad."

We sat there for a while listening to crickets and frogs in the ditch out back.

"Baby Darling needs something, or the other kids, you can contact me," I said. "Best by phone. Otherwise, you and me are done."

I stood up from the glider.

"Goodbye, Hap."

"Goodbye, Belinda."

I walked out to the car and drove away. I felt dampness on my cheeks. What the hell was that from?

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Pookie and Leonard surprised us by nixing a traditional wedding venue. They invited us to their wedding conducted by a justice of the peace at the courthouse in a small room with a few juror seats. There were a handful of other people there; some I knew, some I didn't.

Pookie's relatives, my daughter, Chance. and her ward, Reba, were among them. Chance looked like a very mature young woman. Reba looked like a sassy teenager instead of the sassy child she had been. There's only a slight bit of difference in those two states.

After the brief ceremony, Leonard was talking to one of the guests I didn't know. Me and Brett took that moment to pull Pookie aside and ask about their decision, the dropping of a venue search.

He said, "It was just too much. That kind of thing turns into a nightmare. I wanted it to be a certain way, and Leonard didn't care what kind of way it was."

"Sound exactly right," I said.

"I was getting caught up in the wedding more than being married, and in the end, I agreed with Leonard. It didn't matter. I think we only legalized it because now we can. I like us pissing in the faces of those rednecks that think marriage is only for a man and a woman."

"I know this," I said. "Leonard loves you."

Brett seconded that.

"And I love him," Pookie said.

For a celebration, we all went to a Mexican restaurant, paid for by me. Small talk was made. Pookie and Leonard sat so close, they could have used one chair.

Leonard truly looked happy.

It made me happy. I reached out and held Brett's hand for a moment. She smiled at me.

Reba sat to my right. She was looking down at her food, not eating. "You okay, girl?" I asked.

Her dark, shiny face showed very little until she narrowed her eyes. "Could have gone to McDonald's," she said.

"Could have. But didn't."

"They got them pies."

"They certainly do."

Chance sat across from her. "We finish here, we'll go through the drive-through and I'll buy you a pie."

Reba said, "That works."

"But you have to eat your lunch."

"I'm a grown woman, and you're telling me to eat my lunch?"

"You're not that grown," Chance said.

Leonard smiled, said, "So, the Four-Hundred-Year-Old Vampire still runs the show."

"Know what you can do," Reba said.

"Yes, but I think instead, I'll have another taco. Later, Pookie can do to me what you think I should do to myself."

"Shut that up," Pookie said to Leonard. "Have some manners for a change. She's a child."

"Not really," Leonard said.

There was more juvenile joshing, and then it was over, and Brett and I were driving home.

"What do you think?" Brett asked me.

"About what?"

"About Leonard and Pookie. That going to work out?"

"I think so, but who the hell knows."

"Lots of changes going on," Brett said.

"That's for sure the truth," I said.

That night me and Brett went down to my rock. We didn't have sex this time, because we didn't want our backs to hurt. There was a time when I could have fucked on a bed of nails and not been bothered. Now dust in the bed irritated my skin. I was like "The Princess and the Pea."

We sat on the rock and listened to the water and looked up through the splits in the boughs at the stars. They were bright. The air was cool.

I said, "Killing that girl at the Hatchet Girls' house. How do you feel about that?"

"Better her than you."

"Does it bother you?"

"You know it doesn't. A thing like that is done, nothing I can do one way or another about it. I don't regret it. I move on. I'm fine."

I didn't say anything to that. There was truly nothing to say. I believed her. I wished I was that way.

We sat there for a long time before we gave it up and walked back to the house using my phone light. We went to bed. No sexual activities were involved.

I could hear a night bird singing in a nearby tree. Frogs and crickets seemed to have formed a band. Thank goodness they didn't have drums.

We held one another until we drifted off asleep.

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BOOKS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joe R. Lansdale is the author of nearly four dozen novels, including *Rusty Puppy*, the Edgar Award–winning *The Bottoms, Sunset and Sawdust*, and *Leather Maiden*. He has received eleven Bram Stoker Awards, the American Mystery Award, the British Fantasy Award, and the Grinzane Cavour Prize for Literature. He lives with his family in Nacogdoches, Texas.

ALSO BY JOE R. LANSDALE

THE HAP AND LEONARD NOVELS

Savage Season
Mucho Mojo
The Two-Bear Mambo
Bad Chili
Rumble Tumble
Captains Outrageous
Vanilla Ride
Devil Red
Honky Tonk Samurai
Rusty Puppy
Jackrabbit Smile
The Elephant of Surprise
Sugar on the Bones

OTHER NOVELS

The Magic Wagon
The Drive-In
The Nightrunners
Cold in July
The Boar
Waltz of Shadows
The Bottoms
A Fine Dark Line
Sunset and Sawdust
Lost Echoes
Leather Maiden
All the Earth, Thrown to the Sky
Edge of Dark Water
The Thicket
Paradise Sky
More Better Deals
Moon Lake
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SELECTED SHORT STORY COLLECTIONS

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The Best of Joe R. Lansdale

THE BIG BOOK OF HAP AND LEONARD

PARTICLE BOOKS

JOE R. LANSDALE

"A true American original."
—Joe Hill, author of *Heart-Shaped Box*

Praise for Hap and Leonard

[Starred] “Last seen in the novel Honky Tonk Samurai, Lansdale’s incomparable East Texas crime fighting duo show their chops in this remarkable story collection. Hap Collins, a straight, white liberal, and Leonard Pine, a black, gay conservative, have long challenged genre conventions, and the friendship and camaraderie between these two hard cases as they suit up against injustice and hypocrisy is at the heart of these seven tales. In the novella “Hyenas,” the boys help save a client’s impressionable younger brother from the clutches of a group of psychotic robbers. “Dead Aim” finds the pair taking on the Dixie Mafia after a seemingly straightforward cheating spouse case gets a tad more complicated. “Not Our Kind” is set against the backdrop of the late 1960s, when a teenage Hap first befriends Leonard and faces the racism and intolerance of his peers up close. Readers can also look forward to the debut of the TV show Hap and Leonard on the Sundance Channel in March.
—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

“Seven laid-back adventures, one of them brand new, for 'freelance troubleshooter' and good old boy Hap Collins and his gay black Republican partner Leonard Pine. . . . No one currently working the field demonstrates more convincingly and joyously the deep affinity between pulp fiction and the American tall tale."
——*Kirkus*

“As Mr. Lansdale might say, 'This was more fun than rolling down a hill with a bunch of armadillos.'”
—*Horror Novel Reviews*

“. . . it’s great to have all of these wonderful stories together in one nifty volume”
—*Horror Drive-In*

“It has all the hard to find short stories featuring Hap and Leonard, the most enjoyable mismatched pair of private eyes since Spenser and Hawk.”
—*Sons of Spade*

“East Texas charm, profane wit, and strong characterization, with enough snappy dialogue to keep a smile on your face . . . excellent entertainment, edge-of-your-seat action one minute, gut-busting humor”
—*Adventures in Genre Fiction*

“This collection is crime/pulp fiction at its best and most captivating.”
—*Risingshadow*

“short, concentrated bursts of everything that makes the series so good.”
—*October Country*

“If you find yourself on the wrong side of Hap and Leonard, be cautious, because they are quicker than a rattlesnake, and their bite

is just as bad. If you find yourself an innocent bystander looking for a great book to read, you've come to the right place."
—*Killer Nashville*

"If you are a fan of the genre and looking for a new character to get into, Hap and Leonard won't steer you wrong."
—*LitReactor*

"For those new to either Lansdale or the series, this latest collection is an excellent introduction to the kind of trouble these two often find themselves in; all the while exchanging some of the funniest, lovingly antagonistic, and memorial dialogue of any crime series."
—*Bookgasm*

"If you haven't read any of the dozen or so Hap and Leonard novels, start here."
—*Lone Star Literary*

"A perfect introduction"
—*Booklist*

Praise for Joe R. Lansdale's Hap and Leonard series

"Hap and Leonard function as a sort of Holmes and Watson—if Holmes and Watson had had more lusty appetites and less refined educations and spent their lives in East Texas. . . . Not only funny,

but also slyly offers acute commentary on matters of race, friendship and love in small-town America.”
—*New York Times*

“Lansdale reveals the human condition—our darkest secrets and our proudest moments, all within the unlikely confines of an East Texas adventure featuring the two scruffiest protagonists in modern crime fiction.”
—*Booklist*

“Hilarious. . . . Addictively scarfable. . . . Lansdale excels at dialogue, especially Hap and Leonard’s lewd insult-a-thons. . . . Two thumbs-up, and pardon the barbecue smears.”
—*Texas Monthly*

“As usual, the dialogue is deadpan tart and the action extreme but convincing. . . . Lansdale once again proves he’s the East Texas master of redneck noir.”
—*Publishers Weekly* (on *Hyenas*)

Praise for Joe R. Lansdale

“There’s no bullshit in a Joe Lansdale book. There’s everything a good story needs, and nothing it doesn’t.”
—Christopher Moore, author of *Secondhand Souls*

"[Joe Lansdale has] a folklorist's eye for telling detail and a front-porch raconteur's sense of pace . . . a considerable literary intelligence at work."
—*New York Times Book Review*

"Joe Lansdale is a born storyteller."
—Robert Bloch, author of *Psycho*

"Joe Lansdale simply must be read."
—Robert Crais, author of the Elvis Cole and Joe Pike novels

"Read Joe Lansdale and see the true writer's gift."
—Andrew Vachss, author of *Shockwave*

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—*Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*

Also by Joe R. Lansdale

Hap and Leonard mysteries

Savage Season (1990)
Mucho Mojo (1994)
The Two-Bear Mambo (1995)
Bad Chili (1997)
Rumble Tumble (1998)
Veil's Visit: A Taste of Hap and Leonard (1999)
Captain Outrageous (2001)
Vanilla Ride (2009)
Hyenas (2011)
Devil Red (2011)
Dead Aim (2013)
Hap and Leonard (2016)
Honky Tonk Samurai (2016)
Hap and Leonard: Blood and Lemonade (2017)
Rusty Puppy (2017)
Jackrabbit Smile (2018)

The Drive-In series

The Drive-In: A "B" Movie with Blood and Popcorn, Made in Texas (1988)
The Drive-In 2: Not Just One of Them Sequels (1989)
The Drive-In: A Double-Feature Omnibus (1997)
The Drive-In: The Bus Tour (2005)
The Complete Drive-In (2009, omnibus)

Ned the Seal

Zeppelins West (2001)
Flaming London (2005)
Flaming Zeppelins: The Adventures of Ned the Seal (2010)

Other novels

Act of Love (1981)
Texas Night Riders (1983, as Ray Slater)
Dead in the West (1986)
The Magic Wagon (1986)
The Nightrunners (1987)
Cold in July (1989)
Batman: Captured by the Engines (1991)
Tarzan: The Lost Adventure (1995,with Edgar Rice Burroughs)
The Boar (1998)

Freezer Burn (1999)
Waltz of Shadows (1999)
Something Lumber This Way Comes (1999)
The Big Blow (2000)
Blood Dance (2000)
The Bottoms (2000)
A Fine Dark Line (2002)
Sunset and Sawdust (2004)
Lost Echoes (2007)
Leather Maiden (2008)
All the Earth, Thrown to the Sky (2011)
The Ape Man's Brother (2012)
Edge of Dark Water (2012)
Hot in December (2013)
The Thicket (2013)
Black Hat Jack (2014)
Prisoner 489 (2014)
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Hell's Bounty (2016)
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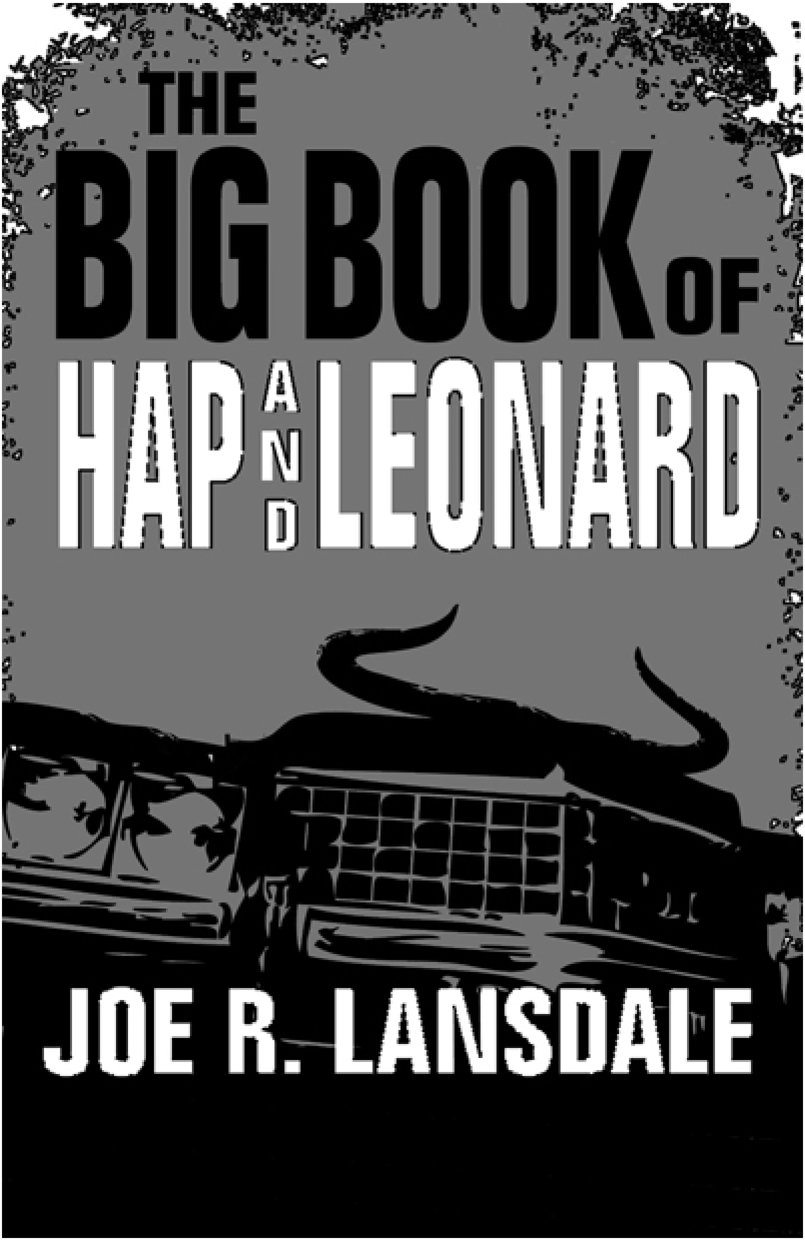
THE BIG BOOK OF HAP AND LEONARD



THE BIG BOOK OF HAP AND LEONARD

JOE R. LANSDALE

The Big Book of Hap and Leonard

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tachyon@tachyonpublications.com

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To the memory of my friend and wonderful human being, Bill Crider.

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Foreword

by Rick Klaw

Joe R. Lansdale can be a pain in the ass. That's why this book exists.

Hap and Leonard collected all of the not-so-dynamic duo's previously published shorter adventures (circa 2016) plus the original story "Not Our Kind," basically everything that's not a novel, in one handsome volume. This being the 21st century and all, an ebook edition was required. And therein lies the problem.

Seems Joe had promised the digital rights to the novellas "Hyenas," "Dead Aim," and the short story "The Boy Who Became Invisible" to another publisher than Tachyon. So we could wait until 2018 for the ebook, when the rights reverted, or figure out something else. We opted for the latter.

The ebook *Hap and Leonard Ride Again* contained all of the material present in *Hap and Leonard* except for the trio of stories mentioned above. Since the remaining material scarcely made for a book, we added the original short story "The Oak and the Pond," the Marvin Hanson novella "A Bone Dead Sadness," Joe's comic script adaptation of "The Boy Who Became Invisible," my interview with Joe, and an original remembrance about the creation of Hap and Leonard by Bill Crider, who sadly died while we were putting together *The Big Book of Hap and Leonard.*

When Joe offered us the rights to “Hyenas,” “Dead Aim,” and “The Boy Who Became Invisible,” we decided it was best to combine the two editions into this one super—dare I say big—book you hold in your virtual hands.

Sometimes a pain in the ass leads to gold. Not sure if this qualifies as such but if not, it’s damn close.

Rick Klaw, editor
Austin, Texas
February 23, 2018

An Appreciation of Joe R. Lansdale

by Michael Koryta

Different writers have different goals, but there are—or should be—some constants. Here are a few: memorable characters, original voice, stories that make the reader feel something.

I can think of many writers who have achieved those things. Then I think of Joe Lansdale, who has achieved them, lapped them, and redefined them. This wonderful collection of the tales of Hap Collins and Leonard Pine is—somehow—just a taste of the Lansdale oeuvre, but it is a delicious one.

Memorable characters? Meet Hap, a former social activist and a “white trash rebel,” and Leonard, a black, gay, Vietnam veteran and Republican voter. In the hands of many writers, this mix would be disastrous, an overwrought pairing designed to conceal inauthentic storytelling. In Lansdale’s hands, not only does the duo work, but they seem natural together, playing off each other in beautiful fashion. The dialogue exchanges between these two, as typified in the novella “Hyenas,” are filled with more gems than a jewelry store:

“Well,” Leonard said, “in cases like that, the gut is often right. We

still know a shark when we see one. That's why we crawled out of the water and became men in the first place. Only thing is, some of the sharks crawled out after us."

"That would be the lawyers," I said.

There's a smile on every page and an outright howler on every other, but it's in the momentum of the stories that I've always found the true genius. Hap and Leonard do a lot of chatting, sure, a unique patter that seasons their adventures, but they're always in motion, and the dialogue is truly in service of the story, not the other way around. A lot of writers with a gifted ear for dialogue—and Joe has one of the best ears around—can get caught in a trap built by their own abilities, creating wandering exchanges that don't do much except show off. Joe's stories are constantly in motion, and the dialogue reflects that:

"Ready?" I said.

"I was born ready." Leonard said.

"Scared?"

"I don't get scared."

"Bullshit."

"Okay, I'm a little scared. Let's get it done before I get more scared."

We started walking.

There you go—they started walking. They're going somewhere, these two, and you'll find yourself turning pages at paper-cut speed to keep up, watching a remarkable feat where Joe Lansdale balances violence and humor, tension and howling laughter, in a way that feels organic, unforced, and perfectly original. Each story or novel seems to begin in mid-sentence, with the sense that you'd best hustle along and catch up or you're going to be left behind. There's a confidence to the prose that is simply masterful, a trust in both voice and reader.

There is also—and I think this is overlooked in the Hap and Leonard stories—a hell of a lot of wisdom. Amid the fun and between the punches, there's the voice of a writer who at times resembles Twain himself—and, yes, I really mean that, and, no, I do not say it lightly or easily.

In "The Boy Who Became Invisible," a story of Hap in his early years, Lansdale does more than make the reader feel something—he makes you hurt. The early pages, a story of seemingly casual schoolyard bullying, show the making of the man we will know as Hap.

That hit me pretty hard, but I'm ashamed to say not hard enough, Hap thinks of his own role, his moral acquiescence to something beneath him. His one-time friend, Jesse, is becoming a target of ridicule, and what Lansdale has to say about it speaks not just to schoolyard torment but to the dangers of group think, of what happens when you compromise personal integrity to just go along with the flow. When the kids laugh at Jesse, you'll hurt for him, and hurt for Hap, I assure you. But better than that, and more impressive—you'll hurt *because* of Hap. And because of yourself. That is when the character-reader bond has reached an emotional height, and it's a special experience.

When Jesse spoke to me, if no one was looking, I would nod.

We all carry memories of shame, embarrassment over our own conduct. Lansdale isn't directing you to examine them; he's too good a writer for that. The reflection is a product of the story, and all the great things—laughter, fear, profundity—that come from his work will *always* come from the story. While many writers repeat the show don't tell cliché, Joe Lansdale lives it. If you don't believe me, wait until you get to the last line of "The Boy Who Became Invisible." See how long that one lingers.

Again, this is merely a taste of a remarkable body of work. That's staggering to consider, and inspiring.

I just have a knack to aim at something and hit it, Hap reflects on his shooting ability in "Hyenas," and that's the way reading Lansdale feels—effortless talent, a knack so natural that he just leans back in his chair, puts his feet up, and spins a yarn. Meet him in person, and you'll leave thinking the same thing, that this stuff comes easily, that he shares great storytelling as naturally as most of us exhale.

And I'm here to tell you it's bullshit.

Does Joe Lansdale, like Hap Collins, have one hell of a lot of natural talent, a "knack" for hitting stories out of the park and dropping one-liners that are the envy of professional comedians? Sure. Does it come easily? No. It comes from a lifetime of dedicated work, a man committed to craft, a man so aware of how story works and why that he can fool us into thinking it's effortless. William Blundell once said, "Easy writing makes hard reading. Hard writing makes easy reading."

I think of that line when I read Hap and Leonard, and when I read Joe Lansdale in general. I think about how smooth these stories go down, each line so razor-edged, each action scene so perfectly choreographed, and I think—this guy has worked awfully hard so the reader doesn't have to.

You have in your hands a collection by a master. Enjoy it, treasure it, and as you breeze through with a smile on your face and some head-nodding over bits of polished wisdom, be damn grateful that Joe Lansdale has put in the work to deliver it so well. I assure you, the writing is not easy.

But the reading? It's an absolute joy. You'd best get started. Hap and Leonard are already in motion, I assure you, and you're going to want to catch up.

Michael Koryta is the *New York Tim*es bestselling author of eleven suspense and horror novels.

Joe R. Lansdale, Hap and Leonard, and Me

by Bill Crider

I like to tell people that I'm so old I can remember when Joe Lansdale said he didn't think he'd ever write a series. He may deny he said that, and I can't prove that he did because I wasn't wearing a wire at the time. But that's the way I remember it, and I should put a disclaimer in right here. Everything that I remember is suspect and might not even be true. I'll paraphrase Mark Twain here (I'll get back to Twain later) and say that my memory is so good that I can remember things that didn't even happen. Those things are true to me, however, and I think it's worth setting some of them down so that future literary critics can mine my comments for information. They're a little bit of the history of Texas writing from the perspective of someone who was around to witness it, whether his memory is reliable or not.

Let me start from the beginning.

I first met Joe R. Lansdale on April Fools Day back in 1979. He may not recall that, either, but I'm certain on this point. It was probably an appropriate day for us to meet, too, though I thought nothing about it at the time. We were both at the AggieCon X, a science-fiction convention at Texas A&M University. The guests of honor that year were Theodore Sturgeon and Boris Vallejo. Wilson Tucker was the toastmaster, and he told us that the War of 1812 was fought in 1814. You could look it up.

Neither Joe nor I was a well-known writer at the time. I'd published pretty much nothing except a lot of reviews of crime fiction and a few essays about it in various fanzines. Joe might well have been selling fiction and nonfiction by that time, but it wasn't anything anybody would have heard of. As incredible as it may seem, some of it might not even have been reprinted. However, in spite of his relative obscurity at the time, I'd seen Joe's name attached to a few reviews and letters in some of the same fanzines I was publishing in, primarily one called *The Mystery FANcier*, and because he was from Texas, his name stuck with me.

I didn't cross Joe's path during the convention itself, or if I did, I don't remember it. On the final day of the con, my late wife, Judy, and I were in the Memorial Student Center where the convention was held in those days. We were getting ready to leave and had headed back to our room to get our luggage. As we walked down a hallway near one of the entrances to the dealers' room (I could take you to the exact spot even today), we stopped near a young man and woman. I was trying to decide whether to make one final run through the dealers' room, and I didn't really notice the man because the woman was (and still is) much better looking. Judy told me to forget the dealers' room, and we were about to move on when I happened to glance at the man's name tag and saw that he was claiming to be Joe Lansdale.

I'm not usually a guy who'll open a conversation with a stranger. I'm socially awkward and the very picture of an introvert (quite the opposite of Joe, as I learned), but Judy and I had been wandering around the convention all weekend without speaking to anyone, and I thought we might as well get acquainted with one person. So I introduced myself. Joe seemed a little suspicious at first when I told him that I knew him from another fandom. Maybe he thought it was some kind of April Fools joke. However, after I told him that I'd read his letters and reviews in *The Mystery FANcier*, he relaxed and pretended that he recognized my name, too. He introduced his wife, Karen, and we talked for a few minutes. Not long, but long enough to exchange addresses. Almost as soon as we got home, we began a correspondence.

This correspondence was conducted in the quaint manner of the time, by means of typewritten letters on paper that was folded, placed in envelopes, and put in the U.S. mail, after which time the letter would reach the recipient within a few days. It seems like a tedious process compared to email, but it worked just fine for me and Joe. We became friends by way of our letters, and every year we'd get together at AggieCon and talk about the same things we wrote about in the letters: writing, reading, movies, TV, and just about anything that interested us. There was hardly anything that didn't interest us, to be honest, and the discussions were wide-ranging, indeed. We covered just about everything, from why Mars needs chickens to why Winston Churchill said (or didn't say) that the British naval tradition was nothing but "rum, sodomy, and the lash." Shoes and ships and sealing wax probably got into the conversation, too.

Many more people than Joe and I got involved in these discussions. A number of couches lined the hallway where we met, and often two or three other couches would be dragged to where we were. People sat on the floor, as well. The core group for many years consisted of me and Judy, Joe, Scott Cupp, Willie Siros, and Neal Barrett, Jr. I can't remember all of the others who dropped by, but I know that Tom Knowles, Lewis Shiner, Henry Melton, Kurt Baty, Bill Page, and Jayme Lynn Blaschke showed up at one time or another. Sometimes the convention guests would stop and talk, too. I know that Greg Bear and David Drake did when they were the guests of honor.

Whatever else we talked about, the main topic was always writing. Not that everybody there wanted to write and publish, but most of us did, and a lot of us succeeded. Neal, of course, had succeeded already, and Joe and I were working on it. In 1981, both he and I published novels. His was *Act of Love*, a novel about a serial killer on the loose in Houston. It was published by Zebra Books, with one of its many fondly remembered knives-in-fresh-fruit covers. Joe's had an impaled strawberry, I believe. Mine was *The Coyote Connection*, one of hundreds of Nick Carter novels in that long-running series. It was written in collaboration with a friend, and here's a big difference between me and Joe. I would have been quite content to spend the rest of my life writing Nick Carter novels, and I might well have done just that had the editor who liked the proposals my co-author and I sent her not moved on. Joe, on the other hand, had no intention of spending the rest of his life writing novels about serial killers.

That was because Joe had more than talent. He had ambition, and he had a powerful confidence in his writing. I had neither one, and after the new Nick Carter editor nixed the proposals my co-author and I had sent to the previous editor, I took a look at the other novel I'd been working on and stuck it in a desk drawer and forgot it.

Joe kept writing, but he didn't stick to crime. From the very start, he was mashing up genres and selling a good many stories while also writing all kinds of things that nobody would buy. He didn't let the things that didn't sell bother him. He was too busy with books like *The Nightrunners, The Drive-In,* and *The Magic Wagon* to worry. In 1989, he published *Cold in July*, which I think of as something of a breakthrough novel. It was a crime novel, but it wasn't like *Act of Love*. It was about ordinary people in East Texas who found themselves in an extraordinary situation, with some savage violence but with some humor and a core of humanity and decency that would distinguish Joe's books from then on.

A few years before *Cold in July*, I'd pulled my abortive novel out of my desk drawer because Joe had suggested we collaborate on a book. I sent him the fifty pages I'd written, but he soon sent them back. His career had started to take off. All those things that nobody would buy were selling now, and he didn't have time for a lengthy collaboration. And he said that the manuscript was fine just like it was and didn't need anything from him to help it along. I eventually finished the book on my own and sold it.

When I got the acceptance letter for my novel, the editor concluded by saying, "You are working on a sequel, aren't you?" The honest answer to that question would have been, "Nope. I never dreamed I'd sell that book, much less another one." This wasn't the answer I gave, however. I said, "Of course I'm working on a sequel." Soon after I sent that letter, I was at the typewriter (this was a long time ago, remember), and the Sheriff Dan Rhodes series is still going as I write this, with nearly twenty-five books and a lot of short stories in it now.

Which brings me at last to Hap Collins and Leonard Pine, the dynamic duo of East Texas who first appeared in *Savage Season* in 1990. It was a paperback original, and nobody who's seen the cover with its dramatic painting of a woman's hand with a nail driven right through the middle is likely to forget it. I remember considerable discussion of that cover at the AggieCon after the book appeared. Would people buy a book with a cover like that, or would they be put off by it? We never came up with a definitive answer, though we all agreed that it was an accurate depiction of the contents.

The other topic of discussion related to the book was about series characters. By that time, I'd published five books in the Sheriff Rhodes series, so I considered myself an expert on the topic. Joe said he didn't like the idea of writing a series. It was too confining. He had too many ideas, too many different books he wanted to write, too many genres he wanted to explore and mash together and generally manhandle. I expect that explains at least in part why it was four years before a second Hap and Leonard novel appeared. By that time a lot of people must have thought the first one was a stand-alone instead of just a great first act.

But I know how it is with writers and characters. When you write a book, the characters don't just go away. They hang around in your head, and sometimes they talk to you. Sometimes they tell you such good stuff that you can't resist sitting down and writing a few sentences about them, and before long you find out you're forty or fifty pages along in what's about to become a much longer manuscript. So you keep writing things down until the characters shut up for a while.

Hap and Leonard must have been pretty insistent talkers, because after *Mucho Mojo* appeared in 1994, the books about them came out with some regularity: *The Two-Bear Mambo* (1995), *Bad Chili* (1997), *Rumble Tumble* (1998), and *Captains Outrageous* (2001). Then the guys went quiet for eight years. It's not that Joe wasn't writing. He was writing a lot, winning about every award there was, including the Edgar presented by the Mystery Writers of America for Best Novel. His bibliography is mighty impressive.

The boys were back at last in 2009 in *Vanilla Ride*, followed by *Devil Red* in 2011, and a couple of novellas, *Hyenas* in 2011 and *Dead Aim* in 2013. A new novel, *Honky Tonk Samurai*, is out in 2016. Not to mention the short stories, several of which are included in this volume. For someone who didn't think he wanted to write a series, Joe's done very well by his characters, and they've done well by him.

And what characters they are. Hap Collins is a working-class kind of guy who, by what must be the merest coincidence, shares a little bit of Lansdale's own background. Joe didn't go to prison for refusing to go to Vietnam as Hap did, but he did oppose the war on moral grounds, and he did refuse to be drafted. Once he makes up his mind, he's like another famous Texan, David Crockett, whose motto was "Be sure you're right, then go ahead." Joe never backed down, and he didn't go off to war. You could probably look up the court case if you were so inclined. Hap didn't back down, either, and served his time in prison. He's still a peaceable sort most of the time, and he doesn't much like guns. Leonard once told him that he had "more bleeding heart than the Democratic Congress." But hurt one of his friends or threaten them, and it's another story. Readers can be forgiven if they get the feeling that had Hap gone to Vietnam, he'd have kicked out the Viet Cong in a few weeks, especially if he'd had Leonard to help him.

Leonard Pine, unlike Hap, isn't a peaceable sort at all. He's black, gay, and often angry, eager to kick anybody's ass at the least excuse. He did go to Vietnam, and when you think about it, that would make both him and Hap about ready to go on Medicare and draw Social Security, assuming they ever paid into those programs, which isn't entirely likely considering their occupations, or lack of them. It's a good thing that fictional characters don't age like us mere mortals, or Hap and Leonard would be having a tough time keeping up their active lifestyles.

Although they sometimes find themselves working as unlicensed investigators for P.I.s named Marvin Hanson or Jim Bob Luke, Hap and Leonard have most often taken on jobs for friends or helped each other work out personal problems that have turned seriously bad and require some heavy lifting to set right. However, both of them have had real jobs on occasion. Hap has worked in the Tyler rose fields, like his creator; at an aluminum chair factory; and on an offshore oil platform. He also works as a bouncer at various bars now and then, although it's a bit embarrassing to him to be doing work that requires him to beat up grown men. He and Leonard have worked security at a poultry plant, too, although Leonard would prefer to be a bouncer. He's not embarrassed by the work and doesn't mind beating up on anybody at all. As a bouncer, he can work out his anger issues in a more or less acceptable and legal fashion. Leonard also likes to burn down crack houses, but that's not really an occupation. It's more of a hobby.

What Hap and Leonard have instead of steady jobs is a talent for getting into trouble. They can't even take an ocean cruise without getting kicked off the ship and marooned in Mexico. We readers wouldn't have it any other way, of course. If they just sat around and led boring lives, they wouldn't be any fun to read about.

Or maybe they would. One thing that distinguishes the books and makes them so readable is Lansdale's use of language. Or maybe I should say that it's Hap's use of language. Hap is the first-person narrator of his own adventures, after all, and he has a way with a simile. When it's humid, for example, Hap might say that it's "humid as a monkey's armpit." A man's not just fast on the draw. He produces a pistol "quick as a bunny fucks."

I have a theory that you can draw a straight line from Mark Twain's use of the American vernacular to Joe Lansdale's use of it. Here's what Twain says in his explanatory note to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: "In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit: the Missouri negro dialect; the extremest form of the backwoods Southwestern dialect; the ordinary 'Pike County' dialect; and four modified varieties of this last. The shadings have not been done in a hap-hazard fashion, or by guesswork; but painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech.

"I make this explanation for the reason that without it many readers would suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding."

Lansdale's use of dialect is equally masterful, although instead of Pike County his territory is East Texas. If I were really going to get far out in my literary theorizing, I'd seize on Twain's "hap-hazard" comment and write a paper for the Modern Language Association's annual meeting about how Hap Collins' first name was derived from Twain's note. But I'm not teaching anymore, and I don't have time for high-falutin literary essays. Besides, I might be wrong.

I do know for sure that there’s nothing haphazard about what Lansdale does with words. He’s not just making up the language that appears in Hap’s narratives. He has, or had at one time, people who’d scout around for good phrases to use in his novels. At one of those late-night sessions at a long-ago AggieCon, Joe said that a friend had recently come to him and said, “I got you one.” When Joe asked what it was, the friend said, “It’s hotter than two rats fucking in a wool sock.” Sure enough, that expression turned up on one of the books not long afterward. It’s too bad nobody recorded those gab sessions. History in the making.

And like Twain, Lansdale’s not afraid to use what’s now called “the n-word.” In fact, there might be more instances of it in one of Lansdale’s books than in Twain’s. Lansdale’s despicably racist characters, of which there are many, find nothing offensive about the word, and it just comes naturally to them, as it does to one in *The Two-Bear Mambo*, who has fond memories of minstrel shows and who thinks Leonard is funny: “I didn’t realize how much I’d missed being around funny niggers. And what I got here is not just some white man in blackface playing nigger, I got the real thing. I got me a genuine, born-of-black-hole nigger.” If you think a situation containing comments like this doesn’t end happily, you’d be right on the money.

Here’s something else. Terrible things are being said in this scene, and terrible things are happening, with even worse things to come, but it’s still very funny in a horrible way. Lansdale can wring humor out of any situation, even this one. You might hate yourself for laughing, you might look back and wish you hadn’t laughed, but you’re going to laugh. It’s the language that does it, as when a man describes Chihuahuas: "Sonofabitches would rather bark and piss than fornicate and eat. That's the thing about 'em. They got no priorities. My sister had one of them little poots, and she use to jack him off once a week 'cause he was tense. Never could figure out what was wrong with the sonofabitch lickin' his noodle like any other respectable dog." You're not going to find a passage like that in anybody else's books.

Hap and Leonard deal out a lot of punishment over the course of the series, but they take a lot of punishment, too. More than most men could handle, I think. After the scene from *The Two-Bear Mambo* I quote above, for example, there's a brawl in which the two come out on the bad end of a serious beating. In *Bad Chili,* we find out about Hap's first meeting with Jim Bob Luke, just after Hap has been tied to a chair with a car battery attached to his testicles. He's had a jolt from the battery, too, and if you can't imagine what something like that might to do a fellow, Lansdale is quite happy to tell you. And he does.

It should be pretty obvious by now that the entire series is not exactly what a reader would want to dip into when looking for some polite, politically correct fiction or for something to read aloud at a Sunday School picnic. Every book is full of cussing, sex, and heavy-duty violence. Not to mention a lot of laughs. It's a tough act to pull off, but Lansdale is a master at doing it. The opening of *Bad Chili,* which describes Hap and Leonard's battle with the rabid squirrel, is downright hilarious, even though it's also frightening and doesn't end well for the squirrel. Or Hap, for that matter.

No one should get the idea that books full of cussing, sex, and heavy-duty violence can't be socially conscious or present serious ideas and thoughtful commentary. Lansdale's Hap and Leonard works, besides containing all of the above and being funny besides, are also full of thoughtful social commentary, but it’s couched in such a fast-moving narrative that some of it would be easy to overlook. Not the criticism of racism, of course. That’s everywhere in the books, but you don’t have to look too hard to find comments on the environment, politics, relationships, and friendships. Nothing about any of this is obtrusive, but it’s all there if you want it.

Hap and Leonard are always true to themselves and to their friends, and while they’re willing to use violence if they have to, and kill if they have to, they do have a code of sorts. They believe in sticking up for each other, their friends, and people who need their help. They don’t take kindly to insults, and they believe in payback. They’re tough, resourceful, and all too human. What’s not to like?

I have one other theory about the books and stories about Hap and Leonard. It’s that nobody really cares about the plots. (I think this is true of a lot of crime novels, in fact, maybe even my own.) The plot is just the writer’s excuse for setting down a tale that ties the pages together. What people really care about is the characters and the writing, or, as Robert B. Parker put it about his own novels, “They like the sound of the words on the page.” Those two things are what make series books a success. Readers want to find out more about the characters and what they’re up to. It’s almost as if they’re real people, old friends whom you like to hear from every now and then. It doesn’t matter how long the series becomes. Readers don’t want it to end. They want their old friends to endure.

And readers want to keep hearing the author’s voice. It becomes a familiar comfort, and from the first page of each story, you know that you’re hearing something unique to an individual, a way of writing that comes from a particular place within a particular person, something that nobody else can duplicate.

It’s true that people try. A series can continue even after an author’s death if the estate finds a writer to carry it forward. Most often I find these continuations remind me of another story about Mark Twain, when his wife tried to shame him about his cussing by repeating what he said. He told her that she had the words but not the tune. Lansdale has his own tune, and it’s not like anyone else’s. It’s unique, his alone, and it carries the reader along with a sound that nobody else can duplicate. He’s been around for a while now, easily long enough for other writers to try to capture some of the magic that appears on his pages, but if they have the words, they don’t have the tune. Lansdale’s still out there singing his own song, and that’s what we want to hear.

Being an old guy, considerably older than Joe Lansdale, as he’s always quick to remind me, I sometimes get a little nostalgic. It’s been a good many years since we sat up on the second floor of the Memorial Student Center during AggieCon and talked about our books and our editors and how things were going in the writing game. Who knew that Joe Lansdale would become a bestselling writer with movies and a TV series based on his work or that he’d become a literary god in Italy? (I’m not making that up. You can ask him.)

I was lucky to be around for the birth of Hap and Leonard, and we’ve all been lucky enough to read the books. This new story collection is a good reason for celebration, as it collects a number of the stories into one volume. Anyone experiencing them for the first time is in for a rare treat. Those of us who have read them before are ready to hear from the guys again and to hear that voice that’s like no other. It doesn’t get much better than that.

Bill Crider lives in scenic Alvin, Texas, near Houston and the Texas Gulf Coast, where he’s suffered the effects of both Hurricane Ike and Hurricane Alicia. He was the Division Chair of English and Humanities at Alvin Community College before his retirement in 2002. Bill is the author of more than fifty published novels and numerous short stories. He won the Anthony Award for best first mystery novel in 1987 for *Too Late to Die.* He and his wife, Judy, won the best short story Anthony in 2002 for “Chocolate Moose.” His story “Cranked” from *Damn Near Dead* (Busted Flush Press) was nominated for the Edgar Award, the Anthony Award, and the Derringer Award. It won the latter. He’s won the Golden Duck Award for best juvenile science-fiction novel and has been nominated for a Shamus. His latest novel is *Between the Living and the Dead* (St. Martin’s). Check out his homepage at www.billcrider.com, or take a look at his peculiar blog at http://billcrider.blogspot.com.

Hyenas

“The hyenas are hungry—they howl for food.”

—*King Solomon’s Mines*, H. Rider Haggard

When I drove over to the nightclub, Leonard was sitting on the curb holding a bloody rag to his head. Two police cruisers were parked just down from where he sat. One of the cops, Jane Bowden, a stout woman with her blonde hair tied back, was standing by Leonard. I knew her a little. She was a friend of my girlfriend, Brett. There was a guy stretched out in the parking lot on his back.

I parked and walked over, glanced at the man on the ground.

He didn’t look so good, like a poisoned insect on its way out. His eyes, which could be barely seen through the swelling, were roaming around in his head like maybe they were about to go down a drain. His mouth was bloody, but no bloodier than his nose and cheekbones. He was missing teeth. I knew that because quite a few of them were on his chest, like Chiclets he had spat out. I saw what looked like a chunk of his hair lying near by. The parking lot light made the hunk of blond hairappear bronze. He was missing a shoe. I saw it just under one of the cop cars. It was still tied.

I went over and tried not to look too grim or too happy. Truth was I didn't know how to play it, because I didn't know the situation. I didn't know who had started what, and why.

Jane had called and told me to come down to the Big Frog Club because Leonard was in trouble. Since she didn't say he was in jail, I was thinking positive on the way over.

When Leonard saw me, he said, "Hey, Hap."

"Hey," I said. I looked at Jane. "Well, what happened?"

"It's a little complicated," Jane said. "Seems Leonard here was in the club, and one of the guys said something, and Leonard said something, and then the two guys inside—"

"Inside?"

"You'll immediately know who they are if you go in the club. One of them actually had his head shoved through the Sheetrock, and the other guy got his hair parted with a chair. He's behind the bar taking a nap."

"Ouch."

"That's what he said," Jane said.

"So . . . I hate to ask . . . but how bad a trouble is Leonard in?"

"There's paperwork, and that puts me off of him," Jane said, "but everyone says the three guys started it, and Leonard ended it, and, well, there were three of them and one of him."

"How come this one is out in the parking lot?" I said, pointing to the fellow with his teeth on his chest.

Leonard looked over at me, but didn't say anything. Sometimes he knew when to keep his mouth shut, but you could put those times on the head of a pin and have enough left over to engrave the first page of the King James Bible and a couple of fart jokes.

"Reason that guy's here, and the other two are inside," Jane said, “is he could run faster.”

“But not fast enough?” I said.

“That’s where we got a little problem. You see, that guy, he’s knocked out so hard his astral self took a trip to somewhere far away. Maybe interplanetary. He’s really out of here, and he hasn’t shown signs of reentry.”

No sooner had she said that then an ambulance pulled up. A guy and a woman got out and went over and looked at the guy on the ground. The male attendant said, “I guess clubbing doesn’t agree with him.”

“Either kind of clubbing didn’t agree with him,” the female EMT said.

It took me a minute to get what she meant. To do their job, I guess you have to have a sense of humor, lame as it might be.

They looked him over where he lay, and I was glad to hear him come around. He said something that sounded like a whale farting underwater, and then he said, “Nigger,” quite clearly.

Leonard said, “I can hear that, motherfucker.”

The guy went silent.

They loaded him in the ambulance.

“Don’t forget his shoe,” I said, pointing at it. But they didn’t pay me any mind. Hell, they worked for the city.

“We got a bit of a problem here,” Jane said. “You see, once this guy ran for it, and Leonard chased him, it couldn’t quite be called self-defense.”

“I didn’t want him to come back,” Leonard said. “I was chasing him down because I was in fear of my life.”

“Uh-huh,” Jane said.

“He turned on me when I caught up with him,” Leonard said.

"Just be quiet, Leonard," she said. "Things will go better. You see, the part that's hard to reconcile, as we in the law business say, is Leonard turning him around and then beating him like a bongo drum. Leonard grabbed him by the throat and hit him a lot."

"A few times," Leonard said. "He called me nigger."

"You called him asshole," Jane said. "That's what the witnesses said."

"He started it," Leonard said. "And there's that whole deep cultural wound associated with the word nigger, and me being black and all. That's how it is. Look it up."

"No joke," she said. "You're black?"

"To the bone," Leonard said.

Jane turned her attention back to me. "A guy watching all this," she pointed to a fellow standing over by the open door of the club, "he said Leonard hit that guy a lot."

"Define a lot," I said.

"After the nose was broke and the cheekbones were crushed, and that's just my analysis, Leonard set about knocking out his teeth, said while he was doing it, according to the gentleman over there, and I quote, 'All the better to suck dick with, you sonofabitch,' unquote."

"So, Leonard's going to jail?"

"What Leonard has going for him is yon man in yon ambulance —"

I looked to see it drive off with the lights on, but it wasn't speeding and there wasn't any siren.

"—hit Leonard with a chair first, and he did call him the Nigger word."

"You mean the N word. When you say Nigger word, well, you've said nigger."

"Did I say the Nigger word instead of the N word?"

"You did."

"If you're quoting someone said Nigger, isn't that different?"

"I think so."

"Hey," Leonard said. "Sitting right here."

"Well, hell, I've pulled two shifts," Jane said. "Another hour on the job and I'll be calling everybody sweetie baby. Anyway, back to Leonard. Somewhere between the N word and him chasing the track star out into the lot, he hit one of the other attackers with a chair and slammed the other guy's head into the wall. Ralph, that's my partner, he's in there right now trying to get the fellow's head out of the wall without breaking something. Either wall or victim."

"Actually," I said, "Leonard had to have been provoked. He's normally very sweet."

"No shit?" Jane said.

"No shit."

"I don't think so. But here's what we're going to do. You bring Leonard by the station tomorrow morning, not the crack of dawn, but before lunch, and we'll fill out some papers. I won't be there. I'll be snoozing. But I got my notes and I got statements, and I'm going to turn those in, so they'll be there. And, just as a sidenote, I really did enjoy seeing that fellow's head stuck in the wall. Before you go, you need to go in there and take a peek, if they haven't got his head loose. They haven't, then you don't want to miss this. It's a fucking classic."

I did take a look inside the Big Frog Club before I drove Leonard home, and the cop trying to work the guy's head out of the Sheetrock was snickering. He looked at me and lost it, made a spitting sound, and let go of him and wandered off, bent over and hooting.

Another cop, smiling, went over and, without a whole lot of conviction, pulled one of the guy's ears—the other one wasn't visible—said, "Come on out, now."

The guy's head was pretty far through the wall. It was poking into a bathroom. He must have turned his back to escape and found a wall, and then Leonard shoved the back of his head, pushing the front of it through the wall and into the bathroom. He was all scratched up, like a cat had been sharpening its claws on his face.

The bathroom walls had never really been laid out, just Sheetrocked, so it hadn't been too hard to push the guy's head through. I took a good look at him. His chin had locked behind a support board, and the back of his head was locked behind another. He had fit in there easily enough, but in such a way he couldn't get out, and the cops didn't seem to be working that hard to release him.

I said, "You had some antlers, we could just leave you there and tell folks you're a deer."

"Fuck you," he said, but it was weak and without conviction, so I didn't take offense.

I used the urinal, which was just under him and smiled as I peed. I didn't flush. I went back in the main room and saw the back of the guy. He was bent slightly with his butt in the air, standing on his tip-toes, probably getting a good bracing from the piss in the urinal.

I went over to the bar, leaned and peeked over. The other guy

Leonard had hit was awake and had his back against the bar. A broken chair was on the floor next to him.

I said, “You put your dick in a beehive, my friend.”

“Tell me about it,” he said. “We was just funnin’.”

“Yeah, how fun was it?”

“Not so much,” he said.

I got Leonard and drove him home.

When we were at my place, I sat Leonard in a chair in the kitchen. Brett, my gorgeous redhead, came downstairs. She was wearing a pair of my pajamas and she looked cute in them, as they were oversized. She was barefoot and her red painted toenails stood out like miniature Easter eggs. She came over and looked at Leonard.

“Anyone check you over?” she said.

“Wouldn’t let them,” he said.

Brett made him move his hand and the bloody rag. She checked out the wound. She’s a nurse, so she was the right one to do it.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” she said. “I think you can get by without stitches.”

“Yeah, well, it feels bad,” Leonard said.

“Would some vanilla cookies and cold milk make it feel better?” she said.

“Hell, yeah,” Leonard said. “Maybe after the milk, a Dr. Pepper.”

“That can be arranged,” Brett said, “but first, come in the bathroom and let me patch you up.”

When that was finished, Leonard came in with a bandage on his head. Brett got him a plate with some cookies on it and a big glass of cold milk. Leonard sat and smiled and dipped the cookies in the milk.

I said, “So, what happened?”

“They called me a queer.”

“You are a queer,” I said.

“It was their tone of voice,” he said.

“How did they know?” Brett said.

“I made a very delicate pass at one of them,” Leonard said.

“How delicate?” I asked.

“I merely asked him if he was gay, because he looked it, and then the shit hit the fan.”

“Actually, you hit a guy with a chair, shoved another guy’s head through some Sheetrock, and beat the cold dead dog shit out of the other guy in the parking lot. No fan was involved.”

“Yeah, that was pretty much it,” Leonard said, and bit into a cookie.

Next morning we went down to the cop shop. They sent us in to see the chief. He was in his office. There was a cop I had never seen before in there with him. They had a bunch of photos spread out on the desk, and the cop was laughing.

I glanced at the photos. They were of the guy with his head through the Sheetrock.

The cop was trying to get hold of himself, trying to quit laughing.

The chief said, “You can’t act professional, you can just leave.”

The cop went past us and out of the room. He was giggling as he went, trying to hold it in, making a sound like a kid spitting water.

“Have a seat,” said the chief.

There were two chairs on our side, and we took them. The chief said, “We can’t have this, fellows. It’s keeping all my officers from doing their jobs. They keep coming in here to look at the crime scene photos.”

He held up one of the photos.

It was of the guy’s face thrust through the Sheetrock.

“This one,” he said, “is especially precious.”

I made the spitting water sound the cop had made.

“And then,” he said, “there’s this one.”

This was an extreme close-up of the fellow’s face, casting a baleful eye out at us.

The chief even laughed this time. He put the photo down on the desk.

“Everyone in the department had copies made. Officer Jane Bowden took them, in the name of efficiency and coverage of a crime scene.”

“Do you have any wallet size?” I asked.

“No, but we’re having some made up. Listen here, Leonard. You’re lucky. Witnesses said they started it and you had to defend yourself. Bar owner is pressing charges against them. Thing is, them starting it, that’s probably right, but sometimes, it don’t hurt to walk away.”

“It was the chair upside my head kept me from walking,” Leonard said. “It knocked me down for a minute, and then when I got up, I was perturbed.”

“Point taken,” said the chief. “Not only were there witnesses, but one of the three you whipped is a witness himself. In your favor. He's going to have to pay a fine and some repairs at the club, but he's admitting they started it."

"Which one would that be," Leonard said, "Mr. Sheetrock?"

"No."

"I'm betting it isn't Toothless," I said.

"That would be a good bet."

"So, that leaves the one I knocked over the bar with a chair," Leonard said.

"Bingo."

When we went out, we saw the guy who had been knocked behind the bar. He was sitting in the waiting room. He hadn't been there when we came in.

Leonard touched two fingers to the edge of his eyebrow in salute as we passed.

The guy was about thirty, blond, and in good shape. He might be nice looking when he healed up. His left eye was closed and swollen and black, his lips were red and meaty like rubber fishing worms. As he followed us out into the parking lot, he had a limp.

We were about to get in my car when he came toward us.

Leonard turned, said, "You and me not finished?"

The man held up his hands. "We are. Mr. Pine—that's right isn't it? Pine?"

Leonard nodded.

"I want to apologize," the man said.

"Accepted," Leonard said. "Good-bye."

"Wait. Please."

I had been at the driver's side, about to get in, but now I went around on Leonard’s side and we both leaned against the car.

“My name is Kelly Smith. I want to hire you.” He was looking at Leonard when he said it.

“Hire me?” Leonard said. “What for? You like to take beatings?”

“Nothing like that. I have this problem. That’s why I was at the bar.”

“Drinking problem?” I said.

“No,” he said, looking at me. “And who are you?”

“A friend,” I said.

He nodded, spoke to Leonard. “Could we talk private?”

“You got something to say, say it,” Leonard said. “Me and Hap can hear it together and no one will cry. We’re not criers.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “There was that movie. You know the one.”

“Oh, *The Last Airbender*,” Leonard said. “Yeah. That sucked. That could make anyone cry. And what was up with that 3-D? It should have been in Smell-O-Vision.”

Kelly stood there while we went through our act. When we finished he said, “What I need is someone to do something tough that’s a little against the law.”

“How little?” Leonard asked.

“Well,” he said, “maybe a lot more than a little.”

We went to a coffee place and got a table near the back wall. There was music playing, and there were a few people at tables, and a nice-looking woman in very short shorts came in. Never been a fan of the heat, but for some things, you had to love summer.

Leonard said, “Hap, pay attention.”

"Right with you," I said.

"I'll tell Brett," he said.

"I'm back, just watching the scenery, not trying to move it around."

Kelly had been looking at her too. Now he looked at us. He said, "I wasn't really with those guys last night."

"Sure looked a lot like you," Leonard said.

"I know," Kelly said. "I meant they aren't friends."

"You fought like they were your buddies," Leonard said.

"We didn't fight well," he said. "You kind of walked through us."

"I staggered a little," Leonard said. "That chair hurt."

"You went down and you came up like a jack-in-the-box," Kelly said. "When you did that, I thought you were fucking Dracula."

"Actually, I would have been Blacula. Ever see that old movie?"

Kelly shook his head.

"Never mind," Leonard said. "Look, it's nice, you buying us coffee and a Danish—"

"I'm having an apple fritter," I said.

"Okay," Leonard said. "Danish and fritters, but if you've got something to say besides I'm sorry and let me buy you coffee, then let's move on. Me and Hap are busy men. We got places to go, things to do, and people to see."

"Not really," I said. "Our day is pretty open."

Leonard gave me a sour face.

"I'll pay you to help me out," Kelly said.

"We talking about moving a piano?" Leonard said.

"No," he said. "We're talking about maybe you having to rough someone up."

“First off,” Leonard said. “Why? And how much?”

“It’s my brother, Donny. He’s in deep doo-doo,” Kelly said.

“What kind of doo-doo?” I asked.

“He got in with these fellas that rob armored cars,” Kelly said.

We all sat there for a moment and let that statement hang between us like a carcass.

“This is starting to sound like doo-doo that’s too deep,” I said.

“It’s deep all right,” Kelly said. “He’s only twenty-one. Good kid, really.”

“Except for wanting to rob an armored car,” I said. “I would consider that a possible blemish on his character.”

Kelly nodded.

I said, “He’s twenty-one, you’re like, what, thirty? You guys are some years apart, aren’t you?”

“Thirty-one, and yeah, he was like a surprise,” Kelly said. “Dad wasn’t all that good about hanging around anyway, but that little surprise, Donny, it was more than he could handle. He took the car out for an oil change, and just kept going.”

“So what’s this got to do with me?” Leonard asked.

“You know that robbery took place in LaBorde last year, the armored car guards at the bank?”

“Yeah, I remember,” Leonard said. “They got the guards when they were transporting the money out of the bank to the truck. Just walked up with masks on and had guns and locked the guards in the back of the truck. It was maybe, what, two hundred thousand dollars they got?”

“About four hundred thousand,” Kelly said. “They must have had someone waiting that drove up, picked them up, and took them away. No one knows. All they know is they were there with

Halloween masks on one minute, then they had the money, and then they were gone. That was it. Took the guards' guns and put the guards in the back of the armored car and put plastic cuffs on them. Fastened one cuff to their left ankle, one to their right wrist. Then had them put an arm behind their back and fixed it there and pulled the plastic down to the other ankle, linked it from behind. That way they couldn't move well, damn sure couldn't run."

"That's cute," I said.

"Was your brother one of them?" Leonard asked.

"No, but I think he's about to be."

"And, pray tell, why do you think that?" I asked.

"Because in his room he's got some articles about the heist," he said.

"That doesn't mean anything," Leonard said. "Hap has books about Satan, but he ain't a Satanist. At least, as far as we know."

"Those damn books and that rap music," I said. "They can change a man."

Kelly ignored me. Sometimes it's all you can do. He said, "Yeah, but Donny, he has these friends come around, and they lock themselves in the back room for hours. I know they're smoking dope. I can smell it. But what I really worry about is I think these friends are the robbers and they want to pull my brother in."

"That's a big guess," I said. "Any reason to have it?"

"These guys, they're a real tough bunch," Kelly said. "And as you can know, I'm not so tough."

"You take a good fall, though," Leonard said.

"You still don't have any serious reason we should believe your brother is about to be part of a robbery."

"I heard them talking. I was sort of sneaking around, and I heard them say they needed a driver. The guy talking was the one Donny calls Smoke Stack. That's the name they all call him. I guess 'cause he smokes all the time. I don't allow it in the house, but he smokes anyway. I asked him not to once, and he just lit up and smiled at me, went in the back room with Donny. Hell, even Donny is tougher than me. He grew up different. He grew up tough. I can almost guarantee you these guys are going to rob another armored car, and they're going to pull Donny into it."

"Still a little lame," I said. "But, if you think you got something, go to the police. We know the chief over there. I'm not sure he likes us, but he did get some humor out of the photos of your buddy with his head through the Sheetrock. So right this minute, he sees Leonard as a comedian."

"I go to the police, they're going to run Donny in, and he's a good kid, really. He was living at home, and our mom died. A heart attack. She was overweight, didn't take care of herself. Went to hell after our dad ran off with another woman and went up North somewhere. She died, I moved back home. But I wasn't able to do it right away. I had a job in Austin, and I had to find another one up this area. I work at the university, doing janitor work."

"What did you do before?" I asked.

"I was a computer specialist, and I made half a mil a year. Now, I got just enough to buy gas for the car and bread for the table. I kind of thought Donny wasn't doing so good and needed me here. Last time I saw him, before Mom died, I could tell he was making some bad decisions. But the bottom line is these friends of his, I don't like them, and I'm sure they're the guys."

"That's your instinct?" I said.

"Yeah."

"Well," Leonard said, "instinct is all right, but it can be you telling yourself something and thinking you're enlightened. Gut instinct tells people to believe lots of things, and most of them are wrong. And, Kelly, this isn't our problem. It's a police problem."

He shook his head. "No. The police pick up Donny, his life is ruined."

"He robs an armored car, a bank, he might get a bullet through his head," Leonard said. "That ruins things too."

"Yeah, that can cut a career short," I said.

"Last night, I went to that bar looking for help. I didn't tell the details to those guys, but I said I was looking for someone could do a little roughhouse work. Those guys were recommended to me by a fellow I know. And then there was that whole thing about one of them calling you a name, and it all getting started . . . I think they started it just to show me how tough they were. Next thing I knew, I was in it with them, you know, part of the pack, and then I'm down, and one guy's got his head through the Sheetrock, and you're chasing the other guy outside. And you're older than them."

"Watch it," Leonard said.

"All I'm saying is, after I saw that, I decided maybe you were the guy instead of them."

"I don't know," Leonard said.

"Donny, he really looks up to this Smoke Stack. He wants to impress him. The guy's got muscles on muscles and he's just mean. Just mean."

"The gut instinct again?" Leonard said.

"Yeah."

"Well," Leonard said, "in cases like that, the gut is often right. We still know a shark when we see one. That's why we crawled out of the water and became men in the first place. Only thing is, some of the sharks crawled out after us."

"That would be the lawyers," I said.

"I told Smoke Stack and his buddies not to come back, but it doesn't matter," Kelly said. "They come around anyway, and if they don't, Donny goes to meet them. Him being twenty-one, I can't legally tell him squat."

"You wouldn't know where he goes to meet them, would you?" I asked.

"No," Kelly said. "And I'm embarrassed to tell you, I'm afraid to follow. I'm afraid they'll catch me. I think Smoke Stack and those guys would do anything."

"What about the other guys, his pals?"

"Three of them. They're followers. It's Smoke Stack runs the program, that's easy to see. I don't know their names, anything about them. Hell, I don't really know anything about Smoke Stack."

"Say we looked into it, found Donny was just smoking dope, or maybe he was selling drugs. What then?"

"I don't know. Maybe you can discourage him. It's such a mess. I wanted to be a big brother to him, but he doesn't care what I think. This Smoke Stack, I think he's like a tough father figure. And he looks like he could wad up a wrench. Again, I think he's like a father for Donny."

"Fathers just need to be tough in will," I said. "It don't hurt if they can bend a tire tool over their knee, but it's not part of the job description."

"Yeah," Kelly said, "but Donny doesn't know that. Look, really, he's a good kid. He's just got to get straight. He gets into this, his life is ruined. I got some money. It's from my savings, saved up before I moved here. I'll give you ten thousand apiece."

I looked at Leonard. He sighed.

I said, "Look, for right now, hang onto your money. Let us think about it, maybe look things over, and then, if we think we can help, we'll talk. If not, we'll still talk. But you might not like the conversation."

"Sure," Kelly said. "Sure, that's all right. That's good."

That afternoon, we went over to the gym to work out. Our gym sucks. It's small and it's hot and it has a small mat room. The mat is thin as paper and smells like sweaty feet. The owner isn't someone who is much into gym work himself. He's a guy with a physique akin to a rubber apple. He sits on a stool by the door so he can get some wind from outside, meaning there's no air conditioning. The door's always open, except dead of winter. Flies are always fluttering about.

He sits there to check memberships. The only advantage his gym has is his memberships are cheap, and he's not that far from the house. The only conversation I remember having with him was him saying, "That'll be thirty dollars a month, apiece."

But, it's all right. We bring our own gloves when we spar. When we spar we use fists a lot, but in real situations I like to use an open hand along with fists. You can use open hands with the gloves we have, but we're friends, and that kind of business can sometimes be worse than fists. Nothing says, "Oh, shit," like sticking a finger in your buddy's eye.

We moved around a little, flicking punches, throwing kicks. We were gym fighting, not really fighting. The two should never be confused. The first is like a swim in a heated pool, the other is like being dropped into a stormy, shark-infested ocean.

So, we were moving around, getting a workout, popping each other a little, and I said, “You believe him?”

“I don’t know,” Leonard said, pausing a little, putting his hands on his hips, taking a deep breath. “Maybe. A story like that, it’s so stupid it’s bound to have some reality about it. I mean, a guy has a problem with his younger brother hanging with thugs that might be bank robbers, so he goes into a bar to get someone to beat the robbers up.”

“You think that’s all he wanted?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he wants us to do something more permanent with these guys.”

“That, I don’t want to do.”

“We may not need to. Here’s the thing, Hap. I think the guy is serious about being worried about his brother, but maybe we can look into it and solve it better than him. We don’t, he’s going to hire someone like that guy I left in the parking lot. Then things will turn messy, and before it’s over Kelly and his brother both might go to prison.”

“Usually, you’re talking me out of stupid shit like this.”

“Does it ever work?”

“Not so much. This guy got to you a little, didn’t he?”

“A little.”

We moved around some more. Leonard hit me a good snap on the forehead. I hooked low, then switched to an overhand right and caught him on the cheek.

He said, “Ouch, I’ve had enough for the day. That was right on my wound.”

"That was your cheek," I said.

"I don't mean the taped part of my head, I mean the bruise. I am so wonderfully black you just can't see it."

"If you say so."

There was no place to take a shower, and as part of our workout, we had jogged from my house, into town and to the gym.

As we jogged back to my place, I said, "We can check into things, see the lay of the land. If it's not lying right, and we don't like it, we can step out. Call the law if we choose."

"Then we'll have some explaining to do."

"We say we thought the guy was full of it, and just wanted us to straighten his brother out."

"You think these guys really are bank robbers?" Leonard said.

"I don't know," I said. "Anything is possible. Say they are robbers. Kid comes along, they see a new recruit. Someone to drive the car is my guess. They start buttering him up with all their King Robber stories, tell him how he'll be rich and his own man, that kind of stuff. The kid, not having a father around and his mother dead, his brother not being around before, maybe not having the relationship they could have had, Donny's ripe for bad business."

"Sure, it could be like that."

We jogged along, silent for awhile. I could tell Leonard was thinking things over, and I let him.

Finally, I said, "So, are we going to check it out?"

"Say we take it easy. We determine if the kid really is in trouble. If these guys really are robbers, and if there's anything we can do about it without getting locked up. I reckon we ought to do that much."

"That's how it is then," I said, and we bumped fists.

We got our friend Marvin Hanson to come in with us. He runs a private investigation agency, and he was once a cop. Sometimes we work for him. Last job we did was simple and we didn't get paid because the client didn't like the outcome. He didn't pay Marvin, so Marvin couldn't pay us.

Because of that, Marvin owed us a favor.

We had him meet Kelly. We had him watch Kelly and Donny's house, see where the kid went, and when he went, and if he went with some guys that looked tough.

When he finished a shift, I took over, and then Leonard took over. We had been at this for a couple of days. We were posted down from the house twenty-four seven, near an empty soccer field with grown-up grass and missing goal nets.

So, it was Marvin's watch, and I'm home with Brett, and we're upstairs in bed reading, and Leonard is snoozing on the couch downstairs, having finished his shift watching Kelly's place not too long back. I put the Western I was reading down, glanced at the clock. Twelve midnight.

I was about to turn in, get some sleep before I went on at eight a.m., and the doorbell dinged. I don't like it when the doorbell dings that late.

I got my automatic out of the drawer by the nightstand, and Brett got her revolver.

"I'll check," I said. "Leonard's down there, and if it's anything nasty, you call the cops."

I went downstairs, but the door was already open. Leonard was letting in Marvin.

I said, "Man, that was a short shift."

"Yeah," Marvin said.

Marvin has a limp and a cane. He was quick to find a chair. He took off his hat, which had once belonged to a friend of ours, and rested it on his knee. He said, “Things went a way I thought maybe you ought to know about.”

“So, about nine thirty I’m sitting in the car, thinking I’d like to be home in bed with the wife, when I see a car pull up at the curb. Four guys get out. One of them looks like he lifts weights. Lots of weights, big weights, heavy weights.”

“That would be the loveable Smoke Stack.”

“Yeah, for all that muscle business, he’s smoking like the proverbial smoke stack.”

“Oh, Marvin,” I said. “That is good. Him smoking like a smoke stack and having the name Smoke Stack. You are so clever.”

“Yep. They go around back, and then coming back from around the house I see all of them again, and this younger guy that I figure is Donny. They got in the car, tight as coins in a miser’s wallet, and drive away. I followed. They went out to the warehouse district, and I went with them, but sneaky like. They never saw me. They went down where the rentals are. It’s one of those cheap places. No cameras, no security gate. You just drive in and take your padlock off your shed. I couldn’t follow them in, so I drove across the street and looked. I could see through the fence and I could see them park, and I could see which storage building they opened. I could see a car in there. An older car, a muscle car. Something that could run like a spotted-ass ape if needed.”

“Ah, the old spotted-ass ape,” Leonard said. “How fast do they run?”

“They are very fast,” Marvin said. “So, they’re there awhile with the door pulled shut, and I could see they had a light on because it was shining under a crack at the bottom of the door.”

“That is some of that ace detective work you’re famous for,” I said.

“My guess is, if they’re planning a robbery, that storage shed is their villains’ lair.”

“Probably has a basement in there, test tubes and shit,” Leonard said. “It’s like the evil Fortress of Solitude.”

“I got another guess too,” Marvin said. “When the other robbery went down, the one with the guards, about a month later they found a guy in a car out in the woods with a bullet through his head. He’d been dead for awhile. At the time it was unexplained. Just a random murder. But, I been thinking maybe the dead guy was their getaway man. And when he got them away, they put him away. My guess is Donny is next on the list. They get some young guy doesn’t know squat, they use him for the robbery, for the driving, then they pop him and the cut is bigger. Next time they got plans, they recruit again. Each new driver doesn’t know about the other. It works until the word gets out they’re finding lots of dead people in stolen cars with false license plates.”

“So Donny is just a tool for them to use and then destroy,” I said.

“That’s my guess. Another thing, I followed them after they left the warehouse. They didn’t take Donny home. They drove him to a house on the edge of town. Most of the block there is burned out, and beyond it the town quits and the woods starts. It’s a run-down place where the back acres have been sawed over by pulp woodworkers. I parked there for a little while, then drove to the warehouse and got closer to the building they were in. It’s number fifteen. Then I came here. I could go back and finish my shift, but I don’t know I need to now.”

“Probably not,” I said. “We know where they keep the getaway car, and we know where they live. And that they may have sold pulp wood.”

“That pulp wood money could be the way they financed the first robbery,” Marvin said. “Bought the getaway car. Now they got money from the first robbery to pull another. They aren’t living high on the hog out there, so they’re keeping what loot they got tamped down for now, which is smart.”

“Marvin,” I said, “your work is done.”

“So we’re even on what I owe you two?” he said.

“We are,” I said.

“Good luck to you,” Marvin said, got up, and picked up his hat and cane. “If you need me for anything, even or not, give me a call.”

Marvin went out and closed the door.

I looked up and saw Brett was sitting on the top stair looking down, listening. I smiled at her and she waved. She was wearing those oversized pajamas and my bunny slippers with the ears on them.

She said, “How about we have some milk and cookies?”

“Hell, yeah,” Leonard said.

We sat at the kitchen table and had our milk and vanilla cookies and thought on the matter. Way we saw it, if we waited until they decided to rob an armored car, it would be too late.

First off, we didn’t know when they had their little heist planned, and we didn’t know if they might tire of Donny and pop him. We didn’t even know if they were actually the robbers, but it sure seemed likely, and we were going to play it that way.

We thought about a number of cool ways to go at it, and we explained them to Brett, and she said, “Why don’t you just go over and confront them, tell Donny how things went with their past driver. Otherwise, while you’re making your plans, he could already be the wheel man and dead and under some log in a creek somewhere.”

“There’s a logic to that,” I said.

“And it fits what you’ve done in the past,” Brett said.

“You mean strong-armed our way through?” Leonard said.

“Yeah,” Brett said. “You guys are smart enough, but you don’t have the patience to be masterminds.”

“Yeah,” Leonard said, “and it’s boring, and yucky, and I don’t want to do it.”

“So there,” I said. “If we go over, confront them, and if we convince and save Donny, they could still commit the crime and they could kill another idiot driver. I know that’s not supposed to be our problem. Our problem is supposed to be just Donny, but I don’t like it.”

“If you convince Donny to leave,” Brett said, “then you can give an anonymous tip about the car, say it’s stolen or something, because most likely it is, and put the cops on it.”

“They’ll need more proof than that to go take a look,” Leonard said.

Brett crossed a pajama-clothed leg, dangled a rabbit shoe from her foot, picked up her glass of milk, and sipped. When she sat the glass down, she had a thick, beaded, white milk mustache that made me smile.

“That’s right,” Brett said, “they will need more proof, but that tip could start movement in the right direction. After that, you get stuck on what to do, just come to me and I’ll figure it out from there.”

Next day we went over to the university and drove around for awhile before we could find a visitor’s parking spot that wasn’t filled, and walked over to the building where Kelly worked as a janitor. On the bottom floor students moved about, and an older woman in a janitor’s uniform was pushing a trash cart. She looked about as excited as a corpse.

We asked her about Kelly, and what she told us sent us by elevator to the fourth floor. Leonard wanted to push the button, and I had to let him, or I would never hear the end of it. He likes pushing buttons on elevators. I can’t explain it. But every time he gets to do it, for several minutes afterward, I must admit, I feel slightly deprived.

There were no students on the top floor. I went to one of the windows and looked out. I had gone to the university for awhile. I had been a good student. I enjoyed it. I still liked the atmosphere of a university, but I was too lazy to finish up my education, and most likely the classes I’d taken long ago in stalking the woolly mammoth and how to build a fire with flint and steel and a gust of wind were no longer valid.

We looked around a while and found an open door and heard some clattering, went in there and discovered Kelly banging a garbage can against the inside of his cart so it would empty.

Kelly looked up at us. The swelling around his eyes had gone down. He said, “You wouldn’t believe the stuff you find in these cans.”

I leaned my ass into the desk up front, and Leonard took a seat at one of the standard desks in the front row. Kelly put the garbage can back in place by the teacher’s desk, said, “Well.”

“We reckon you’re right,” Leonard said. “Those people Donny is running with, they’re not up to any good, and that means neither is Donny.”

“Can you do something about it?”

“Maybe,” I said. “But here’s the thing. We do what we’re talking about doing, you might not be safe. You might not want to go home for awhile.”

“How long’s awhile?”

I shook my head.

“I see,” he said. “And you can get Donny out of this?”

“You can’t make a man believe what he doesn’t want to believe,” I said. “But we can try and show Donny that things aren’t as good as he might think. In fact, they’re really worse than we thought.”

“How?” Kelly asked.

We told him about the dead man in the car, what we suspected. When we finished, Kelly found a desk and sat down. He said, “Shit, how does stuff like this happen?”

“Humans,” I said.

“Yeah,” Leonard said, “they can be pesky.”

“So,” I said, “what we’re asking is, do we go ahead with things? ’Cause if we do, it might make it hot around the old hacienda.

Meaning, you need to not be there. And the job here, I don't know how safe it keeps you."

Kelly nodded slowly. "I got some place I can go for awhile. I mean, I can figure that out. But the job, I need this job. I need it bad. I can't just walk away."

"We can't guarantee your safety, you stay on the job," I said. "We don't recommend it. We didn't have any trouble getting to you, and if they decide to find you, it won't just be to talk."

"I'll leave the house," Kelly said. "But I'll stay with the job. Go ahead and do what you need to do."

"We'll need a photo of Donny," I said.

"I can do that, after work," Kelly said. "But, you will try to save him, won't you?"

"We'll do what we can," Leonard said, "and more often than not, that's a lot."

Marvin was out of it now, and we didn't work in shifts after that. We just drove over together and parked down the street from where Kelly lived. Ever now and then we would move the car to a new position, so no one in a house nearby would call the law on us.

Kelly had followed our advice and found a new place to stay. We told him not to tell us where. That way we didn't have information we didn't need and wouldn't want to accidentally spill.

We also had something else. A last gift from Marvin. Having been a former cop, he had good connections. He got us information on Smoke Stack. Once Marvin knew where he lived, and what his car license was, it wasn't so hard. Marvin wasn't sure about the other guys, but he was sure about Smoke Stack. The license led to the car, and that led to a description, and that led to a rap sheet. I had that with me. And a grainy photo that had been faxed to Marvin and that he gave to us. Smoke Stack's real name was Trey Manton.

Leonard had a small flashlight on and he was using it to look the photo over again and read the rap sheet. We had already done that, but it was a way to pass the time. Leonard spent a lot of time looking at the bad photo. He clicked off the light and closed the folder and put it on the seat between us, said, "Man, that guy looks like he tried to roller skate in a buffalo herd."

"I'm going to guess the buffalo may not have turned out so well. And he's done time for drugs, and he is, shall we say, a violent person, as his prison time shows."

"We are violent ourselves," Leonard said. "But we're the good guys."

"I guess that's one way of looking at it," I said.

"Rather us as tough guys than people like Smoke Stack as tough guys."

"And yet another way of looking at it."

Leonard gave me Smoke Stack's photo. I looked at it again just to have something to do. I gave it back, and took the photo of Donny and looked it over. He looked like the usual, pimple-faced, sassy ass kid. It was a full body shot, and it made me think of the photos I'd seen of Billy the Kid, only without the cowboy hat, the rifle, and the six-gun on his hip. But it had the same attitude about it. The rifle and six-gun had been replaced by sagging pants and tennis shoes that looked too big for his feet. The strings were untied. That's showing them.

As it got dark and they didn't show up, we decided to go to their place and have a chat. Maybe Donny was already with them. With Kelly gone, maybe he no longer saw a need to go home. Next thing was they'd move into Kelly's house and never let him come back. They were the type. I had seen it before.

When we got over to the address Marvin had given us, we parked down from their house in the lot of an abandoned convenience store. It was about three blocks from their house, but seemed the best place to park. Everything there was as Marvin said. The houses and most of the convenience store were burned out and you could smell the dead fire still. Something had set the whole block on fire. Where the burned buildings ended, the woods took over, and up on a hill with some logged-out acres behind it was the house.

I opened the glove box and got out my automatic and gave Leonard his. They were both in black holsters, but the guns themselves did not match. Brett thought it would be cute if we got matching guns with our initials on them.

We got out of the car and Leonard pulled out his shirt and lifted it up and clipped on his holster. He arranged his shirt around it. It was only hidden if you weren't looking for it or you were blind in one eye and couldn't see out the other. I clipped mine to my belt. I was wearing a loose T-shirt, so it didn't cover much.

"Ready?" I said.

"I was born ready," Leonard said.

"Scared?"

"I never get scared."

"Bullshit."

"Okay, I'm a little scared. Let's get it done before I get more scared."

We started walking.

The house had a car out front, and we had to climb up the hill to get there. We stayed to the right side where there was still a line of trees just behind a barbed-wire fence, and then there was a pasture, and more trees, and then the house with the logged-out area behind it.

The house was not well lit and there wasn't much you could tell about it in the dark, but there seemed to be a sadness that came from it. All old uncared for houses seem that way to me. As if they are living things dying slowly from neglect. It's like they're old people no one will visit, or if they do, it's out of obligation or even spite.

There were a series of walking stones that led from a place near the road to the front porch, but grass had mostly covered them. There were a few shingles lying like scales in the yard; they had blown off the roof in a high wind. The rest of the yard had grass growing tall enough to hide a rhinoceros if he crouched a little. There was a washing machine in the yard, tipped on its side, and it looked to have been a popular model about the turn of the century. An old stone bird feeder was still standing. Grass seeds had gotten in it along with enough blown dirt and dust to make a bed, and blades of grass had grown up in a manner that made it look as if someone had used Butch Wax on them.

There was a thin beam of light escaping from under a window to the right of the door. I went up and bent down and looked through the window. There were three guys on the couch passing a joint back and forth. The light of a television strobed across their faces. One of them was Smoke Stack. He was hard to miss. He took up about a third of the couch. He was wearing a T-shirt with the sleeves rolled up so folks could get a look at his biceps, which looked like bowling balls in tight rubber tubing. There were tattoos on his arms, some kind of Chinese writing. I figured Smoke Stack was doing well to read English, let alone Chinese. The tats looked like they had been made by a blowtorch and a fountain pen.

I didn't see Donny.

I stepped back and Leonard took my place. After he took a look, he said, "Rock and roll."

I went up on the porch and Leonard went around back. We didn't say that we should do this. We just knew it. It wasn't our first rodeo.

I carefully pulled back the screen, which had so many holes punched through it, it might as well have just been a frame. It squeaked a little, like a dog toy.

I waited. No one shot at me through the door. No one jerked the door open. I could hear the TV. It was some kind of music show. Music videos, I guess. The music playing was rap, the only kind of music I can't stand, unless it's bagpipe music, which, with the exception of "Amazing Grace," always sounds to me like someone starting up a lawn mower.

I heard the back door breaking open, and when I did, I kicked the front door with all my might. It hurt my foot a little, but the door sagged back, which spoke not so much for my manliness as it did for the geriatric state of the house.

Rushing inside, I had my gun drawn. I was wearing my badass smile. I know it's bad ass, because I practice it in front of a mirror.

As we came in, me from the front, Leonard from the back, I focused on the three on the couch. As I said, one of them was Smoke Stack. The thugs on either side of him were almost interchangeable. Lanky with pot bellies and greasy hair, arms branded with tattoos, their heads wreathed in cigarette smoke. They looked like the kind of guys that might share a brain, and today the brain had a day off.

Sitting in chairs to the side were Donny and another guy. Leonard was watching them. Donny looked like a dumb kid, thin-faced, big-eyed, his chin bristling with a few hairs and competing pimples. The guy next to him was dark and short and stout and sunburned. He had his hair cut in a military do, probably because the hair on top was as thin as dirty water. Overall, he gave the impression of someone who had lived on a planet with heavy gravity and too much sunlight.

They jumped up and went for guns they had in their pants. Except Donny. He just sat there with his mouth hanging open.

Leonard waved his gun, said, “Who do I shoot first?”

There were no volunteers. They stopped moving.

I had my gun pointed too. I said, “Okay, boys, let’s keep standing, and take them out one at a time, starting with you, Smoke Stack. Put them on the floor. And I’m not talking about your dicks.”

“Do I know you?” Smoke Stack said.

“No,” I said. “But you’re about to know a little about me, and my guess is you aren’t going to like it.”

When they had the guns on the floor, I told them to kick them lightly away. Leonard held his gun on them, collected theirs, and took them outside. I watched through the open door as he threw them under the porch and came back inside.

“Nice night,” I said to no one in particular.

Leonard turned off the TV.

“What you guys want?” Smoke Stack said. “We ain’t got nothing for you to rob.”

“I think maybe you got some money from a bank robbery somewhere,” Leonard said.

Smoke Stack looked at Leonard, then me, then they all looked at Donny. They just kept staring, like they were waiting for him to break out into a little dance.

“No, man,” Donny said. “I didn’t tell them anything. I don’t even know these guys.”

“He ain’t lying,” I said. “He doesn’t know us. But, we are here for Donny’s benefit. We want that you should quit this group, Donny. Come home and quit acting like a gangster wanta-be. Or what we refer to in the privacies of our home as a dumb dick.”

“My brother,” Donny said. “He sent you. That’s it, isn’t it? Well, he and you both can keep your nose out of my business.”

“Just come home and forget these guys,” I said. “You do that, life will be a lot better for you, and so will the air. Man, you guys could use a bath. Or is it because you’re shitting behind the couch?”

“Ha!” Smoke Stack said. He looked at us and our guns like he was looking at kids with suckers. “You ain’t so much.”

“We got guns,” I said. “That puts us way ahead of you. We took yours away from you. And you know what? We might not give it back.”

Smoke Stack looked at Donny. “Who are these guys, kid?”

“I tell you, I ain’t had nothin’ to do with them. I tell you, I don’t know these guys.”

“They know you,” he said.

“Actually, we know who he is,” I said. “He doesn’t know us, and we don't know him. But we have a nice photograph. And we know this. You are planning to pull a heist, and the kid here, you want to get him in on it, and then when it's over, you'll pop him, and we're not talking about with a wet towel."

Smoke Stack let that revelation roam around in his head for awhile. It went on for so long you could see it cross behind his eyes, like someone moving past a window. I glanced at Donny. There was something roaming around in his head as well. Suspicion, I hoped.

"What the hell you talking about?" Smoke Stack said.

"That doesn't sound all that convincing," I said. "The part where you try to act like you don't know what's going on, and you've don't remember how you clowns shot your last wheel man and left him in the woods for the ants."

"What's he talking about?" Donny said, looking at Smoke Stack.

"They don't know nothing," Smoke Stack said. "They're just talking air. Don't pay them no mind. You really don't know them, then just keep your mouth shut."

"What they like to do," Leonard said, looking right at Donny, "is they hire some dumbass to drive their car, and then they kill him and split it between themselves."

"What, for one less split we kill a guy?" Smoke Stack said.

"Yep," I said. "And, hey, you fellas, what makes you think one of you isn't next? Were you all in on the previous job? Are there some bodies in the woods somewhere?"

I could tell from the way a couple guys looked at Smoke Stack that I had hit a chord.

"You guys don't listen to this shit," Smoke Stack said. "And you, Donny. Ain't I treated you right? I been more of brother to you than your own brother."

“You mean you’ve kind of let him do what he wants,” I said, “because at the bottom of it all, you don’t care about him. He’s just a pawn. It’s tough being a father or mother or big brother, ’cause they got to tell you stuff you don’t want to hear, make you do stuff you don’t want to do. But you, you can just tell him everything’s all right, even when it isn’t.”

“I ain’t got to do nothing,” Donny said. “My brother, he ain’t much of a man.”

“And Smoke Stack is?” I said. “Your brother works his ass off for you. Butt-wipe here steals what he wants and hangs out. Not a whole lot of manly in that.”

“I could snap you like a stick,” Smoke Stack said.

“No,” I said. “No, you couldn’t.”

“You talk tough with a gun,” Donny said. “I’ve seen what he can do. You ain’t so tough.”

“What?” Leonard said, grinning at Donny. “Smoke Stack? Tough? With some drunk, maybe? Some poor guy half in the bag. You think he’s bad because he has muscles and tattoos and cigarette breath. Hap here, on his worst day, could turn him inside out and make him say how much he likes it.”

“Ha!” Smoke Stack said.

I went over and gave Leonard my gun. Now he had one in either hand. I took off my jacket, hung it over the doorknob of the door I’d kicked open.

“Why don’t I show you that he’s not so tough?” I said.

“That’ll be the goddamn day,” Smoke Stack said.

“This is, in fact, that day,” Leonard said.

Smoke Stack grinned at Leonard. “I get through mopping the floor with him, you’re next, nigger.”

“Oh, don’t make me wet,” Leonard said, then he waved the guns at the others. “All you assholes, except Smoke Stack, and you, Donny, all of you over here and on your bellies. Make like fucking run-over snakes.”

They did what they were told. They lay on the floor on their bellies by the wall, lifted their heads up to see what was going on.

Leonard looked at them, said, “All you dick cheeses, all you move is your heads, savvy? Donny, you sit on the couch. You get a bird’s-eye view.”

“Why we doing this?” Smoke Stack said.

“Because we can,” I said. “And because you think you’re tough as an old saddle.”

“You’re too old for me,” Smoke Stack said to me.

“Yeah, well, I’ll try not to hurt you too bad.”

“I think tough guy is starting to waffle, Hap,” Leonard said. “I think he’s looking for a hole to run into.”

Smoke Stack said to me, “We get started, it goes bad for you, your man will step in with the guns?”

“He’s got the guns to keep your friends in line. It goes bad for me, I’ll take my beating, and then we’ll leave.”

“Shit,” Donny said. “Think you can beat Smoke Stack, you’re crazy. I seen him whip two guys once, and one of them with a board.”

I felt a little nervous right then, because that old adage about how bullies are always cowards isn’t true. Sometimes they’re bullies simply because they can do what they say they can do, and they enjoy doing it.

Leonard said, “Yeah, but it ain’t how many guys he whipped, it’s the guys. Hap, he wasn’t one of those guys.”

"He whips Smoke Stack, hell, I'll go with you," Donny said. "That's how much faith I got in him."

Smoke Stack looked at the kid and nodded.

"All right," I said. "I don't whip him. You stay, and we'll go, and we're out of your life. You rob banks, you fuck goats, you do what you like. We're done."

"You'll be saying stuff to folks you shouldn't, like we're going to rob a bank," Smoke Stack said. "We wouldn't want people believing something like that. You ain't got no proof of nothing that way."

"We'll make it simple for you," Leonard said. "You whip Hap, we'll leave, and then, so you don't cry at night, you can always come and try to kill us before we let the cat out of the bag. We'll give you a whole two days. You got our word, and that's better than yours, I'm sure."

"I whip him," Smoke Stack said, nodding at me, "then I'm coming for you. That's gonna be a treat."

"You don't even know me," Leonard said, then smiled at him. "And you don't want to. But if Hap slips on a banana peel, then I'll put the gun away, and me and you can dance all over this place."

"Hey, Smoke Stack," I said. "You gonna talk us to death, or you gonna show me what you got?"

There was a clearing between the people on the floor and the couch where Donny sat. Leonard was by the open door, pointing the guns. Smoke Stack moved forward, and as he did he crouched a little and put his fists up. He smiled at me, came closer.

He hooked a big right. I could have seen it coming with a bag over my head. I stepped into him at an angle and the punch went around me. I popped a jab in Smoke Stack's eye, hooked him to the throat. He had his chin down, so the hook was a so-so shot. Still, he didn’t like it. He stepped back with a sputter, coughed a little, and came at me windmilling. I leaned way right when he was right on me, put out my foot, and caught his ankle as he rushed. It catapulted him forward and into the wall and caused him to knock a hole in the Sheetrock with his head, then to roll on top of his gang members.

When he got himself straight and turned, I kicked Smoke Stack in the balls so hard people in China had heart pains. I stepped in quick and gave him a left-hand Three-Stooges poke in the eyes, hit him with a right cross that came from hell without a bus ticket and that smacked against the ridge of his jaw. He twisted and went down and started to get up, but didn’t.

“You waitin’ on reinforcements, Smoke Stack?” I said.

“What he needs to get up,” Leonard said, “is a fucking winch truck.”

Smoke Stack finally got upright, rushed me with his head down, bellowing like a bull. I hooked my arm under his neck as he came and went back on my hips and kicked him in the nuts again and lifted him over me so that he hit hard on his back on the floor. I could hear the breath go out of him, loud as an elephant fart.

I flipped back so that I landed straddling him, slammed my forearm into his nose and chin. Once. Twice. Three times.

He quit struggling. I got up and looked down at him. His face was bloody. He rolled over on his stomach and started crawling away, like a roach that had had its rear end stepped on. Then he collapsed, quit crawling. He was unconscious.

Donny was looking at me with his mouth open so wide you could have turned a semitruck around in there.

Donny said, “Did you kill him?”

"Just his pride," I said. "And maybe one of the two brain cells he had. That leaves him one so he knows how not to shit himself. Now, come on."

Donny looked at Smoke Stack, then at me. "I don't know."

"We had a deal. You can come, or Leonard here will pistol-whip the goddamn shit out of you and we'll take you anyway. You can go without knots and bruises, or we can fix you up. You get to choose. And you get to choose right now."

Donny nodded.

"We'll be taking all your guns," Leonard said. "We're gonna make Donny crawl under the porch and bring them out. He's going to do that without pulling one, so that way we don't have to shoot him. You can check for your pistols at the bottom of assorted lakes, creeks, and rivers. And if you follow us, I will personally shoot holes in your head, and when they find you, your guns will be shoved up your asses."

When we were in the car, with Donny seated in back, he said, "But he was so much bigger."

"David and Goliath," I said. "Ever read that passage in the Bible?"

"No. What's it mean?"

"It means David got lucky," I said.

"Only Hap wasn't lucky," Leonard said. "He was skilled. Smoke Stack, he's got big arms and a big mouth, but he was gonna get you killed, kid. We done you a favor, and you don't even know it."

"I don't believe that," Donny said, but his voice didn't hold a lot of conviction.

“Yeah, well, you can be stupid, or you can be lucky, and right now, you’re goddamn lucky,” Leonard said.

“I didn’t think anyone could do that to Smoke Stack,” Donny said.

“Your problem, kid,” Leonard said, “is you haven’t been doing a whole lot thinkin’, just reactin’, and you haven’t been around long enough to know life ain’t like the movies. I get the whole lost your parents thing. Been there. But that don’t have to turn you stupid. That’s a choice, like wearing green stretch pants. You don’t have to do it.”

“My brother shouldn’t have done this,” he said. “He shouldn’t have asked you guys to do this.”

“Woulda, shoulda, coulda,” I said. “We’re trying to save you from yourself. But, we got a time limit, boy. You fuck it up later, then we done what we could. You can go back to being stupid and probably shot to death in a car out in the woods. But, for right now, we got other plans.”

“What plans?” Donny said.

“Pancakes,” Leonard said.

We went to my place and made pancakes. It was late by the time we did, and Brett came in. She was carrying a newspaper. She saw Donny sitting at the kitchen table with a large glass of milk and a plate of pancakes covered in syrup. He was eating heartily. Leonard sat across from him with a Dr. Pepper. Leonard thought Dr. Pepper went with most anything. Brett nodded at Leonard and Donny, said to me, “So, you found a child in the yard and took him in to raise.”

“Found him under a rock,” I said. “Can we keep him? We’ll build him a pen out back."

She smiled at me. "We'll think it over. You got any more pancake batter?"

"Coming right up, banana pancakes," I said. "I should work at IHOP, I'm so good at this."

I went about making her pancakes. While I did, she sat at the table and looked at Leonard for an explanation. Leonard told her all about it.

Brett looked at Donny, said, "Honey, you could have been in some real trouble."

"I just wanted to make some money," he said, and the way he looked at her it was hard to determine if he was seeing a sister figure, a mother, or someone he wished he was old enough to date. Brett had that effect on people.

"So taking someone else's money is okay so you can have some?" she said.

"Smoke Stack said it's not someone's money if they can't keep it," Donny said. "And besides, that bank money, it's insured."

"Someone pays out the insurance, baby boy," she said, "and that might be me if I bank there." She picked up the newspaper and hit him a pretty good whack in the back of the head. "Bad dog. Bad, bad dog."

Donny lowered his eyes, said, "I didn't think about it like that."

"You haven't been thinking," she said. "You been hearing some bullshit, is what you been hearing, and I got to say, for you to take it as fact, you must want to believe it. There's people born stupid, but you're one of those Hap calls the Happily Stupid. They believe what they hear, not what they investigate or think about. They're the ones that don't listen to news, they listen to opinions and editorials and think it's news. Rumors and lies and sometimes the truth. It's all the same to them."

"I haven't had it so good," Donny said.

"So, you're like a special case?" Leonard said.

"Ain't no one matters but yourself," Donny said. "That's what Smoke Stack told me."

"Then that means you don't matter much to him," I said. "He's telling you the truth when it comes to his philosophy. He doesn't care about you or anyone else. You're just a cog in the machine, and he wouldn't mind replacing you with another cog at the drop of a hat."

I put Brett's pancakes in front of her and heated up the syrup a little in the microwave. I brought it to her and then got her a cold glass of milk. I sat down across from her.

When I sat, I put my hands in front of me, clasped together, and Brett said, "You okay, Hap?"

"I cut my knuckles."

I held them out for her to see.

"So you did."

"I think I can use some sympathy."

"We'll talk about it when we go to bed," Brett said.

What we ended up doing was not going to bed right away, but calling Marvin, and getting him out of bed, and pissing him off, but he came over anyway. He came over with the information about the body found in the woods, and in fact, he had gotten a copy of a photograph from one of his cop friends, had it in a big yellow envelope. We didn't look at it right away.

Once he had some of my pancakes, his attitude was better. We went into the living room, and Marvin told Donny some of what he knew. He took the photo out of the envelope and showed it to Donny. It was a clear photo of a man behind the wheel of a car. He had a hole in his forehead, and he was swollen up so bad his shirt collar had rolled into the swell of his neck. Insects had been at him, and a string of ants were clearly visible crawling into his nose.

“No gun was found,” Marvin said. “He didn’t shoot himself.”

“That could be anyone at anytime,” Donny said.

“Yeah, it could,” Marvin said. “It’s a possibility it is someone unrelated to your buddy Smoke Stack. It could be a pumpkin painted up to look like a man. But I don’t think so. Timing’s right, the description of the car fits.”

“There’s lots of cars like that one,” Donny said.

“You got me there, kid. You’re bound and determined to get yourself killed. So have at it. You want to take the chance it’s not connected, that’s your bailiwick. Me, I’m going home.”

Marvin stood up, leaving the photograph on the coffee table.

On his way out, Marvin picked his hat and cane off the back of a chair, said, “Nice knowing you, kid. Next time I see you, it’ll be in a photograph like that one.”

Marvin went out and closed the door.

“Bullshit,” Donny said.

“He’s just trying to help,” Brett said.

“He’s trying to scare me,” Donny said.

“Yeah,” I said, “he is. I hope it’s working. You damn well better be scared. This is some serious business we’re talking about. Smoke Stack, he’s a loser. He’s so cool and important, why’s he live in that shithole where he lives and have a bunch of other losers hanging around him, and that includes you. But it doesn't have to."

"He does all right," Donny said.

"Yeah," Leonard said. "Well, he don't keep his left hand up worth a shit."

"Or his right," I said.

That night we put Donny in the little guest bedroom we had built of recent for Leonard. It wasn't very big, but we had built it onto the back of the house. There was a window that Donny could climb out of if he were ambitious. The only thing was, Leonard was sleeping in the bed under the window and near the door. Donny was sleeping on a pallet on the floor. Donny would have had to have been a ninja to get out that window and Leonard not know it.

As we walked him to the bedroom and I laid out his pallet, Brett brought him pajamas and a towel for a shower, Leonard said, "I'm a light sleeper. And if you wake me up, thinking you're going to sneak out, I'm going to beat the hell out of you. That's as simple as I can put it."

Donny looked at me.

"He will," I said.

"Here," Brett said, handing him the towel and pajamas. "Baby, you ought to listen to these boys. They know what they're talking about. Like your brother, they just want to help you."

"My brother is a loser," Donny said.

"Your brother quit a good job to come here and take care of you," Leonard said. "He went from high living to low living. He's a janitor. Good honest work, but not work of his choosing. He did that for you. He may not be perfect, but he did it for you. That means something."

Donny didn't say anything to that.

Brett said, "You should listen. Those people you were with, hell, not people . . . those beasts you were with. They aren't human. They're hyenas. They might have been people once, but they're hyenas now. You don't have to be one too. You get to choose. That's the difference between you and a natural-born hyena. There's a choice for you. For the animal there isn't, but for humans to choose not to be animals, there is."

"Actually," Leonard said, "I like the hyenas better than humans."

"I don't know what you mean," Donny said.

"That's what scares us," I said.

"He knows," Brett said, and took hold of Donny's chin with her thumb and forefinger. "He's just not ready to admit it. . . . And Donny, honey, be sure and take that shower before you lay down to sleep. You'll sleep better, and you won't stink."

Donny looked as if someone had just stuck a hot shot to his balls.

"Not trying to hurt your feelings," Brett said, "just fact. Girls sure don't want to be around some stinker. And you're kind of cute, if you'd clean yourself up."

"Really?" Donny said.

"Really."

"Smoke Stack said if you got money, you got the girls."

"Did he?" Brett said. "That's like saying if you got corn you get the pigs. Thing is, who wants pigs? Look here, kid. Get a shower, and let's see we can do something about those pimples. You just aren't washing your face good. And I got some stuff you can put on them. Even a natural beauty, a goddamn goddess like me, sometimes gets a bump.”

Next morning Brett slept in, and I went downstairs and woke Leonard and Donny. I called Kelly and told him we had his little brother, and that we would try and hang onto him for a few days, to see if common sense soaked in. I didn’t offer him any guarantees.

We called Marvin about seeing if he could drop a word to the police about the car in the shed, and so on. He did. They didn’t really have enough cause, but they went out and cut the lock anyway. The car inside was gone. The place was empty. They went out to the house where Smoke Stack lived. It was cleaned up and only Smoke Stack was home. He told them the bruises on his face were from falling down in the driveway.

It was an iffy move, putting them on the alert like that, but me and Leonard figured it was best to make them a little nervous.

After we got the news, Leonard said, “Smoke Stack and his swinging-dick friends are done tidying up. There’s nothing left for the cops to find. I think we should have shot them all last night. I think we should have shot Smoke Stack twice.”

Donny was sitting on the couch, listening.

“That includes you,” Leonard said.

“He’s just testy,” I said. “He hasn’t had his morning coffee. And his boyfriend isn’t talking to him.”

“You’re gay?” Donny said to Leonard.

“Yep.”

“You don’t act gay.”

“How do they act?”

“I don’t know. . . .”

“Look here, kid. We come in all shapes, sizes, and attitudes. But it’s pretty much a given we all have big dicks.”

“Yeah,” I said, “but he doesn’t have an ounce of fashion sense.”

“No Barbra Streisand records either,” Leonard said. “I just prefer men to women. And just for the record, I can whip your ass and pretty much anyone else’s on any day of the week, provided the moon is in Leo.”

“What?” Donny said.

“He’s fucking with you,” I said. “About the moon in Leo part.”

We went to the gym and took Donny with us. When we got there we put the bag gloves on him and showed him how to work the heavy bag. He didn’t want to do it at first, but Leonard persuaded him with a threat. After Donny hit the bag a few times, he got into it. He started asking questions on how to throw punches. He had seen us do it, seen how we moved the bag, and he wanted to learn it. I think he was also thinking about that ass-whipping I had given his hero.

Leonard said, “You got to come from the hip. But, you get older, you get more experience, you realize this bag don’t mean shit. Hitting a person, you don’t have to be able to move this bag. You got to hit a man when he’s in the void, when he’s stepping, when he’s trying to shift or recover his balance. Catch him then, you can take down a big guy with a simple punch, a kick. Catching someone off balance, or controlling their balance, makes them easier to throw.”

We spent two hours at the gym, then went back home.

We pulled up in the drive, and I saw the front door was open. Leonard and I were in the front seat. He turned and looked over his shoulder, said, “Donny, you stay in the car. If anyone comes out shooting, or you hear shooting, you run like a motherfucker. But, you don’t hear shooting, I come out, and you’re gone, I will track you down—”

“And beat the shit out of me,” Donny said.

“That’s right.”

We had guns in the glove box and we got them out. Leonard went around back, and I went up on the porch and moved the open front door wider with my foot, peeked inside.

I didn’t see anyone. I moved in slowly, and then I heard the back door lock click, and Leonard was in.

Leonard took the kitchen, and I took his room. We checked the bathrooms. I went upstairs. The bedcovers were pulled back, and the big red T-shirt she had slept in was lying on the floor. On the end of the bed was a note.

I picked it up and read it.

WE GOT YOUR REDHEAD. WE GOT DONNY'S BROTHER.
WE GOT YOUR LADY'S CELL PHONE,
AND WE GOT YOUR NUMBER.
GO TO THE COPS, THEY'RE BOTH DEAD.
WAIT FOR OUR CALL.

There’s no way to describe the emptiness I felt. I went downstairs with the note and gave it to Leonard. He read it and went upstairs and came down with a shotgun, two pistols, and a single-shot .22 rifle. None of them are registered. I keep them in a special place in the closet where the ceiling tiles can be moved and the guns can be stored.

I sat at the table, stunned, and Leonard went out and got Donny and brought him in.

Donny looked at me, said, “What’s wrong?”

Leonard gave him the note, said, “That’s your man, Donny. He’s got Brett and your brother. That’s what cowards do.”

Donny put the note down. “Smoke Stack said no one would get hurt. He said we’d just end up making some money.”

“Someone will get hurt all right,” Leonard said. “Smoke Stack. And anyone with him. If he hurts Brett, we’ll kill them all and shit on their graves on a weekly basis.”

“Brett didn’t have anything to do with this,” Donny said.

“Yeah, and that mattered, didn’t it?” Leonard said.

I was thinking on what to do next when the cell rang.

When I answered, Smoke Stack said, “All right, bad ass. We got your woman and she’s going to drive the getaway car for us. That’s ironic, ain’t it, asshole? It didn’t take all that much work to figure who you guys were, ’cause first off, we got the brother, and it didn’t take more than a few burning cigarettes on his chest and he talked right up, told us who you were. How you like that?”

“Peachy,” I said.

“We nabbed Donny’s brother at his job just before he started to clean a toilet. Now listen up tight ’cause I ain’t gonna repeat it. We hit the First Commercial Bank at one thirty today. Anyone should get tipped off before then, or at all, we’ll kill the chick and the brother too. What we’re gonna have the redhead do is drive the getaway car. Ain’t that classic? You take our wheel man, and we take your girl, and now she’s our wheel man. Pardon my goddamn fucking manners. Wheel woman. I hope she can drive, ’cause if she can’t, got to just go on and pop her.”

"She can drive," I said. "Don't hurt her."

"Man, that would be a shame, wouldn't it? Fox like that. She's fine, man. I don't know how you got something like that. I see her, and I see you, I got to wonder you got some kind of Love Potion thing going."

"Just don't hurt her. . . . How do I get her back?"

"You didn't mention getting the brother back. So, we'll keep him. We'll keep him until we're gone for some time. We give the redhead back, you tell who we are, then he's toast. Otherwise, a week from now we'll let him go . . . no. I don't like that. You see, I'm thinking since you didn't even ask about him, he's not such a big worry for you. You get the woman back, then what do you care? We'll do it the other way. We'll keep the redhead and give you the brother. A week from now, we'll let her go. Just so you know, we caught her sleeping. Just sprang the lock and found her upstairs. I made her change, and I watched while she did it. It's good to know she's a natural redhead. It's good to know what she's got under the hood, so to speak."

"Fuck you," I said.

"Don't get rowdy. It might not do to get me mad. And let me tell you something. Other night, you got lucky. I was high as a kite."

"Yeah, and you can't fight either."

"Maybe we'll get another chance and I can show you what I can do when I'm straight."

"Maybe we will."

"Tell you what. We keep her a week, we'll give her back, but in the meantime, we might try and put out that little fire between her legs. I'm a regular fireman."

"You hurt her, you touch her, you're dead," I said.

"I wouldn't talk like that, if I was you. There's all kinds of things can happen between now and then. You could be looking for her for twenty years and not so much as find a hair. That body we left in the woods, in the car, that was a mistake. From now on, there won't be bodies to find. So you better pay attention to me. You sit quiet. We'll hit the bank. We'll leave the brother somewhere, and then we'll let your woman go in a week. That way, we got plenty of time to do what we want and get where we want. You don't believe me, call the police. Show up and cause trouble. You might get me, but you won't get her back. Least not alive. Have a nice fucking day, asshole."

I put the cell away and told Leonard what Smoke Stack said.

I said to Donny, "He won't let your brother go, and he won't let Brett go. He knows we know who he is, and he's determined to pull the armored car job anyway. Out of spite. He's trying to prove he's smart."

"I'm so sorry," Donny said. "I guess I haven't been thinking."

"You ought to be sorry, kid," Leonard said. "You've stirred up the goddamn bees' nest."

"He might let them go," Donny said.

"No," I said. "His pride is what this is about. He knows at some point we'll tell somebody, so I figure he'll do the robbery, then tell us he's going to let the brother go, and we can pick him up at such and such a place, but neither brother nor Brett will be alive by then. And they'll be waiting for us. They'll ask that you come along, like they're gonna take you back. But you know what? They plan to kill us all. No witnesses, and then they're back in business. Cops will know it's them that did it because of circumstantial evidence, but thinking and proving, that's two different things. They could lay low for a year or two and then launder the money somewhere, come out good. And my figure is everyone in that group, except Smoke Stack, will turn up dead. He'll end up with all the money and no one to talk about how things were done."

"You know, it's not a nice thing to say," Leonard said, looking at Donny, "but this is all your fault."

"It is, isn't it?" Donny said.

"Damn straight," Leonard said.

"It's not all your fault," I said. "I was Kelly, I'd have told too. No one is as tough as they show in the movies. I should have thought that angle. We tried to play this one too nice."

"Hap likes being nice," Leonard said. "Me, I don't care for nice."

"Will you go to the police?" Donny asked.

"We could take that chance, but we won't," I said.

Donny looked at the floor, then up at me. "It's not an armored car this time."

"No?"

"They're just going to hit the bank. Two inside, and then they'll come out and the getaway car will be waiting. I wanted to tell you that. He shouldn't have bothered Kelly and Brett."

"I bet Smoke Stack stays in the car," Leonard said.

"Yeah," Donny said. "Him and one of the others. And the driver."

"And now that driver is Brett, and your brother will be in the car too," Leonard said.

"All right," I said. "That doesn't change much, it might make it easier, no armored car guys to worry with."

"Yeah, it really doesn't matter," Leonard said. "But you showed some balls by telling us, by stepping farther away from that asshole Smoke Stack.”

“What will you do?” Donny asked.

“What Leonard said earlier. We’ll kill them all and shit on their graves.”

It was still early in the day. My guess was they would keep Brett and Kelly alive until they were finished with the job. That would be their insurance until they didn’t need them anymore. I had to hold onto that idea. It was my only comfort. Still, it wouldn’t be long after the job was over that both Brett and Kelly would end up dead.

I called Marvin and told him the situation.

“So, how about I park somewhere where I can see them do the robbery. The asshole even told you the bank.”

“He thinks he’s untouchable.”

“I can be an eyewitness later. Say I saw them. Right after I shoot the living hell out of them.”

“Just be a witness,” I said. “Don’t get involved. Leonard and I will take care of them.”

“I know that,” Marvin said. “I never thought otherwise. But I can do my part.”

“Not for us you won’t,” I said.

“I didn’t say anything about it being for you and Leonard. It’s Brett I’m talking about.”

“And I appreciate it, but just watch what goes down so you can say you saw them there. If you see us, kind of forget that you did.”

“If they call me on the witness stand later and ask if I saw you two?”

“Lie under oath.”

“Certainly. I just wanted to make sure we were on the same page.”

We met Marvin at a drive-through eatery about noon, had some coffee. I don’t remember if I drank mine or not. We were sitting in Marvin’s car. Leonard’s car was parked beside it. Donny was sitting with us.

“Donny, you stay with Marvin,” I said.

“You don’t have to worry about me running,” Donny said. “I want my brother back. I want you to get Brett back. She was right. I do get to choose.”

“Yeah, well,” Leonard said, “talk is cheap.”

“By the way,” I said, “in case you choose wrong, I’m not worrying about you running. Marvin will shoot you.”

“I will,” Marvin said. “A whole lot.”

“Maybe somebody ought to shoot me,” Donny said. It was a little dramatic, but right then I think he meant it.

Leonard raised his hand. “Who’s for it?”

“Right now you just stay out of trouble, Donny,” I said. “This kind of stuff is our business.”

“Yeah, like we don’t fuck up regularly,” Leonard said.

“Not this time,” I said.

“But they said for you not to come,” Donny said. “That if you did they’d kill her.”

“They’ll kill her anyway,” Marvin said. “So, it’s then or not at all.”

Leonard and I got in his car. We had put false license plates on it that morning, and we had a roll of false pinstripe to use. It was a stick-on thing you could remove easily, then wipe the sides of the car with some rubbing alcohol and it was like it had never been there. It was a little thing, but it was something that might throw an observer off.

Just to keep the disguise theme going, Leonard and I were going to wear hats.

Marvin was to drive to a spot across from the bank. A hotel parking lot. It would be quite a coincidence, him being at the hotel parking lot at the same time as the robbery, considering he'd turned in information about them earlier. Information that didn't pan out. But, he planned to tell them the hotel had a hell of a catfish buffet, and that he liked to take it in now and again, just happened to be there when the whole thing went down. Donny being there might take a bit more explaining, but in the end, truthfully, I didn't think it would matter. Not with what I had in mind.

We stopped in a lot behind a closed supermarket and got out and quickly put the pinstripes on the car. We put our hats on and drove to a place across the street from the bank. It used to be a mercantile store, but like most things downtown, it had gone the way of the dodo bird. From where we were, we could see the bank and we could see the hotel across the way. Marvin and Donny were parked in the lot.

The little mercantile lot was now a free parking lot, and it was full of cars. Mostly people who worked for the bank. We didn't try to find a parking spot, we just drove to the rear of where all the cars were and pulled up there. As we sat, a police patrol car came by on the street between us and the bank. He didn't look our way. Which was good. I had the .22 bolt-action rifle in my lap; it held one shot at a time. In the backseat was a shotgun. We had pistols in the glove box. No land mines or golf clubs.

I opened the door quietly and got out of the car and looked over the roof, and over the roofs of the other cars in the lot. From there I had a clear shot.

I got back in the car.

I looked at my watch. One fifteen.

I took a deep breath. Leonard said, “It’ll be all right.”

“It’ll be all right when it’s all right,” I said.

“We’ll get them.”

“He could have lied about the time,” I said. “He could have done that.”

“Yep,” Leonard said, “but I think he feels safe. The coward’s way is to be brave when he holds the cards. Not when he doesn’t.”

“I just hope I’m not the one to hurt her.”

“Hell, Hap, when was the last time you missed a shot?”

I tried not to remember when that was, tried not to imagine I could miss.

“Listen, brother,” Leonard said, “I can do the shooting for you. I’m not like you. You know, in Vietnam I killed a lot of men. The only ones I feel bad about are the ones I tried to kill, shot at, and missed. I remember them better than the dead ones ’cause all I can think about is they may have gone on to kill one of us. I’m not like you. I don’t carry the burdens of popping off a bad guy. I can get closer somehow, and I can do it.”

“No you can’t. You’re an all right shot, but when it comes to this business I’m the one to do it. And it needs to be done from as much distance as the shot will allow.”

“You got me there.”

I nodded. “Yeah. I do.”

I never learned to love guns. Didn’t sit around and talk about how big a hole they can put in something and from how far. I didn’t need bigger, better, and more. I don’t enjoy the smell of gun oil, don’t even like cleaning them. I don’t know all the brand names and all the calibers and such.

But I can shoot a long rifle better than damn near anybody outside of a trained sniper, and I’m okay with a handgun if it’s not too extreme a shot. I just have a knack to aim at something and hit it. Put a long gun in my hands and I can normally put a shot up a gnat’s ass, and that’s without the gnat bending over and pointing to the target.

Right then, however, all I could think about was that I might miss. I had certainly missed before, but I didn’t want this to be one of those times.

Leonard knew what I was thinking. He often does.

“You won’t miss, Hap.”

We didn’t say another word. Just sat there and watched and listened to each other breathe. I paused once and looked in the mirror on the back of the sun visor. I should note I looked pretty cool in my hat, a brown fedora. Leonard didn’t look so sharp in his. He loved hats, but like I keep telling him, he isn’t a hat person. Every hat he wears looks like something left on a scarecrow.

One thirty came and they didn’t. Had Smoke Stack given me a line of shit? I felt like I was going to burst out crying.

Five minutes later we saw a car with two of the guys that had been with Smoke Stack in the house that night. The skinny, potbellied guys.

The car was a replacement for the one they had originally stored in the shed Marvin told us about. A brown, speedy model. They parked it in a spot and sat for a moment. I got out of the car with the .22 and laid it over the roof. I was a good distance away, and I had a limited shot over the roofs of parked cars. My stomach fluttered.

Way I figured, those guys in the brown late model would hit the bank, rush out and into the getaway car as it arrived. Smoke Stack, Brett and Kelly, and Stumpy would be in that car. Brett would be at the wheel. When the robbery was done, the others would jump in the getaway car and go. Brett would have to drive them out of there. I hoped like hell she didn't try to get cute, wreck the car. She did, they'd kill her or the wreck might. With Brett, you never knew. She was a fighter.

Way they planned it, if things went wrong with the pickup, they had a spare car in the lot. But the best thing was to have a getaway driver waiting so the robbers wouldn't have to start up and back out. It wasn't elaborate. It was simple. Simple was what worked.

The two shitheads got out of the car, ready to go in the bank. They had on gloves and jackets under which I was sure there were guns.

I had the .22 beaded on the back of the head of one of them. A .22 isn't a heavy firing weapon, but it doesn't recoil much and in matters like this, it isn't firepower, it's aim. The .22 had another advantage. It wasn't particularly loud.

I took a deep breath, two more, then slowly let out all my air, steadied the rifle. My face was beaded with sweat and a drop ran into my eye. I wiped it away quickly with my arm. The sweat had spoiled my aim.

They paused, and the one I hadn't sighted talked on his cell phone. That would be the call for the getaway car, which would be nearby. And that would be the pause I needed to set my shot again.

They started walking toward the bank entrance. I sighted down the barrel, took three deep breaths again, let out all my air, and gently tugged the trigger. The sound of the shot was like someone snapping a whip. The guy I was aiming at folded his legs under him and sat down quickly like he was about to start meditation. I knew there would be a small hole in the back of his head, but the front would have one the size of a half-dollar. There would be a punch out of bone, an explosion of blood and brains on the concrete. As I watched, slowly, he leaned forward, his forehead hitting the cement.

The other man with him wheeled and pulled a gun and darted back toward his car. I shot and hit him in the side before he made it. He went down. I could hear him scream from there. He threw the pistol aside and got up on his knees and held both hands up in surrender; he was a professional quitter.

I could tell he hadn't seen me yet, had no idea where the shot had come from. He was rapidly turning his head from left to right, front to back, holding his hands up.

He yelled out to no one in particular, "I haven't got a gun. I give up. I quit."

All I could think about was Brett.

I timed the turn of his head and shot him between the eyes. He fell back. I tossed the .22 in the backseat and climbed back in the car. About that time, people came out of the bank. They gathered around the bodies.

We sat where we were. People were looking in all directions. I took deep breaths and let them out.

“Easy,” Leonard said. “Two down.”

Then we saw a black SUV pull into the lot.

Brett was at the wheel. Smoke Stack was beside her. One of the other shits was in the back, the one Smoke Stack called Stumpy. I didn’t see Kelly.

I got out of the car again with the .22, keeping it held down low. But when Smoke Stack saw the situation at the bank, the crowd, his boys down in the lot, he had Brett drive on. Nothing speedy. She just eased out of the lot. So far, no one even knew the SUV was supposed to be part of what was going on.

I was sure neither Smoke Stack nor Stumpy had seen me. I got in the car, and we eased out of the lot with our hats pulled down low and followed the SUV.

It went slow as it turned down the street toward the square, and then it hit South Street and turned. Holding a ways back, but not too far.

My cell rang. I answered.

It was Marvin. “You on them?” he asked.

“On them,” I said.

They went along for a few lights, driving casual, then they turned on Highway 7. We pulled down a little dirt road and got out and pulled off the pinstriping and threw it and our hats into the bushes. It was most likely wasted energy, but it was the only clever thing we had had time to plan, and frankly, it wasn’t that damn clever.

We got back in the car and went after them, finally caught up and stayed behind them at a goodly distance. Another car passed and got between us. But that was all right. It was a kind of camouflage. We all three drove out Highway 7.

We went on for quite some time, and then the car between us turned off, and we fell back a little. There was road work ahead, and they fanned the SUV through, but stopped us. We sat there and waited. It was a cool day, but I was sweating. They were getting ahead of us.

“Should we run it?” I said.

“Stay cool,” Leonard said.

That was like asking a polar bear to stay cool in Albuquerque in mid-July.

Finally they waved us through. Leonard put his foot to the floor. We didn’t see them. We had lost them.

I called Marvin.

“Man, we lost them. We’re gonna need you out here to help look. We got to do back roads. Shit, I don’t know what we got to do.”

“Take it easy,” Marvin said.

“Easier said than done. Goddamn road work. It got us hung up.”

“Where are you?”

“Out Highway 7.”

“Highway 7. We’re coming . . . wait. Donny. He wants to talk to you.”

“Fuck him.”

“It’s about where they might be.”

“Then put him on.”

“Hap,” Donny said, “I want to help.”

"Then you better not be wasting my time with a chat."

"Smoke Stack, if he's out Highway 7, he's going to the Take Off. That's what he calls a pasture out there. I think his family might have owned it. It's about twenty acres, used to be a hayfield, has some aluminum buildings. He keeps an ultralight there. That's why he calls it the Take Off. He uses the pasture as a kind of airport. He could be going there. I was there with him once. Went out to help him get a car from one of the sheds. One we had stored for the getaway, before you found out about it. He could have stored the car back there."

"For a trade-off?"

"Maybe. But that's a place he could be. Maybe they're just hiding out there. I don't know. But it makes sense."

He gave me the directions. It was down a county road. We had passed it. Leonard wheeled the car and we drove back.

The place wasn't hard to find, not once we knew which road to take. Donny explained all that over the phone. There was a line of trees, and then a pasture. From the directions, we concluded we were at the right place.

We parked by a small bridge. I spoke into the cell. "We're here."

"Good luck," Donny said.

"Luck has got nothing to do with it," I said, and turned off the phone.

I took the .22 out and Leonard took the shotgun. We walked over the bridge and along the side of the road behind the trees for about a hundred feet. We stopped near the road and jumped over a ditch and looked through a gap in a patch of pines.

From there we could see a grown-up pasture and about a hundred yards out, a long low aluminum shed. It had two large double doors on it. One set of doors was wide open. I could see the ultralight Donny had mentioned. I had been up in one once, a two-seater. I was the passenger. It was like riding in a winged lawn mower.

The SUV was parked near the shed.

If Smoke Stack and Stumpy were going out of there in the ultralight, then there wouldn't be any room for Brett and Kelly. They'd either leave them, or pop them. I suspected the latter. But they hadn't done it yet because I could see Brett and Kelly by the shed. It looked as if they might be wearing handcuffs; their hands were tucked behind their backs and they were leaning against the building. The only way into the pasture, which was fenced with barbed wire, was over a cattle guard.

Smoke Stack and Stumpy were tugging the ultralight out of the shed.

"Looks like they aren't going to bother with a car," Leonard said.

"Go start the car," I said.

"You can shoot from here."

"I can. But I'm going through the trees and through the fence, and I'm going to walk straight toward them. I need to be closer and surer. You drive over that cattle guard like your ass is on fire, distract them. I'll take my shot then. It'll be Smoke Stack first. Then I reload and it's the other one."

"That's slow reloading with all that's going on, you and that single-shot squirrel rifle," Leonard said.

"I'm quick and it's a little late to upgrade."

Leonard walked back to the car and I started through the trees and through the wire. I heard the car engine start. It wasn't loud enough to startle anyone, far back as he was. And then I heard the car coming, like the proverbial bat out of hell.

I hurried across the pasture. Smoke Stack hadn't seen me yet. He was preoccupied with another part of his plan. He hadn't wanted to share the two-seater at all. And I knew why. All that money had to have a place to sit.

He had an automatic pistol drawn, and he turned and shot his partner right through the head. I saw him heave something in a bag into the ultralight, then he started over toward Brett and Kelly, the automatic hanging from his hand. He was partially hidden by the ultralight. I could only get glimpses of him through the wings and the motor and the seating. He hadn't seen me yet. He was preoccupied.

I stopped and dropped to one knee and took my shot.

I saw his hair lift a little, my shot was so close.

But I missed. I NEVER FUCKING MISSED. And I had missed.

My heart sank.

Smoke Stack wheeled. And when he did, Brett jumped up, and, with her hands against her back, she leaped at him, hit him with a body slam, and knocked him spinning backwards, his gun flying from his hand. I dropped the .22 and started running toward him. Leonard was flying through the cattle guard then, bearing down on Smoke Stack.

Smoke Stack got up and out from under Brett, who struggled to her feet and tried to jump at him again. But Smoke Stack dodged her like a quarterback on the run and leapt into the ultralight. I heard the motor start up and a moment later the machine was bouncing over the field. I was running on a collision course with Leonard. He slammed on the brakes and I slid over the hood and jumped in on the other side.

“Go,” I said.

The ultralight was gaining some speed. Its bounces were becoming higher. In a moment it would hop and then leap to the sky.

But the motor on that thing wasn’t a match for a car. We were closing. As we passed Brett, who had struggled to her feet, she looked at me.

I waved.

The car bounced along until it was almost even with the ultralight. I hung myself out of the open window, eased out until I was sitting on the edge of it with my legs dangling, my arms inside, keeping me lodged. And then I eased on arm out.

“Closer,” I said.

Leonard did that. I cocked one foot up until it was on the window support, and I shoved off just as the ultralight was making its big jump.

I hit the wing of the ultralight, scrambling for a grip, and my weight nodded it toward the ground. The wing hit. The propeller gnawed at the pasture. There was a sudden whirl as the sky came down and then went up again, followed by a close look at, and a hard impact with, the ground.

I heard a noise like someone dragging a rake through gravel. It was the ultralight spinning in circles like a confused idiot. The money had come loose of the bag and some of it was spinning in the air and some had been caught in the propeller and chopped up. It looked like the last hurrah of a parade, the last bits of confetti thrown.

On my feet, I saw Smoke Stack coming toward me. He was so angry he was actually foaming at the mouth. His face was scratched up.

“Now you get your shot, buddy,” I said.

“I’ll fucking kill you.”

He was like a locomotive. It wasn’t like that night in his house. He was crazed with anger and maybe he had been on drugs, or most likely had just underestimated me. That happens a lot. But he was dead serious now.

I dodged his rush and kicked out. I was trying to hit him in the solar plexus, but he instinctively crunched his body and took the shot on his upraised forearms. The impact, the disorientation of the crash, had me off a bit, so the impact of hitting him like that knocked me down. He leaped on me like a big frog.

I heard Leonard slam the car door and start over. But me and Smoke Stack were into it. I spread my legs and got him between them. He tried to hit me. I put up my arms. I was deflecting most of the blows, but I was taking some of it. Finally I cupped one of his arms at the elbow and swung a leg to the side of his neck. I was trying to pull him into a triangle choke, but the angle wasn’t right. He pushed my leg back so that it was being mashed across my face. It was damn uncomfortable. I used my other leg to kick at his hip, knocking him back a bit, loosening him. It allowed me to swing my leg free. I poked him in the eyes with my fingers, and when he went back and put a hand to his face, I rolled out from under him.

Now I was on my feet, where I preferred to be. I saw Leonard leaning against the car, the shotgun lying on the fender.

“You got him,” Leonard said.

Smoke Stack came in swinging. I ducked him and came up with an uppercut that knocked him back. I kicked him in the nuts then, but he was too high on adrenaline for it to matter. He came swinging again. I glanced the blows off my forearms and got inside and grabbed his head and kneed him inside of the leg. Adrenaline wasn't enough to stop that pain.

His leg went out from under him. I swung a downward right cross, and back he went. He rolled onto his hands and knees and scuttled and finally got to his feet. He put a hand to his pocket, and when he brought it out, he had a knife.

He crouched, eased toward me. There was sound like a cannon going off and Smoke Stack's head disappeared in a blur of red and gray and flying white fragments. Within a blink of an eye, what was left of him was lying on the ground.

I looked at Leonard. He was lowering the shotgun.

"You proved your point, and you got your licks in," he said. "But that knife, that could have been a problem."

We found that Brett's and Kelly's hands were bound with plastic cuffs. We cut those off. I said to Brett, "You all right, baby?"

"Yeah," Brett said. "I'm fine. All they did was get an unauthorized look at my nubile body. A look like they got, I should have been paid money."

I grinned at her and we kissed.

I walked back and got the .22. The shell casing was still in it.

We packed up and drove out of there in Leonard's car, left the money and the bodies.

It was a few weeks later.

A tip had led the police to the bodies in the field. Way it looked was there had been a problem between thieves. Smoke Stack had shot his partner and tried to escape, but crashed. Someone had blown his head off. They took this to be another partner. They were glad to get most of the money back. I don't know about the shredded stuff. I envisioned some bank clerk gluing the pieces back together like an archaeologist reuniting shards of pottery. It was a silly thought, but it hung in my head.

The other partner, of course, wouldn't be found. Neither would the .22 that killed the two would-be robbers in the bank lot. The cops had an idea that one of the partners went rogue, first with a .22, then a shotgun. It was a silly theory, but thank goodness they liked that story and were sticking to it. They're not dumb, just arrogant.

It was a nice afternoon with a clear sky and a light wind. We were in the backyard grilling burgers, me and Brett and Leonard. The doorbell rang. That would be our guests.

I went through the house and let Marvin and Kelly and Donny in, walked them out back.

Leonard was flipping the burgers.

We greeted each other, talked.

Donny said, "I haven't said nothing, and I never will."

"I believe you," I said.

"I wouldn't want you mad at me," Donny said.

"That's good thinking," Leonard said.

"But I wouldn't say anyway. I . . . I can't thank you guys enough. You hadn't done what you did, I'd be dead."

"Absolutely," Leonard said.

“Thanks again for saving my little brother,” Kelly said, “and thanks for passing on the payment I owed you guys. I can use the dough.”

“Man,” Leonard said. “You’re the hero. You put yourself on the line. Changed your life, got your ass whipped by me, and thoroughly, I might add, and then you didn’t even have any protection from those guys and still you went to work.”

“You warned me,” Kelly said. “You told me not to stay on the job.”

“Yep,” Leonard said. “We did.”

“And, I sort of squealed when they put those cigarettes on me. I thought I could take it. I was sure I could. One burn and I was already starting to loosen my tongue.”

“It hurts,” Leonard said. “You’re not a professional tough guy. We don’t begrudge you trying to make the pain stop. Besides, in the long run it worked out.”

“Well,” Brett said, stretching out in a lawn chair, her long legs poking sweetly out of her shorts. “All’s well that ends well and doesn’t make mess on the rug.”

“Here, here,” Marvin said.

“You said it right, Brett,” Donny said. “They were hyenas. And I don’t want to be like that.”

“Good thinking,” Brett said.

“I find a woman I care about,” Donny said, “I hope she’s half the woman you are, Brett.”

“Oh, honey,” Brett said smiling. “That’s so sweet. But too optimistic. You can’t find anyone half as good as me. A quarter of my worth maybe, if you’re having a good day. But half, don’t be silly.”

Veil’s Visit

with Andrew Vachss

1.

Leonard eyed Veil for a long, hard moment and said, “If you’re a lawyer, then I can shit a perfectly round turd through a hoop at twenty paces. Blindfolded.”

“I am a lawyer,” Veil said. “But I’ll let your accomplishments speak for themselves.”

Veil was average height, dark hair touched with gray, one good eye. The other one roamed a little. He had a beard that could have been used as a Brillo pad, and he was dressed in an expensive suit and shiny shoes, a fancy wristwatch, and ring. He was the only guy I’d ever seen with the kind of presence Leonard has. Scary.

“You still don’t look like any kind of lawyer to me,” Leonard said.

“He means that as a compliment,” I said to Veil. “Leonard doesn’t think real highly of your brethren at the bar.”

“Oh, you’re a bigot?” Veil asked pleasantly, looking directly at Leonard with his one good eye. A very icy eye indeed—I remembered it well.

“The fuck you talking about? Lawyers are all right. They got their purpose. You never know when you might want one of them to weigh down a rock at the bottom of a lake.” Leonard’s tone had shifted from mildly inquisitive to that of a man who might like to perform a live dissection.

“You think all lawyers are alike, right? But if I said all blacks are alike, you’d think you know something about *me*, right?”

“I knew you were coming to that,” Leonard said.

“Well,” I said. “I think this is really going well. What about you boys?”

Veil and Leonard may not have bonded as well as I had hoped, but they certainly had some things in common. In a way, they were both assholes. I, of course, exist on a higher plane.

“You wearing an Armani suit, must have set you back a thousand dollars—” Leonard said.

“You know a joint where I can get suits like this for a lousy one grand, I’ll stop there on my way back and pick up a couple dozen,” Veil said.

“Yeah, fine,” Leonard said. “Gold Rolex, diamond ring . . . how much all *that* set you back?”

“It was a gift,” Veil said.

“Sure,” Leonard said. “You know what you look like?”

“What’s that?”

“You look like Central Casting for a mob movie.”

“And you look like a candidate for a chain gang. Which is kind of why I’m here.”

“You gonna defend me? How you gonna do that? I may not know exactly what you are, but I can bet the farm on this—you ain’t no *Texas* lawyer. Hell, you ain’t no Texan, period.”

“No problem. I can just go *pro hac vice*.”

“I hope that isn’t some kind of sexual act,” Leonard said. “Especially if it involves me and you.”

"It just means I get admitted to the bar for one case. For the specific litigation. I'll need local counsel to handle the pleadings, of course. . . ."

"Do I look like a goddamned pleader to you? And you best not say yes."

"'Pleadings' just means the papers," Veil said, his voice a model of patience. "Motions, applications . . . stuff like that. You wanted to cop a plea to this, Hap wouldn't need me. I don't do that kind of thing. And by the way, I'm doing this for Hap, not you."

"What is it makes you so special to Hap?" Leonard asked, studying Veil's face carefully. "What is it that you *do* do?"

"Fight," Veil said.

"Yeah," I said. "He *can* do that."

"Yeah, so can you and me, but that and a rubber will get us a jack-off without mess." Leonard sighed. He said to Veil, "You know what my problem is?"

"Besides attitude, sure. Says so right on the indictment. You burned down a crack house. For at least the . . . what was it, fourth time? That's first-degree arson, malicious destruction of property, attempted murder—"

"I didn't—"

"What? Know anyone was home when you firebombed the dump? Doesn't matter—the charge is still valid."

"Yeah, well they can valid *this*," Leonard said, making a gesture appropriate to his speech.

"You're looking at a flat dime down in Huntsville," Veil told him. "That a good enough summary of your 'problem?'"

"No, it ain't close," Leonard said. "Here's my problem. You come in here wearing a few thousand bucks of fancy stuff, tell me you're a fighter, but your face looks like you lost a lot more fights than you won. You don't know jack about Texas law, but you're gonna work a local jury. And that's still not my big problem. You know what my big problem is?"

"I figure you're going to tell me sometime before visiting hours are over," Veil said.

"My problem is this: Why the hell should I trust you?"

"I trust him," I said.

"I know, brother. And I trust you. What I don't trust, on the other hand, is your judgment. The two ain't necessarily the same thing."

"Try this, then." Veil told him. "Homicide. A murder. And nobody's said a word about it. For almost twenty years."

"You telling me you and Hap—?"

"I'm telling you there was a homicide. No statute of limitations on that, right? It's still unsolved. And nobody's talking."

"I don't know. Me and Hap been tight a long time. He'd tell me something like that. I mean, he dropped the rock on someone, I'd know." Leonard turned to me. "Wouldn't I?"

I didn't say anything. Veil was doing the talking.

Veil leaned in close, dropping his voice. "It wasn't Hap who did it. But Hap knows all about it. And you, if keep your mouth shut long enough, you will too. Then you can decide who to trust. Deal?"

Leonard gave Veil a long, deep look. "Deal," he finally said, leaning back, waiting to hear the story.

Veil turned and looked at me, and I knew that was my cue to tell it.

2.

“It was back in my semi-hippie days,” I said to Leonard. “Remember when I was all about peace and love?”

“The only ‘piece’ I ever knew you to be about was a piece of ass,” Leonard said kindly. “I always thought you had that long hair so’s it could help you get into fights.”

“Just tell him the fucking story,” Veil said. “Okay? I’ve got work to do, and I can’t do it without Leonard. You two keep screwing around and the guard’s going to roll on back here and—”

“It was in this house on the coast,” I said. “In Oregon. I was living with some folks.”

“Some of those folks being women, of course.”

“Yeah. I was experimenting with different ways of life. I told you about it. Anyway, I hadn’t been there long. This house, it wasn’t like it was a commune or nothing, but people just . . . came and went, understand? So, one day, this guy comes strolling up. Nice-looking guy. Photographer, he said he was. All loaded down with equipment in his van. He was a traveling man, just working his way around the country. Taking pictures for this book he was doing. He fit in pretty good. You know, he looked the part. Long hair, but a little neater than the rest of us. Suave manner. Took pictures a lot. Nobody really cared. He did his share of the work, kicked in a few bucks for grub. No big deal. I was a little suspicious at first. We always got photographers wanting to ‘document’ us, you know? Mostly wanted pictures of the girls. Especially Sunflower—she had this thing about clothes being ‘inhibiting’ and all. In other words, she was quick to shuck drawers and throw the hair triangle around. But this guy was real peaceful, real calm. I remember one of the guys there said this one had a calm presence. Like the eye of a hurricane."

"This is motherfucking fascinating and all," Leonard said, "but considering my particular situation, I wonder if you couldn't, you know, get to the point?"

Seeing as how Leonard never read that part of the Good Book that talked about patience being a virtue, I sped it up a bit. "I was out in the backyard one night," I said. "Meditating."

"Masturbating, you mean," Leonard said.

"I was just getting to that stage with the martial arts and I didn't want any of the damn marijuana smoke getting in my eyes. I guess I was more conservative about that sort of thing than I realized. It made me nervous just being around it. So I needed some privacy. I wasn't doing the classic meditation thing. Just being alone with my thoughts, trying to find my center."

"Which you never have," Leonard said.

"I'm sitting there, thinking about whatever it was I was thinking about—"

"Pussy," Leonard said.

"And I open my eyes and there he is. Veil."

"That'd be some scary shit," Leonard said.

"Looked about the same he does now."

"Yeah? Was he wearing that Armani suit?"

"Matter a fact, he wasn't," I said. "He looked like everyone else did around there then. Only difference was the pistol."

"I can see how that got your attention," Leonard said.

"It was dark. And I'm no modern firearms expert. But it wasn't the stuff I grew up with, hunting rifles, shotguns, and revolvers. This was a seriously big-ass gun, I can tell you that. I couldn't tell if he was pointing it at me or not. Finally I decided he was just kind of

. . . holding it. I asked him—politely, I might add—if there was anything I could do for him, short of volunteering to be shot, and he said, yeah, matter of fact, there was. What he wanted was some information about this photographer guy.

"Now hippie types weren't all that different from cons back then, at least when it came to giving out information to the cops. Cops had a way of thinking you had long hair, you had to be something from Mars out to destroy Mom, apple pie, and the American way."

"Does that mean Texas too?" Leonard asked.

"I believe it did, yes."

"Well, I can see their point. And the apple pie part."

"I could tell this guy was no cop. And he wasn't asking me for evidence-type stuff anyway. Just when the guy had showed up, stuff like that."

Leonard yawned. Sometimes he can be a very crude individual. Veil looked like he always does. Calm.

"Anyway, I started to say I didn't know the guy, then . . . I don't know. There was something about his manner that made me trust him."

"Thank you," Veil said. I wasn't sure if he was being sarcastic or not.

I nodded. "I told him the truth. It wasn't any big deal. Like I said, he wasn't asking anything weird, but I was a little worried. I mean, you know, the gun and all. Then I got stupid and—"

"Oh, *that's* when it happened?" Leonard asked. "That's like the moment it set in?"

I maintained patience—which is what Leonard is always complaining he has to do with *me*—and went on like he hadn't said a word: “—asked him how come he wanted to know all about this guy, and maybe I ought not to be saying anything, and how he ought to take his pistol and go on. I didn’t want any trouble, and no one at the place did either.

“So Veil asks the big question: Where is the guy right now? I told him he was out somewhere. Or maybe gone, for all I knew. That’s the way things were then. People came and went like cats and you didn’t tend to get uptight about it. It was the times.”

“Groovy,” Leonard said.

“We talk for a while, but, truth was, I didn’t *know* anything about the guy, so I really got nothing to say of importance. But, you know, I’m thinking it isn’t every day you see a guy looks like Veil walking around with a gun almost the size of my dick.”

“Jesus,” Leonard said. “Can’t ever get away from your dick.”

“No, it tends to stay with me.”

“How about staying with the story,” Veil said, still calm but with an edge to his voice now.

“So I ask Veil, it’s okay with him, I’m going back in the house and get some sleep, and like maybe could he put the gun up ’cause it’s making me nervous. I know I mentioned that gun several times. I’m trying to kind of glide out of there because I figure a guy with a gun has more on his mind than just small talk. I thought he might even be a druggie, though he didn’t look like one. Veil here, he says no problem. But I see he’s not going anywhere, so I don’t move. Somehow, the idea of getting my back to that gun doesn’t appeal to me, and we’re kind of close, and I’m thinking he gets a little closer, I got a small chance of taking the gun away from him. Anyway, we both stick. Studying each other, I think. Neither of us going anywhere.”

“Neither the fuck am I,” Leonard said. “Matter of fact, I think moss is starting to grow on the north side of my ass.”

“All right, partner,” I told him, “here’s the finale. I decide to not go in the house, just sit out there with Veil. We talk a bit about this and that, anything but guns, and we’re quiet a bit. Gets to be real late, I don’t know, maybe four in the morning, and we both hear a motor. Something pulling into the driveway. Then we hear a car door close. Another minute or so, the front door to the house closes too. Veil, without a word to me, gets up and walks around to the drive. I follow him. Even then I think I’m some kind of mediator. That whatever’s going on, maybe I can fix it. I was hell for fixing people’s problems then.”

“You’re still hell for that,” Leonard said.

“Sure enough, there’s the guy’s van. I’m starting to finally snap that Veil hasn’t just showed up for an assassination. He’s investigating, and, well, I don’t know how, but I’m just sort of falling in with him. In spite of his sweet personality, there’s something about me and him that clicked.”

“I adore a love story,” Leonard said.

“So anyway, I wasn’t exactly shocked when Veil put the pistol away, stuck a little flashlight in his teeth, worked the locks on the guy’s van like he had a key. We both climbed in, being real quiet. In the back, under a pile of equipment, we found the . . . pictures.”

“Guy was a blackmailer?” Leonard asked, a little interested now.

“They were pictures of kids,” I told him. Quiet, so’s he’d know what kind of pictures I meant.

Leonard’s face changed. I knew then he was thinking about what kind of pictures they were and not liking having to think about it.

“I’d never seen anything like that before and didn’t know that sort of thing existed. Oh, I guess, in theory, but not in reality. And the times then, lot of folks were thinking free love and sex was okay for anyone, grown-ups, kids. People who didn’t really know anything about life and what this sort of thing was all about, but one look at those pictures and I was educated, and it was an education I didn’t want. I’ve never got over it.

“So he,” I said, nodding my head over at Veil, “asks me, where does the guy with the van sleep? Where inside the house, I mean. I tried to explain to him what a crash pad was. I couldn’t be sure where he was, or even who he might be with, you understand? Anyway, Veil just looks at me, says it would be a real mess if they found this guy in the house. A mess for us, you know? So he asks me, how about if I go inside, tell the guy it looks like someone tried to break into his van?

“I won’t kid you. I hesitated. Not because I felt any sympathy for that sonofabitch, but because it’s not my nature to walk someone off a plank. I was trying to sort of think my way out of it when Veil here told me to take a look at the pictures again. A good look.”

“The guy’s toast,” Leonard said. “Fucker like that, he’s toast. I know you, Hap. He’s toast.”

I nodded at Leonard. “Yeah,” I said. “I went inside. Brought the guy out with me. He opens the door to the van, climbs in the front seat. And there’s Veil, in the passenger seat. Veil and that pistol. I went back in the house, watched from the window. I heard the van start up, saw it pull out. I never saw the photographer again. And to tell you the truth, I’ve never lost a minute’s sleep over it. I don’t know what that says about me, but I haven’t felt a moment of regret.”

“It says you have good character,” Veil said.

“What I want to know,” Leonard said looking at Veil, “is what did you do with the body?”

Veil didn’t say anything.

Leonard tried again. “You was a hit man? Is that what Hap here’s trying to tell me?”

“It was a long time ago,” Veil told him. “It doesn’t matter, does it? What matters is: You want to talk to me now?”

3.

The judge looked like nothing so much as a turkey buzzard: tiny head on a long, wrinkled neck and cold, little eyes. Everybody stood up when he entered the courtroom. Lester Rommerly—the local lawyer I went and hired like Veil told me—he told the judge that Veil would be representing Leonard. The judge looked down at Veil.

“Where are you admitted to practice, sir?”

“In New York State, your honor. And in the Federal District Courts of New York, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Michigan, California, and Massachusetts.”

“Get around a bit, do you?”

“On occasion,” Veil replied.

“Well sir, you can represent this defendant here. Nothing against the law about that, as you apparently know. I can’t help wondering, I must say, how you managed to find yourself way down here.”

Veil didn’t say anything. And it was obvious after a minute that he wasn't going to. He and the judge just kind of watched each other.

Then the trial started.

The first few witnesses were all government. The fire department guy testified about "the presence of an accelerant" being the tip-off that this was arson, not some accidental fire. Veil got up slowly, started to walk over to the witness box, then stopped. His voice was low, but it carried right through the courtroom.

"Officer, you have any experience with alcoholics?"

"Objection!" The DA shouted.

"Sustained," the judge said, not even looking at Veil.

"Officer," Veil went on like nothing had happened, "you have any experience with dope fiends?"

"Objection!" The DA was on his feet, red-faced.

"Counsel, you are to desist from this line of questioning," the judge said. "The witness is a fireman, not a psychologist."

"Oh, excuse me, your honor," Veil said sweetly. "I misphrased my inquiry. Let me try again: Officer," he said, turning his attention back to the witness, "by 'accelerant,' you mean something like gasoline or kerosene, isn't that correct?"

"Yes," the witness said, cautious in spite of Veil's mild tone.

"Hmmm," Veil said. "Be pretty stupid to keep a can of gasoline right in the house, wouldn't it?"

"Your honor. . . ," the DA pleaded.

"Well, I believe he can answer that one," the judge said.

"Yeah, it would," the fire marshal said. "But some folks keep kerosene inside. You know, for heating and all."

"*Thank* you, officer," Veil said, like the witness had just given him this great gift. "And it'd be even stupider to smoke cigarettes in the same house where you kept gasoline . . . or kerosene, wouldn't it?"

"Well, *sure*. I mean, if—"

"Objection!" The DA yelled. "There is no evidence to show that anyone was smoking cigarettes in the house!"

"Ah, my apologies," Veil said, bowing slightly. "Please consider the question withdrawn. Officer: Be pretty stupid to smoke *crack* in a house with gasoline or kerosene in it, right?"

"Your honor!" The DA cut in. "This is nothing but trickery. This man is trying to tell the jury there was gasoline in the house. And this officer has clearly testified that—"

"—That there *was* either gasoline or kerosene in the house at the time the fire started," Veil interrupted.

"Not in a damn *can*," the DA said again.

"Your honor," Veil said, his voice the soul of reasonableness, "the witness testified that he found a charred can of gasoline in the house. Now it was his expert *opinion* that someone had poured gasoline all over the floor and the walls and then dropped a match. I am merely inquiring if there couldn't be some *other* way the fire had started."

The judge, obviously irritated, said, "Then why don't you just ask him that?"

"Well, Judge, I kind of was doing that. I mean, if one of the crackheads living there had maybe fallen asleep after he got high, you know, nodded out the way they do . . . and the crack pipe fell to the ground, and there was a can of kerosene lying around and—"

"That is *enough*!" the judge cut in. "You are well aware, sir, that when the fire trucks arrived, the house was empty."

"But the trucks weren't there when the fire *started*, judge.

Maybe the dope fiend felt the flames and ran for his life. I don't know. I wasn't there. And I thought the jury—"

"The jury will *disregard* your entire line of questioning, sir. And unless you have *another* line of questioning for this witness, he is excused."

Veil bowed.

4.

At the lunch break, I asked him, "What the hell are you doing? Leonard already *told* the police it was him who burned down the crack house."

"Sure. You just said the magic word: crack house. I want to make sure the jury hears that enough times, that's all."

"You think they're gonna let him off just because—?"

"We're just getting started," Veil told me.

5.

"Now officer, prior to placing the defendant under arrest, did you issue the appropriate Miranda warnings?" the DA asked the sheriff 's deputy.

"Yes sir, I did."

"And did the defendant agree to speak with you?"

"Well . . . he didn't exactly 'agree.' I mean, this ain't the first time for old Leonard there. We knowed it was him, living right across the road and all. So when we went over there to arrest him, he was just sitting on the porch."

"But he *did* tell you that he was responsible for the arson, isn't that correct, officer?"

"Oh yeah. Leonard said he burned it down. Said he'd do it again if those—well, I don't want to use the language he used here—he'd just burn it down again."

"No further questions," the DA said, turning away in triumph.

"Did the defendant resist arrest?" Veil asked on cross-examination.

"Not at all," the deputy said. "Matter of fact, you could see he was waiting on us."

"But if he *wanted* to resist arrest, he could have, couldn't he?"

"I don't get your meaning," the deputy said.

"The man means I could kick your ass without breaking a sweat," Leonard volunteered from the defendant's table.

The judge pounded his gavel a few times. Leonard shrugged, like he'd just been trying to be helpful.

"Deputy, were you familiar with the location of the fire? You had been there before? In your professional capacity, I mean." Veil asked him.

"Sure enough," the deputy answered.

"Fair to say the place was a crack house?" Veil asked.

"No question about that. We probably made a couple of dozen arrests there during the past year alone."

"You made any *since* the house burned down?"

"You mean . . . at that same address? Of course not."

"Thank you, officer," Veil said.

6.

"Doctor, you were on duty on the night of the thirteenth, is that correct?”

“That is correct,” the doctor said, eyeing Veil like a man waiting for the doctor to grease up and begin his proctology exam.

“And your specialty is Emergency Medicine, is that also correct?”

“It is.”

“And when you say ‘on duty,’ you mean you’re in the ER, right?”

“Yes sir.”

“In fact, you’re in *charge* of the ER, aren’t you?”

“I am the physician in charge, if that is what you’re asking me, sir. I have nothing to do with administration, so . . .”

“I understand,” Veil said in a voice sweet as a preacher explaining scripture. “Now, doctor, have you ever treated patients with burns?”

“Of course,” the doctor snapped at him.

“And those range, don’t they? I mean, from first-degree to third-degree burns. Which are the worst?”

“Third degree.”

“Hmmm . . . I wonder if that’s where they got the term, ‘Give him the third degree’. . . ?”

“Your Honor. . . ,” the DA protested again.

“Mr. Veil, where are you going with this?” the judge asked.

“To the heart of the truth, your honor. And if you’ll permit me . . .”

The judge waved a disgusted hand in Veil’s direction. Veil kind of waved back. The big diamond glinted on his hand, catching the sun’s rays through the high courthouse windows. “Doctor, you treat anybody with third-degree burns the night of the thirteenth?”

"I did not."

"Second-degree burns?"

"No."

"Even *first*-degree burns?"

"You know quite well I did not, sir. This isn't the first time you have asked me these questions."

"Sure, *I* know the answers. But you're telling the jury, doctor, not me. Now you've seen the photographs of the house that was burnt to the ground. Could anyone have been *inside* that house and *not* been burned?"

"I don't see how," the doctor snapped. "But that doesn't mean —"

"Let's let the jury decide what it means," Veil cut him off. "Am I right, Judge?"

The judge knew when he was being jerked off, but, having told Veil those exact same words a couple of dozen times during the trial already, he was smart enough to keep his lipless mouth shut.

"All right, doctor. Now we're coming to the heart of your testimony. See, the reason we have *expert* testimony is that experts, well, they know stuff the average person doesn't. And they get to explain it to us so we can understand things that happen."

"Your honor, he's making a speech!" the DA complained, for maybe the two-hundredth time.

But Veil rolled on like he hadn't heard a word. "Doctor, can you explain what causes the plague?"

One of the elderly ladies on the jury gasped when Veil said "the plague," but the doctor went right on: "Well, actually, it is caused by fleas, which are the primary carriers."

"Fleas? And here all along I thought it was carried by rats," Veil replied, turning to the jury as if embracing them all in his viewpoint.

“Yes, fleas,” the doctor said. “They are, in fact, fleas especially common to rodents, but *wild* rodents—prairie dogs, chipmunks, and the like.”

“Not squirrels?”

“Only *ground* squirrels,” the doctor answered.

“So, in other words, you mean varmints, right, doctor?”

“I do.”

“The kind of varmints folks go shooting just for sport?”

“Well, some do. But mostly it’s farmers who kill them. And that’s not for sport—that’s to protect their crops,” the doctor said, self-righteously, looking to the jury for support.

“Uh, isn’t it true, doctor, that if you kill *enough* varmints, the fleas just jump over to rats?”

“Well, that’s true. . . .”

“That’s what happened a long time ago, wasn’t it, doctor? The Black Death in Europe—that was bubonic plague, right? Caused by rats with these fleas you talked about? And it killed, what? Twenty-five *million* people?”

“Yes. That’s true. But today, we have certain antibiotics that can —”

“Sure. But plague is still a danger, isn’t it? I mean, if it got loose, it could still kill a whole bunch of innocent folks, right?”

“Yes, that is true.”

“Doctor, just a couple of more questions and we’ll be done. Before there were these special antibiotics, how did folks deal with rat infestation? You know, to protect themselves against plague? What would they do if there was a bunch of these rats in a house?”

“Burn it down,” the doctor said. “Fire is the only—”

“Objection! Relevancy!” the DA shouted.

“Approach the bench,” the judge roared.

Veil didn’t move. “Judge, is he saying that crack *isn’t* a plague? Because it’s my belief—and I know others share it—that the Lord is testing us with this new plague. It’s killing our children, your honor. And it’s sweeping across the—”

“That is *enough*!” the judge shrieked at Veil. “One more word from you, sir, and you will be joining your client in jail tonight.”

“You want me to defend Leonard using sign language?” Veil asked.

A number of folks laughed.

The judge cracked his gavel a few times and, when he was done, they took Veil out in handcuffs.

7.

When I went to visit that night, I was able to talk to both of them. Someone had brought a chess board and pieces in and they were playing. “You’re crazy,” I told Veil.

“Like a fuckin’ fox,” Leonard said. “My man here is right on the money. I mean, he *gets* it. Check.”

“You moved a piece off the board,” Veil said.

“Did not.”

“Yeah, you did.”

“Damn,” Leonard said, pulling the piece out from between his legs and returning it to the board. “For a man with one eye you see a lot. Still check though.”

I shook my head. “Sure. Veil gets it. You, you’re gonna get life by the time he's done," I said.

"Everything'll be fine," Veil said, studying the chess board. "We can always go to Plan B."

"And what's Plan B?" I asked him.

He and Leonard exchanged looks.

8.

"The defense of *what*?" the judge yelled at Veil the next morning.

"The defense of necessity, your honor. It's right here, in Texas law. In fact, the case of *Texas v. Whitehouse* is directly on point. A man was charged with stealing water from his neighbor by constructing a siphon system. And he did it, all right. But it was during a drought, and if he hadn't done it, his cattle would've starved. So he had to *pay* for the water he took, and that was fair, but he didn't have to go to prison."

"And it is your position that your client *had* to burn down the crack . . . I mean, the occupied dwelling across the street from his house to prevent the spread of disease?"

"Exactly, your honor. Like the bubonic plague."

"Well, you're not going to argue that nonsense in my court. Go ahead and take your appeal. By the time the court even hears it, your client'll have been locked down for a good seven-eight years. That'll hold him."

9.

Veil faced the jury, his face grim and set. He walked back and forth in front of them for a few minutes, as if getting the feel of the ground. Then he spun around and looked them in the eyes, one by one.

“You think the police can protect you from the plague? From the invasion? No, I’m not talking about aliens, or UFOs, or AIDS, now—I’m talking crack. And it’s here, folks. Right here. You think it can’t happen in your town? You think it’s only Dallas and Houston where they grow those sort of folks? Take a look around. Even in this little town, you all lock your doors at night now, don’t you? And you’ve had shootings right at the high school, haven’t you? You see the churches as full as they used to be? No you don’t. Because things are *changing*, people. The plague is coming, just like the Good Book says. Only it’s not locusts, it’s that crack cocaine. It’s a plague, all right. And it’s carried by rats, just like always. And, like we learned, there isn’t but one way to turn that tide. Fire!

“Now I’m not saying my client set that fire. In fact, I’m asking you to find that he did *not* set that fire. I’m asking you to turn this good citizen, this man who cared about his community, loose. So he can be with you. That’s where he belongs. He stood with you . . . now it’s time for you to stand with him.”

Veil sat down, exhausted like he’d just gone ten rounds with a rough opponent. But, the way they do trials, it’s always the prosecutor who gets to throw the last punch.

And that chubby little bastard of a DA gave it his best shot, going on and on about how two wrongs don’t make a right. But you could see him slip a few times. He’d make this snide reference to Leonard being black, or being gay, or just being . . . Leonard, I guess, and, of course that part is kind of understandable. But, exactly like Veil predicted, every time he did it, there was at least one member of the jury who didn’t like it. Sure, it’s easy to play on people's prejudices—and we got no shortage of *those* down this way, I know—but if there wasn't more good folks than bad, well, the Klan would've been running the state a long time ago.

The judge told the jury what the law was and told them to go out there and come back when they were done. Everybody got up to go to lunch, but Veil didn't move. He motioned me over.

"This is going to be over with real quick, Hap," he said. "One way or the other."

"What if it's the other?"

"Plan B," he said, his face flat as a piece of slate.

10.

The jury was out about an hour. The foreman stood up and said "Not Guilty" about two dozen times—once for every crime they had charged Leonard with.

I was hugging Leonard when Veil tapped me on the shoulder. "Leonard," he said, "you need to go over there and thank those jury people. One at a time. Sin*cere*, you understand?"

"What for?" Leonard asked.

"Because this is going to happen again," Veil said. "And maybe next time, one of the rats'll get burned."

Knowing Leonard, I couldn't argue with that. He walked over to the jury and I turned around to say something to Veil. But he was gone.

Death by Chili

"Well, I can almost see murdering someone for a good chili recipe," Charlie Blank said, "but not quite."

"What if it had been barbecue?" Leonard asked.

"Now, that's different."

"Ah, hah!" I said. "That's because you're prejudiced. You think barbecue is *The* Texas food, when any idiot knows it's chili."

"Only if you can't get barbecue," Charlie said.

"One thing is for sure," I said. "Goober Smith's recipe for chili isn't going to grace anyone's dinner table from here on out. Other than the person killed him for it, that is."

It was a cold, rainy afternoon, dark as night, and we were sitting around Leonard's dining room table drinking coffee and eating vanilla cookies, which Leonard thinks are some kind of food of the gods, but they're just these plain ole vanilla things that you can eat about twenty-three zillion of and not realize you've eaten anything till you get on the scale. Even if you don't like 'em much, you tend to eat 'em.

Anyway, we were sitting at the table and Charlie was telling us about Goober Smith. It was a story we'd all heard before, but not the details. Charlie, who's a lieutenant on the police force, got the story from someone at the cop shop, someone who had been around in 1978 when Goober got his head blown open and went face down in a bowl of chili.

“Whoever it was came up behind him and let the boom drop,” Charlie said. “Killed him deader than the five-cent candy bar, then snuck off with his chili recipe. That recipe used to win all the chili cook-offs around these parts.”

“What I wonder is what this person did with the recipe,” I said. “If they were stealing it to win cook-offs, it never surfaced. Right?”

“Goober’s chili was supposed to be as distinctive as a chicken with dentures. No one could use it if they stole it. Unless they were at home.”

“Must have been some really fine chili,” Leonard said.

“Jack Mays thought it was the best,” Charlie said.

“That the cop told you about this?” I asked.

“Yep. He used to go around to cook-offs all over East Texas tryin’ to see if he could get a taste and figure who killed Goober. Solving the murder was kind of an obsession with him. Everyone else had given up. Course, Jack’s retired now.”

“Now you’re on it,” I said.

“I tinker with it now and then,” Charlie said.

“And how are you tinkering?”

“Not so good. I’ve looked at it from every angle possible. Why would someone come into Goober’s place at night, catch him at the table, shoot him in the back of the head with a Luger, and steal his recipe?”

“What I’d like to know,” Leonard said, dunking a cookie, “is how anyone knows his recipe was stolen. He could have had it in his head.”

"Nope," Charlie said. "He was adamant about the fact he kept it under lock and key in his wall safe, and the safe was cracked open and money was still in it. Only thing seems to have been missing was the recipe. Least ways, no one ever found it."

"*Seemed* to be missing," Leonard said. "But you don't know for sure. Right?"

"I guess so," Charlie said. "Well, it's all chili through the intestines now, isn't it?"

"Wasn't the final official word it was suicide?" I asked.

Charlie nodded. "He was found sitting at the kitchen table, nude. The Luger was on the floor by the chair, and his brains were all over the place, and he was facedown in an empty bowl that had contained chili. There was a pot of it on the stove."

"What made Jack think it wasn't suicide?" I asked.

"Funny stuff. The bullet had gone out the top of Goober's head, hit the ceiling. The casing from the Luger was on the floor behind him, and there was powder residue on his hand. No note."

"Sounds like suicide to me," Leonard said.

"Problem was, a Luger ejects its shell forward. You put the barrel to your head, the shell casing would have been thrown forward onto the table or the floor. That wasn't the case."

"Could have rolled," I said.

"Floor behind Goober was raised, a living area. It couldn't have rolled uphill. And the lead in the ceiling. Had Goober put the gun to his head, even if he'd slanted it, doesn't seem likely it would have gone into the ceiling at that angle. It could have, I guess, but it doesn't seem likely. Someone else could hold it at that angle more comfortable. It's difficult to do it yourself and get those results. Add to it the safe was open and the money was there but there was no chili recipe, and you got a mystery."

"Did Goober have reason to commit suicide?" Leonard asked.

"He was sick," Charlie said. "Rumor was it was a bad disease of some kind, but what it looks like is someone came up behind him, shot him with the Luger, wrapped his hand around the gun, and let it fall so it would look like suicide. Then they stole the recipe."

"The safe blown open?" Leonard asked.

"No. But that doesn't mean it wasn't cracked by someone knew how. Or someone had the combination. An old girlfriend was one of the suspects, but nothing ever came of that. Actually, I still have my eye on her."

"The Luger belong to Goober?" Leonard asked.

"No one knows. Wasn't registered. A war souvenir. Goober's dad had been in World War II, so it's possible it had been passed down, but if it was, that doesn't mean Goober shot himself with it. Someone could have used it on him."

"My uncle had a Luger like that," Leonard said. "A World War II souvenir. I have it now."

"Hey, I got to go, boys."

Charlie put on his coat and I walked him to the door. It was very cold out there. Good chili weather. Charlie and I shook hands, and he drove off in the rain.

When I came back inside, Leonard was pouring us fresh cups of coffee.

"That recipe thing, that is kind of weird," he said. "A real-life mystery."

"For what it's worth," I said.

"I've heard about Goober Smith all my life," Leonard said. "And the stuff about his chili and his murder and the missing recipe, but I never thought there was anything to it until Charlie gave us the skinny."

"Want to watch a movie tonight? I see *She Creature* is coming on. We could pop some popcorn, get some *Sharp's*."

Leonard seemed distant, but he said, "Sure."

We popped popcorn and watched the movie, but Leonard didn't really seem into it. He had a kind of glassy stare through it all.

I was making out with this marvelous raven-haired beauty, and she was just about to expose her breasts when she grabbed me by the arm and shook me like I was in a paint shaker.

I came awake to Leonard standing by the couch where I slept.

"Hap," he said, shaking me, "I solved the mystery."

"What mystery?"

"Get up."

"You're kidding. I was dreaming of and just about to make love to a black-haired beauty."

"She'll wait."

I pushed the covers down and sat on the edge of the couch. I felt like I had been plowed into the ground for fertilizer. Outside the rain hammered the house like a drum solo.

Leonard turned on the light. He brought a chair to the front of the couch and sat down on it. He was holding a Luger.

"This is my uncle's Luger," Leonard said.

"That's nice. Right now I'd like to shoot you with it."

Leonard held it in front of him. "I'm going to eject a shell."

"How nice."

He did. It flew up and over my head. "That was great, Leonard.

Now let's go back to bed."

"Forward, just like Charlie said." Leonard put the Luger in his lap. "But if this is the Luger." He made a gun with his thumb and finger. "And I put it to my head, it wouldn't fire in such a way as to shoot a bullet into the ceiling."

"Which is what Charlie said."

"Right. But, think about this. Goober was naked, as suicides often are. He knows he's dying, or is going to be terribly ill, so he decides to kill himself. You try and hold the Luger in the normal way, it isn't comfortable. I mean, you hold it just right it could fire through the head and ceiling, but like I said, it's not a comfortable way to hold it."

"I don't think comfort was on his mind."

"So he holds it this way, which is really more natural."

Leonard put his finger to his head, thumb down. "Think about it."

I did. I was starting to get interested.

"So, when he pulls the trigger, he gets powder burns on his hand, and upside down, it would eject the shell casing backwards, behind Goober."

"What about the way the bullet went into the ceiling?"

"Well, if it's flat against the head, it won't go into the ceiling at all. It could be slanted, held either way, but it's very comfortable holding it upside down, and easier to give it a slant, and therefore easier to fire through the skull and into the ceiling."

"As I said, I doubt Goober was all that worried about comfort right then."

"Okay. But the rest of it adds up pretty good, doesn't it?"

I thought about that for a moment. "That's all well and good," I said, “but that still doesn’t explain the open safe, the missing recipe.”

“I think it does,” Leonard said. “Goober was secretive about his recipe to the point of phobia. So, when he decided to commit suicide it was the one thing he wanted to take with him.”

“But it wasn’t found.”

“Because he ate it.”

“You mean he put it in the chili?”

“That’s what I think. He made up a last batch, tore up the recipe like seasoning, put it in the chili. Had himself a big bowl, then blew his brains out. That way, no one would ever have his recipe. That’s why nothing else was taken from the safe. Simple really. Charlie and Jack are all wet. It wasn’t murder. The first impression was correct. Goober really did kill himself.”

“You know what, Leonard? I think you’re right for a change.”

“Good, now I can go to sleep.”

“Course, it’s all just guess work and will probably never be proven one way or another.”

“I’m satisfied,” Leonard said.

“You going to tell Charlie?”

“Sure. Tomorrow. I want him to know how smart I am.”

Leonard turned off the light, went into the bedroom, and closed the door. I stretched out on the couch and pulled the covers over me. I looked at the ceiling a while.

Sonofagun, I thought. He probably did figure it out.

The rain hammered on the house. Lightning flashed through the curtains over the living room window.

I closed my eyes, hoping the raven-haired beauty would be back.

Lansdale Chili

First, you cook a lot of hamburger meat. I'm not sure how much is a lot, but you know, a lot. Anyway, you brown it, drain off the grease and put it in a pot. Now cut some steak into strips and brown it, cut this up in chunks and put it in the pot. Add a couple cups of water and six to twelve ounces of tomato paste. Put in two teaspoon's of sugar, four teaspoon's of chili powder, and ten cut up juicy jalopena peppers. Stir and add more water, be your own judge, but don't make it too watery.

Now, a dash of cayenne pepper, a dash of tobasco sauce, a teaspoon of garlic or some real chunks of garlic, add one tablespoon of olive oil—that's so it won't all clog up like a brick inside you.

Cut up two to three medium ripe tomatoes and toss this into the mix. Slice up a small onion and add it. Half a teaspoon of oregano. A tablespoon or two of black pepper and a half cup of ketchup.

Let this simmer for a damn long time, adding water when needed, but don't add too much. Keep it thick. If it looks a little watery, then add more ingredients. It's better at this point to add a cat or a parakeet than it is to add too much water.

After a few hours take a Pepcid and have chili.

If it doesn't taste quite right, you probably followed the recipe too closely or didn't take enough Pepcid. Throw it back into the pot, add some more of everything but water, and try again.

If your chili comes out of the pan in wads, then maybe you do need to add some water.

Dead Aim

“Too many guns is not like too many guitars.”

—Hap Collins

Each time out, I assume that a job we’re hired to do will be exactly what we think it’s going to be, and frankly, some are. I don’t talk about those much because they’re boring. And for a long time I didn’t think of myself as a freelance troubleshooter, but instead, a guy looking for work to tide me over until I got my career going, whatever that might be. Then Leonard explained to me that I was actually practicing my profession, and that I was good enough at it and it was really what I wanted to do. That all that stuff about finishing out a degree at my age and becoming a teacher, or some such thing, was just so much talk.

After a short nervous breakdown, and a period of finding my center, as they say in martial arts, I got back on the horse, and now I’m riding, in the dark. But I’m at least on the horse and not being dragged around by it. I realized that Leonard was right. I also realized that like it or not, at the bottom of it all, I was a sometime killer.

When Leonard and I accepted a simple protection job, or what seemed simple, I was hoping, as always, that we'd just get it done and go home and Marvin would give us a check that didn't bounce, and we'd be as happy as a stud horse in a corral full of fillies.

A guy named Jim Bob Luke recommended Marvin's agency for the job. It's not exactly a legit job, which is frequently the case. The problem was a lady who had known Jim Bob Luke asked him to help her out. She had an ex-husband who was stalking her, and had actually threatened her, but she couldn't prove it. It was her word against his. Jim Bob was going to be busy and couldn't drive to LaBorde to help out, so he put us onto it.

Me and Leonard drove over to see the lady. She was offering us good money to split between us and the agency. What she wanted us to do, as she put it, was meet up with her husband and have a discussion with him. The way she said it, it sounded like we were just going to set a date at a restaurant and have tea. Of course, that's not what she meant at all.

It was early afternoon in September and some of the hot had gone out of the day. Midday it could get pretty warm in East Texas, but not like a month or so earlier when you could fry an egg on the sidewalk, and going barefoot on cement was like walking across a pancake griddle. It was a pleasant change. Cooler weather was in the offing.

Me and Leonard were the kind of guys that never took anything at face value, or at least we liked to think of ourselves that way. So we thought we'd go over and talk to our client, Mrs. Devon, soon to be the ex-Mrs. Devon, and see if we thought her complaints were legit, or if she was just looking to have someone beat the shit out of her husband for vengeance and entertainment.

From the mouth of the street she lived on, across the way, we could see a new apartment complex, and not far from that was a long street full of fast food joints and doctor's offices and the like. Along the street where she lived, there were a few houses still clinging to the past, like ancient souls waiting silently for death, or hoping for a last visit from somebody before they were knocked down flat and carried out.

Next to those were marginally better houses, prefab style, the sort of thing where a shell of a house could be put up in the weekend, and two weeks later plumbing and water would be ready. All that was needed then was furniture, kids to yell at, and a dog to crap on the lawn, which at least for a few months would be a patch of bulldozed red clay.

Mrs. Devon's house was back from the street a bit. There were hedges on either side of her driveway, and they were well-trimmed but a little anemic. In the open garage there was a blue Cadillac that had aged well, and a closed-up barbecue grill pushed up against the wall with a sack of charcoal bricks stacked on top.

We parked behind the Cadillac and got out.

When the door was answered it was by a lady about six feet tall with black hair and a nice shape. She must have been about forty, and you could tell it if you looked real hard, but it was a nice forty, and the body seemed to belong to someone about twenty-five; she obviously had a gym membership, a trainer, and a special diet. She smiled and showed us that she had nice teeth. Her face was nice too. Her eyes were as green as Ireland. When she moved, something primal inside me moved.

After she confirmed we were who she was expecting, we came in and sat down on an elderly but comfortable couch. She asked us if we'd like a drink, and we ended up with ice tea.

“Jim Bob told me you could help me,” she said.

“Probably,” I said. “I mean, we have to check things out.”

“In case I’m lying and just want you to beat up my husband?”

“That would be it,” Leonard said.

“He hasn’t been all that clever about it,” she said. “I don’t think he’s trying to sneak, it’s just that no one has really seen him do anything, or will admit to it. No one but me. I really don’t want him arrested. I just want him to stop. The divorce is going to go through, and I don’t think he cares about that. He doesn’t love me, and I don’t love him. He just doesn’t like losing me. He wouldn’t have minded dumping me. But I dumped him first. That sort of got his panties in a twist.”

“When was the last time you saw him?” Leonard asked.

“A few days ago. I had a gentleman over.”

“Someone you’re dating?” I asked.

“Someone I had one date with. Henry showed up and beat up my date. Bad.”

“So there’s your proof,” I said. “Have your date press charges.”

She shook her head. “No. My date wasn’t willing to turn him in, because Henry threatened to kill him if he did.”

“You think he’s capable of that?” I said.

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. But my date thought so.”

“That happened here?” Leonard said.

“Yes. I had left the back door open. I didn’t think he was that dangerous. Henry, I mean. But he’s big and scary.”

“How big is he?” I asked.

“Six-five, maybe three hundred. Not a fat man. Does that scare you?”

“Hell yeah,” I said. “But it won’t stop us if we believe you.”

"All I got is my word, and no one else is talking. I thought I could give you his address and you could just check on him. Follow him around or something, see what you think. See if he shows up here. I've got so I lock all my doors and the windows too. I don't know that he's dangerous, but the beating he gave that man . . . it was quick and it was awful. I think he may have broken his ribs."

"So he comes by a lot?"

"He used to knock on the door. Now he mostly just drives by, or pulls up in the drive and sits there. By the time I call the cops, he's gone. They've talked to him, but he just says I'm lying, and I can't prove it any other way. They can't post a man twenty-four seven just on my word. And won't. That's why I've come to you."

"Give us his address," I said. "We'll check on him. One of us can stay here with you if you like."

"I have an extra bedroom so one of you can be here all the time. Jim Bob recommended you two and your boss, Mr. Hanson, very highly."

"How do you know Jim Bob?" Leonard asked.

"We dated in high school. I lived in Houston then."

"Jim Bob went to high school," Leonard said. "I thought he came out of the womb the way he is, wearing that hat and driving that old Cadillac."

"That would have been painful for his mother, don't you think?" she said.

"It would," I said. "It certainly would."

"You lock up," I said, "and we'll go get a few things we might need, like an axe handle, and we'll be back."

“An axe handle?” she said.

“Call it insurance,” Leonard said. “You want the protection, you got to allow us to protect. And discourage.”

“You won’t kill him, will you?”

“Of course not,” I said.

“Look, I really don’t want him hurt.”

“Only if he tries to hurt us,” I said.

“Why don’t one of you stay now?” she said. “Start this minute.”

“Because we have to decide if we believe you or not.”

“Oh.”

“In the meantime, lock this place up tighter than a nun’s chastity, and we’ll be right back.”

We walked out and waited for her to lock the door behind us. When we heard the lock click, we walked to the car.

In the car, backing out, I said, “What do you think?”

“Sounds legit,” Leonard said. “I think she’s scared and wants to get on with her life and wants him to know he’s not welcome.”

“If we beat the dog shit out of him, you think he’ll quit?”

“Hard to say, but I do know it works more often than you hear about. I had someone tell me, you know, you do that, they just come back. I’ve done it a few times, so have you—”

“And they didn’t come back.”

“Yep.”

“But sometimes they do.”

“Yep,” Leonard said. “Sometimes they do.”

“Henry sounds like he could be pretty hard-core.”

“Worrying about him being big?” Leonard asked.

“Crossed my mind.”

“What the axe handle’s for, my boy.”

“And if he turns us in for whipping his ass?”

“We were visiting a friend of a friend. That friend being Jim Bob, and she being the friend of that friend. Henry arrived. Violence broke out. Axe handles were lying about, and . . . well, you can figure from there.”

“And we just happened to be there when he showed up? With axe handles?”

“Exactly,” Leonard said. “It doesn’t have to be a true story, it just has to be our story. . . . You know, you’re getting cautious in your old age.”

“I am. I like having a nice home and Brett and a comfortable place to lay my head and put my dick.”

“Since I’m living at your house these days,” Leonard said, “I like you got a nice home and a comfortable place for me to lay my head, though I’m still in search of a place to lay my dick.”

“About that . . .”

“Yeah. I know,” Leonard said. “Like Ben Franklin said, fish and friends smell after three days.”

“No. I’m asking about you and John. The dick part, and the deeper meanings that go with it. How are things developing between you two?”

“Nothing much. We talk by phone now and again. I’m almost done with that business. I think you can only brood so long, wait on someone so long, and then you got to move on. But, I’ll move out soon enough.”

“Not what I meant,” I said. “Stay as long as you like.”

“Hell, I know that. I was joking. You can’t get rid of me.”

Brett was off on rotation from work. She was sitting at the kitchen table wearing white shorts and a big, loose, red T-shirt. Her thick red hair was tied back in a bushy ponytail. She wasn't wearing any shoes. Her toenails were painted as red as her hair. She was drinking coffee. Leonard and I went over and poured ourselves a cup from the pot.

"Well?" Brett said.

"We think she's for real," I said.

"So, how are you going to play it?" Brett said.

"Leonard is going to stay there for awhile, and I'm going to be on phone service here at the house. Later, we can swap out."

"What's she look like?"

"She wouldn't hurt anyone's feelings at a glance," I said.

"How about if they concentrated?" she said.

"No one's feelings would be hurt that way either," I said.

"Then you best just let Leonard stay there."

"You're just saying that because I'm queer," Leonard said.

"Exactly," Brett said.

"You don't trust me?" I said.

"I trust you, but I don't know her, and Little Hap likes pussy almost as much as life."

"You know better than that," I said. "Well, you're right about the pussy part and life and all that. But you know what I mean. I'm trustworthy."

"Yeah, but I'm still a little jealous."

We had our coffee, then we got a few things together for Leonard. Toothbrush and toothpaste. Deodorant. Axe handle from the closet. A small handgun. That kind of stuff.

"Be sure and not shoot anyone," I said.

"Gotcha," Leonard said, got his keys, and drove his car away. I watched from the kitchen window until he was out of sight.

"He gone?" Brett asked.

"Yep."

"Great," she said. "Let's screw like mongooses."

We screwed like mongooses and one extra beaver and a water snake, and then lay in bed and watched TV. We watched *The Fugitive Kind* on some movie channel. I wanted a cool jacket like Marlon Brando wore in that movie. I knew I'd never have one. Besides, I didn't have anything against reptiles, and it was supposed to be made out of them.

When the movie wrapped, another came on, and we watched part of that, but it wasn't much, and we gave it up. I had a book to read and Brett had a biography. We stacked pillows behind us and lay there nude and read. It was one of our favorite things to do, following the whole mongoose thing, which got a number-one rating.

Three hours or so later, feeling lazy, I lay down and dozed. Brett woke me, freshly showered, dressed in blue jeans and a blue top, tennis shoes on her feet.

"Baby," she said, "you're taking me out. Get up and shower."

I got up and showered, dressed, and we drove into town to a Mexican restaurant that served a good steak, better than average tacos, tamales, and the usual rice and beans, and so far no stomach poisoning. When it comes to good eats, nothing beats Mexican food, though Japanese is close. Sometimes I eat meat, I think about the poor cows, and then I think since I ate them, I might as well wear leather too. No use letting a discarded cow suit go to waste. But I wished I could just eat lettuce and tomatoes and tofu. Doesn't work for me, though. I get sick. Hypoglycemia. I think about a lot of things on a full stomach. It's easier to think about not eating something anymore when you just ate it.

When we got back to the house, Brett pulled on the big loose shirt she had been wearing earlier in the day and, as a treat to me, left off the panties. I pulled on my pajama bottoms as a treat to her, and a loose T-shirt, and climbed in bed. This was my favorite kind of day. Lazy.

I said, "You said you were jealous earlier, of Sharon Devon. You weren't serious, were you?"

"A little," she said.

"I've never known you to be jealous."

"I didn't think I was. I guess it's because I want to see this arrangement as permanent."

"I already saw it that way."

"I did too, but you know, there were doubts in the back of my mind."

"Because we're not married?"

"That was there in an old-fashioned way," she said. "But I don't think that really matters. Not really."

"But it is a braver commitment, isn't it?"

"Maybe," she said.

"Look, honey," I said. "I want to be with you. I'll keep it like it is, or I'll marry you. Whatever, baby. It's you and me."

"You once said something to me about having kids."

"I was just in a mood."

"I think you meant it."

"I did mean it. But, you pointed out what should have been obvious to me: we're a little too old."

"I'm younger than you," she said.

"Everyone thinks you're twenty years younger," I said. "And you look it. Pretty soon they'll be thinking I'm your grandpa."

"That could happen," she said. "But, just in case. I looked into fertilization drugs, you know, to see. Case I might need them."

"I wouldn't want to have a kid just because you think I want one," I said.

"I know that."

"You are a mother, but I've never been a father. I figure I don't become one, that might even be best."

"You do know things would change," she said.

I nodded. "I know. And what worries me is—"

"You don't know if you can really change."

"I been trying so long now, that I'm starting to think the trying and not doing it is as much a part of who I am as what I actually end up doing. Which seems to be hitting people in the head, shooting people—"

"And being their rescuer. Hap Collins, have I ever told you that all your doubts about yourself are none of my doubts? That I worry about you using my toothbrush instead of yours, and you sometimes pee on the floor, but as far as your worth as a person, even if you have done some things you consider dark, they do not faze me or concern me at all. Except if we have kids. And it's not about what you're doing, but about what it could do to a child."

"I wouldn't want him or her to grow up like me," I said.

"I would want them to have your integrity," she said.

I started to say something, but it was like a fist was in my throat.

“Let’s read,” Brett said.

We read a long while, watched the late movie, and then we did the mongoose thing again before going to bed.

When I woke up the next morning, it was to a knock on the bedroom door. I sat up. Brett was gone. Off to the hospital to nurse someone. Since I was upstairs in our bed, I opened my drawer and took out my revolver and lay back against my pillows.

I said, “Who is it?”

“Marvin.”

“Come in.”

Marvin opened the door. He hobbled in on his cane and found a chair in the corner.

“How’d you get in?”

“You gave me an emergency key, remember?”

“Is this an emergency?”

“No. But I thought I’d take advantage of my key ownership and see if I could get some coffee. It’s nine already.”

I put the revolver in the nightstand drawer and pulled off the sheets and got out of bed, forgetting I hadn’t replaced my pajamas after mine and Brett’s mongoose moment last night.

Marvin said, “Oh, the humanity.”

Downstairs, with my pajama bottoms on, as well as a top, I started the coffee pot. I said, “You don’t have coffee at your house? The office?”

“Actually, I forgot to buy coffee for either place. Wife is mad at me.”

"Coffee is like a goddamn staple," I said. "You don't forget that. That's just wrong."

"What my wife told me."

"So, what's up besides you being here drinking my coffee?" I said.

"Talked to some cop friends. They said Mrs. Devon reported her husband beating a boyfriend up, and the boyfriend, though he looked like he had been through a meat grinder, wouldn't press charges. Told them he got that way falling down. They didn't have proof otherwise. They think his masculine ego was harmed and he didn't want to harm it any more by admitting he got his ass beat like a bongo drum."

"So, do the cops believe her ex is bothering her?" I asked.

"They do, but they can't spend all their time waiting for him to show up."

"Course, if he shows up and kills her, they can put their time into that," I said.

"Well, they'll have a pretty good idea who did it. At least solving it will be easy enough."

"There's that," I said.

"Here's the thing, though. They told me if he bothers her, and you're there, don't mess him up too bad, 'cause then you'll be up a creek."

"They know we're watching?"

"Not officially, just my contact at the cop shop. He knows, and he's not telling. But, you mess this guy up too bad, they'll have to look around, and you two may come up in the investigation."

"What's the world coming to that you can't just give a good old-fashioned ass-whipping anymore?"

“He’s doing what they think he’s doing, they want you to whip his ass, just not so much he can make a good stink. If you can find him some place other than her place, that would be best.”

“May not get to choose,” I said.

About noon I drove over to Mrs. Devon’s house, and parked in the back behind the garage, next to Leonard’s car. We weren’t being wide open about what we were doing, but we weren’t being sneaky either. Sometimes a stalker isn’t a full-blown nut, and just the presence of someone who might embarrass them, or put a stop to their actions, can end the matter.

Other times, however, it’s worse than that, and what it takes is kicking their asses up under their hairline. Then, sometimes that’s not enough. This situation was wide open.

I had been inside the house about five minutes, drinking a cup of coffee offered to me by Mrs. Devon.

I was sitting at the table with her and Leonard and the axe handle, which I had named Agnes.

She said, “Really. I don’t want him hurt. I think you should just talk to him.”

“That’s the plan,” I said. “This is just to dissuade six feet and three hundred pounds, if the need should arise.”

“I really don’t think it will come to that,” she said.

I thought she was sounding a lot more confident today. Maybe it was just a good night’s sleep.

The doorbell rang.

Mrs. Devon looked at me and Leonard, and we looked at each other. I got up and went to the door and looked through the little square of glass. There was a guy there. He wasn't big. He was carrying a briefcase. I didn't take him to be Mr. Devon.

I opened the door. The man looked at me in a kind of stunned manner. "Is Mrs. Devon in?" he asked.

"Who's asking?" I said.

"It's okay," Mrs. Devon said, came over, opened the door wider, unlatched the screen, and let the man in. "This is my lawyer, Frank Givens."

She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and led him into the house and to the table, where he took a seat. I locked the screen back, and then the main door. I sat down in front of my coffee again. Givens was staring at Agnes lying on the table.

"I hope I'm not in the way, Sharon," Givens said.

"Of course not," she said. "This is Hap Collins and Leonard Pine. They are protecting me."

"Has Henry come back?" Givens asked.

"Not yet," she said. "And if he does, my friends here hope to encourage him to leave."

"Being a lawyer I don't know exactly what to say to that."

"We just want to talk to him some," Leonard said. "We can explain someone's position real good, we take a mind to."

"I bet you can," he said.

"They do look like gentlemen who can take care of themselves," Mrs. Devon said, "but then again, Henry is someone who can take care of himself as well."

"Yeah, but there's two of us," I said.

"And we have an axe handle," Leonard said.

"Its name is Agnes," I said.

"Have you seen him yet?" Givens asked.

"No," I said.

"Have you seen those old stills from the silent movie about the Golem?"

"Maybe," I said. "But if I haven't, I get the idea."

"Thing is, he really wants Sharon back," the lawyer said. "Not because he loves her, but because he wants her back. He thinks he owns her."

"Me and Henry were all right for awhile," she said. "I just made a big mistake."

"How long have you been married?" I asked.

"About . . . what is it, Frank?"

Frank looked as if the answer soured his stomach. "Almost four years."

She patted Frank, the lawyer, on the arm, said, "Me and Frank, we were married once."

"Oh," I said.

"It's all right," she said. "That was some years ago."

I looked at Frank. The look on his face made me feel that he might not think it had been that long ago.

"We were married young," Mrs. Devon said. "We got along fine, but the fire played out. And then I was on my own for awhile, a few years ago I met Henry. He was interesting. Worked in the oil business, and then the business played out, and so did we. I know that sounds terrible. Like it was the money. And maybe it was. We had a nice place, not like here. . . . Oh, I guess this is all right. But we had a nice place, and then the money was gone—"

"And the fire went out," I said.

"Are you being judgmental?" she asked.

"Quoting you," I said.

"You aren't paying us enough to be judgmental," Leonard said.

"Please be respectful," Givens said.

"I didn't mean anything by it," I said. "I'm just saying the fire went out for you, but not for him. I can see you're a woman that could have that effect on someone."

She smiled at me. "You think so?"

"I think so," I said.

She looked at Leonard and smiled. "What do you think?"

"I think heterosexual stuff is confusing to me. I like what men have in their pants, not women."

"Oh," she said. "Oh."

"That bother you?" Leonard said.

"No. No. Not at all. I just didn't know. I mean, you look so masculine . . . I didn't mean it that way."

"Yeah you did," Leonard said, "but it's all right. Look. The gay folk who fit your idea of gay folk are the ones that stand out. We come from both ends of the spectrum. Some of us even learn how to have sex with heterosexuals and fake a happy orgasm. Mostly those guys are preachers and politicians. Me, I'm a tough guy. Even us queers can make a fist. End of story."

"I assure you, I didn't mean anything by it," she said. "You come highly recommended. The both of you."

Looking at Mrs. Devon I had an idea then why Jim Bob wanted us to do this job. He probably still had the hots for her. She wasn't only good-looking, it was the way she talked, the voice, the way her eyes half-closed when she was serious. I even felt a little sorry for Henry then, and Frank Givens the lawyer. I felt like she was a woman that could tell you a sincere lie.

"I can see you're well protected by these gentlemen," Givens said. “That being the case, I’ll get right down to business. I have the divorce papers with me. They’re all set. He’s contesting the divorce, but at this stage, there’s nothing he can do to keep you from going through with it. All you need to do is sign.”

“But he can be a pain in my ass,” she said.

“That he can, Sharon,” Givens said.

We left Givens and Mrs. Devon, who we had been told to call Sharon, sitting at the table discussing divorce plans. Me and Leonard went out in the backyard and stood around.

“How about that, Givens is her ex-husband,” I said.

“And he still loves her,” Leonard said. “And she doesn’t even know it.”

“Oh, she knows it all right,” I said. “I think she’s something of a manipulator.”

“Starting to doubt her stories about hubby?”

“Not necessarily. I’m just saying she’s manipulative. I think she’s using Givens to get the kind of deal she wants for very little money. And she might be feeding him a little possibility, if you know what I mean.”

“A chance to rekindle the fire.”

“Yeah.”

“Do we stick with it?” Leonard said.

“So far we don’t know things are any different than what she says. But I do have the feeling I’m in a play. A bit actor.”

“I know what you mean,” Leonard said. “I feel a little played in some way, and I don’t even know what it is. But we’re getting paid.”

"Yeah," I said. "There's that."

"Goes on too long we might have to ask for more money."

I nodded.

"But, if she doesn't offer us any more, and we haven't discouraged her hubby—"

"We'll stay anyway," I said.

"Yep," Leonard said. "It's our way. It's not a good way, but it's the honorable way."

"And it's just about all we got."

"Our honor?"

"No. Our way."

What we decided was Leonard would stay at the house, as originally planned, and I would try and locate the husband. If I could catch him leaving his place, lurking around Sharon's house, as soon as he acted like a threat, then I'd go after him. Probably after I called Leonard for reinforcements. We're tough, but we're not stupid. Double-teaming would be the best system. That way, we could possibly convince Henry the better part of being an asshole was staying at home and minding his own business, letting Sharon go her own path.

Sounded and seemed simple enough.

I had an address for him, and me and Agnes went over there and sat on a hill that looked down a wooded lane. I could see his driveway from there. I sat for a moment and got my shit together, then drove down and past his house and took a look.

The house was pretty nice, but it wasn't well attended. I could understand that. I hated yard work. The front yard was grown up and the trees needed trimming, and it stood out because the houses on either side of his were out of *House Beautiful*.

He had an open carport, and in the carport was a not too old Chevy truck. I drove to the end of the street, to the dead end there, turned around, and went back up and sat at the top of the hill. Up there the neighborhood changed, and was not so nice. I parked in the lot of an abandoned laundromat. There were other cars there. It had become a parking spot for the chicken-processing plant on the far side of the highway that broke Haven Street, the street Henry lived on.

I had a good view from my parking spot, and nothing was going on down below. I wondered if Henry had a job now that the oil had played out. I wondered if he had money. I wondered if he was as big as they said. I wondered why I was doing this.

I had a CD player with me, and I listened to a CD Leonard had given me, Iris DeMent. It was good stuff. A few years back I wouldn't have listened to it. When I was young I associated country with ignorance and backwoods. The music still carried some of that with it, but no more than what a lot of rap carried with it; when it was ignorant, it was urban ignorant. It always depended on who was doing it, and how it was done. I was thinking about that as seriously as if I were going to write a paper on it, when the house I was watching moved. Well, the door did. I saw a man big enough to eat the balls off a bear while it was alive and make it hold its paw against the wound walk out to the mailbox, open the lid, and yank out some mail. He was so big I was surprised he could get his hand in there. Frankly, I didn't know people could grow that big. He may have been six-five or six-six, but in that moment he looked seven-six. His shoulders were just a little wider than a beer truck and he was about as thick the other way as City Hall.

We had to deal with that motherfucker, we were going to need a bigger boat. Certainly a bigger axe handle. I think we had to graduate to a baseball bat. Maybe a cannon. He might take the axe handle away from us, swallow it, and pull it out of his ass as a sharpened stick with our names tattooed on it.

As I watched him walk back to the house, a little chill went up my back and crawled across my scalp. I pulled out my cell and called Leonard.

“Yeah,” Leonard said.

“You know, this Henry guy. I just saw him. He’s big.”

“How big?”

“Do you remember that robot in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*?”

“Ouch.”

“Exactly,” I said.

“He still at home?”

“Yep.”

“You gonna keep watching?”

“Ever vigilant,” I said. “Just wanted you to know what we were up against. And for all we know, he’s armed.”

“You’re exaggerating?”

“Nope, I’m being conservative. You know the remake of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*?”

“Yeah.”

“The robot in that one. More that size.”

“Bigger ouch,” he said. “Watch yourself.”

“If I want to see something way pretty, that’s exactly what I do.”

I closed up the phone and put on an old rockabilly CD and listened to that. This went on for hours, me sitting and listening to CDs. I went through everything I had twice and got so bored I was close to playing with my dick. Then I saw people coming from across the street toward the lot. A bunch of people.

I looked at my watch.

It was quitting time at the chicken plant. Or at least it was a shift change. Pretty soon I'd be the only car in the lot, and that wouldn't be as good. I was considering what to do next, if I needed a new parking spot or what, when I glanced down the street and saw Henry's Chevy pull out of the drive.

I followed him to a Burger King. He went through the drive-through and I pulled in after him. Looking at his head through the back window, it looked as big as a bowling ball, but with a close haircut.

He made his order, and then I ordered some fries and a big soda, and followed to the checkout window. He went through. I went through. He drove home. I parked again in the abandoned lot. It was just me up there with Agnes, my drink, and fries. And, of course, my precious thoughts.

Leonard called.

"You want to switch shifts?"

"Nope. I'm fine. I think I'll wait until after dark, then you can drive over and we'll swap out."

I told him exactly where I was parked, and hung up.

I rolled down my window. The air was cool. The mosquitoes, however, were busy. I was about to roll the window up again when I heard a shot.

I was positive it had come from Henry's house. I had seen a flash of light behind the window. And it was a gunshot. I was certain. I had heard quite a few of them. I thought about just going home or waiting for a neighbor to call, but all the houses were dark on either side of Henry's, and since it wasn't really late, I figured no one was home. If they were, they might not have even recognized what the sound was. Sometimes shots don't sound like much, especially when they come from a small-caliber gun.

I had a revolver in my glove box. I got it out. I picked Agnes off the seat and got out of the car. I put the gun under my shirt, in my waistband. I carried Agnes in my left hand and held her down by my side. The street was pretty dark for the neighborhood. There was no one moving about except a cat, and he didn't seem all that interested.

I went across the street slowly and came up in Henry's yard. I thought I should have called Leonard, but I hadn't. I had just reacted. In the stealth business they call that poor planning.

I took out my phone and turned it off and put it back. All I needed was for it to ring while I was putting on the sneak. I went to the front door and touched it, using my shirttail to tuck my hand into. No use leaving prints.

The door was locked.

Okay.

I eased around the edge of the house, and now I had my gun out. I was breathing a little heavy. Maybe Henry had fired the shot. Popping a rodent. Didn't like a TV show and was showing it what he thought of it. There could be all kinds of explanations. The one I figured most likely was that someone had shot someone.

Taking a deep breath, I eased my head around the edge of the house, stooping down low to do it. No one was there. The yard was open, with no fence at the back, but there were some thick trees and they went over the hill toward where the highway curved.

I eased around and took a better look. The back door was a sliding-glass door. It was open. I went over there on tippy-toes and looked inside. Dark in there. I moved away from the door and leaned against the wall and thought things over. The smart thing was to call Leonard. Or go away. Those were good choices and safe.

Me and my gun and Agnes went inside.

It was dark and I couldn't see, and I figured if anyone was still in the house, they'd have had time to adjust to the dark. They would be able to see fine. They'd be able to shoot fine.

I leaned against a wall and thought that any moment there would be a shot I wouldn't hear, and it would be all over.

Around the corner from where I leaned was a hallway. There was a break to the left. There was some light in there, but it was the outside light. It was darker in the house than outside.

I moved from my spot, inching carefully into the room beyond the hall. It was a kitchen. A nice kitchen with a nice table and chairs and a coffee pot I could see on the counter, and leaning over the sink, his elbows in it, his knees on the floor, was our big guy Henry.

I said, "Henry?"

Henry didn't call back.

I went over easy, and a little wide. There was a light switch on the wall next to the sink. I used the back of my wrist to flip it on. The top of Henry's head was up against the windowsill. He must have been looking out the window when it happened. Maybe at me and my car up there at the parking spot; he might have had my number early on, standing there in the dark seeing what I was doing while someone was coming in to see what he was doing. Someone with a gun. There were brains and blood on the wall and a little on the window, and a lot of it had run down into the sink; most of it had gone down the drain, but as the blood pumped slower, it had started to go thick. He was still big, but that didn't matter much now. You don't get too big for a bullet, if it's placed right.

I didn't shake him to see if he would come around.

I leaned Agnes against the wall, got out my phone and called Leonard.

"Yeah," Leonard said.

"You know that big guy?"

"Uh-huh," he said. "Henry."

"We are not going to have to fight him. We are not going to have to deal with him."

Leonard was silent for a moment. "That doesn't sound good."

"Not for him it isn't."

"You hurt him?"

"No."

"Killed him?"

"No. But someone did."

"Shit," Leonard said. "You sure he's dead?"

"Oh, yeah. The splattered brains gave him away."

Lights jumped around outside the window. I took a look. Cop cars.

"My turn to say shit," I said.

“What?” Leonard said.

“I think our donkey is in a ditch.”

The chief of police said, “I see you so much, maybe we ought to have a chair put in, something with your name on it, like those movie directors have.”

“That would be nice,” I said. “Maybe with a built-in drink holder.”

We had gotten off the subject, but we had sure been on it a lot for the last hour or so. My butt was tired and I had answered the same question so much it was starting to sound new when I heard it. I was starting to think maybe I should make up new answers. The truth wasn’t working.

“Why don’t you kind of run over things again,” the chief said.

“So you can see if I slip up?”

“That’s the idea, yeah.”

“I might ought to call for a lawyer.”

“You asking for that?” the chief said.

“No, I’m just thinking about it. But without a lawyer, I’m going to say it one more time. I didn’t kill him.”

“You had a gun on you.”

“Weak ploy, Chief. Wrong caliber.”

“You can’t know that,” the chief said.

“I’ve seen what a gun like mine can do. It would have made a bigger mess.”

“Maybe you had another gun.”

“Sure. Two-Gun Hap. What did I do with the other one, hide it up the big guy’s ass?”

"We can take a look."

"Go right ahead. There's no one going to stop you. Least of all Henry. You can prowl around in there all day. Bring the kids."

"All right," the chief said. "I don't think you did it."

"That's nice of you," I said.

"Least not by yourself," he said. "I'm thinking there was you and your partner, Leonard, and he got away. Quick out the back door."

"That's a shitty theory," I said. "He was with Sharon Devon, being a bodyguard."

I had told him all of this, but he liked to pretend we had never discussed it. It's how we danced. I figured Leonard was in another room with someone else, being interrogated same as me.

"So, what's your theory?" he asked.

"My theory is I was there to make sure he didn't bother his soon to be ex-wife."

"And how were you to do this?"

Now we were getting into new territory. "Idea was to keep an eye on him."

"And if he went to see his wife with bad intent?"

"I was supposed to dissuade him."

"And how, pray tell, were you supposed to do that?" the chief asked.

"I was going to reason with him. Really, man. We been all over this so many times you could tell me my story."

"Reason with him, huh," he said. "I got to keep coming back to the part about you were in his house and he was dead and you had a gun and an axe handle."

"Sometimes reason requires visual aids," I said.

“Just wrap it up a little,” he said, leaning back in his chair, placing his hands behind his head. “Tell me the good part, about how you went in the house and found him like that. Tell me why you went in again.”

I sighed. “I was watching the house. I heard a shot. I went down there and went in the back way. The door was open. Henry was hanging on the sink. I think he knew I was following him. Not at that moment. He didn’t know anything right then. But before that I think he knew. He made me.”

“A clever boy like you?” the chief said.

“Even squirrels fall out of trees. But maybe he was looking up the hill at me in my car. Someone was in the house. They may have come in the back way. The door was open. They snuck up on him.”

“That could be Leonard,” the chief said.

“But it wasn’t,” I said.

“You might not have found the door open,” he said. “You might have broke in to kill him. The lock had been worked. We could tell from the scratches. A lock kit. You could have come in using that.”

“Did you find a lock kit on me?”

“Maybe you stashed it somewhere with the other gun, the one you used to shoot Henry.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I stuck them both down the commode along with my spare Range Rover and flushed them.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t seem so likely,” he said. “I think all those things together might cause a clog. I mean, you know, after the Range Rover.”

“What was I saying?”

“You heard a shot.”

“So, someone slipped in and shot Henry. I heard the shot. I went down there. When I did, whoever killed him saw me. I figure they were in that patch of woods behind the house. They called the cops. It put you on me and off of them, whoever them is."

"The one with the lock-pick kit and the right-caliber gun?" he said.

"That would be him or her, yes."

"You want a candy bar?"

"What?" I said.

"Candy bar," he said. "I got a couple in the drawer."

"Really?"

He opened his desk drawer and took out two Paydays and put them on the desk. "Go ahead," he said.

I took one and peeled the wrapper off and put it on the desk. "It's a little warm, kind of melted," I said.

"It's free," he said.

"That's true," I said, and took a bite. When I finished chewing, I said, "You don't think I did this, do you? I mean, you said you didn't, but really, do you?"

"No, but you're the kind of guy who could do it," he said.

"Shoot him in the back of the head?"

"I think you'd do it any way you could get it done," he said. "I planned to shoot a guy big as Henry, I'd have shot him in the back of the head. You know, these are pretty good."

"Yeah," I said, and ate the rest of mine.

The chief eased out his breath. "No, I don't think you did it, but it's my job to ask, and I can't treat you any different from anyone else."

"And if you act like you're really on my side, give me a candy bar and all, I'll slip up and tell you something that will hang me."

"It's the sort of thing that's happened," he said.

"But not to me," I said.

"So it's not working?"

"Nope."

"You can go," he said. "But we might come back around to this again. Same questions. Maybe some new ones to go with it. Could be your answers will change."

"Just restock on candy bars," I said.

I got up and went out.

Leonard came to the house about an hour later. When he came in I poured him a cup of coffee and put it on the table along with a bag of vanilla cookies.

"I had a candy bar," I said. "Did you?"

"No . . . they gave you a candy bar?" he said.

"Yep. It's my charm."

"What kind of shit is that?" he said. "They didn't offer me a candy bar. They didn't offer me a fucking stick of gum."

"Did you talk to the chief?"

Leonard shook his head. "I talked to a major asshole who was about five-four and wanted to be six-six and wished twelve inches of that would be dick. Tell you another thing, I saw Sharon there when I came in, and she looked at me like I had crapped a turd on the tile."

"Yeah?" I said.

"Yeah. And the guy grilling me, he said she rolled over on us."

"They lie like that to get you to give things up," I said.

"I know that, Hap. You think I don't know that?"

“I know you know that,” I said. “I’m just saying.”

“What I’m telling you though, I saw her there in the hall, and I got the vibes.”

“Tell me about the vibes,” I said.

“I think we been butt-fucked vibes, that’s what they were.”

“Define butt-fucked.”

“She had you go over there to watch the guy, and then she had someone go over there and pop him, and guess who takes the rap?”

“They’re going to have a hard time proving I shot him with the wrong gun and hit him with an axe handle when I didn’t.”

“They think she hired you and me to pop him,” Leonard said. “That’s how it looks, so to help herself out, to make them not think that, she’s got to paint us like we went rogue on the deal. Just decided it was easier to lay him down than to follow him around. She may have had it planned that way all along.”

“It could be like that,” I said. “Though you were at her house.”

“But that doesn’t do you any good, and she could still make me part of the plan. Say I wasn’t there. I could get the rap as the actual shooter.”

“She sure seems to be tossing us on the track in front of a train quick-like,” I said. “Quick enough you got to wonder.”

“Yep. . . . Where’s Brett?”

“She picked up a shift for a friend. . . . So what do we do now?”

“I suggest,” Leonard said, “we don’t let ourselves get screwed any more than we already have. That’s what I suggest.”

“How do we do that?” I asked.

“I ask questions, as wise men do. I do not provide the answers.”

“So, you think I’ll come up with something?” I said.

“Probably not,” he said. “Why I asked where Brett was.”

At Marvin's office I sat in the chair in front of the desk and Leonard sat on a stool by the counter with the coffee. He had the bag of vanilla wafers with him. He had not offered me or Marvin any, and I was the one who bought them for him. He was sipping a cup of Marvin's bad coffee and eating the wafers. He would put one in his mouth and close his eyes and look as satisfied as a lion with a gazelle in its stomach. If he had had a Dr. Pepper, his favorite drink, he would have floated to the ceiling and farted vanilla.

"That doesn't sound good," Marvin said, after I explained it to him. "You know what's worse? She never paid her bill."

"That is the least of our worries," I said.

"It's high on my list," he said. "Hey, I didn't ask you guys to kill him. I just wanted you to do right, get me paid so I could dole out a few bucks to you two. That way, I would have enough for a house payment."

"Funny," I said. "Leonard, think you might want to get in on this? Considering we might go to prison or get a needle in the arm for something we didn't do?"

"I wasn't in the house," Leonard said. "I think I can turn on you and get a lighter sentence."

"And me," Marvin said, "I'm in pretty good shape. I just hired you guys to do a simple observation job. What the lady wanted. And the two of you went crazy. You went in there and shot him with an axe handle, Hap."

"Nice," I said.

"Look here," Marvin said. "Let's figure this thing. Jim Bob knows the lady, so maybe we start with him."

"Nobody knows where he is," I said. "I tried him on the phone before we came here. He's not answering for whatever reason. For now, he's out."

"Then we got to think about what it was we were asked to do. Lady comes in and says she has a recommendation, and it's from one of our best buddies, Jim Bob. She says she needs someone to protect her. To discourage someone. We take the job. You guys go over there and talk to her and hear her story and meet her lawyer. How am I doing so far?"

"Good," I said.

"She tells you her husband is big, and it turns out he is. She tells you he is scary and he beat up a boyfriend, a date, whatever. But the guy that got whipped won't press charges. Course, really, he doesn't need to. The cops can go after Henry anyway, if they want. But they think: All right, guy got a beating, wouldn't stand up for himself, so why should we bother? Kind of a Texas thing going there."

"Maybe," I said. "Shit, Leonard. Would you at least not smack?"

"Sorry," Leonard said.

"But whatever, they know he's going to be a shitty witness. Maybe he'll say he fell down a few times and got banged up because he wants to keep his Man Ticket. Won't admit he got a licking. By the way, this guy that took a beating. Who is he?"

I looked at Leonard.

Leonard said, "I don't know."

"Nor do I," I said.

"You know what?" Marvin said. "I think this guy, whoever he is, would be a nice place to start. I think anyone with detective skills would have already thought of that."

"We've been a little preoccupied," I said.

"And you have limited detective skills," Marvin said.

“Well, yeah, there’s that,” I said.

“Let me show you some detective work,” Marvin said.

He called his friend on the force. The one that knew the guy’s name. He wrote down the name and gave it to us.

Robert Unslerod.

Unslerod lived out in the country in a trailer. That was surprising. Not the kind of man Sharon Devon would date. Least I didn’t think so. She struck me as someone who liked money, a man who wore a tie and took her to good dinners and when he dropped trousers he’d be wearing silk shorts. She was someone that at least wanted a man with a nice car to take her out. The car parked in front of the trailer looked like something the farm pigs drove when they went out for a spin. From the looks of things Unslerod seemed to belong in mine and Leonard’s category. He seemed like the sort of guy Sharon Devon would wipe her ass on at best.

We knocked on the trailer door, but no one answered. Maybe Unslerod was actually taking a spin in his Porsche and this is just where he came to store his garbage. When he didn’t answer, I got a pad and pen out of my pocket and pressed it against the door to write a note.

The door swung open a little. A smell came out of there that was, to put it mildly, unpleasant.

“Not good, sir,” Leonard said.

“Nope.”

We went back to the car and stood by it.

“Call the cops?” I said.

“Might just be a dead raccoon under the trailer,” Leonard said.

"That stink is from inside the trailer," I said.

"Might be a dead kitty cat inside," Leonard said. "Maybe he went off for the week and forgot to leave Fluffy his kitty food and water dispenser."

"And maybe that's not it at all," I said.

"Yeah, well, probably not," Leonard said, opened the car door and got my revolver out of the glove box and held it by his side. "You get the axe handle."

I got the axe handle. We went back to the trailer and I nudged the door with the toe of my old Tony Lama's. It slid back. I stuck my head around the corner. It was dark in there. The stink was terrible, worse when we got completely inside.

There was a pile in the hallway between the living room and the bedroom, near the open bathroom door. It didn't look like a lump in the rug. It was too big to be a cat.

"Shit," I said.

We went over and looked. It was a man, facedown. The floor under him was dark, like a hole had opened up there. He was only wearing dark boxer shorts; my guess was they were not silk. We couldn't tell too much about him there in the dark, but what we could tell was that he wasn't just having a little nap.

Leonard went past me, and, holding the revolver in front of him, he looked in the bathroom.

"No one," he said. He went along to the bedroom. The door was cracked. He looked in there. "And the hits just keep on coming."

I went over and looked. There was a nude woman on the bed. There was enough light through the curtains I could tell she wasn't napping either. It was hard to tell what she might have looked like. She was swollen up and her head was bloated. All I could tell was it was a female.

I used my elbow to turn on the light. She didn't look any more identifiable. She looked worse. She was lying on her back with a hole in her forehead. It reminded me of the hole in the back of Henry's head. The sheet under her head was dark and caked with blood. The sheet pulled over her went up to her waist. I was tempted to pull it over her head, but I resisted.

Back in the hall I used the axe handle to turn on the light so we could get a look at the man. He was facedown and was stuck to the floor by dried blood.

"Did you touch anything?" Leonard asked.

"The door with the toe of my boot and I used my elbow on the light. Wait a minute, I put the note paper against the door . . . I didn't touch anything but the paper though."

"Okay, let's keep it that way."

We went outside and breathed in clean air.

"They been dead awhile," Leonard said.

"No shit, Sherlock."

"And me without my deerstalker."

We got in the car. Leonard put my revolver back in the glove box. I put the axe handle on the backseat.

I said, "I hope no one saw us drive in."

"Probably not," Leonard said. "No houses much. We didn't pass any cars."

It was a good guess. There was only a little dirt road leading to the trailer, and the property was a pasture with high grass and some trees at the back. Still, someone could have watched us turn in. Nothing for it but to hope no one had seen us arrive.

I pulled onto the road and eased along. Driving fast would just draw attention to us.

“This whole business is starting to stink worse than that trailer,” Leonard said.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m beginning to feel like you and me have been puppets all along, and that Sharon Devon is our puppeteer.”

“Time we cut the strings,” Leonard said.

We went to my place and Brett was home. She was cute in some old overalls worn over a paint-splattered shirt; it had got that way when we repaired a door and painted it. She had the cuffs of the overalls rolled up and she was barefoot. Her toenails were painted bright red. It went with her hair, which was tied back with a yellow tie. I made some coffee and we told Brett everything we knew. I always told Brett everything I knew. The only people I would tell that sort of thing were her and Leonard, maybe Marvin. Under certain circumstances, Jim Bob. In fact, when I got through telling Brett all we knew, she said, “Seems like you got to start with who put you in her camp.

“Jim Bob,” she said.

“Makes sense,” I said, “and maybe we can do that, but I got to say, if we were fooled, Jim Bob was fooled. And on top of that, I have tried him, without luck. He’s not answering his phone. I figure he’s turned it off on purpose. He may be in the middle of a job, and the kind of work he does often means the cell is off.”

“I wasn’t saying he had anything to do with it,” she said. “Just that he might give you some insight.”

“Yeah, he and Devon used to date,” Leonard said.

“Way back,” I said. “What I figure is she may have always been selfish, and over time, she became more of that. A whole lot of that. Enough so that it might lead to something that had to do with murder. Jim Bob, if he hadn't seen her in awhile, he wouldn't know that. Wouldn't suspect it. He'd remember her as the woman he dated."

"Problem with that," Leonard said, "is I was with her when Henry was killed. And somehow I can't see her breaking into that trailer and popping Unslerod and his girlfriend."

"Yeah," I said. "I figure whoever picked Henry's lock picked the trailer lock, caught Unslerod heading for the bathroom, shot him, and was in the bedroom before the woman knew what happened. They were probably both dead in less than fifteen seconds. If it took that long. Wouldn't have to be a professional killer, but someone who knew locks and was sneaky as an alley cat."

"Or professional," Leonard said. "I'm voting professional, but I'll settle it could be either way."

"Maybe you guys ought to forget all this," Brett said. "You're off the job. Not your problem, really. Maybe you stay out of it, she won't try to pin it on you."

"I don't want to feel like I let her set me up and she got away with it," I said. "Or that I somehow helped any plan she had all along to kill Henry. I don't know how I helped, but I have this horrible feeling I did. We only got how bad Henry was from her. Unslerod, what did he do? What did his woman do? I don't like it."

"You know what?" Leonard said. "Actually, we didn't just hear how bad Henry was from her. We heard it from the lawyer."

"And he's still in love with her," I said.

"Bingo," Leonard said. "You got any more cookies?"

Brett got up.

I said, “Don’t show him the stash.”

She laughed and opened a drawer next to the sink. It had two bags of vanilla cookies in it.

“And you know what, hon,” she said to Leonard, “I got you some Dr. Peppers.”

“Oh, hell,” Leonard said. “I swear, darling, I am going to quit being queer and go straight so I can take you away from Hap and you can keep me supplied in cookies and Dr. Peppers.”

Leonard was taking a nap on the couch, and Brett was upstairs in bed reading. I turned on the computer in Leonard’s bedroom we had built onto the house for him and did some checking on Frank the lawyer. What I got was Frank’s firm had been around a while. He owned it and employed other lawyers; in other words, he ran a large aquarium for sharks. I looked to find out about his cases, discovered his firm was pretty good. They had nice odds on their winnings. Not too many losses. They did everything from divorce to murder trials, but they didn’t seem to be ambulance chasers. As far as I could tell, they didn’t advertise on TV. They had been around long enough they didn’t have to. I called Marvin, told him what I found, asked if he might be able to find out more from some of his contacts. “After all,” I said, “as you have pointed out, you are the detective.”

“An attempt at flattery?”

“How’s it working?”

“I see it coming as clearly as an elephant trying to walk a high wire, so not so well.”

“But, then again, aren’t you the true detective?”

"Damn you, Hap Collins," he said. "It is working. You have found my weak spot."

I went upstairs and locked the door and took off my clothes and slid under the sheets with Brett. She was sitting up in bed with pillows at her back. She had the sheet pulled up over her. She had her reading glasses on, pushed down on her nose. She put the book in her lap.

"I hope you don't think you're going to get any," she said.

"Any what?" I said.

"Don't act coy with me," she said.

"I just got naked," I said. "It has nothing to do with you. I'm comfortable naked. Some of us are quite comfortable with our bodies, our nudity."

"Oh," she said.

"Yep."

"I'm reading, you know."

"How's the book?"

"Sucks."

"So, want to do the nasty?"

"That is far from romantic," she said. "But lucky for you I think a lot of that stuff is nonsense. The romantic stuff. I'm not as girly as I look. And then again, the book sucks, so that makes your suggestion a little more interesting."

"Dear, believe me," I said. "You are as girly as you need to be."

She laid the book on the bed beside her. She dropped the sheet. She was naked too.

"Surprise," she said.

The phone call woke me up. Brett stirred in my arms.

“You get that,” she said.

I slipped loose of her and put my feet on the floor and picked up the phone. It was Marvin.

“You busy?” he asked.

“Not right now,” I said.

“This Henry guy,” he said. “He seems to have been a pretty straight dude. Made a lot of money in oil. He was a land speculator for the companies. His job was to get people to give up beautiful land so it could have trees cleared, the soil torn up by a bulldozer, concrete and oil drills put down. He made a lot of money. And then he didn’t.”

“It comes and goes,” I said.

“People were drilling everywhere because of the oil shortage talk, and then when they drilled in some places and didn’t find as much as they hoped, they quit drilling so much.”

“And he quit making money,” I said.

“But here’s some things,” Marvin said. “He has a daughter. Her name is Nora. My cop friends say she has been arrested. A lot. Mostly stupid stuff. Small amounts of drugs. Being at the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong people. Not exactly a Bonnie Parker, more just troublesome. Lindsay Lohan without the fame and without that much money. Daddy had enough money to help her out of deep doo-doo, though, until he didn’t.”

“So what has she got to do with this?” I said.

“I’m not sure,” Marvin said. “Maybe nothing. But she didn’t get mentioned by Sharon Devon, did she?”

“Nope. The girl didn’t come up in conversation,” I said.

“My friend at the cop shop said Sharon and Henry always came down together to bail her out and such, and that it was pretty clear to them that the girl was close to Sharon. Like a mother. Her actual mother was dead. Car accident. Got an engine block through the chest."

"So, you're saying why didn't the dog bark in the nighttime?" I said.

"That's right. If they had a daughter and were divorcing, and the daughter was close to them both, why didn't she come up in your conversation with Mrs. Devon? And where is she? She was supposed to be living with Henry. The cops have been looking for her too, and nothing. No one knows what happened to her."

"Connected?"

"Maybe," Marvin said. "Cops have tried to find her every which way, but it's like she fell off the face of the earth. I'm not sure what that means or what we should do, but something about it bothers me."

"The lawyer," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I figure he knows something more than we know and we ought to know it."

"Lawyers have client privilege," Marvin said.

"Sometimes that wavers if they think you're going to beat the hell out of them," I said. "Not saying we would, but maybe he could think we mean to, even if we don't say we plan to. Just sort of insinuate."

"Maybe we ought to just drop it," Marvin said. "A reason we ought to, and I have been holding this back for dramatic effect, is Sharon Devon went down to the station and said she didn't think you had anything to do with Henry's death, and that she sent you there, and you were only doing what she asked."

"That's kind of different than before," I said.

"I guess she thought about it," Marvin said.

"Or decided she didn't need that dodge anymore."

"Well, there's a little bit more," Marvin said. "She's got a big insurance policy. Henry left everything to her and he's got this policy that's worth about seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars. They weren't divorced, and he hadn't changed his will or his policy, so it all goes to her."

"So she didn't have any reason to make too much of a stink about us being involved," I said.

"It clears the palate some," Marvin said. "It gets attention away from her, and it's just another unsolved murder. And there's all that money. Maybe not as much as he would have had a few years back, but it's more than starter change."

"You think she had him hit?" I said.

"It happens," he said, "but if so, why hire us in the first place?"

"It made Henry look like a bad man and it made us look like someone who might have put him down, and it confused the situation. It doesn't seem to take much confusion to mess a jury up these days. If she could plant in people's mind that he was dangerous, any sympathy there might be for him could be negated."

"You sound like you're holding something back, Hap," Marvin said. "It's not what you're saying, but I know your tone well enough to know there's something missing here."

"Not really," I said. "I was going to get around to telling you. Maybe, like you, I was holding it back for dramatic effect. I meant to tell you earlier, but I wanted to think about things first. Unslerod, you remember him?"

"The guy that got beat up by Henry," Marvin said.

"He's dead, and a woman who was with him is dead too."

"Shit."

"I haven't called about it. I figured they weren't going to get any deader. Maybe stinkier, but not deader."

I gave Marvin the location of the trailer. That way he could contact his friend at the department, maybe keep me and Leonard out of it. Marvin too.

"This is getting more complicated," Marvin said.

"Still think we should let it go?" I asked.

"I think we ought to," Marvin said. "And I want to."

"But we won't, will we?"

"Of course not," Marvin said.

I had no sooner got off the phone than there was a knock on the bedroom door.

Leonard called out, "I woke up and I was all alone and I didn't know where you were."

"Go fuck yourself," I said.

"Get up and let him in," Brett said.

I got up and pulled on my pajama pants and T-shirt, unlocked the door, and let Leonard in.

"The cookies are missing," Leonard said.

"I put them up," I said. "You eat all of them if I don't hide them. You'll have a tummy ache."

"You hid Leonard's cookies?" Brett said. She was sitting up in bed with the sheet pulled around her. Her red hair fell against the white sheets and her fine skin and made her look like a goddess.

"They're not his cookies," I said.

"Are too," Leonard said.

"Yeah," Brett said. "They are. You go down there and give the baby his cookies."

I said, "You're spoiling him, you know."

When the lawyer, Givens, came out of the restaurant, we were waiting in the parking lot. We had followed him from his work and parked as near to his car as possible. We had been waiting all morning for him to leave his office, not even sure he would, but hoping eventually he'd come out. If he went to lunch we could maybe pull off talking to him easier than trying to set a time at his work and him not wanting to talk to us; we tried it that way, he could avoid us for ages. So, when he left we were watching from across the street and we followed him, and now, here we were, waiting.

While he was in the restaurant enjoying a good meal, Leonard and I were eating hot dogs from Sonic, which frankly, wasn't half bad.

We ate and waited, and after about an hour he came out. As he got close to my car we got out and started walking like we were going into the restaurant. He looked up from fumbling with his car keys and saw us.

"Hello," he said, and gave us one of those smiles you would expect from someone who had just discovered his zipper was down.

"Hey," I said, like it was a big surprise to see him. "How are you?"

"Okay. Just grabbing a little lunch."

"Yeah, well, good," I said. "We thought we'd have a little lunch ourselves."

"That's nice," he said. He couldn't have been more awkward than if he were standing on a mile-long razor blade over a gorge.

"You know, things really didn't work out for us on that gig with Mrs. Devon," Leonard said.

"Yes, of course," he said. "I know. Sorry about that."

He tried to dart for his car.

I said, "Thing is, we think a lot of what happened stinks. We think maybe we got played for fools."

"I'm sure you're mistaken," he said.

"Then you wouldn't mind talking to us?" I said.

"Did you follow me here?" he asked.

"Happy coincidence," Leonard said.

"Well, I don't know I have anything to say," he said. "Mrs. Devon is my client, and—"

"Oh, come on," I said. "It's just us guys talking here."

"She's more than a client. She's also a friend," he said.

"Ah," Leonard said, "I bet you feel more than that for her. I mean, hell, you were married to her for awhile, and to think that big jock Henry was riding her around the bedroom like she was a pony had to get your goat."

"That is inappropriate," Givens said.

"So is framing our ass," Leonard said.

"Mrs. Devon has made it clear you had nothing to do with what happened," Givens said. "It was just an unfortunate coincidence."

"Coincidence, huh?" Leonard said. "You know what I'm thinking, and I'm just thinking here—"

"And for him to do that, he has to really be serious," I said, "because it hurts his head."

"There you have it," Leonard said. "But I'm thinking since you knew Hap was watching Henry's house, you sneaked over there and picked the lock and shot Henry. Hap hears the shot, like maybe you thought he would, and he comes in and looks bad for it."

"I already told you Mrs. Devon says it was a coincidence, and the police believe her."

"That's good," I said. "Really, but we still got to wonder if that was part of the original plan, to have our dicks mashed between two bricks."

"I didn't shoot anyone. I don't even own a gun, and I don't know how to pick locks, and if I were going to frame someone, I'd find a better way to do it than that. Hoping you heard a shot and came in and got framed. That's not a very good plan."

"It wouldn't have mattered if I came in," I said. "All that mattered was I was there, and the cops could fill in the rest of the blanks."

"Wouldn't you have to have the same kind of gun that killed him?" Givens said. "Wouldn't you have to have a gun that had been fired?"

"Okay," I said, "you're starting to sound more convincing. Listen, let me put it another way. We really don't know you had anything to do with it. We're just fishing. But we don't like being played for idiots. Some might think that happens daily, but they would be wrong. Leonard just looks foolish, he's not."

"Thanks," Leonard said. "That was mighty white of you."

Givens said, "Good day," and made like a bullet for his car.

I trailed after him. When he got to the car, unlocked it and was opening the door, I said, "Thing is, if you two have something going on that's got nothing to do with us, maybe we can help. Maybe you ought to talk to us."

Givens looked back at me, paused. I thought for a minute he was going to say something, but instead he got in his car and drove away.

"He hesitated," Leonard said. "I think that help line got to him."

"I was just throwing it out there, seeing if it had a hook on it."

"I think it did," Leonard said. "And some bait, and he almost went for it. That makes me think maybe he's telling the truth. Or part of the truth. That they didn't set us up. But it's also got me thinking he knows more about what happened than he's letting on."

"I keep telling myself if we're out of it, we ought to let it go," I said.

"I know," Leonard said. "But you know, that would be a first, and I'm not sure I want to start down that road. Next thing, I'll break down and buy my own cookies. And you know that ain't right."

We had just pulled away from the restaurant when my cell rang.

It was Marvin. He said, "I got a call from Givens."

I had it on speaker, so Leonard heard it. "That was quick."

"So, does this mean we're in trouble?" I said.

"No," Marvin said. "I think something you did may have worked out. He wants to see you at his office, downtown in an hour. It's a pleasant request. He even said please and that he's thought over what you said and he wants to talk straight."

"Interesting," I said.

"Find out how interesting."

We stopped by Starbucks and sat at a table and had coffee in mugs. Since I found out you can have it in a ceramic mug if you don't plan on carrying it off, I had it that way every chance I got. It tastes better.

We drank our coffee, and then went over to the law office and rode the elevator up to the third floor. When we got there the office door was open. Frank Givens and Sharon Devon were both there. Sharon was in a chair near the desk. She looked as if she had just seen her own ghost.

Givens was standing up behind his desk. As we came in, he said, "Shut the door."

I shut it.

"I started to say something in the restaurant lot," Givens said, "but you see, part of the problem was who I had lunch with today. I wanted to get out of there as swiftly as possible. Before he came out. I didn't have your number, so I called your boss."

"Sometime boss," Leonard said. "Actually, he can't do without us."

"So you weren't there to eat?" I said.

"I lied," Givens said. "I went in and I sat in a back booth in a conference room and got talked to by a person who is part of the problem. Him and his bodyguard."

I looked at Leonard, said, "Is any of this making any sense?"

"Not to me," he said. "But I'm still trying to figure out the ending to *The Sopranos*."

"I'm sorry," Givens said. "Please sit down."

There were two very comfortable leather chairs, and we sat in them.

Sharon Devon had not spoken a word. She looked as if she had been crying. Her eyes were red as sunrise and she looked more her age today, as if she had finally lost the war against it. I felt sorry for her. I feel sorry for just about everybody.

“We led you along some,” she said.

“Figured that,” Leonard said.

“Me and Henry,” Sharon said, “we weren’t really having trouble.”

“Okay,” I said.

“We were just pretending,” she said.

I glanced at Givens. He didn’t look too happy. I couldn’t tell if it was about Henry and her not actually having trouble, or about something worse. I decided a little of column A and a little of column B. I had a suspicion there might even be a column C.

“So we were just sort of window dressing?” Leonard said.

She nodded. “Yes. You see, we have a daughter, Nora.”

We knew that, of course, but we didn’t say so.

“She is by Henry’s previous marriage. I was never able to have children. But, I love her quite a bit. Nora was precious to me. She wasn’t quite a teenager when we first met, but I took to her right away, and she to me. After that came the teenage years and Nora was pretty wild. Not that uncommon. I was pretty unruly myself. Nora started seeing boys we didn’t want her to see, and she started experimenting with drinking and drugs. It made what happened later easy.” She paused. Givens got up, went to a cabinet and pulled out a bottle of water, got a glass and a coaster and brought it over to her. He placed the glass on the coaster and unscrewed the cap on the water bottle and poured about half a glass.

Patiently, she waited while he did all this, as if a pause like this was the most natural thing in the world. For the two of them, maybe it was. When he was finished she sipped her water, delicately, placed the glass back on the coaster.

“You see, Henry really was in oil,” she said. “And he really did have a loss of money. But part of the reason wasn’t just a shift in natural fortune. There was a dismantling of fortune, and Henry was the cause. He liked to gamble. He liked to gamble a lot. Then the business went bad and he got into debt with the wrong people. He bet on some football games, some horses. He bet on just about anything. He would have bet on the number of freckles on my ass if I’d have been willing to let someone count.

“I loved him, but he was a gambling addict, and no matter how bad the people were he got into debt with, he kept letting the debt get deeper. Then they put interest on what he owed. Lots of interest. About double. They wanted him to get in deep, because they assumed he was a big shot, and that whatever problem he was having paying would go away, because they had had a few ups and downs with him before, and in the end, he had paid it off, and with interest. Lots of interest.”

“But the downs didn’t stop,” I said.

She shook her head. “No. They didn’t. He went to them and told them there was no way he could pay all that back if they kept compounding the interest, which they were doing. They didn’t listen. He was late, so they added on a late fee, and added interest on that. He told them if they stopped compounding it, maybe he could pay it back, in time. He probably couldn’t have paid it back if they had let him go back in time to the beginnings of the earth and work it off up until now. The business, it wasn’t coming back. Not the way they thought it might. Fact was, he had lost the business, but they didn’t know that.”

Sharon paused and drank some more of her water.

“He let them think he was still making money. Maybe that was the right thing, to let them think that, because if they didn't think he could pay, they didn't have any reason to let him live. They even threatened me. We had some money. But it was just eating money, gas, enough to pay a few bills. We didn't have enough to pay them so that it would mean anything to them. That's when we came up with a plan. Idea was we'd divorce and sell the house."

"I don't see why you would have to divorce," I said. "Don't see the plan in that."

"Turns out it wasn't too good a plan," she said. "We tried to get clever because we thought we were smarter than a bunch of thugs."

"You probably are smarter," I said, "but not as clever. They're two different things."

"Or as ruthless," Leonard said. "That's something makes them real different."

"Why didn't you just go to the cops?" I said.

"For the same reason I said," Sharon said. "We thought we were smarter. We didn't want people to know about Henry's gambling debts. We thought we could work things out and no one would know, and we could make some kind of life together again."

"So what was the plan?" Leonard said.

Sharon drank more of the water and looked as if she might break out crying. She didn't. She said, "Thing was, Henry thought if we were divorced, at least they'd leave me alone. They didn't. And the man that I said I dated, that got beat up—"

"Let me guess," I said. "He isn't really your type."

"No," she said. "He was a messenger for the people Henry owed."

"And Henry beat him up, causing more problems," Leonard said.

"Yes," she said, "but there was already a problem. You see, the messenger came to my house because he said he wanted us to know that if we didn't pay he had our daughter. She had been seeing someone that was part of the problem. Jackie Cox. She was in with the wolves already."

"Ah, I got it," I said. "The Dixie Mafia Cox family."

"You know them?" she said.

I shook my head. "I know who they are. They took the place of someone who used to run this area's business. Those people we did know. They came to kind of a sad end."

"Rumor is," said the lawyer, "you were involved."

"Rumors are all over the place," I said.

"Jimson and his crew," the lawyer said, "they got killed in a filling station in No Enterprise, and the rumor is from cops I know, you and Leonard might have had something to do with that."

"We had our problems with Jimson," I said. "But no. That wasn't us."

And it wasn't. It was a young and lethal lady named Vanilla Ride who had put them down, but that's a different story.

I said, "I don't want you to be too disappointed about that, though. Me and Leonard, we've had our moments, and I figure you wouldn't have asked us here if you didn't know that, and didn't want us to have a moment again."

"Jackie was seeing our daughter," Sharon said. "She met him because of my husband and his gambling dealings. He didn't intentionally introduce her to Jackie, but he used to have these tough guys coming around, and Jackie, he's the son of one of them."

"Richard Cox," I said.

She nodded her head. “They got tight quick. Maybe because he was a bad boy, and Nora liked bad boys. But then Henry owed them the money, things went bad, and then they sent this Unslerod around.”

“He was kind of a tough guy they used,” Givens said.

I didn’t mention that he wasn’t that tough anymore, and unless Marvin got in touch with his cop friend, Unslerod and his girlfriend were still collecting flies in a trailer out in the boonies.

“He said they had our daughter,” Sharon said, “and if Henry didn’t find some way to pay half, soon, and the other half almost as soon, they would harm her. Henry was already living apart from me, trying to set the divorce up to maybe make me safer, and then this guy came around. He was looking to talk to Henry. He thought he was tough.”

“But Henry was tougher,” I said.

“Much more so,” she said. “He gave him a beating and they didn’t get any money. It was a foolish thing to do, them having our daughter. I don’t think Henry believed them at first. Then they sent this.”

She opened her purse and took out a plastic bag and dug in the bag. When she got through with that she pulled out another plastic bag and unwrapped that. There was a pair of red thong underwear inside.

“These are hers,” she said. “I bought them for her and her father didn’t like that I did. All the girls were wearing them, she said, and I thought it was harmless. Anyway, they’re hers. I know they are. It proves to me they have her.”

“What we would like,” Givens said, “is that you go and get her back. That you make these men stop bothering Sharon. They killed her husband and took her daughter, and now they're pressuring her to pay. She can't pay. They have come through me with all this. They said Sharon goes to the cops, or doesn't pay something on what she owes, and by something they mean a substantial amount, they will send the part of her daughter that fits in the underwear to her in a cardboard box with a bow on it."

"How much time did they give you?" Leonard asked.

"Three days," Givens said, without waiting for her to answer.

At Marvin's office, he said, "So, how do you read it?"

"I think Henry got his dick in a crack," I said, "and he was too arrogant to take care of matters when he could, so he just kept it there and the crack got tighter. He didn't pay, so they took his daughter. They sent around a guy they thought was tough to collect and tell Henry how things were, that being Unslerod, and maybe he thought he'd play tough on Henry. Henry was tougher. Maybe Unslerod pissed Cox off with his failure, or maybe it was some other reason, but it seems more than likely Cox had him taken care of. His girlfriend was probably just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Later on it was Henry's turn. I figure Unslerod and the woman were dead some days before Henry, considering how their bodies looked. Way I understand it, Cox doesn't like failure, and he gives it a very short shelf life."

"Question comes to me," Marvin said, "guy owes you, why whack him if you want the money that bad?"

"That's the question me and Hap got to thinking on coming over here," Leonard said. "We got to thinking on it hard enough that I cell phoned Sharon. I asked her how they expected her to pay what was owed, and she said—"

"Insurance money," Marvin said, and snapped his fingers at the same time.

"Yep," Leonard said. "You are a wizard. She has a shit-full policy. Seven hundred and fifty thousand. Henry managed to keep that up, as protection for Sharon. That isn't even all Henry owes, but it's a good part of it. She told me that, I cleverly asked, doesn't it take time for the policy to pay out? And she said it did, and you know what?"

"The lawyer is helping her out," Marvin said, leaned back in his desk chair and placed his hands behind his head. "He's going to put the money up for her in return for the insurance money."

"Yep," Leonard said. "He's not only an ex-husband carrying a torch, he's a fucking saint."

"Sure he is," Marvin said. "Sure he is."

We drove over in my car and met the lawyer. We were going to go with him to the Dixie Mafia guy and they were going to give us the girl in exchange for the lawyer's money. When the insurance paid off, Givens was going to get his money back from Sharon. He was carrying a briefcase when he came outside his office and met us at the curb.

It was a nice day, and I wondered, as I often wondered, if it might be my last day on earth, if this might be the day I set out to do something simple and it turned bad and I'd end up in a ditch with crows pecking at my eyes.

Givens climbed in the backseat with his briefcase. He said, "We got to drive to Tyler."

"All right," I said, and I slipped away from the curb. "We meeting in the city?"

"That's the plan," he said. "It should go easy enough."

"They explained it to you?" Leonard said. "You got all the particulars down?"

"They just want the money," Givens said.

"What about the boyfriend?" I said. "Cox's son?"

"He was just the bait," Givens said. "He was the one that got her to trust him."

"And that's kind of what we are, aren't we?" I said.

Givens was quiet for a long moment. "I don't think I follow you."

"I might have to throw a few words in, but I figure you'll put it together pretty quick. I'm talking about you getting us to trust you, same as you say Jackie did with Nora."

Givens didn't say anything. I looked at his face in the rearview mirror. He was doing a fair job of looking puzzled.

"Let me see the briefcase," Leonard said.

"Why?" Givens said. He put a hand on top of it where it rested on the seat.

"Because if you don't," Leonard said, "I'm going to have Hap pull over by the side of the road and I'm going to kick your ass so hard you'll be peeking out of your asshole."

"What in the hell is wrong with you guys?" he said.

"Let's just say we don't like your story," I said. "We look in the suitcase, see the money there, we might believe you better."

"It's there," he said.

"Show it to us," Leonard said. "And right now. I'm feeling edgy."

"He wanted vanilla cookies," I said, "but he got up too late, and I had eaten all of them with my coffee. You don't want to make him mad when he hasn't had his cookies."

Givens had no idea what his life had to do with vanilla cookies, and frankly, neither did I, but it was on my mind. Cookies are not cheap, I'll have you know. Not when your brother eats them by the bagful. What really made me mad was Leonard didn't gain a pound. I looked at cookies too long and I could feel myself gaining weight.

Leonard leaned over the seat and held out his hand, said, "And that gun you got under your coat. I saw it when you got in the car. Reach for it and I'll be over this seat pronto and stick it up your nose."

"I just brought it for safety," he said.

"But you told us they said not to bring guns," I said. "They making like a special deal just for you?"

"Hand me the case," Leonard said. "While you're at it, hand me the gun. Never mind."

Leonard went over the seat and was on top of Givens so fast Givens probably thought Leonard had a warp drive up his ass. I glanced in the mirror. Leonard was practically sitting in Givens' lap. He reached the gun from under Givens' suit coat and threw it in the front passenger's seat. Then he slapped Givens across the face, twice, fast as the beat of hummingbird's wings, then got off Givens' lap and picked up the briefcase. Givens held his hand to his mouth as blood dribbled between his fingers.

"You didn't have to do that," Givens said.

"I thought I did," Leonard said. "Soon as I saw that bulge in your coat, I knew you'd lied to us, that you were putting our lives in danger by bringing your gun, or that there was more to things than you wanted us to know.”

“Another thing,” I said, “just for the record, we brought guns ourselves. Because, you know what? We didn’t believe you. First, you’re a lawyer, and that’s a mark against you, and second, you still got a thing for Sharon, and third, you putting up that kind of jack for your former wife seems unlikely, love her or not. You may be a lying scumbag lawyer who makes a lot of jack, but it’s hard to think even you got seven hundred and fifty thousand just lying around? Possible, not likely. So, that means you got something else going on here. Something that might even make you look like a bit of a hero, and we would be there to witness you turning the money over and taking the girl back. That could ingratiate you to Sharon, couldn’t it?”

“We don’t do this right,” Givens said, “it’ll turn out bad. Real bad.”

Leonard opened the briefcase. “Well, now, ain’t this some shit,” he said.

Leonard turned the case toward me. It only had a pile of empty manila folders inside.

“That won’t pass for money,” I said.

“No,” Leonard said. “It won’t.”

I pulled over to the side of the road and put the car in park and looked back over the seat at Givens.

“Lay it out,” I said. “No stalling. No stories within stories. Lay it out.”

“No one was meant to get hurt,” Givens said.

“Yeah,” I said, “it’s all fun and games till someone loses an eye.”

“Henry owed the money, and well, I know the people involved. You might say I handle their affairs.”

“You’re their lawyer,” I said. “The Cox family.”

“That, among other things.”

“That’s goddamn typical,” Leonard said.

“I do odds and ends for them here and there. Henry owed them and they wanted their money, and they knew I knew Sharon and that I had been married to her.”

“Favor time,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “They wanted me to put the screws on her to make Henry give up the money. I thought if we had someone threaten Henry he’d give it up. I was sure he had money in some hidden account somewhere. They sent Unslerod around and he didn’t work out so well.”

“Henry turned out to be tougher than they thought,” I said.

“He did,” Givens said. “Then Unslerod decided he’d blackmail me by threatening to let Sharon know I worked for the organization.”

“The organization,” Leonard said. “I like that. The Dixie Mafia and Cox you mean.”

Givens nodded.

“That meant you had to get rid of Unslerod,” Leonard said. “And when you did, the woman just happened to be there.”

“Something like that,” Givens said, and I saw in his eyes then something that made me shiver a little. He may have been a frightened weasel, but I knew in that moment I had to keep my eye on him. Because nothing is more dangerous than a frightened weasel. They have no loyalties but themselves.

“That was cold,” Leonard said.

"He was a deadly man," Givens said.

"But not so deadly you couldn't sneak up on him and shoot him," I said. "And then the woman."

"It just worked out that way," Givens said. "I used a credit card on the door and I surprised him. Well, he surprised me too. I shot him, and then I went in the bedroom and she was there and I didn't have any choice. I shot her too."

"No choice, huh?" I said.

"I didn't think so," Givens said.

"So what happened next?" I said. "Better yet, let's go back in time to Nora."

"I didn't want to do that, but I set it up so Jackie could meet Nora. He got her interested in him, and then she moved in with him."

"She wasn't kidnapped?" Leonard said.

"No," Givens said, sighing so loud it was like a windstorm blew into the car. "What I thought was it could look like a kidnapping. Cox said that would be good, and his boy Jackie was for it. And so was Nora."

"Nora was in on it?" I said.

"Yeah," he said. "She was. Big time. Way we arranged it was we'd hold her for ransom and Henry would come through. Like I said, we all thought he had money and was holding back, and that if he thought Nora was in danger he'd give it up."

"Only problem was he didn't really have any money," I said.

"Correct," Givens said. "No money. Or at least I don't think so now. He loved Nora. I think he would have come through if he had any."

"So you revised the plan, and the revised plan included bad things for Henry," Leonard said.

"I didn't so much revise it because I wanted to, but because I had to. Cox had one of his men do in Henry. A black guy named Speed. He's big as Henry, but more dangerous."

"Let me guess the rest," I said. "You told them they had to do Henry because you knew about the insurance policy. You never planned to give Cox your money until you got the policy money. You'd just pretend to take Sharon off the hook. Me and Leonard would be there as witnesses, and you'd hand them the briefcase full of folders, and they would give you Nora, and you would bring her home like she was let go, and when the money came through, you'd give it to Cox because he liked the plan and didn't mind temporary ownership of folders and a briefcase. When you paid them the insurance money, minus you and Nora taking a little off the top for your troubles, no one would be the wiser."

"It wasn't all that Henry owed," Givens said. "But it was enough for them to be satisfied, and it would take Sharon out of the mix."

"And you'd look real good in her eyes," I said.

He nodded. "I suppose that's true."

"You and Nora are some pair," I said. "Nora cheating her grieving stepmother for some dollars and for this Jackie Cox, and then you cheating Sharon. Not to mention committing murder."

"That's pretty much it," Givens said.

"You know," I said. "One revision on what I said earlier. I don't think you brought us along so we could say what a hero you were. I think you brought us along because Sharon insisted. She said she wanted us along to make sure things went well. She wanted us to protect you and Nora. How am I doing?"

"All right, I guess," Givens said.

"You know what, Givens?" Leonard said. "I didn't check you out so good. I see you are trying slowly to ease your hand down to your sock, where I suspect just under your pants leg is a holstered handgun that you hope to pull and shoot me and Hap with."

Leonard poked the gun he had gotten off the front seat against the side of the lawyer's well-combed hair, just over his temple. "What you want to do is tug up your pants leg, pinch the gun out by the grip with thumb and forefinger, and hand it to me easy as if it might blow up."

Givens did as he was told. Leonard took the gun. He tossed it over the seat into the passenger seat and hit Givens across the head with his own gun, right over the ear. It knocked Givens sideways. He reached up and held his head. When he moved his hand there was blood on his fingers.

"You sonofabitch," Givens said.

"And don't you forget it," Leonard said.

I had some tissues in the car and I gave some to Givens and had him wipe the blood off his head and hand.

"What we're going to do," I said, "is we're going to go through with this plan. Almost. We're going to have you waltz in there with the briefcase. We're going to have you be a really nice guy and not let on we know dick about what you're doing, 'cause if you do, we will kill you deader than a tree stump.

"When we get the girl, both of you get a drive to the police station. We'll call Marvin and have him grease the path for us with the cops. We'll turn you and her over to them, let you figure out how to explain extortion, illegal gambling profits, murder, and fraud, or whatever the fuck crimes we got here. Thing is, we play this right, we get you two and they get the briefcase, thinking they're going to get insurance money later, and you get to leave without a hole in your head. How's that plan?"

"Cox won't forget," Givens said.

"We'll see how that turns out," I said. "We got long memories ourselves."

Givens didn't say anything. I figured he didn't like the plan.

The meeting place was on the first floor of a two-floor parking garage in Tyler. Just before we got there we pulled over, and Leonard made Givens get up front in the passenger seat, and he sat directly behind him. He had both of Givens' guns and one of his own he had brought, and I had mine from the glove box tucked in a holster at the small of my back, with my shirt pulled down over it.

When we drove inside the garage we went to spot 15, as Givens said for us to do. A big black car—of course it was black—was waiting. We pulled up behind it and a man got out. He was an exceptionally large black man that moved like a cat; frankly, he moved the way Leonard and I do. I'm just telling it like it is. One bad man can spot another, even if that bad man is me and I'm feeling a lot less bad these days. I figured he was the aforementioned Speed. He was dressed in an expensive black shirt, coat, pants, shoes, and a very glossy black dress jacket that couldn't have been off the rack, not and fit those shoulders. His head was shaved and it looked to have been waxed. It was shiny enough you could have used it as a mirror to comb your hair.

"You go on and get out," Leonard said to Givens. "I'd be real cool, I was you."

Leonard got out, and Givens got out.

Speed looked at me behind the wheel. He was expressionless, which was expression enough. Guy like that, not showing much in his features, you had to watch him. Wasn't the kind of fella that would give you many signals before he shot or punched you or drove a car over your ass.

I had my window rolled down. I said, "Hey, how's it hanging?"

Speed ignored me. He looked at Leonard and Givens. They had come around to the front of the car.

"Givens," the big man said.

"Speed," Givens said.

"Hey," Leonard said. "How about this weather?"

"Which bozo is this?" Speed asked.

"Leonard," Givens said. "Guy behind the wheel is Hap."

"How's it hanging?" I said again.

Still no evaluation of the general hanging condition of his meat was offered by Speed.

"Here's the thing," Speed said. "You got no guns, right?"

"Not exactly," Leonard said. "I actually got some guns."

Speed turned his attention to Givens. "You were told no guns."

"They go their own way," Givens said.

"That's right," Leonard said. "Way I see it, since we're all pals we won't be shooting anybody, right? You came with a gun, because I see it under your well-cut coat."

"You don't leave the guns," Speed said, "we don't go."

"How about we get where we're going, we all put our guns in a pile," I said. "Till then we keep them. You see, the lawyer here told us your rules, but we're here to make sure he don't get shot and we don't either. To make sure it works out that way, we got to have rules of our own. One of which is we hang onto our guns until it looks like it's okay to let go of them."

I knew that since this was a scam, there was no real threat in saying we wouldn't give them the briefcase. Cox wanted the meeting to happen, to set it up so Givens could give him the insurance money eventually.

It was a big joke, but a joke only works if you play it right. Thing was, they didn't know we were in on the joke. We had a few laughs of our own planned.

Speed let what I said move around in his thoughts for awhile. His expression didn't change.

"You follow me out," he said.

He got back in his car and we backed out from behind him. He pulled from his parking place and drove off. We followed. I saw that he was on his cell already.

When Bad Guys start directing you outside of town it's always a crapshoot. But that's where we were going, outside of town. We passed what used to be Owen Town. It was really nothing more than an asphalt path and a couple of storage buildings. It had never been a town since I was alive, but it used to be a place where aluminum chairs were made. I worked there when I was young.

We went along until we came to the cutoff for Starrville, a little burg so small most of the inhabitants could have lived in one house, and maybe a shed out back. We didn't go all the way there. Instead, we stopped in the Starrville Cemetery. There was another black car like the one Speed was driving already parked there. The windows were dark. A man got out from behind the wheel. He was a big white guy with a crew cut. He was almost as big as Speed. His jacket, an ugly plaid thing, fit him the way a designer dress fits a hippopotamus.

Speed got out of his car. We got out of ours. After a moment, the back door of the other car opened and a man slid out, leaving the door open. It was Cox. I had never met him, but had seen a couple photos of him on the Internet, usually something to do with law-breaking. He always claimed to be innocent, and always got out of whatever problem he was in. He was a tall, lean man with gray, well-cut hair, and a look about him that said he liked things his way. He was dressed in a nice gray suit to go with the hair. My dad always told me not to trust anyone who ran around in the middle of the day with a suit on. If they wore one because they were on their way to preach, he told me to watch them even closer.

“So,” said Cox, “we’re here to deal.”

“If you got something to deal with,” I said.

“They got guns,” Speed said.

Cox glanced at Speed. “What did I tell you?”

“No guns,” Speed said, but he didn’t look worried about the situation. My guess is it was mostly show. My bet is when I saw Speed was on his cell phone, he was calling ahead to tell Cox we had guns.

“We just want to play even,” I said. “Your man here has a gun. And I’m going to guess the guy in the plaid coat has one too. Wouldn’t surprise me you had one. All I’m saying is we all keep our guns and stay friends. Having us put ours up and you keeping yours, that wouldn’t be playing fair. And me, I’m all about fair play.”

“You said we would put them all in a pile,” Speed said.

“I lied,” I said.

"All right," Cox said. "We'll play your way." He looked at Givens. "Got the money?"

Givens held up the briefcase they both knew was empty.

"Good," Cox said.

"You got the girl?" Leonard said.

"I do," Cox said.

He looked back at the car. A young man who looked a lot like Cox, but with black hair, got out. He poked his hand back inside the car, when he pulled on it, a girl came out with it. She was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. She wasn't wearing a bra. This wasn't a negative. She had unreal red hair and a pretty face, but there was something about it that made you want to throw a pie at it.

Givens said, "These men, they know what the real deal is."

I looked at Leonard. He looked at me. The cat had just jumped from the bag.

Givens walked over to Cox's car carrying the briefcase. He stood by Cox.

"They know," he said. "They know and they're trying to work me to get the girl back. They know she's in on it."

"Yeah," Cox said, "and how do they know that? You tell them?"

"They figured it," Givens said.

"That's right," Leonard said, "we're pretty smart for old country boys. We can even tie a square knot in the dark."

I let my hand drift to the edge of my shirt. Speed eased his coat back. I think the guy in plaid was still trying to figure out what everyone had said. Cox didn't look any different at all. Oh, maybe a bit irritated, but nothing more. The girl looked at the young man, who I figured was Jackie, then looked at Cox. She seemed to be waiting for someone to tell her something.

“All right, so they know,” Cox said.

“They plan on taking me and her to the police,” Givens said.

“They do, do they?” Cox said.

“That’s exactly the plan,” Leonard said.

No one said anything for a while. A plane flew over. I wished they were parachuting in reinforcements.

“I think there’s more of us than there are of you two,” Cox said.

“What a mathematician,” Leonard said.

“Me and Leonard get to shooting though, your numbers may decrease,” I said.

“Speed here,” Cox said, “he’s fast on the draw, and he hits what he aims at.”

“I’m not that fast on the draw,” Leonard said, “and I’m not that good of a shot, but I still might hit something. But him, Hap, he can shoot. That motherfucker is a natural. He don’t really know from guns, but he knows shooting. It’s like a god-damn inborn knack.”

“This is true,” I said. “I’m like a fucking prodigy.”

I didn’t add that my expertise was really with long guns, though I did all right with a handgun. And Leonard was right. I didn’t know that much about the workings of guns, really. Not the way gun nuts do, the guys talking about them the way you ought to talk about a woman, but I could hit stuff. As for fast on the draw, I had no idea. I never thought of slapping leather with anyone. I usually had my gun out and ready.

“We got quite the conundrum then, don’t we?” Cox said, and grinned a little.

“Pretty conundrummy,” Leonard said.

Speed was a little to my left rear, but I could see him well enough. Across the way was Crew Cut, and not far from him were

Cox and the girl, Jackie, and Givens. Leonard was off to my right.

“You know what?” Leonard said. “I’m going to step a little wide, in case my man here decides to shoot. He’s got dead aim, but I don’t want to be in the line of fire. He might let a lot of bullets go.”

“You really good?” Speed asked me.

“There’s all manner of opinions floating around,” I said.

“He will blow your head off, Speed,” Leonard said, without looking back at me, keeping his eyes on the others. “It will happen so fast you’ll never know you have a hole in you.”

I thought: Don’t build it up so much, Leonard. This Speed guy, he looks like someone who would like to try me out, and I’d rather not. But I didn’t let on I was worried. I smiled a lot. I was one confident and happy-looking sonofabitch.

“I’m thinking I might like to try you, fast man,” Speed said.

Shit. I knew it.

“We don’t have to, you know,” I said.

“You sound a little scared,” Speed said.

“It’s just I don’t like having to clean my gun,” I said. “All that smoke in the barrel. The cost of a bullet.”

“You know what I think,” Speed said, pushing his coat back so the butt of his holstered gun could be seen. “I don’t think you’re that—”

I drew and wheeled and shot him, right in the center of the chest. I wheeled again, toward Crew Cut. He was struggling his gun out of the holster beneath his coat. I shot him in the arm. The gun he’d grabbed went flipping away and he fell back against the car, grabbed his arm, said, “Shit.”

Leonard had his gun out now. It was about time.

“Damn, Hap,” Leonard said. “That was some good shooting.”

“Wasn’t bad,” I said. “Disarm the dick cheese.”

Leonard pointed his gun at them. He said, “You, Nora, you get their guns from them, bring them over here and toss them on the ground behind the car. You get feisty, I’ll put a hole in you. I got a rule, anyone tries to hurt me gets hurt, male, female, wild animal. And if they got hide-out guns, those better come out slow and easy too, not be hanging around for later. Something like that would make me irritable, and like the Hulk, you wouldn’t like me when I’m mad.”

Nora did as she was told. It was quite a pile of guns she dumped behind the car. When she was finished, Leonard said to her, “You come over here and get in our car. Sit in the backseat, put your hands in your lap, and look prim.”

Nora got in the backseat of the car the way a child in trouble will do.

I went over to Speed. I had been watching him carefully ever since he hit the ground, except for when I shot the Crew Cut fellow. He was bleeding badly and his eyes were blinking very fast. He wasn’t even trying to reach for his gun. I knelt down beside him.

“Damn, my man,” Speed said, coughing a little. “I never even cleared leather.”

“That’s because I’m faster than you,” I said.

Speed made a barking laugh that tossed blood onto his lips. “You’re the real deal,” he said.

“Frankly,” I said, “I didn’t know that until just now.”

I pulled his gun from its holster, just in case he might be stronger than he looked, though the way he lay there he gave the impression that lifting his fingers would be a serious workout. I lifted his head up so he wouldn't choke on his blood. I turned my head, said to the young man: "Your name is Jackie, right?"

He nodded.

"You have the sports coat man there give you his coat."

"My arm hurts," Crew Cut said. "And I like this coat."

"Give him the coat anyway," I said, "or you won't have to worry about hurting."

Jackie went over and Crew Cut worked his way out of the coat. Jackie brought the coat to me. He said, "Don't hurt Nora. This wasn't any of her idea."

"I don't believe that," I said, "but she isn't going to get hurt as long as she doesn't get cute. Now, sit down there on the ground in front of my car."

Jackie went over and did just that. I rolled the coat up and put it under Speed's head.

"Bullet didn't have much impact," Speed said, still gurgling blood.

"It was enough," I said.

"I mean I didn't feel it so much," he said. "But I can hardly move."

"That's because you haven't had time to feel it," I said. "Now shut up. You're spitting blood."

Speed lay quietly on the sports coat.

I got out my cell phone and made a call.

Next day we were at Marvin's office, in our usual spots. Marvin behind his desk, me in the chair in front of it, Leonard sitting by the coffee machine, munching on vanilla wafers. At least he had bought those with his own money.

Marvin said, “I called you here to tell you the cops believe your story, about how you thought you were just getting the girl back and they tried to kill you, so you shot them. They’re not too happy about you going out there without calling them, not telling them what the deal was, but I think they’re in a forgiving mood. They been wanting Cox on something that would stick, and you two talking at a trial, and Givens talking to save his own bacon, that’ll nail him. And way I figure it is you’ll be all right ’cause they’ll be shit-blind happy you helped nail Cox.”

“What about Speed?” I said.

“They think he’s going to make it and get to go to prison,” Marvin said. “He appears to be as tough as boot leather.”

“But he’s not near as fast as he thought he was,” Leonard said. “My man here is like fucking Wild Bill Hickock.”

“I got lucky,” I said. “And I shot him while he was talking.”

“Well,” Marvin said, “I think his future career is woodshop in prison.”

“What about Nora?” I asked.

“The kid, Jackie, he’s saying she didn’t know anything about it, and so’s the old man. She’s gone back to her stepmother. I think the cops will let that stand. Givens will get some time too. He’s backing Jackie’s story about the girl having nothing to do with it. Guess he wanted to have the same story Cox had. He’s helping put Cox in prison, but maybe he didn’t want to go the whole hog, thinks he might get a brownie point or two.”

“Think he will?” I asked.

“Nope,” Marvin said. “They will most likely have him shanked in prison. They do, no tears here.”

Leonard said, “Me either.”

I have to admit, I didn’t see myself shedding tears for that lying, conniving weasel.

“I believe Nora thought she found true love,” I said, “and would get some money out of her father, and she’d have some teenage revenge on her stepmother. For what, I’m not sure, but it seems that’s how she was thinking. She was close to her, but maybe she got unclose when she started to grow up and thought Daddy was putting more attention into Sharon than her. No idea really.”

“Frankly,” Leonard said, “my take is she’s just stupid. Probably glad it’s over, probably glad to be home. Probably forget Jackie in a year’s time. You can bet the way she’ll tell it to Sharon is she was forced. I think that little shit’s a born liar. One of those entitled turds who think they have the best of everything coming just because they are who they think they are, not necessarily who they are.”

“That’s some serious psychoanalyst shit going on there,” I said.

“Naw,” Leonard said. “I just sort of made that up.”

“Actually, that’s what I really thought,” I said.

“I think that’s what Sharon wants her to do—just pretend things are fine between them until they are,” Leonard said. “In the long run, I think she figures what really happened won’t matter, and she’s probably right. And maybe Nora really did find true love, because Jackie didn’t tell it different, and Cox didn’t say his son was lying, so you got to give the old man points for going with what his son said. I think the cops want to let Nora go. They got the fish they wanted to fry and could care less about the minnows.”

“Cox family values,” I said. “Kind of touching. Go figure.”

Brett and I were lying in bed. I said, “I love you.”

Brett turned and put her arm across my chest. “I love you too.”

“I asked you to marry me, would you? Right now, if I asked?”

“Are you asking?”

“I’m running a test,” I said.

“A test, huh,” Brett said.

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know, baby. Really, I don’t. I want to, but you know, I got married once before and it ended with me setting my husband’s head on fire.”

“So, you get married, you have to go for gasoline and a match?”

She laughed.

“No, I’m just saying what happened before, my first attempt at wedded bliss. What I’d say about us is this. Let’s give it some thought. Let’s see if it’s something that really matters, and if it does, we’ll get past talking about it. Maybe we’ll decide things are just fine the way they are and we don’t need a piece of paper.”

“It’s not the paper, it’s the commitment.”

“I know. I’m just saying let’s think about how much it matters to us. Give it some thought, some time.”

“All right,” I said.

“Do you want to play doctor?”

“No,” I said. “I’d just like to hold you.”

“Really?” she said.

“Really.”

“That works too,” Brett said, and so I held her.

A Bone-Dead Sadness

It was about one o'clock in the afternoon with nothing to do but read email. It was mostly ads. Marvin Hanson was trying to figure out how to filter the ads, and not having much luck at it, when he came across an email to his website that was interesting.

It said:

MR. HANSON. I WANT TO HIRE YOU OR YOUR OPERATIVES, IF YOU HAVE ANY. MONEY IS NOT AN ISSUE. WELL, IT MIGHT BE AN ISSUE IF YOU ASK FOR TOO MUCH, BUT OTHERWISE, IF YOU'RE INTERESTED, COME OUT TO TIMBER LAKE DRIVE, 113, AND TALK TO ME ABOUT THREE P.M. TODAY. MILDRED CRAVER.

Hanson leaned back in his desk chair and thought a moment. He looked at his watch. He had come in late today, starting with lunch, and had only been in the office thirty minutes. It was already one-thirty.

Marvin leaned forward and typed: SEE YOU THEN, MARVIN HANSON.

Marvin sat in his desk for a moment and considered. He knew the area of the address in the email. Once nice, kind of gone to seed, but there were people out there that had money. Mildred said it wasn't an issue, but she had also curiously, and perhaps with humorous intent, added the part about asking too much.

There hadn't been much in the way of work lately, and certainly not enough to hire any operatives, that being mostly two of his friends, Hap Collins and Leonard Pine. They weren't worth messing with unless there was real business to take care of. Actually, friends or not, they were kind of a pain in the ass.

Nope. This was one he'd take care of himself.

Considering his leg, which had given him grief for some time due to a car accident, was much better, he thought he could handle it all himself. He still carried a cane, but mostly for psychological support. It was also a good weapon if he should need it. He thought about getting himself one with a sword inside of it, but it probably wouldn't play out well if he ended up using it. For now, he'd stick to the cane he had—solid hickory with a knob, not a hook.

Marvin got up without use of the cane and made a cup of coffee. He drank that while he sat at his desk reading the rest of his email. That finished, he made a phone call to his wife. Their marriage had a few bumps they were ironing out, and had been ironing out for years, but Marvin knew he had brought it on himself. Fact was, the wreck that had messed up his leg and nearly killed him had involved a girlfriend he was seeing.

Pussy.

It made a man crazy. Even a good man, and he liked to think that's what he was. But the thing was, he had cheated on his wife, and she knew, and she took him back. Even if she did remind him of it daily, and not always directly. She didn't have to. She just gave him a look that made him feel like a worm on a hot rock. She did it less as time went on, and he liked to think he had proven to her that he had acquired better sense, but a certain element of trust had been lost, and maybe forever.

Anyway, he called her. It was a short talk, and mostly pleasant. She no longer checked on him, which was a mixed bag. It either meant she trusted him a lot more than before or just didn't care anymore.

When they finished talking, he fiddled with the email awhile longer, then pulled a book out of his desk drawer and read a bit of it. It was pretty good. *Hank and Muddy*, by Stephen Mertz.

He put it away after an hour and drove over to Starbucks and bought some coffee at the drive-through. It was better than the coffee he made. Decaf with soy milk and two artificial sweeteners. He sipped it as he drove out to Timber Lake Drive.

When he got there he saw the area had gone downhill a might more than he thought, but the house he was looking for hadn't gone downhill at all. In fact, it was sitting on top of one surrounded by trees. The yard looked as if it had just been clipped and the sky even looked brighter over the roof, as if the sunlight had saved itself for that location.

Marvin parked and got out. He had left his cane at the office, on purpose, now he was having second thoughts. He limped a little as he went up the steps and knocked on the door. After a short time, a middle-aged woman answered.

"Mrs. Craver?" Marvin asked.

She smiled. "I am, but I think you're looking for the other Mrs. Craver. Babe Craver. That's what everyone calls her. My mother-in-law. Would you please come in?"

Marvin did just that. It was a nice house. Not a mansion, but nice. The younger Mrs. Craver went away in search of the older.

When the older Mrs. Craver showed up, she looked old enough to have ridden in on a mammoth. She moved well enough, but there was something about her gait that gave the impression that she was near worn out. She had very white false teeth that fit like they were too big for her mouth. She had hair that looked more orange than red and her face was marked with lines that looked to have been the results of chickens scratching through the pale powder on her face. Her lipstick was a little lopsided, like a monkey had put it on her in the dark. Marvin judged her age to be about Three B.C.

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Hanson?" she said.

There was a couch, so Marvin sat. She sat too, though it took her awhile. Marvin commiserated. He wasn't her age, but his leg had given him hell for quite a few years, so he recognized how she was trying not to show pain. He liked her immediately. Old as history, and tough as stone.

"Are you open to all manner of investigation?" she asked.

"I think I am. I have to hear the job to know."

"Do you rough people up?"

"Not that I'd admit to."

The old woman grinned her false teeth. "That's all right. I was just checking. I don't want you to beat anyone up. I just like to know if you're a tough guy."

"Do I need to be?"

"Nope. But my husband was, and I liked that about him. He was a good guy, but he was tough. They don't make men tough anymore. You look pretty tough though."

"It would take a dog a long time to eat me, I think."

"Ha," she said. "What I want is to find out what happened to my son, Tom."

"How long has he been missing?"

"Twenty-five years."

"Yikes."

"Yep. Yikes. He went missing twenty-five years ago and I haven't so much as heard a peep from him. I figure he's dead, but I'd like you to look into it. If he is dead, I'd like to know how he ended up and where he is before I pass away. I don't know how long I got left, but I wouldn't count on much. I got up this morning and felt so bad I thought I was dead for a couple of hours."

"You look spry enough," Marvin said.

"You sweet liar."

"When was he last seen and where?"

"The bank, twenty-five years ago," said the younger Mrs. Craver, who was entering the room again, carrying a tray with a pitcher of ice tea on it and three glasses. Marvin had heard her banging around in the kitchen and had hoped some kind of drink would be the result.

"This is my daughter-in-law, Frankie," said Mrs. Craver. "She lives with me."

"I'm more like a daughter," Frankie said.

"True enough," Mrs. Craver said.

Frankie sat. She was a thick lady with thick ankles and a thick neck. Her face showed a former beauty hidden under some fat. "He came to see me at the bank, and that was the last time anyone saw him."

"Just a visit?"

"Actually. . . ," Frankie glanced at Mrs. Craver when she spoke.

"It's okay," Mrs. Craver said. "He's going to find him, he's got to have the whole package."

"He was fresh out of prison and he came to see me about money."

"Your money or the bank's?" Marvin asked.

"My money that he wanted to make his money," Frankie said. "I didn't give it to him."

"Tom had his faults," Mrs. Craver said. "And in fact, he was a shit and not worth the powder to blow him up. But he was my son, and in some place deep in the back of my old withered heart, I love him and want to know what happened to him. I presume an untimely end. But after twenty-five years, the police, and four private investigators who have found nothing, I thought I'd give it another try. I was told at the police department that you used to be a cop and that you were known to manage some tough jobs, and sometimes you were known to stretch things a little, but not so much that they snapped."

"Not that anyone knows about," Marvin said.

"I'm not sure you're joking," Mrs. Craver said.

Marvin didn't say anything to that.

"No matter what the outcome," Mrs. Craver said, "I'd like to know what happened to him."

"Tell me about his coming to see you," Marvin said to Frankie.

"I worked a desk in the bank," Frankie said. "The Standard Bank. I was a loan officer. That's when the bank was in the old section. Before the newer section was built."

Marvin considered that. The old bank had been scheduled to be torn down at one time, until the historical society made a big stink about it. There was history with the old bank. Once it had been robbed at the turn of the century. One of the first robberies by car, before all the famous guys like Bonnie and Clyde came along. Marvin didn’t really remember all that much about it.

“He came to see me, wanting money,” Frankie said. “It was about closing time, and I remembered the whole thing embarrassed me. I didn’t give him any money. He left. That was the last time I ever saw him. That was the last time anyone in the bank ever saw him. No one else has ever claimed to have seen him since.”

“The law, the private detectives,” Marvin asked. “Did they come up with anything?”

Mrs. Craver tapped some thin folders that were lying on the coffee table between them. “These are the police reports, and the reports from the private investigators. Well, three of them. The fourth took our money and went to bars and never looked any farther than the bartender. We sued him. We won, but he didn’t have any money and he spent ours.”

“All right,” Marvin said. “Any special interests or friends that Tom may have had? That kind of thing.”

“He was short in the friend department,” Frankie said. “He was, of all things, a rodeo clown for awhile, then a circus clown. He actually ran off to the circus.”

“When he was eighteen,” Mrs. Craver said. “He was our youngest. All the other kids, and there are three others, did quite well for themselves. But Tom, he was always a pain in the ass. He took gymnastics, and baseball, and was good at all of them.”

“He was a contortionist in the circus,” Frankie said. “I figured when he went away that day, he just joined back up with the circus.”

“I believe it was actually a carnival that he worked for,” Mrs. Craver said.

“Whatever,” Frankie said. “He worked for them from time to time. He could dislocate his shoulders and put his foot behind his head. It wasn’t a skill that served him well outside of the carnival, and he didn’t work there often. He was always looking for the easy way out.”

“You don’t sound like you miss him much,” Marvin said to Frankie.

Frankie looked at Mrs. Craver.

“It’s okay, dear,” Mrs. Craver said. “I understand that you two weren’t that close. Not in the end. It doesn’t matter.”

Frankie reached out and touched Mrs. Craver’s arm. “You know I love you.”

“Of course I do,” Mrs. Craver said. She looked at Marvin. “She takes very good care of me. Better than my own children. She moved in with me to take care of me.”

“So you and Tom weren’t close,” Marvin said to Frankie, “because of Tom’s work habits, or lack thereof, and his time in prison.”

“That would be a lot of it,” Frankie said. “That and the fact he chased every woman he saw. He was charming, but it was all BS. We were separated at the time of his disappearance. When he got out of prison, he wanted us to get back together. I had heard that before. And he’d mean it when he said it. For about a week, or until I gave him some money. My guess was in no time he’d be back in prison.”

“What did he go to prison for?” Marvin asked.

“Burglary,” Frankie said.

“All right,” Marvin said. “I guess that does me for now. I might have some questions later.”

“That’s fine,” Mrs. Craver said. “Shall we settle on a fee?”

They talked money. It was good money they were talking, and Marvin felt it was one hell of a good deal they settled on. A good fee to look and report, a better fee if he found out where Tom was, or what had happened to him.

When the deal was struck, Marvin picked up the files from the coffee table. “I’ll return these when I finish.”

“That’s fine,” Mrs. Craver said. “Do you think you can find out what happened to Tom?”

“It’s been quite a while.”

“But it’s possible?” Mrs. Craver said.

“Yes,” Marvin said. “But there are no guarantees.”

“I understand,” Mrs. Craver said.

“However,” Marvin said, “if it’s any consolation, if anyone can figure out what happened to him, or where he is, it’s me.”

“That’s not a very modest view,” Mrs. Craver said, showing her false teeth.

“No, it isn’t. But it’s not a brag either. Just fact.” Frankie walked Marvin out to his car. When he opened the door to get in, he paused and leaned on it.

“I was trying to give her some hope in there,” Marvin said, “and I meant what I said about being good at what I do. But, it really is a long shot.”

“I realize that,” Frankie said. “And frankly, as far as Tom goes, I don’t really give a damn. He can be dead. He can be alive, living in Argentina with Hitler, and I don’t care. But, for her there’s always going to be a bone-dead sadness about her until she knows what happened to him, good or bad. Therefore, it matters to me. For her sake.”

“Is there anyone else that worked at the bank at that time that may remember Tom’s visit?”

“You doubt me?”

“Someone may have noticed something you didn’t.”

“And they’d remember twenty-five years later?” Frankie said. “I think the other detectives went over that.”

“A lot of detective work is looking at old information in a new way.”

“Well, I think James Raymond saw him, but he’s no longer around. He was the bank manager at the time. It was a small bank then, they were about to build the new one. He knew Tom in passing. But, as I said, he’s dead, so that doesn’t matter. There was Tiffany Millar. She was a teller. In fact, there was the manager, me, Tiffany, and old Mrs. Thompson. She did the books. She’s long dead as well. That was the whole bank staff back then.”

“All right,” Marvin said. “Thanks. And, good-bye.”

That evening at the dinner table, Marvin said to his wife, Rachel, “It’s a pretty odd case. Guy’s been missing twenty-five years.”

“You think he’s dead?”

“I think it’s highly possible. Likely even. But it’s also possible he’s living somewhere under another name.”

“He could be back in prison.”

“I checked that. That would have been easy for the law or the previous investigators to figure out. Even if Tom had been using an assumed name, he got caught doing something he shouldn’t, the fingerprints would have ratted him out. No. He’s either dead or out there in hiding.”

When they were through eating, Rachel said, “I’m going to go to bed.”

“Pretty early,” Marvin said. “We could watch some TV.”

“No. That’s all right.”

“Rachel?”

“Yes.”

“I’m trying.”

“Trying what?” she said.

“You know. To make up for things.”

“Sure. I know.”

“Can’t you forgive me?”

“I forgive you, Marvin. I just can’t forget.”

“Will you ever be able to forget?”

“No,” she said. “Of course not. You don’t forget getting burned, or hit by a car, or cheated on.”

“Stupid question.”

“Yes, it was. But maybe I can forgive more in time. I’m trying to. I want to. I’m just not there yet.”

“It’s been a long time,” Marvin said.

“Trust. Hard thing to get back, Marvin.”

“I know. I don’t know what I was thinking. I love you. I have always loved you. I just don’t know what I was thinking.”

“I do.”

“All right. Yeah. I was thinking that. No excuse. I was a dog.”

“Yes, you were.”

“It’s never happened again.”

“She’s dead.”

“I mean with anyone. It never will.”

“I believe you.”

"Then?"

"It still hurts. In time, maybe it won't. I'm going up to bed."

"I'll be right up, soon as I finish my milk."

"Don't hurry."

"No problem."

"No," Rachel said. "You watch some TV. That would be good. You come up after awhile."

Marvin knew what that meant. After she was asleep.

"All right," he said. "I'll take care of the dishes."

Rachel got up from the table and leaned over and kissed him on top of the head and went upstairs. Marvin watched her go. When she was gone he finished his milk and picked up the dishes, then went into the living room and got the *TV Guide*. He looked it over. There was nothing he wanted to see. He stretched out on the couch. He thought about Tom and what happened to him. He got up and got the files and looked at those. He read them for awhile. He decided to go up and go to bed, but he knew he would just have his cold space on the far side of the mattress.

He put the files away, stretched out on the couch, and thought about Florida, the woman he had cheated with, the one who was dead now. But that was a different deal, and he didn't want to think about that. He thought about the Craver case a little more, and then he fell asleep.

At the office the next morning, Marvin went to the bank website. It was a lot of what he already knew and had been told by Frankie and Mrs. Craver.

The old bank had once been scheduled to be torn down. It had been sealed off as soon as it was closed, and for about two years the new bank was in a larger rented building on the other side of town. The plan was to destroy the old bank and build a new, larger, more modern one on the site. Instead, property next door to the old bank opened up and was purchased for the new bank. It was decided the old bank would be used for storage for awhile, and when the new bank was built, it would be torn down and that area would become a parking lot.

The storage plan never materialized. The new bank was built next to the old one, and the old one was saved by the city's historical society. Later, the new bank expanded even more and the old one was connected to it and was turned into a tourist attraction, which garnered money for the town with its simple tour and gift shop. Hanson thought about all that, decided there was nothing there that helped him much.

The notes from the private detectives offered a little more. An armored car that delivered money to the bank came up missing for a couple of days, was later found down in the Sabine River bottoms. The two drivers were there too, but they had bullet holes in their heads. No money was in the truck at the time, and therefore nothing was stolen.

Odd.

And odder yet, the bank manager Frankie said was dead was indeed that. But not of natural causes. He had been murdered a month after Tom disappeared. Marvin thought it odd that Frankie hadn't mentioned that. One of the private investigators had thought this might be important, said so in his notes, but apparently, whatever that importance was, he had never been able to link it up.

From the notes, no one at the police department had ever spoken to Tiffany Millar, the teller. Only the private detectives, and they didn't really have anything of value from her in the notes.

He looked her up in the phone book. He called and she answered on the first ring.

"Excuse me. Is this Tiffany Millar?"

"It is."

"Who used to work at the bank?"

"I did. Who is this?"

"My name is Marvin Hanson. I've been hired by Mrs. Craver to look into the disappearance of her son."

"Again? I talked to private detectives about this before."

"I know. It's probably just old hat, but I wanted to speak with you. We can do it over the phone, or in person if you prefer."

"I'm bored. How about I meet you somewhere?"

"My office okay?"

"Do you have good coffee?"

"No."

"Starbucks?"

"When?"

"Now. Like I said, I'm bored."

They met at Starbucks. Hanson, who had already had morning coffee, ordered decaffeinated with soy milk and two artificial sweeteners. He bought Tiffany's drink, which looked to be something chocolate with whipped cream and colored sprinkles on top.

Tiffany, one hot fifty-year-old blonde who looked to have had only minimal surgery on her face, sat at the table and crossed her legs, which were long and smooth and clothed in high-heel shoes. Marvin thought: Who wears high heels in the middle of the day to go to Starbucks? But, he didn't mind all that much, and since he assumed she sat the way she did so she could show him her legs, he let her.

She smiled at Marvin. He was sure it was a smile that had melted many a male heart and made many a female mad. It was doing something to him as well, though the area it was affecting was somewhat lower than the heart.

"I don't know I can add much to help," she said. "All I know is Tom came up missing and no one has found him, and that he came into the bank that day and spoke with Frankie. She was cute then," she said. "Though I think time has been somewhat rough on her."

"Not financially," Marvin said.

"No. Not so bad in that department." Tiffany said all of this between sips of her drink. "She endures."

"Is there anything you can tell me about that day?"

"Tom came in and spoke to Frankie at her desk, and they argued a little, and then he left."

"Did you hear anything they said?"

"No. Not really. I think it was over money. He wanted some, and she didn't want to give it to him. I think they were not really together by then. He just hoped they were. And I don't think it was for love. I think it was money, because his mother wouldn't give him any more, and he thought his wife might. I think Frankie and her mother-in-law were close."

"Still are," Marvin said.

"Okay. But it wasn't love. It was her money, and the money he thought he might get from his mother by way of his wife."

"How do you know it wasn't love he was after?" Marvin said.

"Because he had hit on me before, right after he got out of prison."

"He came in before that?"

"He came in three or four times," Tiffany said. "He'd walk around and look the bank over, and act like he was interested in the place. You know, it was still the old bank in that day, and it had a kind of pioneer feel about it. It was old and small. It's a museum now. You should have a look at it."

"I will."

"He liked to look around and see the bullet holes in the wall. The bank had been robbed in the early nineteen-hundreds, old cowboy-style, except the robbers came with a car instead of a horse and got shot to death before they left town. They were shot with some kind of big gun. Shot so much it knocked one of them out of his boots. The car had a flat, you see, and the law caught up."

"But you didn't hear anything odd between Frankie and Tom?"

"If I did, I've forgotten it. I just remember it was an argument and money came up, and that was it. I really didn't mean to hear that much, but it was hard to help, you know. Small bank."

"Did Tom talk to anyone there besides her that time, or for that matter, the time before?"

"Just hit on me. Oh, I guess he chummed it up with everyone. He was a real glad-hander. A bullshitter, you might say. Excuse my language. TV has ruined the way I talk."

"Did you and Frankie socialize outside of the bank?"

"Usually just bank functions."

"What about the bank manager?"

Tiffany was suddenly a little less light. "Jim was found dead, you know."

"What did he die of?"

"Two bullet holes."

"Oh," Marvin said, as if he didn't know. "How long after Tom disappeared did that happen?"

"About two weeks, I think. Yes. That seems about right."

Marvin studied Tiffany. She looked not only less light, but he thought she looked teary.

"You were close to him?"

"Not really," Tiffany said. "He was my boss, of course."

"Did he get along with everyone at the bank?"

"Quite well," Tiffany said. "Frankie, well . . . I think he may have gotten along with her too well."

"They had something going?"

"I suppose there's nothing wrong with that. She and Tom were separated. But she did work for him. It wasn't seemly, the way she carried on. It wasn't that she was at anytime a great looker, so I don't understand his attraction."

"You said she was cute," Marvin said.

"Like a Chinese pug, but not pretty."

"So, the boss liked her?"

"I doubt it was anything serious."

Marvin sipped his coffee. None of this had been in the notes. And another thing not in the notes, and left unsaid, but seemingly said beneath the conversation, was the fact that Tiffany had had designs on the boss herself.

Marvin decided to come right out with it.

"Did you have interest in Jim?"

"Of course not."

“A beautiful woman like you, and he didn’t notice?”

The beautiful woman line perked Tiffany up, but the glow faded quickly. “Oh, he noticed. He noticed plenty. It made Frankie mad, the way he noticed. It made her mad plenty.” Tiffany leaned back with satisfaction and drank her coffee. She licked at the whipped cream at the top of the straw like a cat licking milk.

“He just noticed?” Marvin said. “That’s all? Just noticed?”

“Yes. He just noticed. Are you looking into all of this again?”

This seemed like a stupid question, since that was why he had invited her to coffee, but he said, “Yes. I think the previous detectives might have missed something.”

“What would that be?”

“Don’t know yet, but I’m going to find out. They skimmed the surface. That’s what I get from reading their notes anyway. Me, I’m tenacious.”

“Are you?” she said.

“Very much so. It’s a cold day in hell when I quit.”

“I see. Well, that’s certainly a good quality in your line of work.”

“I like to think so.”

“Nothing else I can help you with, I suppose I should run along. I have a few errands to take care of.”

“If I think of something I’ve forgotten, would it be alright to call you up again?”

“I just can’t imagine having anything else to say on the matter. I’ve told you all I know. To tell the truth, I think Tom’s gone forever and no one will ever find him.”

“I’ve found people missing for years before,” Marvin said. “Sometimes they were even alive. So, you never know.”

She stood up with her drink in her hand. “Good luck to you, then.”

She stuck out her free hand. Marvin stood and shook it.

The next moment she was out the door.

Marvin drove by the bank. It was a pretty large building, and there were a number of drive-through outlets associated with it scattered throughout town.

It seemed to Marvin it hadn’t been that long ago when the old bank, which was a fifth the size of the new one, was the only one in use. But when he counted up the years in his head, he winced. Time flew quickly and was as merciless as a hawk.

The new bank was attached to the old one, but the old one was now a museum and could be entered only by the original front door. Marvin did just that. The old bank had a lot of exposed fine wood, and there was a huge red brick fireplace to one side, and there were tellers’ desks, and at the back was a glassed-in section that had been the manager’s office. He remembered that from when he was a kid. He had lived in Houston at that time but visited LaBorde often, as his aunt had lived here. Dead and gone now, he had tagged along with her a number of times as she did her banking. It made him feel good to do it.

There was a woman at the desk and she smiled at Marvin and he smiled back. She was a plump woman in a loud flower pattern dress, but she had a gorgeous brown face and short black hair.

“It’s a dollar to look through,” she said.

Marvin paid his dollar. He walked around. There really wasn’t much to see. The bullet holes had a frame around them and there was a placard there that said they had been shot into the wall by one of the robbers, Dog-Face Fulton, just to show he and his two pals meant business. This may have let the people in the bank at that time know he was serious, but it also alerted the law, who took note of the getaway driver outside, and promptly chased them down and shot them to pieces. Fulton may have been dangerous, but he wasn't smart.

Marvin was surprised to discover that the bank really was small. Even smaller than he remembered. As a child, it had seemed so imposing. He walked to the back and looked in at the glassed-in manager's office. It was claimed by another placard on the wall that all the furniture in the manager's office, and throughout the bank, was the original furniture in the same position, dating all the way back to the bank robbery. Probably was. It seemed like the same furniture he remembered.

Marvin stopped at the fireplace. There was a placard there. It said the fireplace ceased to be in use after the bank closed, but at one time it was the only heat for the bank. He walked past the desk where the lady sat. He said, "So, the front door was the only way in when the bank was in use."

"No, you could come in from the back street," the lady said, and pointed at a sealed door. "That door leads into the new bank, but it used to be an outside entrance. There was an alley there. Oh, and there was a storage room off to the left of the door. That's gone too. It got incorporated into the new bank."

It was funny that he and she both thought of it as the new bank. It was only new as compared to the museum.

"I see," Marvin said, and thanked her and started to leave. But then he paused. He walked to where the old back entrance had been. There was a door there, but it was locked. He looked where the storage room would have been. He faintly remembered its location, and the doorway from the alley. Where the storage room had been located, there was only a wall.

He went back to the desk. “So where the wall is, there was a storage room?” he said as if he didn’t know better, hadn’t really listened to her.

The lady smiled the way you might for a little child who was easily distracted. “Yes, that’s right. But everything else is the same.”

“Everything?”

“All the desks, everything. Just like they were, all the way back to the robbery.”

“Like the placard says,” he said.

“Just like that,” she said, losing a tiny bit of patience.

Marvin didn’t blame her, but he thought it best to double-check. His memory wasn’t perfect about the old bank, and he wanted to make sure the placards weren’t shining on their history a bit more than was true.

Marvin looked at the back door. If someone had walked out that way, they could easily have stepped into the storage room, if they were being clever, without being seen by anyone. Unless that person was sitting where this lady was sitting now.

Marvin said, “This desk is original?”

“Yes, it is,” the lady said, “as I said.”

“Is this its original location? I mean, was it setting here back twenty-five years ago?”

“Wait a minute,” the lady said.

She pulled open her desk drawer and pulled out a small stack of papers. She said, “This is a copy of the original layout. . . . Yes, it looks as if the desk was here all the way back to the eighteen-hundreds." She pushed the paper across the desk toward Marvin. "See," she said, "everything is pretty much the same. You can check for yourself."

"May I have a copy of the layout?" Marvin asked.

"There are plenty. I suppose I should put them out here on the desk, it's just that no one really seems all that interested in how things were laid out back then . . . I mean, you look around, and you can see that, how it was laid out. But if you'd like, certainly. Take one. Take two."

"One will do," Marvin said, took the sheet of paper, smiled, and went out.

Marvin stopped by the police station. He was lucky. His friend, the chief of police, was in. He was invited into the office. The chief was a cop named Drake who had been bumped up to the position recently. LaBorde went through chiefs of police like toilet paper for prune-juice drinkers.

Drake was thin and black as night. He had a flat nose that was partly due to genetics and partly due to someone's fist. He was leaning back in his chair, smiling at Marvin. "There's coffee, you want it."

Marvin stopped at the coffee table and fixed him a cup, lots of cream and sweetener. Marvin sat down and took a sip. He said, "Man, who shit in this?"

"I do the shitting," Drake said. "Every morning. It gives the stuff some bite."

Marvin took the coffee to the trashcan and dropped it inside.

"You'll make everything wet," Drake said.

"There's a liner."

Marvin sat back down. He said, "Twenty-five years ago, a fellow named Tom Craver disappeared. He was never found. Know anything about it?"

"They don't know where he is," Drake said, and grinned.

"Thanks."

"It's a cold case. I know a little about it. I even looked into it once. Not very seriously, I admit. But it came up again when I was a cop, not a chief, and we have that cold-case unit, which is two tired cops, one of which at the time was me, and a police dog without all his teeth and a surly attitude."

"The dog helps on cold cases?" Marvin said.

"Not that I can see. He doesn't even sniff drugs very well. But, can't fire him. Union, you know."

"Uh-huh. So, nothing?"

"I don't remember a whole lot about it," Drake said. "Just that this guy Tom disappeared and they didn't find him. He was at the bank one day. Spoke to his wife, or ex-wife. I forget the exact situation. Anyway, he spoke to her, went out, and no one ever saw him again."

"I hear the bank manager turned up dead of gunshots," Marvin said.

"Oh, yeah. I remember that. Sure. No connection that anyone could find, though this Tom had a record, you see, and some thought it was him. That he wanted to rob the bank, maybe by getting the manager to help him out at gunpoint. There was an argument, and he shot the manager and killed him in his car while it was sitting in the drive. Anyway, some thought this Tom was good for it, but we never found him. Tom, wasn't he some kind of circus guy?"

"Carnival. He was a contortionist. Clown. That sort of thing."

"Yeah," Drake said. "I remember now."

"Anything else curious?"

"Let me see. Hell, there was the guard and the driver."

"Excuse me?"

"The armored car," Drake said. "They delivered money to the bank, and a week later, them and their armored car were found in the Sabine River, some good many miles from here. They were both shot in the head."

"How many times?" Marvin said.

"What? Oh. I get you. Twice, I think. We can get the files and look, to make sure, but I think it was twice. You're saying it was the same as the manager?"

"I'm saying they both got shot twice," Marvin said. "A bit of a coincidence. I'm assuming the armored car made deliveries and or pickups at the bank."

"Yep," Drake said. "And a connection was thought of then, but none was found. No money came up missing. The bank was even. The armored car showed up there. The manager checked the money in. The money was put in the bank, and the right amount was there the next morning, and a week later. No one ever figured why the guards were killed, as they weren't carrying money at the time, and no one ever figured why the bank manager was killed. A connection was implied, but never found. It seems to have all been a coincidence."

"I believe in them," Marvin said. "Happens all the time. But three of them? The armored truck guard and driver. The manager of the bank. And Tom Craver missing. That seems like a lot of coincidences, and all of them at least mildly related."

"How do you see it?"

"Not sure," Marvin said. "I think Tom might have gone in and talked to his wife, and then acted as if he left the bank, but maybe hid in a storage room."

"To do what, use the bathroom later?" Drake said. "Nothing was stolen."

"That's where my theory has a hole in it," Marvin said.

"And that puts you right back in the position where everyone else has ended up. Except no one has ever thought Tom hid out in the storage room. And if he did, to what purpose?"

"You're making me feel bad," Marvin said.

"You getting paid good money for this?"

"I am."

"Monopoly money?"

"Nope. The real stuff."

"Who's paying?"

"Tom's mother."

Drake nodded. "She's got some dough."

"Yep."

"I know you're going to actually try and find Tom. I think some of the other detectives, from what I've heard, didn't. I have a feeling you're going to end up tired and frustrated."

"You knew them? The private detectives?"

"One. He wasn't so good in the reputation department. He probably did enough to make it appear he took a serious look, but I think he mostly looked at his name on the check Mrs. Craver wrote him. She's a nice sort, actually. I've met her a few times."

"I liked her," Marvin said. "She seems like a tough old bird."

"Last of a breed," Drake said. "So, you doing this with the help of your crack assholes, Hap and Leonard?"

"Don't think I need them for this."

"Good. Otherwise they might have come in with you. They give me a stomachache. Especially Leonard."

"They're my friends, and they give me a stomachache. Especially Leonard."

"You feel you're really onto something?" Drake asked.

"You ever have that sensation that there's a worm of wisdom in the back of your brain, and that it has the answer to what it is you're searching for? That it has things figured out and it's trying to burrow to the front of your head so it can let you know what's up?"

"Nope."

"Yeah," Marvin said. "Me neither."

Marvin drove back to his office. The worm in the back of his head was wiggling pretty hard now. He parked and waved at the good-looking woman who ran the bicycle shop below his place, climbed the stairs, and unlocked the door. His leg was bothering him, and when he got inside, he was glad to see his cane on his desk. He had a pretty good idea that for the rest of the day, he walked anywhere, he and it would be companions.

He made a cup of coffee, fixed it the way he wanted, was about to sit at his desk, and the door opened.

Two guys not any bigger than professional wrestlers entered the room. They weren't young, but they weren't old either. One was a little tubby, but he still looked like he could turn over a car and fuck it in the transmission. The other was leaner and had more defined muscles. He was the prettier of the two, and would have only been scary to children and small animals and old people, and well, pretty much anyone.

“You Hanson?” said the pretty one.

“That’s me,” Marvin said, and put the coffee down. He looked at them and moved toward his desk, stood behind it. He studied the men. They had an air of trouble about them. “How can I help you?”

“Look here,” said the not-so-pretty one. “We want you to leave our sister alone.”

“And who might that be?”

“Tiffany,” said the pretty one.

“I thought Tiffany and I had a nice and civil conversation,” Marvin said.

“She said you wanted to talk to her again, and she don’t want to talk,” said the pretty one.

“So she sent you troglodytes around to ask me not to call?” Marvin said. “That seems extreme.”

“Extreme, not so extreme,” said the not-so-pretty one, “we want you to not bother her anymore.”

“You know, I didn’t plan to,” Marvin said.

“That’s good,” said the not-so-pretty one. “It’s best that way.”

“I didn’t have any reason to,” Marvin said. “Until now.”

Marvin grabbed the cane and came out from behind the desk and whipped the cane over his head and caught the pretty one in the teeth. It was a good blow. Hickory is stout. The prettier of the two was soon less pretty. He was on the floor, bleeding from the mouth, spitting teeth.

The not-so-pretty one came at Marvin, and Marvin swung the cane and hit him in the knee, popped it up and caught him in the side of the jaw, then stepped in and folded the cane against his forearm and hit the not-so-pretty one in the throat with that. The man went down.

The prettier one tried to get up and Marvin kicked him in the throat. For good measure, he popped him across the back of the head with the cane. He went back quickly then to his desk, dropped the cane on it, pulled open the drawer, and took out a large automatic. He sat down in the chair behind his desk and waved it in their general direction.

“My leg hurts,” Marvin said. “So, I’m going to sit. You two can get up, but do it slow and don’t act like assholes, or I’ll shoot you full of more holes than a cheese grater. I’m in what I like to think of as one of my blue moods.”

Marvin rubbed his leg. It hurt like hell all of a sudden. The quick moves, the twisting.

“Now, what the hell is this all about?” he said.

“You knocked out some of my teeth,” said the formerly pretty one.

“Yes, I did,” Marvin said.

“It hurts.”

“I hope so. Now, both of you. Pay attention. Tell me what this is about, or I’m really going to get mad.”

“You’re already mad,” said the not-so-pretty one.

“Yes, but this isn’t as mad as I get.”

“Our sister wanted us to tell you to quit.”

“Let me tell you something,” Marvin said. “I have a gun. I have a cane. I have two friends that are less pleasant than I am. One’s named Hap, and one’s named Leonard—he’s really unpleasant. If I don't beat you to death with my cane, or shoot you, they will find you and do one or the other if you bother me again. Do you understand?"

"They don't know us," the not-so-pretty one said.

"They'll find you," Marvin said. "You can count on that. Now, don't bother me anymore. Get up and leave, and don't let your fucking shadow darken my doorway again."

They got up slowly.

Marvin said, "Before you go. You. Asswipe, find your teeth and take them with you."

The formerly pretty one stood up and went about looking for his teeth. They were in various places around the room. He picked them up and put them in his pocket.

"Put those on ice, go to a dentist, they might can put those back in for you," Marvin said.

"We was just gonna scare you," said the not-so-pretty one. "It worked on the others."

"The others?"

"Detectives," said the not-so-pretty one.

"Now git," Marvin said.

They got.

Marvin looked up Tiffany's address and drove over there. It was a very nice house. Not as rich as the Cravers' joint, but nice nonetheless, and in a neighborhood that was even more nice. No wear and tear around there.

Parking at the curb, Marvin went to the door and pushed the bell. Tiffany answered the ring. Her pretty face fell.

"Hey," she said. "My brother lost teeth. I think Tony has a broken nose."

"I hope so," Marvin said. "They were certainly quick to call."

She tried to shut the door. Marvin stuck a foot out and blocked it. "No you don't."

"I'll call the police," she said. "You get off my property."

"I'll wait here while you call the police, and then I'll tell them about your brothers, and about how they threatened me. Had you left well enough alone, I might not have known you were dating your boss at the bank."

"You don't know that . . . I mean, that isn't true."

"Sure it is," Marvin said. "I had my suspicions from our conversation earlier. But it didn't matter to me. Not until you sent your brothers to see me. That was just plain stupid. Can I come in?"

"Are you serious?"

"As a heart attack."

"My husband gets home in half an hour," she said. "He wouldn't like you here."

"Oh, it's all right. Me and him can talk about your earlier days, about the bank, about your boss and what was going on with him."

Tiffany looked around, as if someone might be in the yard, said, "Okay, come in. But I only have twenty minutes."

"I think that'll cover it, if we can quit horsing around and get to the point."

They went into a sitting room that didn't look as if anyone ever sat there. It was very formal and smelled as clean as a hospital room, but was less charming. She waved at a chair and Marvin sat. She sat in a chair across from him.

"Ask what you like," she said.

"Your boss. You were seeing him. Right?"

"Right. That was then, though. This is now, and that's long in my past."

"You were seeing him, and so was Frankie."

"How do you know that? Frankie tell you?"

"No. You did. Or at least I could easily get that from your conversation today. It didn't really matter that much at first, but when you sent your two stupid siblings around, it sort of did. It mattered that much to you that I didn't ask about it, it had to be important."

"I just don't want my husband knowing."

"Was that before you met your husband? You and Jim."

"Yes."

"Then what do you care?" Marvin said.

"I just don't want it brought up."

Marvin nodded. "We can maybe avoid that. I think we can. If you answer some questions. And honestly, I'd hate to have to come back, or have your brothers lose more teeth."

"That was a bad idea, me sending them. It worked before. I guess I panicked. I didn't want it to come up, and for my husband to know. He can be pretty jealous, even if Jim is dead."

"Like you were jealous of Frankie?"

"I just never saw what he saw in her," she said. "We were dating, and the next thing I know, she's flirting with him, and I'm thinking, okay, look at me and look at her. I mean, even then, she wasn't pretty. But she certainly opened his nose."

"How long did the two of them date?"

"They had just started. Me and Jim still saw each other, but I could tell he was playing the field. Me, her, whoever. But her working at the bank. Well, it hurt. I liked him quite a bit.”

“All right. The day Frankie’s husband came by. Which way did he go out when he left?”

“Go out?” she asked.

“Which door?”

“Oh, my god, that’s been twenty-five years ago. I have no idea.” Tiffany looked at her watch. “He’ll be home soon.”

“Did you ever hear of any money missing from the bank?”

Tiffany knitted her brows. “Never.”

“Did all the money go straight in the vault?”

“Yes . . . well, there was the packet.”

“The packet?” Marvin asked.

“That’s right. I never quite understood about the packet. Jim explained it to me once, but I don’t remember the details, but it made enough sense then, whatever the explanation. It was some kind of extra money for the bank and was kept separate.”

“Tell me about the packet,” Marvin said.

“The armored truck. It brought the money, and it brought the packet, which was separate. The packet was kind of hush-hush because it didn’t go in the vault.”

“Where did it go?”

“In Jim’s desk drawer.”

“Was it a packet of money?”

“That’s what Jim said. That it was money, but it was separate. And that he had to make special notations and would put it in the vault later. I’m sure there was nothing wrong about it. The truck guards gave it to him and they were always there when he put the packet in the drawer, the rest in the vault.”

“How big was the packet?”

"Hefty. Like a couch pillow. It was money wrapped in paper. Or I guess it was money. It arrived every now and then, this packet. Frankie saw it too. It wasn't a big secret."

"No hiding about it? Nothing unusual."

"No," Tiffany said. "Nothing like that."

"Okay. And now I'm going to be a little more direct. Back then, were you sleeping with Jim?"

"That's none of your business. I won't answer that."

"All right. Fair enough. Was Frankie?"

Tiffany was quick to answer. "Yes. She was. I know she was."

"And how do you know?"

"Because I was very serious about Jim, and I could tell things weren't right, and then the way he and Frankie started flirting at the bank . . . a girl knows these things. And then he quit seeing me. I thought maybe we could work things out . . . then, he was murdered. I really cared about him then. Loved him, I guess. But later, I had the feeling I didn't really know him. Not really. I felt there had to be some secret for him to be killed like that. Nothing was stolen, or so I heard. He was just killed. I was even a suspect, but I was cleared. I had a solid alibi." Tiffany looked at her watch. "Please. He's so jealous. I don't want him to find out about Jim, even if it was in the past. I don't want to open that can of worms."

"One more question. How long before the old bank changed over to the new bank?"

"There was a bank holiday that weekend. All the way until Tuesday. They were already building the new bank, and Tuesday we were to move into the new one and the old one was locked off. I remember that clearly. Will that do?"

"Good enough," Marvin said, and stood up.

"So we're through?"

"Can't say for sure," Marvin said. "Probably. But no promises." Marvin headed for the door, said, "I can find my own way out."

"I bet you can, you sonofabitch," Tiffany said.

That night, at home, Marvin had dinner with his wife, then she went up to bed. He didn't even try to follow. He sat on the couch and turned on the TV and watched for awhile, and then the phone rang. He turned off the TV and answered.

It was Frankie. "I just thought you should know. Babe is in the hospital."

"What?"

"She's been having spells, and she had a bad one today. I wanted you to know, because if there's anything you've found out, any kind of comfort, even if it's a lie you can give her, that would be good."

"To tell you the truth, I might have something. I can't say for sure, but if you're willing to go to the bank museum tomorrow, I might have an answer, though I can't promise."

"It's Sunday. It's closed."

"I know. But Chief Drake can have it opened."

"Chief Drake?" Frankie said.

"Yes. And if you can come, I'd be grateful. I might need you to verify something."

"What time?"

"Ten a.m. And keep in mind, I could be all wet, and in the end I may end up embarrassed and know no more than I did when I first started."

"But you don't think that?" Frankie said.

"No, I don't."

"I'll see you then," Frankie said.

Marvin arrived at the bank museum about five till ten. Drake was there and had already had the lady Marvin had met at the museum open the doors. She was inside at her desk, not looking too happy about things. Drake was leaning against the fireplace. Frankie had yet to arrive.

Marvin nodded at the lady at the desk, leaned on his cane. "Thanks for opening up."

She said, "I'm missing church."

"Sorry," Marvin said. "I'll try not to take long."

"I don't want to go in after things start."

"I'm sorry you've missed it," he said. "This shouldn't take long, and you can get on with the rest of your day."

This didn't seem to please or inspire the lady any at all.

Frankie came through the door and nodded at Marvin. She nodded at the lady behind the desk. "Tulip," she said. "How are you?"

"I'm missing church," she said.

"Preacher just makes it up anyway," Frankie said.

Tulip gave her a confused look. Frankie said to Chief Drake, "How are you?"

"Fine," Drake said. "I'm not missing church, but I am missing sleeping in late. I don't want to miss football."

"This shouldn't take that long," Marvin said. "If I'm wrong it'll take even less time. And if I'm wrong, I'll owe you all a lunch."

“Get on with it,” Drake said.

“Everyone get comfortable,” Marvin said.

Frankie captured a chair out from behind one of the desks and carried it over and placed it by the desk where Tulip sat.

“I’m just going to be blunt and get right to it,” Marvin said. “Frankie, I think your ex-husband, Tom, wanted you to help him rob the bank. No need to answer that. Just listen. I think he wanted you to do that, and I think maybe you were still seeing him again, and at the same time had taken up with Jim.

“Okay. Let’s focus on Jim. I think you got to wondering about the packets that the armored car guards were bringing in. The ones Jim put in his desk drawer, separate of the money in the vault. Maybe you figured it out, or maybe he even told you, during a little pillow talk. But I think you understood, or guessed one way or another, that that money was different. That it was Mob money, and this bank was a laundry for them. It was separate money, but in time, it was laundered through the bank, and it came out clean. Or at least the cut the Mob expected was clean. When I say Mob, I’m saying Dixie Mafia. I’ve had a few run-ins with them, and I have an idea how they work. Am I warm?”

Marvin was looking right at Frankie.

“You might be,” she said, and crossed her legs and swallowed.

“So, you’ve got the money figured, and maybe you even got something going with Jim, and then the ex-husband comes back into things. I’m figuring you’re thinking not to take all the money. Not the bank money, just the Mob money. The crooked money. But you don’t know you can do it. You need to be somewhere else for an alibi, so you need the ex. You have him come in, you two have that fight so everyone remembers it, and he goes out. But I figure he ended up in the storage room. The only way someone would know he didn't go out is if you were sitting where Tulip is sitting now. Knew he wouldn't go out, and had in fact planned for him to hide in the storage room until the bank closed. Could it have happened that way?"

Frankie didn't answer.

"All right then, I'll go on," Marvin said.

Drake said, "This better have one hell of an ending."

"I think it might," Marvin said.

"So, you have an alibi. Turned out no one suspected you of anything because the money didn't get out there in the world. How do I know that? I figure if it had, you wouldn't have ended up living with your mother-in-law. My guess is the Mob was moving some serious cash through here. They wouldn't bother for a few thousand. Or even a hundred thousand. My guess was there was anywhere from a quarter million to a million in that big fat packet, and there was something like that every time that packet showed up."

"Why would I do something like that?" Frankie said. "My mother-in-law has money."

Marvin dipped his chin. "True. I thought of that. But greed, it's hard to explain. It comes out of nowhere and it's a hell of a bitch. And maybe you thought you didn't want to live with Tom's mother, which is what you were doing since he had been in prison. It wasn't like this bank job was making you a fortune. But I figure you didn't get the money that your ex stole. That it didn't happen the way you had hoped. Then Tom was gone, and, well, things fell in place. You ended up staying with Mrs. Craver, and in time, my guess is the two of you actually became close. I saw the way you looked at her. I think you care. I think it was a stupid mistake on your part, thinking about that money. Maybe it was the adventure. Maybe you said something to Tom about it, and then he got it in his mind to steal it and cut you in."

"Lot of conjecture," Drake said.

"Yep," Marvin said. "I noticed all the windows are barred or wire meshed. And they would be locked. Tom had to have not only a good hiding place but a way out. And he didn't want it to look like someone broke in or out. He left everything locked from the inside, there was no way for anyone to suspect anyone had been inside for any reason. Next day, when people came to >work, there were no signs of him breaking in. But the night he hid here, in the storage room, when everyone was gone, Tom came out and took the Mob money. He knew it was in that drawer, because you knew, Frankie. You knew when the guards came, and you knew Jim hid it in the drawer overnight, until he could do whatever he needed to do to launder it. When he came in the next day, discovered it was missing, he couldn't, wouldn't say anything. Fact was, no one would ever know it was missing except him, and Tom, and you, Frankie. Oh, and in time, the Mob. That's what happened to Jim. In a way, you and Tom killed him. Because when that money came up missing, and the Mob didn't get their fair share, they thought Jim and the truck guards tried to pull a fast one. So the Mob killed them all. Just moved onto another bank with another sucker. Someone who would do what they wanted for a healthy cut of the take. Same as Jim."

Drake leaned away from the fireplace. "That fits. That really fits."

"Yeah," Marvin said. "I thought so."

"But there's a problem," Drake said. "How would Tom get out and not leave a window open, a door unlocked?"

"He could have had a key, I suppose," Marvin said. "But my guess is, and this is just a guess, no one had a key to lock up but Jim. That's how he would want it, keeping that Mob money here. Is that right, Frankie?"

"He had the only key," Frankie said. "But that doesn't prove anything."

"It sure doesn't," Drake said. "I think your theory is falling apart. Sounded pretty good for a minute there, but now, not so much."

"Tom was a contortionist," Marvin said. "I figure, from looking at that big fireplace, he thought he'd just go up that and out." Marvin walked over to the fireplace. "Now we see if I'm an idiot."

Marvin reached a little flashlight from his pants pocket, ducked down carefully on his bad leg, looked up the chimney with the light. He reached up inside the chimney and got hold of something and pulled.

When he pulled his hand back, there was a shoe in it, and part of a bone. An ankle. The rest of the foot was in the shoe. "Looks like to me, the rest of Tom is hung up in there. It was a little tighter than he figured. He got hung. Probably even yelled out. But, it being a bank holiday. Well, my guess is he got up in there, twisted about, broke something, a rib maybe. Punctured something inside. Lung, heart, kidney. And he bled out internally. Died. Probably stank like crazy. But with the place sealed off for so long, no one being in here, it wasn't noticed, and in time he dried out. As for the money, if the rats haven't eaten it, you might find it up there too."

Drake looked at the shoe, said, "I'll be goddamned."

“With the bank closing, the fireplace was never used again, so no one ever thought to look up there.”

“Until you,” Drake said.

“Yep,” Marvin said. “Until me.”

“Oh, my goodness,” Tulip said.

Marvin hated hospitals. He had spent more than a little of his time in a hospital bed after the wreck. He rode the elevator up and walked along the antiseptic hall, his cane clicking against the tile as he went.

A nurse moved past him. Down the hall he saw two nurses hustling quickly, which was never a good thing. Someone was in distress.

Marvin came to the room he wanted. The door was cracked open. He knocked ever so gentle, as if he might be waking up a dragon and was uncertain of the outcome.

Frankie came to the door, eased out into the hallway.

“She’s sleeping,” she said.

“Maybe we could talk for awhile then,” Marvin said. “Down in the cafeteria. I came to see her, to tell her in person about the outcome, but I wanted to see you as well.”

“When you tell her, I guess that’s not going to look so good for me,” Frankie said.

“Let’s go downstairs to the cafeteria, have some coffee.”

When they had their food and were sitting at a table away from the others, and there weren’t many in the cafeteria, Frankie said, “No matter what you might think, I really do care about her. I didn’t care so much for Tom after awhile, but I cared for her. And

I'll tell you this. I never planned to rob anyone. You're wrong about that."

"Am I?" Marvin said.

"I was seeing Jim, and I knew about the money, and he even bragged to me about it. He thought that might cinch the deal, me and him staying together. Maybe he just wanted to impress me right then. He was getting the goods, you know, so I don't see how he needed to impress me anymore than he had."

"Sounds like you still care about him."

"Not at all, but I'm trying to tell you how things were then. What he told me didn't endear him to me at all. It just confused me. I decided I wanted out of the relationship, and I went back with Tom. There was an easy excuse I could tell Jim. That Tom and I are trying to fix our marriage. It wasn't really any better, our marriage, but it's the excuse I used. I was actually thinking about turning Jim in to the law. But I was uncertain. And then Tom and I seemed to be getting along, and like an idiot, and I have no excuse except I was young, but I told Tom about the money. What Jim told me about it being Dixie Mafia money, and that he laundered it, got a big cut."

"And that gave Tom ideas," Marvin said.

Frankie nodded, sipped her coffee. "Yes. It did. I knew I had messed up immediately. I mean, if there ever was a sorry criminal at heart, and in action, it was Tom. And the idea that he could steal the money and no one would know who did it, and the law wouldn't be bothered at all, and Jim would take the heat, for him, that was just too perfect to pass up.

"So, he tries to talk me into helping him. He wants me to give him a key. But I didn't have a key. No one had a key but Jim. He always locked up. The doors in and out. He never locked his office. He never locked his desk. Cocky, I guess. And since the money most people would want was in the vault, he wasn't worried. That little bank hadn't been robbed since the famous robbery years before, and it hadn't turned out so well for them. Arrogance on Jim's part, I suspect.

"But that day me and Tom had the argument, he came to the bank and asked me for some money. I wouldn't give it to him, and then I realized he was just putting up a front. He had other ideas. He told me he wanted to hide in the store room, and for me not to let on. That he had plans. I think he thought I'd draft in with him on account of, well, there he was and he was saying he was going to do it and I wouldn't have a choice."

"You didn't report him. So I guess you did make a choice," Marvin said.

"No. I didn't report him. He hid there and I didn't say anything. I thought he'd take the money and leave, and that would be that. I mean, it was Mob money. Not the people in the town."

Marvin added some milk to his coffee. "How'd you think he'd get out?"

"The chimney. I knew what he had planned. I knew how he thought. Never occurred to me he'd get stuck. He was so cocky about what he could do. And then there was that long weekend, and then the bank moved. It was months before they even opened the museum. I mean, damn. No one even cleaned the chimney after all these years."

"I found out they blocked the chimney off at the top," Marvin said. "Found that out yesterday. They had sealed it off some time ago, and hadn't even noticed Tom was down there. I guess, you wanted to see him, you'd have to be looking. They just slapped some concrete on the bricks and put a piece of metal in the chimney, cemented it in."

"What about . . . getting him out?"

"They already have. They took the entire chimney out to remove the body, or what was left of it. Mostly bones in clothes. Rats had been at the money. Wasn't worth a thing. Just some chunks and mostly dust. All of it in a leather bag, and that wasn't in too good a shape either. Pocked with rat and insect holes."

"I thought he had taken the money and run off," Frankie said. "I thought he got away with it. Figured he got away and maybe got himself killed some other way down the line."

"He thought he'd squeeze through. But the chimney, for all its large size, it was built small inside. He got about halfway up, and the thing was even smaller there. Bad design. Bad luck for Tom."

"All that time," Frankie said. "In the goddamn chimney."

"How's Mrs. Craver taking it?"

"She doesn't know all the details," Frankie said.

"No one but me and you and Drake and Tulip know all the details," Marvin said. "I guess I was trying to be dramatic and wanted an audience. Like in an old mystery movie. What does she know?"

"That you found Tom. That he was in the chimney, and was there to steal money. I left my connection out. Thought you could fill her in on my part. I just couldn't tell her. I didn't have the courage or the heart to let her down. I'm the last thing she has to cling to."

"How'd she take Tom's death?"

"Well enough. I think she just wanted to know what happened.

She never expected him to come to any good, but she wanted to know, and now she does, and I think it was a relief.”

“Her health?”

“She won’t recover,” Frankie said, pushing her coffee cup away from her. “They say she’s got a few days at most. She comes around from the drugs about midday for a few hours. You can explain it all to her then.”

Marvin shook his head. “Nope. Me and Drake, we figure you were an idiot, but you didn’t really steal anything. And it was Mob money. And Jim was Mob, directly or indirectly.”

“He was still a human being.”

“But he’s a dead human being. You’re trying to do right, Frankie. You care about your mother-in-law. It’s a twenty-five-year-old crime. You haven’t stolen anything in the meantime, and if it’s any consolation, I believe your story.”

“Thank you,” Frankie said and reached out and touched Marvin’s hand.

He patted her hand and smiled. “I think it’s best we leave it alone from here on out. No one in town lost any money. The Mob made Jim and the two guards in on it pay, and that seems like a fitting end to all of it. I’ll try and see Mrs. Craver later today. But I won’t have anything new to add to what she knows.”

Frankie opened her purse and took out a check. She gave it to Marvin.

“Mrs. Craver signed this, told me to give it to you.”

Marvin looked at it.

“This is a lot more than we agreed to,” Marvin said.

“She wants you to have it. I want you to have it. Take it.”

“You’re sure?”

“I am. Mrs. Craver is.”

“All right then,” Marvin said. “That’s the end of my argument.”

That night at home, Rachel and Marvin had dinner. When they finished, Rachel said, “Want to watch some TV?”

“Sure.”

“We can surf the channels, see if there’s something interesting,” Rachel said.

“Sounds good.”

They went in the living room with glasses of ice tea and sat on the couch, Rachel on one end, Marvin on the other. They watched TV for a few minutes, and during a commercial, Rachel said, “What you told me about Mrs. Craver, about Frankie, not turning her in. That was the right thing to do.”

“I think so,” Marvin said.

Rachel slid over closer to Marvin and let her hand rest on top of his. “You’re a good man, Marvin.”

“Think so?”

“Stupid now and then,” Rachel said, “but at heart, a really good man.”

Marvin didn’t say anything to that, but he smiled. A little later he put his arm around Rachel’s shoulders, and she placed her head against his chest.

The Boy Who Became Invisible

A Story

The place where I grew up was a little town called Marvel Creek. Not much happened there that is well remembered by anyone outside of the town. But things went on, and what I'm aware of now is how much things really don't change. We just know more than we used to because there are more of us, and we have easier ways to communicate excitement and misery than in the old days.

Marvel Creek was nestled along the edge of the Sabine River, which is not a wide river, and as rivers go, not that deep, except in rare spots, but it is a long river, and it winds all through East Texas. Back then there were more trees than now, and where wild animals ran, concrete and houses shine bright in the sunlight.

Our little school wasn't much, and I hated going. I liked staying home and reading books I wanted to read, and running the then-considerable woods and fishing the creeks for crawdads. Summers and afternoons and weekends I did that with my friend Jesse. I knew Jesse's parents lived differently than we did, and though we didn't have money, and would probably have been called poor by the standards of the early sixties, Jesse's family still lived out on a farm where they used an outhouse and plowed with mules, raised most of the food they ate, drew water from a well, but, curiously, had electricity and a big tall TV antenna that sprouted beside their house and could be adjusted for better reception by reaching through the living room window and turning it with a twist of the hands. Jesse's dad was quick to use the razor strop on Jesse's butt and back for things my parents would have thought unimportant, or at worst an offense that required words, not blows.

Jesse and I liked to play Tarzan, and we took turns at it until we finally both decided to be Tarzan, and ended up being Tarzan twins. It was a great mythology we created and we ran the woods and climbed trees, and on Saturday we watched *Jungle Theater* at my house, which showed, if we were lucky, Tarzan or Jungle Jim movies, and if not so lucky, Bomba movies.

About fifth grade there was a shift in dynamics. Jesse's poverty began to be an issue for some of the kids at school. He brought his lunch in a sack, since he couldn't afford the cafeteria, and all his clothes came from the Salvation Army. He arrived at history class one morning wearing socks with big S's on them, which stood for nothing related to him, and he immediately became the target of James Willeford and Ronnie Kenn. They made a remark about how the S stood for Sardines, which would account for how Jesse smelled, and sadly, I remember thinking at that age that was a pretty funny crack until I looked at Jesse's slack, white face and saw him tremble beneath that patched Salvation Army shirt.

Our teacher came in then, Mr. Waters, and he caught part of the conversation. He said, "Those are nice socks you got there, Jesse. Not many people can have monogrammed socks. It's a sign of sophistication, something a few around here lack."

It was a nice try, but I think it only made Jesse feel all the more miserable, and he put his head down on his desk and didn't lift it the entire class, and Mr. Waters didn't say a word to him. When class was over, Jesse was up and out, and as I was leaving, Mr. Waters caught me by the arm. "I saw you laughing when I came in. You been that boy's friend since the two of you were knee-high to a legless grasshopper."

"I didn't mean to," I said. "I didn't think."

"Yeah, well, you ought to."

That hit me pretty hard, but I'm ashamed to say not hard enough.

I don't know when it happened, but it got so when Jesse came over I found things to do. Homework, or some chore around the house, which was silly, because unlike Jesse, I didn't really have any chores. In time he quit stopping by, and I would see him in the halls at school, and we'd nod at each other, but seldom speak.

The relentless picking and nagging from James and Ronnie continued, and as they became interested in girls, it increased. And Marilyn Townsend didn't help either. She was a lovely young thing and as cruel as they were.

One day, Jesse surprised us by coming to the cafeteria with his sack lunch. He usually ate outside on one of the stoops, but he came in this day and sat at a table by himself, and when Marilyn went by he watched her, and when she came back with her tray, he stood up and smiled, politely asked if she would like to sit with him.

She laughed. I remember that laugh to this day. It was as cold as a knife blade in the back and easily as sharp. I saw Jesse's face drain until it was white, and she went on by laughing, not even saying a word, just laughing, and pretty soon everyone in the place was laughing, and Marilyn came by me, and she looked at me, and heaven help me, I saw those eyes of hers and those lips, and whatever made all the other boys jump did the same to me . . . and I laughed.

Jesse gathered up his sack and went out.

It was at this point that James and Ronnie came up with a new approach. They decided to treat Jesse as if he were a ghost, as if he were invisible. We were expected to do the same. So as not to be mean to Jesse, but being careful not to burn my bridges with the in-crowd, I avoided him altogether. But there were times, here and there, when I would see him walking down the hall, and on the rare occasions when he spoke, students pretended not to hear him, or James would respond with some remark like, “Do you hear a duck quacking?”

When Jesse spoke to me, if no one was looking, I would nod.

This went on into the ninth grade, and it became such a habit, it was as if Jesse didn’t exist, as if he really were invisible. I almost forgot about him, though I did note in math class one day there were stripes of blood across his back, seeping through his old, worn shirt. His father and the razor strop. Jesse had nowhere to turn.

One afternoon I was in the cafeteria, just about to get in line, when Jesse came in carrying his sack. It was the first time he’d been there since the incident with Marilyn some years before. I saw him come in, his head slightly down, walking as if on a mission. As he came near me, for the first time in a long time, for no reason I can explain, I said, “Hi, Jesse.”

He looked up at me surprised, and nodded, the way I did to him in the hall, and kept walking.

There was a table in the center of the cafeteria, and that was the table James and Ronnie and Marilyn had claimed, and as Jesse came closer, for the first time in a long time, they really saw him. Maybe it was because they were surprised to see him and his paper sack in a place he hadn't been in ages. Or maybe they sensed something. Jesse pulled a small revolver from his sack and before anyone knew what was happening, he fired three times, knocking all three of them to the floor. The place went nuts, people running in all directions. Me, I froze.

Then, like a soldier, he wheeled and marched back my way. As he passed me, he turned his head, smiled, said, "Hey, Hap," then he was out the door. I wasn't thinking clearly, because I turned and went out in the hall behind him, and the history teacher, Mr. Waters, saw him with the gun, said something, and the gun snapped again, and Waters went down. Jesse walked all the way to the double front door, which was flung wide open at that time of day, stepped out into the light, and lifted the revolver. I heard it pop and saw his head jump and he went down. My knees went out from under me and I sat down right there in the hall, unable to move.

When they went out to tell his parents what had happened to him, that Marilyn was disfigured, Ronnie wounded, and James and Mr. Waters were dead, they discovered them in bed where Jesse had shot them in their sleep.

The razor strop lay across them like a dead snake.

The Boy Who Became Invisible

A comic book script based on the story of the same name

Note to artist: East Texas is not West Texas. No mountains. No deserts. No sand dunes. It's a place of great pines and plentiful water in the form of creeks and rivers and man-made lakes. So do not think Texas of the movies, as East Texas is much closer in appearance to Louisiana and Arkansas. But most of the story takes place in a school and a schoolyard, places where that isn't a concern. Jesse's home should be on a wooded lot, and it isn't so small as it is old.

Another note: This comic builds, and it's not an action comic, and therefore could be designated as "talking heads" a lot, but I try to give it scenes and background that keep it interesting. I think the comic panels should reflect the alteration in Jesse's state of mind, along with events and dialogue. This keeps a kind of slow burn more interesting, and then in the end it becomes more dynamic. Much of the strength of the piece is the build, and the tension the artist puts into panels.

First page or so sets up town and era and mood, some symbolic ideas to go with the captions.

All CAPTIONS are Hap's internal dialogue.

Lastly, the artist may decide to change the size and number of panels, which is fine as long as the script is being properly conveyed. I like the artist to have freedom to create.

THE BOY WHO BECAME INVISIBLE

PAGE ONE

Four Panels

Panel One:

FIRST THIRD OF A PAGE

One end of the street looking down at—

View of a typical small East Texas town, one long main brick-street drag with buildings on either side, circa 1940s, though the story takes place in the 1960s. So keep that in mind. A couple of 1960s automobiles coast down the street, one toward us, one away from us.

CAPTION

I grew up in a
little East
Texas town

called Marvel
Creek.

Panel Two:

CAPTION
Not much
happened
there that will
remembered
outside the
town and the
surrounding
countryside—

SECOND THIRD OF PAGE, AERIAL VIEW

View of the Sabine River, which is long, and muddy-colored and winding, but it’s rarely a wide river, so we will use a medium-size run of water as it hurtles under a high metal trellis bridge, and all along the water is bordered by tall trees, oaks and pines and hickories, and close to the shore, willows and a few shrubs.

Panel Three:

AVERAGE-SIZE LEFT-HAND PANEL.

CAPTION
—but more

went on there
than outsiders
might suspect.
Some of it as
evil as a water
moccasin bite
on a blistering
hot day . . .

Close-up on a water moccasin swimming in the river water.

Panel Four:

A DARK SKY and a long, nasty, brightly flaring lightning bolt.

CAPTION
. . . as
unexpected
and deadly as
being struck
by a blast of
lightning.

PAGE TWO

Four Panels

Panel One:

MEDIUM PANEL

A schoolyard with young kids running and playing, the school behind them, a structure of red brick and shiny windows, circa 1950s style.

CAPTION

Our little
school wasn't
much. And
frankly, I
preferred to
stay home
and read
books.

Panel Two:

MEDIUM PANEL

CAPTION (1)

I pretended to
be sick a lot.

CAPTION (2)

When I wasn't
reading
books, I liked
to run along
the creeks and

through the
woods with
my best
friend, Jesse.

The woods with a little creek winding along through it, and running beside the banks of the creek are two boys about nine or ten. One is Hap, the narrator of our story; the other is Jesse. Hap is a nice-looking kid with an air of contentment. Jesse is a raw-boned, long-legged, ragged-clothed kid with greasy hair that falls in his face.

What we see in their faces is the youthful excitement of being alive.

Panel Three:

CAPTION
Jesse was a
kid's kid. He
could juggle.

Jesse juggling rubber balls as Hap watches with surprise and delight.

Panel Four:

CAPTION
I couldn't.

Hap dropping balls as he tries to juggle, a look of disappointment on his face.

PAGE THREE

Three Panels

Panel One:

CAPTION
He could walk
on his hands.

Jesse doing just that, in perfect upright position, legs straight and high to the sky.

Panel Two:

Hap is attempting to walk on his hands. We see him with his head down and his legs bent and him toppling.

CAPTION
I couldn't.

Panel Three:

HALF-PAGE PANEL

CAPTION
I knew Jesse's
family lived
differently
than we did.

They were
very poor. So
were we. But
compared to
them, we
were the
Rockefellers.

Very important to give some of Jesse's background, or at least how Hap sees it.

Hap and Jesse in tire swings side by side, swinging on ropes fastened to the tires and the limb of a huge oak.

Behind them we see a rundown shack with a porch to one side, and a leaning outhouse out to the left and some distance away from the house. There are old cars in the yard, tireless, wheel-less, up on blocks. Along with that, strewn about the yard, are overturned washing machines, hubcaps, and heaps of drying grass.

PAGE FOUR

Four Panels

Panel One:

DAY

CAPTION

And although
my father
couldn’t read
or write, he
was a raging
intellectual
compared to
Jesse’s old
man, Cletus.

SIDE VIEW AND MEDIUM-SIZED PANEL

Jesse’s old man, a classic peckerwood-cracker-son-of-a-bitch. He’s big, tall, and raw-boned like Jesse, but broad-shouldered with muscled arms. He’s wearing overalls and his hair is greasy and combed back Elvis-style with what was called a duck’s ass in the back—long, oily, flipped-up hair at the base of the neck. He is shirtless under the overalls.

Cletus has Jesse by the back of the neck, has his belt off and looped, and he’s beating Jesse like a drum.

Hap is standing off to the side, shocked.

SFX
Sound effect
of Jesse
caterwauling.

Panel Two:

CAPTION (1)

Cletus had the
brain of a
flea, the
ambition of a
frog, and the
temper and
savagery of a
wounded
bear.

CAPTION (2)

He could go
off on Jesse
for the
slightest
reason. Real
or imagined.

MEDIUM-SIZED PANEL

Another angle on this scene. Jesse facing us, his old man behind him. His eyes are lit with anger or glee, a little of both, if that's possible to present, and his arm is raised high, the belt coiled and ready to strike. Although we are showing the same thing as the panel before, I think seeing what's going on twice and from a different angle affects the viewer more, and lets us really know how nasty Jesse's home life is. But, if the artist wants to use these two panels to make several small panels to show what's going on, that's cool too. I'm for the artist using common *sense.*

Panel Three:

MOMENTS LATER, ANOTHER ANGLE

Jesse and Cletus, and in this scene Cletus is giving Jesse a good kick in the ass, sending him flying.

CAPTION
Cletus was a
brutal old
bastard.

Panel Four:

Hap is running by the front porch, away from Cletus's home, and on the porch we see Cletus's wife, a rundown middle-aged woman with black eyes.

CAPTION
He didn't
treat his wife
or dogs any
better. And as
far as Jesse's
mother was
concerned, he
was on his

own.

PAGE FIVE

Six Panels

Panel One:

INTERIOR CLASSROOM, DAY

Big panel for establishing classroom and kids.

No teacher is present yet. Blackboard. Desks. A globe of the world setting on it. Usual stuff. Pencils, notepads. Teacher supplies.

The kids are all sitting in their desks. Jesse is in the front row wearing ragged clothes, and behind him is Hap, simply dressed. Nothing fancy, but not ragged.

In a desk on Jesse's right is a solid-looking fifth grader, already looking as if some day he'll own a car dealership, have a gym membership, and have a mistress on the side and a fat pile of money. He's got a flattop and he's well-dressed for a fifth grader. This is JAMES.

Behind James is a near carbon copy, a little smaller, red hair. This is Ronnie. He's yukking it up over James's remarks.

Across from James there is a cute, blonde girl. This is MARILYN. She's laughing as James delivers his line. If ever there was a wicked harpy in *the making, she is it.*

JAMES
Jesse, you
steal those
clothes off a
drunk?

SFX
Giggles from
Ronnie and
Marilyn, or
any sound
effect for
laughter you
like.

Panel Two:

FRONT VIEW SHOT OF JESSE

He's the main focus, but to his right side (our left) we can see James, his mouth open.

Jesse is sitting with his head hung, and we can see James thundering along with his abuse.

JAMES
I bet you

sleep under
the porch
with the dog.

Panel Three:

INSERT CLOSE ON JESSE'S FEET.

He has monogrammed socks. Cheap-looking with a big "S" on them.

CAPTION
Jesse's
secondhand
socks
especially
drew James's
ire.

Panel Four:

James pointing at Jesse's socks, his head thrown back in a laugh.

JAMES
What's that
"S" for, Jesse?
Sardines? No,
I know.
Skunk?

Panel Five:

ON HAP

He doesn't look happy about what's going on, yet he sits, closed mouth.

CAPTION
I didn't like
what they
were doing to
Jesse, but to
my shame, I
said nothing
in his defense.

Panel Six:

ON JAMES as he touches Jesse's shoulder with his ruler, as if knighting him.

JAMES
I dub you
"Skunk."

PAGE SIX

Five

Panels

Panel

One:

The teacher coming into the room. He's a big jock-looking guy, but with a kind face. This is Mr. Waters.

MR. WATERS
James. Be
quiet.

CAPTION
Our second-
period
teacher
always took
up for Jesse.
He knew
what was
going on.

Panel Two:

WE SEE:

Mr. Waters seated at his desk with a book cracked open, and his mouth *is open as well, and he seems to be giving a lecture or commenting on something to do with the studies.*

And we see James passing a note back to Marilyn.

Panel Three:

INSERT NOTE AND MARILYN'S SMALL HANDS:

We see what it says.

I can smell
Jesse from
here.

Panel Four:

Marilyn leaning forward, holding her nose. This is at a cross-hatch angle, and we can see the red-headed kid in this scene as well, and he's grinning.

Panel Five:

On Hap, looking disappointed in himself.

CAPTION
I should have
said
something.

But they were
the most
popular kids
in school, and
I feared I
might
redirect their
wrath from
Jesse to me.

PAGE SEVEN

Six Panels

Panel One:

As they are leaving the classroom, filing out, Jesse is in front of Mr. Waters's desk, walking with his head down.

MR. WATERS

I like your
socks, Jesse.
Monograms
are a sign of
sophistication.
I need to get
me some.

Panel Two:

Jesse in the hallway, Hap behind him.

CAPTION

Nice try on
Mr. Waters's
part, bless
him, but I
think
recognition of
socks with a
monogram
that didn't fit
Jesse's name
only made
him feel
worse.

Panel Three:

ON THE PLAYGROUND

James and Ronnie have Jesse on the ground, and James is kicking him while Ronnie is bending over him, punching him in the back of the head. Marilyn is watching, laughing, her pretty blonde head thrown back, giving some impression of the beautiful but mean-spirited human being she will grow up to be.

CAPTION

It was bad

enough he got
beatings at
home for
nothing, but
now he was
getting the
same thing at
school.

Panel Four:

Marilyn has turned her head to look at Hap while the beating continues in the background. She is smiling.

Hap standing there, dumbstruck.

CAPTION (1)
Marilyn. She
was so pretty.
And I was so
smitten.

CAPTION (2)
Goddamn me.

Panel Five:

ANOTHER ANGLE ON SCENE

Now Marilyn and Hap are close together and both are laughing as Jesse continues to take a beating in the background.

CAPTION
For a moment
I was no
better than
them. Like
Jesse, I just
wanted to
belong.

Panel Six:

Ronnie has Jesse's foot, and Jesse's shoe is off, and James is peeling off the monogrammed sock. He has his head turned to show the smell is offensive.

JAMES
I'm going to
put this in a
jar of alcohol
as a little
souvenir of a
skunk hunt.

PAGE EIGHT

Six Panels

Panel One:

Jesse is sitting on the ground, crying, putting his shoe on his bare foot. He’s looking over at Hap, who is standing with the others. They are all laughing, including Hap.

Panel Two:

Jesse walking home, one foot without a sock, bloody, with his books under his arm. Hap watching from a distance.

CAPTION

I began to
distance
myself from
Jesse. I too
began to see
him as weird.

Panel Three:

CLASSROOM, ANOTHER DAY

All the seats, viewed from the front of the room, over Mr. Waters’s shoulder. Everything is arranged the same. Except for Hap. He’s now sitting at a desk closer to Marilyn.

CAPTION (1)

I was too
young to
know what it
was about her
that stirred
me. I just
knew what I
felt wasn't a
need to pee.

CAPTION (2)
It wouldn't be
the first time
my dick
steered me
wrong, but it
was the worst
time.

Panel Four:

The kids are filing out the door. Hap is last in line. Mr. Waters is at his desk.

MR. WATERS
Hap. Stay a
minute.

Panel Five:

Hap standing in front of Mr. Waters. They are the only ones in the classroom.

MR. WATERS

You and Jesse
been friends
since you
were both
knee-high to a
grasshopper.
He doesn't
need you
joining in
with those
jackals.

HAP

Yes, sir.

Panel Six:

As Hap is going out the door, Waters, visible at his desk, calls out.

MR. WATERS

You're better

than that.

CAPTION

Only I wasn't.

PAGE NINE

Four Panels

Panel One:

Hap inside his home, the curtain cracked, looking out at the street, and we can see Jesse over Hap's shoulder, walking down the road past the house.

CAPTION

Jesse quit
coming by the
house. And I
avoided him
when I could.

Panel Two:

HALL OF HIGH SCHOOL, FEW YEARS LATER

The kids are about seventeen in the following scenes.

Hap is walking down the hall, books under his arm, and coming toward him is Jesse with his books. Jesse looks equally uncomfortable.

CAPTION

I saw him at
school now
and then. But
we seldom
spoke. For
me, he was
fading into
the
background.

Panel Three:

CAFETERIA

Jesse sitting at a table, alone, with his sack lunch. Across the way at a table with others, including the bullies, sits Hap. He's looking at Jesse, but Jesse doesn't see him.

CAPTION(1)

Jesse couldn't
afford school
lunches. He
brought his,
when he had
it to bring.

CAPTION (2)

A can of
sardines or
sausages,
some
crackers. All
of it he ate
with his
fingers.

Panel Four:

Fairly large panel so we can take in the budding sex bomb that is Marilyn.

CAPTION

Marilyn went
from being a
mean little
kid—

MOMENTS LATER, SAME SCENE

Marilyn with her tray of cafeteria food, a carton of milk, and she's in mid-model stride.

Marilyn, older now, a real knockout in a mini-skirt so tight that if it had a pocket and there was a coin in it, you could read the writing on it. She has long, blonde hair, great cheekbones, and full lips. She looks like the *kind of girl that would make you set fire to the pope and throw your wife into the flames after him. She's walking toward Jesse's table. She is smiling in a friendly way.*

PAGE TEN

Five Panels

Panel One:

FULL PANEL ON JESSE'S FACE

He's staring at Marilyn, and we can see her reflection in his wide eyes. His skin is popped with sweat. He looks as if he could shit a high chair with a baby in it.

CAPTION

—to being an
entitled,
mean-spirited
—

Panel Two:

Jesse stands, and we'll catch him in mid-stand, slightly bent as he comes to his feet. Marilyn is also in view, very close to his table, smiling wickedly, as if she's about to drop her panties right then and there and bend over a chair.

CAPTION
—devil with
the face and
body of an
angel.

Panel Three:

Jesse pulling out a chair for Marilyn. He's hopeful she's going to sit with him, and it looks as if that is exactly what she is about to do.

CAPTION
When she
spoke, it was
loud, for all to
hear.

MARILYN
Are you
kidding? I just
wanted to see
what a loser
eats for lunch.
I thought it
might be
roadkill.

Panel Four:

WIDE VIEW OF CAFETERIA

All the kids are laughing as Marilyn, still carrying her tray, is walking away from Jesse's table, our view being her back and that marvelous ass. Her head is turned toward the table where Hap and the two bullies sit, and we can see her smiling her killer smile. Jesse is still standing, still feeling the insult.

SFX
Ha, ha, ha, or
whatever
sound effects
you feel are
appropriate
for a room
full of mean
laughter.

Panel Five:

Jesse, red-faced, is leaving the cafeteria with his sack, his head hung.

PAGE ELEVEN
Four Panels

Panel One:

EXTERIOR HIGH SCHOOL

Jesse outside the school, sitting on the curb eating his lunch.

CAPTION
After that,
Jesse ate his
lunches alone.

Panel Two:

INTERIOR HIGH SCHOOL, HALLWAY

Jesse coming down the hallway, and everyone in the hall, including Marilyn, Ronnie, and James, have turned their backs to Jesse. He is walking silently right behind them. Hap is not present in this shot.

CAPTION (1)
The wicked
trio came up
with a new
plan to
torment Jesse.
They decided
to treat him
like a ghost.

CAPTION (2)
Word was
spread that
when he was

present, he
was to be
ignored. That
if he spoke,
no one was to
respond.

Panel Three:

DAY, STREET IN FRONT OF THE PICTURE SHOW

Hap in the driver's seat of a tan Impala. He has the window down and he's looking at Jesse walking on the sidewalk in front of a movie theater with a marquee that announces the current film. ROSEMARY'S BABY.

CAPTION (1)

I had had
enough.

HAP

Hey, Jesse.

CAPTION (2)

I decided not
to continue
with that
trio's
meanness. But
me and Jesse

didn’t go back
to being
friends as
before.

Panel Four:

Jesse is so happy to be acknowledged, he’s stopped walking, and is smiling awkwardly and raising his hand in a friendly wave as Hap drives away in his Impala.

CAPTION
Still, I was
done with
that bullshit.

PAGE TWELVE

Five Panels

Panel One:

THE SCHOOL CAFETERIA

Hap is standing in the lunch line with a lot of other teenagers, holding an empty tray, waiting to pick up his food. Behind him, coming through the door from a hallway, we see Jesse entering, carrying his sack.

Panel Two:

Jesse passing Hap, as Hap turns to look at him.

HAP

Hey, Jesse.

Panel Three:

Jesse has stopped and turned toward Hap. The look on Jesse's face is serene.

JESSE

Hi, Hap.

Panel Four:

CENTER OF CAFETERIA

At a table, sitting together, our trio of bullies, Marilyn, James, and Ronnie. They are all sitting with their lunches. Jesse is walking directly toward them. Marilyn is really looking good this day, at her devastating, mini-skirt best, her long legs crossed.

Panel Five:

ANOTHER ANGLE, JESSE'S POINT OF VIEW

Jesse has his back to us, but at an angle, so we can see part of his face, and we can see his hand reaching into his lunch sack. He's standing right by the trio's table, in front of an empty chair.

The trio is looking up at him with a "what the hell?" attitude.

CAPTION
In that
moment,
Marilyn
dropped their
code of
silence toward
Jesse.N

MARILYN
Kind of lost,
aren't you,
Skunk?

PAGE THIRTEEN

Six Panels

Panel One:

Jesse has pulled a revolver from his sack. Marilyn has jumped to her feet, and we can see her chair tipping over backward behind her.

JESSE
My name is
Jesse.

Panel Two:

Gunfire in Marilyn's face. A little blast of light and smoke.

Panel Three:

James, still in his chair, his mouth open in surprise, as he takes a full blast in the chest.

Panel Four:

Front view of Ronnie running toward us, but his hands are thrown out and we can see his chest bursting open as a bullet exits, and in the background we see Jesse pointing the revolver at him, a thin smile on his face.

JESSE
Bingo.

Panel Five:

CAFETERIA

Teenagers running in all directions, but in the center, calm as a fence post, is Jesse, walking, the revolver by his side.

Panel Six:

Hap is standing by himself, the tray dangling in his hand by his side, and

Jesse is walking right up to him.

JESSE

Bye, Hap.

CAPTION

I don't know
for sure how I
found my
voice, but
when I did, it
seemed to be
coming from
some place
cold and far
away.

HAP

Bye, Jesse.

PAGE FOURTEEN

Six Panels

Panel One:

Jesse exiting the cafeteria, entering into the hallway. Behind him, viewed through the door, but still in the cafeteria, Hap is following.

CAPTION
I can’t explain
it, but I
walked out
after him.

Panel Two:

IN THE HALLWAY

Jesse, and coming down the hall is the teacher Mr. Waters.

MR. WATERS
Jesse. What
have you
done, son?

Panel Three:

We are looking down Jesse’s gun arm as he fires at Mr. Waters, who is taking the shot in the head and lurching backward from it.

CAPTION
I guess Mr.
Waters was
just in the
way. Wrong
place, wrong
moment.

Panel Four:

VIEWED OVER HAP’S SHOULDER AS HE STEPS INTO THE HALLWAY

At one end of the hall are two glass doors, and Jesse is using one hand to push one of them open. The revolver dangles in the other hand.

CAPTION

I think I knew
what was
about to
happen. It
might have
been for the
best.

Panel Five:

CLOSER ON JESSE As the glass door is closing behind him. We see him through the glass as he places the gun to his head and is pulling the trigger.

SFX

BLAM!

CAPTION

His head
jumped to the

right a little,
and then he
fell.

Panel Six:

Jesse lying on the ground, a crowd around him that includes Hap. There's one boy in the crowd leaning over Jesse, looking down on him.

BOY
What got into
Skunk?

PAGE FIFTEEN
Five Panels.

Panel One:

Hap has angrily grabbed the boy by the shirt.

HAP
Don't call him
that. Don't
ever call him
that.

Panel Two:

LATER THAT DAY

CAPTION (1)
When they
went out to
tell his
parents what
had happened
. . . that Jesse
was dead . . .

Sheriff's car pulling up in front of Jesse's home, the hovel.

CAPTION (2)
. . . that
Marilyn was
disfigured,
James was
dead, and
Ronnie was
paralyzed
from the waist
down . . .

Panel Three:

IN THE YARD

Sheriff and a deputy looking down at a dead dog in the yard.

CAPTION
. . . they
found the
family dog
dead in the
yard. I figured
Jesse didn't
want him to
go hungry.

Panel Four:

INTERIOR SHACK, BEDROOM

Jesse's parents lying on their backs, with their heads missing for the most part. They are just holes where bullets have gone through them. There is something lying across the old man's chest.

CAPTION
They
discovered
Jesse's parents
on the bed
where he had
shot them in
the face,
numerous
times.

Panel Five:

CLOSE ON THIS SOMETHING

It's the belt that Cletus used to beat Jesse with. It's stretched out in full.

CAPTION

And across
Jesse's
father's chest,
lying there
like a dead
snake, was
the belt Cletus
had used so
many times to
beat him.

THE END

Not Our Kind

When I got out of school that day, I drove over to the Dairy Queen to get a hamburger before I had to go to work at the aluminum chair plant. I had a work permit, so I got off early, and I usually grabbed a burger, and then I drove out to the plant and worked until midnight. A lot of us from high school worked there, making fifty-six dollars and fourteen cents a week, which wasn't even good for 1968.

I was sitting at the back of the Dairy Queen, eating quickly, and was about halfway through the burger when four boys from school came in. I knew one of them pretty well, and the others a little. We all knew each other's names, anyway. I can't say any of them were friends of mine. We ran in different circles.

They saw me and came over. Two of them sat down in my booth, across from me, and the other two sat out to the side at a table and leaned on their elbows and looked at me. I didn't like their attitude.

"What's going on?" I said.

"You're seeing it," the one I knew best said. His name was David. Last time I saw him was at the Swinging Bridge, and there had been a fight there for money. My new friend Leonard was there. He won the fight. It was a friend of David's he fought, and he beat the guy's ass like a tambourine and made some money.

Actually, that fight, lit by a huge tire fire, was the first time I met Leonard, and we hit it off, and we saw each other again in Marvel Creek, running into one another accidentally at first, and then finally on purpose. He lived over in LaBorde with his uncle, but they came to the general store in Marvel Creek to shop, which I didn't understand. Everyone in Marvel Creek goes to the larger city of LaBorde to shop, but his uncle had a store in Marvel Creek he liked, place where he had been buying shoes for a long time. He liked it, Leonard said, because the owner never told him to come around back, even before laws were passed that said he didn't have to.

David said, "We were talking about you the other day."

"Were you?" I said.

"Yeah. Some. We been seeing you around with that nigger."

"Leonard?"

"One name is as good as another for a nigger. 'Boy' will work. We'll call him 'Boy.'"

"I won't. And if I was you, I wouldn't call him that. You might find yourself turned inside out and made into a change purse."

"You think he's tough, don't you?"

"Don't you? You seen him whip some ass at the Swinging Bridge, same as me."

"We seen you whip some too," another of the boys said, "but that don't scare us none, about you or the nigger."

The big guy's real name was Colbert, but everyone called him Dinosaur on account of he was big and not that smart. He was a football player and he thought he was as cool as an igloo. He was said to be the toughest guy in school. That might have been true. He hadn't been at the bridge that night. I didn't know if he'd seen me and Leonard together or not, but he was riled about it, thanks to David.

I didn't like where this was going. I kept eating, but I didn't taste the rest of the burger.

"Way we see it," David said, and bobbed his head a little so as to indicate the others, "you aren't doing yourself any good."

"Oh, how's that?"

"Ought not have to spell it out for you, Hap. Hell, you know. Hanging with a nigger."

"You mean Leonard."

"Yeah. Okay. Leonard the nigger."

I nodded. I didn't realize until that moment that I really liked Leonard, and these guys I had known all my life, if only a little, I didn't care for that much at all.

"Word's getting around you're a nigger-lover," Dinosaur said.

"Is it?"

"Yeah. You don't want that," David said.

"I don't?"

"Are you trying to be a smartass?" Dinosaur said.

"I don't think so," I said. I put one foot out of the booth so I could move if I had to, could get a position to fight or run.

"There's talk, and it could reflect on you," David said.

"In what way?"

"You think girls want to date a nigger-lover? And way we hear it, this guy's queer as a three-dollar bill, and proud of it. A nigger queer, come on, man. You got to be kidding me."

"But he has such a nice personality," I said.

"You aren't going to listen, are you?" David said. "Girls don't want to date no nigger-lover."

"You said that."

"Because it's true."

"So, you have come here to spare me being viewed in a bad way, and to make sure I don't lose my pussy quota? That's what's up?"

"You're making light of something you shouldn't," David said. "We got a way of doing things, and you know it."

"We got to keep it protected," Dinosaur said.

"We?" I said.

"White people," David said. "Now that niggers can vote and eat with us, they think they can act like us."

I nodded, glanced at the two that hadn't spoken. "You guys, you thinking the same?"

They all nodded.

"Civil rights may change how the Yankees live," David said, "but it won't change us."

"That's why I don't like you guys."

This landed on their heads like a rock.

"You don't have to like us, but we can't have one of our own hanging about with niggers. He's not our kind. He's not one of us."

"You know, it's really been nice, but I have to go to work now, so I'll see you."

I got up and eased past Dinosaur, keeping an eye on him, but trying to look like I wasn't concerned.

They all stood up. I was about halfway to the door when they came up behind me. David grabbed at my arm. I popped it free.

"You better take in what we're saying," David said.

"I could throw you through that window glass right now," Dinosaur said.

"You might need yourself a nap and a sack lunch before you're able to throw me through that glass, or anywhere else for that matter," I said.

I was bluffing. I was a badass, and I knew it. But four guys, badass or not, are four guys. And one of them was a fucking freak of nature. I was reminded of how freakish he was with him standing almost as close to me as a coat of paint. He was looking down at me with a head like a bowling ball, shoulders wide enough to set a refrigerator on one side, a stove on the other.

About that time, the manager, Bob, came out from behind the counter. An older guy, red-haired, slightly gone to fat, not as big as Dinosaur, but I'd seen him throw out a couple of oil workers once for throwing ketchup-soaked fries against the Dairy Queen glass to see who could make theirs stick and not slide off. They didn't get very far in that game.

What I remember best was one of those guys, after Bob had tossed them out like they were dirty laundry, pulled a knife and held it on Bob when he came outside to make sure they were leaving.

Bob laughed, said to that guy, "Should have brought yourself a peppermint stick, you oil-field trash. They're a hell of a lot easier to eat."

This with the tip of the knife pressed to his stomach. The guy with the knife and his buddy believed Bob. Believed him sincerely. They were out of there so fast they practically left a vapor trail. It seemed they were standing there outside the Dairy Queen one moment, and the next their car's taillights were shining red in the distant night.

Bob said to David and the others, "All right, boys. Take it outside."

I thought, shit. Outside isn't going to be all that better for me.

We all started outside. Even Dinosaur didn't want a piece of Bob.

As we were going, Bob put his hand on my shoulder.

"You stay with me."

The others turned and looked at Bob.

"Unless I've developed a stutter, you know what I said."

They hesitated about as long as it takes to blink, and went out.

Bob waited until they were outside and looking through the glass. He made a shooing movement with his hand, and they went away. After a moment I saw their car drive by the window and on out to the highway.

"They'll be watching for you, son."

"I know."

"Hanging with niggers is frowned on. I got some nigger friends, but you got to know how to keep them at a distance. I go fishing with a couple of them, but I don't have them around at my house, sitting in my chairs and eating at my table."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll remember that."

"Still, no cause to pick on someone. You or the nigger. They don't get to choose to be niggers. And you can get along with most anyone, and learn from most anyone, even a nigger. I learned how to catch catfish good from one."

Well, Bob was better than the other four.

I bought a bag of chips and a Coca-Cola on ice to go, went out to my car, and drove to work. I was about halfway to the aluminum chair plant when Dinosaur, driving a Ford Mustang, pulled up behind me. The other three guys were in the car with him. They followed me to work. I parked close to the door and got out with my chips and Coca-Cola. I slurped at the Coca-Cola through a straw as I walked. I was saving the chips for dinner break. It was a light dinner, but I'd been trying to drop a few pounds. I was always prone to picking up weight, and I had to watch it.

I turned at the door into the plant and looked at them.

Dinosaur shot me the finger.

I shot him the finger back.

We had really showed each other. Funny how that can make people so mad. It's their finger in the air, and that's it. It has about as much actual effect as a leaf falling from a cherry tree in Japan.

They drove way, screeching tires as they left, and I went to work.

Next few days in school I'd see them in the hall, and I never once avoided them or tried to get out of the way. They were not always together, though sometimes they were, and Dinosaur bumped me a couple of times as he went by. I kept my cool. Once David said to me as he passed, "We'll get you, nigger-lover."

This went on for awhile, and now and then they'd follow me to work, but they never did anything. I had a ball bat in my car, and they knew that, because I let them see it by holding it up once while driving, knowing they could see it from their Mustang, as they were so close on my ass. What I feared is they'd hold up a gun or guns in response, but that didn't happen. Everyone wasn't shooting everybody back then.

This went on through the semester, and then the spring came, and one day I went downtown to buy some blue jeans and a union shirt. The old white union shirts had become popular. Everyone was dying them, or tie-dying them, and I guess I didn't want to be left out. What we had there in Marvel Creek was a kind of general store named Jack Woolens, and that's where I went to buy the shirt, couple pairs of jeans, and maybe what we called desert boots, which were tan, low-cut, comfortable shoes. I thought I had enough to afford it all. I was thinking on that, figuring I could skip one pair of pants if I had to, and I'd have enough for sure that way to get the shirt, shoes, and one pair of Lee Riders.

My hair had grown longer, and I had to comb it behind my ears at school and push it up off my forehead into a pompadour so I didn't get sent home. A bunch of us were wearing our hair longer, and there was even talk of a sit-in to protest how we were hassled by the principal, but I was the only one that showed up for the event. I ended up wandering around in the hall for a few minutes and went back to the lunchroom and had some Jell-O before going to math class. I had it washed and combed out this day, and it was bouncing loosely as I walked. I thought I was as cool as a razor edge in winter time.

I parked my junker and was walking along the sidewalk, almost to Jack Woolens. I could see the wooden barrels setting out front—one had walking canes in it and brooms, the other had axe and hoe handles.

As I came along the sidewalk, I saw Leonard coming toward me. He saw me and smiled. We hadn't seen each other in a while, but when I saw him I knew I had missed him. He was like a stray dog that wandered in and out of my life, and I felt like when we were together that something missing was fulfilled. It was an odd combo, him being a homo and me being straight, him being black and me being white, and him being more redneck than I was. He didn't like my long hair and had told me, and I didn’t like that he thought we needed a conservative president. He was a stray dog I liked, and I decided right then and there I wanted to keep him, even if he might bite. He probably thought I was the stray dog. I doubt he worried about my bite, however. He came down the sidewalk with one hand in his pants pocket, the other swinging by his side.

That’s when David and Dinosaur, and the other two thugs, got out of the Mustang parked across the street, having spotted me and caught me without my ball bat. They came across the street, almost skipping.

They got to me before Leonard.

They came up on the curb and managed their way around me in a half circle. The door to Jack Woolens was at my back. It was open. It was a cool day and air-conditioning wasn’t as common then, so it was left that way to let in the breeze as well as too many flies.

“Gotcha now,” David said.

“Gotcha what?” Leonard said, as he came up the sidewalk, both hands swinging by his sides now.

“You’re the other one we want to see,” said Dinosaur. “You and the girl, here.”

“Wow,” I said. “That bites. You see, Leonard, they’re calling me a girl because my hair is long.”

“It is too long,” Leonard said.

“They are really pushing the wit, calling me a girl, noticing I have long hair. These guys, they ought to be on Johnny Carson.”

“Fuck you,” Dinosaur said.

“You’re looking for us, well, you done found us,” Leonard said.

“That’s right,” I said. “You have.”

“We don’t like what we see,” David said.

“That’s because you are a blind motherfucker and don’t know a couple pretty fellas when you see them,” Leonard said. “I could be on a fucking magazine, I’m so pretty. Shit. You could hang my goddamn dick in the museum of fucking modern art. Damn, Big Pile, you know you want to kiss my black ass, right where the tunnel goes down into the sweet dark depths.”

“You gag me,” David said.

“Fuck you,” Dinosaur said.

“The big man is consistent with those two words,” I said.

I didn’t know what it was about Leonard, but he brought out the double smartass in me. I figured if I was going to die, I might as well go out with a few good remarks. And with Leonard there, well, I felt I had a chance. That we had a chance.

Leonard looked at me. “Yeah. He repeats himself because it’s wishful thinking that slips out. Some of that Freudian stuff. Big white boy wants a piece of my fine, shiny, black ass I tell you, but his little ole dick dropped down there would be like tossing a noodle into a volcano.”

“Now I’m starting to get gagged,” I said.

“Ah, you’ll get over it, Hap,” Leonard said.

David said to Leonard, “You’re a goddamn dick-sucking nigger and he’s a nigger-lover.”

“Nah,” Leonard said. “I mean, yeah. I’m a dick-sucker, but me and Hap, we ain’t fucking, just hanging. Oh, I should also add, I don’t like being called a nigger, you cracker motherfucker.”

“You got some sand,” David said.

“I’m a whole goddamn beach,” Leonard said.

“What we’re thinking,” David said, “is we’re going to knock you two around until your shit mixes, until you get it through your head how things are supposed to be."

"That a fact?" I said.

"Oh yeah," Dinosaur said, "we're gonna do that."

Leonard grinned, said, "I guess you boys ought to get started. It's already midday."

"But the sun stays up for quite awhile," I said.

"Yeah, there's that," Leonard said. "We got plenty of time to whip their asses."

"Smartass nigger," David said, and glanced at Dinosaur, who moved forward.

That's when an older black man stepped out of Jack Woolens and reached in one of the barrels and pulled out an axe handle.

"I hear you peckerwoods calling my nephew a nigger?" the man said.

David bowed up a little. "We ain't got a thing against hitting an old nigger, or a lady nigger, or kicking around a dead nigger, which is what you're gonna be, you ancient watermelon fart."

That's when the old man swung the axe handle and clipped David across the jaw and made him stagger. I almost felt sorry for David. Even more so when the handle whistled again and caught him behind the neck and laid him out flat on his face on the cement.

The other three thugs froze, then seemed to come unstuck and started toward the three of us. Me and Leonard took fighting stances. That's when Jack Woolens came out behind us, a slightly paunchy old man with thinning dark hair.

"Stop it, goddamn it," Jack said.

They stopped, but when Dinosaur saw who it was, he said, "You old Jew bastard."

"Old Jew bastard fought Nazis, so he isn't afraid of your kind. You aren't a pimple on a Nazi's ass, but you're made of the same kind of pus."

This stopped them. I don't know why, but they hesitated.

The old Jew bastard pulled an axe handle from the barrel and stepped up beside the black man. "Way I see it," he said, "is we have axe handles, and for now, you have teeth. You see it that way, Chester?"

Chester said, "Yeah. They got some teeth right now."

Dinosaur looked a little nervous. "We ain't even eighteen, and that nigger hit David with an axe handle."

"Hard as he could," Leonard said.

"That's against the law," Dinosaur said. "We're underage. Minors."

"Sometimes, you have extenuating circumstances," Jack Woolens said. "I once strangled a Nazi when I was in the O.S.S. Look it up, you never heard of it. It wasn't a social group. I strangled him and went back to the farmhouse where I was hiding in Austria, and slept tight. I knocked me off a piece the next day. Young German girl who thought I was German. I can speak it. I had the chance, I'd have strangled another fucking Nazi."

"No shit?" Chester said. "You speak German?"

It was like they forgot the thugs were there.

"Yeah, I was born in Germany."

"No shit?"

"Yeah. I did get a little scratch when I was strangling that Nazi by the way. I don't want to sound like I come out clean. That would be lying."

Jack Woolens put the axe handle back in the barrel, and showed Chester a cut across his elbow by nodding at it. It was a long white line.

"Knife," Jack said. "I had to wear a bandage for a few days."

"That ain't shit," Chester said. "Cracker tried to castrate me once. I got a scar on my thigh I can show you makes that look like hen scratch. I had twenty-five stitches and had to stand when I fucked for awhile and reach under and hold my balls up so it didn't slap my stitches. Want to see?"

"You win," Jack said. "Keep your pants on."

"I was moving when the cracker did that, cut me I mean," Chester said. "Cracker didn't turn out so well. They found his lily-white ass in the river, and there wasn't no way of knowing how he got there. Some kind of accident like being beat to death and thrown in the river is my guess. You know, said the wrong thing to someone, tried to cut their balls off, something like that. I ain't saying I know that to be a fact, him being dead in the Sabine River, but I'm going to start a real hard rumor about it right now."

Jack turned back to the barrel and retrieved the axe handle, casual as if he were picking out a toothpick.

The thugs continued to stand there. As if just remembering they were there, Chester thumped Dinosaur's chest with the axe handle. "Pick up this sack of dog shit, and carry him off. Do it now, 'cause you don't, it'll be hard to do with broke legs. You boys carry him now, you won't have to scoot and pull him away with your teeth, ones you got left. Gumming him might be difficult. One way or another, though, it ain't gonna turn out spiffy for you fellows."

Dinosaur looked at me, then Leonard, then the older men. He looked at his friends. Nobody bowed up. No smart remarks were made. Dinosaur seemed small right then. They picked up David like he was a dropped puppet, tried to get him to stand, but they might as well have been trying to teach a fish how to ride a tricycle. They had to drag him across the street and into their car.

When they got David inside, the others got in, and Dinosaur went around to the driver's side. He shot us the finger. He said, "This ain't over."

"Better be," Jack Woolens said.

Dinosaur drove his friends out of there.

"We could have handled it," Leonard said.

"Maybe," I said.

"Shit," Leonard said. "We could."

"Now they're tough guys," Jack said to Chester. "It's all over, and now they're tough."

"We were tough enough," Leonard said, "and we could have got tougher."

"Leonard," Chester said, pulling car keys out of his pocket. "Bring the car around, and don't squeal the goddamn tires."

"Like he can't walk a few feet," Jack said. "Like he's got a lot to carry. A pair of shoes on lay-a-way he bought. He can walk."

I looked at Leonard and he grinned at me. I loved that grin.

Chester said. "I got the lumbago."

"Lumbago," Jack said. "Now the lumbago he gets."

Chester grunted, said to Leonard, "Get the car, kid."

Leonard looked at me, smiled, and went away to get it.

The Oak and the Pond

At one time there was a great oak tree behind the house where Leonard was living then, and the oak was deep in the woods, and it was one of the last of the great oaks. It stood tall and thick and ancient. It had great limbs you could crawl up on and stretch out on and sleep without real fear of rolling off.

We called it the Robin Hood tree, like the great tree where Robin and his merry band of men gathered to talk and feast. I also thought of it as the Tarzan tree, imagined how you could build a treehouse on its massive limbs and have plenty of room to live with a lithe, blonde Jane and do more than call elephants and swing on vines.

Leonard and I would meet at the oak, me having hiked through the woods from my place. My place wasn't all that far if you came by wooded path, then broke off the path and took a deer trail, and finally a winding trace through a series of tall blackjack oaks until you arrived at Fisherman's Creek. Across the creek the trees thinned in number but not in magnificence. There were sweet gums and hickory trees, and of course pines.

The Robin Hood tree was the granddaddy of them all. The oak rose higher and spread its limbs wider than all the others. Its bark was healthy and dark, and in the spring its leaves were green as

Ireland. To stand beneath it when it rained was a miracle, because the limbs were so thick and the leaves so plush that during the spring, and much of the summer, if not the fall when the leaves were brown and yellow and falling, you would hardly get wet. When it stormed the limbs shook like angry soldiers rattling their weapons, but the limbs didn't break, just old dead leaves and little branches dribbled down. The soil beneath the oak was thick and dark with many years of dropped and composted leaves. There were acorns on the ground, and sometimes when you came to the tree, squirrels were beneath it, rare black squirrels that made this part of the woods their home. They were in the tree too, chattering and fussing as you arrived.

Leonard and I met there many mornings, usually having a breakfast of boiled eggs we had brought in sacks, drinking coffee from our thermoses, carrying fishing gear and small coolers with our lunches in them.

We would sometimes sit there beneath the tree and talk, and finally we would go away from there, carrying our coolers, through the trees, and then along the creek line to where the pond was. It was a big pond, and at one point in time there had been a house near it. Now the house was a pile of gray lumber and rusty nails and a few bricks that showed where the fireplace had been. Beyond that was a clapboard barn that still stood, the great wide doors gone, probably taken for lumber for someone's project. Trees crowded it, and one sweet gum had grown up and under the roof and was pushing it loose on one side.

The pond had been dug maybe fifty years before and had been filled with fish, and we were fishing their descendants. There was a boat down there, one we had tediously carried there along the creek bank, and we left it for when we wanted to fish. No one bothered it, because no one came there anymore but us. The land was owned by someone up North who had mostly forgotten about it. The pond was always muddy, but the fish were thick. We caught them and generally threw them back, unless they were good-sized enough and fat. Then they went home with us and became our supper.

We fished there with cane poles, not rods and reels. It wasn't a place for rods and reels. It was a place for fishing in an old and simple way. We put lines on the poles, sinkers, corks, hooks, and bait, usually worms. Out in the boat we would dangle lines and watch the fish jump, the dragonflies dip down on the water, see the shadows of birds flying over, now and again there was the sight of a leaping frog or a wiggling water moccasin. Turtle heads rose like periscopes, then fell beneath the water with a delicate splash and a small ripple.

In the spring it was cool for a long time, and in the summer it grew hot, but with wide-brimmed hats on, we still fished, and we lazed, and sometimes we talked, softly, fearing we might frighten the fish. We talked about all manner of things we believed in, and how we differed from one another. I told Leonard about my women, and he told me about his men. We talked about brotherhood without speaking of it directly. I told bad jokes and Leonard grumbled.

When Leonard moved from the house next to the woods, and I later moved from where I lived, we lost that spot.

Some years later the people up North remembered the land, and they brought in pulp crews and cut the woods down, even the great and ancient oak, which must have fought the saws with its old, hard wood. But the saws won, and it tumbled down and was coated in gasoline and set on fire. They didn't even bother to make it into lumber. The land where it stood was a black spot for a long time.

They planted rows and rows of soft lumber pines to be cut and replanted every fifteen or twenty years a crop. People claim there are more trees now than before, but they are wrong. Once you could drive all through East Texas and there were trees as far as you could see, and not just pines either. The trees grew close to the roads and covered them in shadow. You don't have to go out in the woods and count trees one by one to know that the statements being made about there being more trees than ever before is a bald-faced lie. The pines they planted where the oak grew didn't shield you from rain or rattle in the wind the way the Robin Hood tree did.

Eventually, they filled in the pond, killing the fish. They dammed up the creek and made another, larger pond farther up, but it lacked charm, and finally scummed over. Nothing lived in it.

A company that raised chickens for a supermarket chain bought the land, and a series of long, commercial chicken houses took the place of the original pond and the woods that had surrounded it, even the pulp trees, which they also cut down and didn't replant. Now there is a wide gravel road that leads out of where the trees once grew, on to the highway. It's odd. Looking down that gravel road, you can see the highway so easy. It seemed farther away in the years before the road was there and the trees were cut.

Leonard wouldn't even look in the direction of the old place when we drove by. I look, but I don't like what I see. The rain still falls and the wind still blows, but the oak and the pond are gone.

Bent Twig

When I got in from work that night, Brett, my redhead, was sitting at the kitchen table. She didn't have a shift that week at the hospital, so I was surprised to see her up and about. It was two a.m. I had finished up being a night watchman at the dog food plant, hoping soon my buddy Leonard would be back from Michigan, where he had gone after someone in some case he had been hired out to do for our friend Marvin and the detective agency Marvin owned. We did freelance work like that from time to time.

There was no job for me in this one, and since Leonard was without a job at all and needed the money more than I did, he hired on. I had a temporary job at the dog food plant. It was okay, but mostly boring. The most exciting thing I had done was chase some rats I had caught in the feed storage room, nibbling on some bags of dog food, stealing chow out of some hound's mouth, so to speak. Those rats knew not to mess with me.

I kept hoping Marvin would have something for me so I could quit, but so far, nothing. I did have that week's paycheck from the dog food plant in my wallet, though.

"What are you doing up?" I asked.

"Worrying," she said.

I sat down at the table with her.

“We have enough money, right?”

“We got plenty for a change. It’s Tillie.”

“Oh, shit,” I said.

“It’s not like before,” Brett said. What she meant was a little of column A, a little of column B.

Column A was where she got in with a biker club as the local poke, and got hauled off to be a prostitute, partly on purpose, as it was her profession, and partly against her will because they didn’t plan to pay her. We had rescued her from that, me, Brett, and Leonard. She had then gone off and got into a series of domestic problems over in Tyler, but those were the sort of things Brett got her out of, or at least managed to avert catastrophe for awhile. Every time Brett mentioned Tillie, it meant she would be packing a bag, putting her job on hold, and going off for a few days to straighten some stupid thing out that never should have happened in the first place. Since she was Brett’s daughter I tried to care about her. But she didn’t like me and I didn’t like her. But I did love Brett, so I tried to be supportive as possible, but Brett knew how I felt.

“You have to go for a few days?” I asked.

“Maybe more to it.”

“How’s that?”

“She’s missing.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time she took a powder for awhile. You know how she is. Goes off without a word, comes back without one, unless she needs money or a tornado got the double-wide.”

“It’s not all her fault.”

“Brett, baby. Don’t give me the stuff about how you weren’t a good mother.”

“I wasn’t.”

“You were young yourself, and I don’t think you did all that bad. You had some circumstances, and you did what you could for her. She’s mostly a mess of her choosing.”

“Maybe.”

“But you’re not convinced.”

“It doesn’t matter. She’s my daughter.”

“You got me there,” I said.

“I got a call from a friend of hers. You don’t know her. Her name is Monica, and she’s all right. I think she’s got a better head on her shoulders than Tillie. I met her when I was there last. I think she’s been a pretty good guide for my girl. Fact is, I sort of thought Tillie was getting it together, and I’ve been keeping in touch with Monica about it. She called to say they were supposed to go to a movie, a girls’ night out. Only Tillie didn’t show. Didn’t call. And now it’s three days later. Monica said when she got over being mad, she got into being worried. Says the guy Tillie lives with, that he could be the problem. He used to run whores, and Tillie could easily fall back into that life. I mean . . . well, there’s a bit of a drug problem with the guy, and Tillie, sometimes. He could have gotten tough with Tillie. He might be trying to make some money off of her, or he might have got into something bad and Tillie got dragged with him.”

“Monica think he’s holding her at home?”

“Maybe worse.”

“I thought he was supposed to be all right.”

“Me too,” she said. “But lately, not so much. At first, he was a kind of Prince Charming, an ex-druggie who was doing good, then all of a sudden he didn’t want her out of the house, didn’t want her contacting anyone. Didn't want her seeing Monica. But Monica thinks it's because he was choosing who he wanted Tillie to see."

"Prostitution," I said.

Brett nodded. "Yeah, it's how those kind of guys play. Like they care about you, or they got some of the same problems they're kicking, and the next thing Tillie knows she's on the nose candy again and is selling her ass, and then pretty soon she's not getting any money from the sell. He gets it all."

"The pimp gets it all, keeps her drugged, and keeps the money flowing in."

"Yeah," Brett said. "Exactly. It's happened to her before, and you know that, so—"

"You're thinking it could happen again."

"Yeah," she said. "I am."

"Course it doesn't matter, and it may not have been planned. He may have just fallen off the wagon and grabbed her as he fell. After he got the prize he wanted, he didn't want to share it or show it around."

"He liked showing her around at first, all right," Brett said. "He liked her to dress sexy, and then if anyone looked, he was mad. She was for him, and yet he wanted to parade her and not have anyone look at the parade. Later on, he wanted to bring people to the parade. Maybe when his drug habit got bad. I don't know. I don't care. I just want to know she's safe."

"And you want me to check it out?"

"I want us to check it out."

"Let me drive back to the dog food plant and quit with prejudice first."

"Short notice," Brett said.

“I know,” I said. “But then so was this.”

It felt odd going off to see about something like this without Leonard. I liked having him around in these kind of circumstances. He helped strengthen my backbone. I liked to think I was already pretty firm in that area, but it never hurt to have your brother from another mother there to keep you feeling confident.

Tillie lived just outside of Tyler, between there and Bullock, a little burg outside of the city. Tyler wasn’t up there with Dallas and Houston, but it was a big town, or small city, depending on how you liked your labels. A hundred thousand or so, with lots of traffic, illegal immigrants, and college students. The immigrants they liked to hire to get work done cheap, then use them for every scapegoat situation possible, forgetting they wouldn’t even be there to blame for what they did and for what they didn’t do if they weren’t offered the jobs in the first place.

When we got to Tillie’s house we found two cars in the carport. Brett said, “That’s Tillie’s and Robert’s cars. Both cars are here.”

I went over and knocked on the front door, but no one answered. It’s hard to explain, but sometimes you knock, you know someone’s inside, and other times it has a hollow feel, like you’re tapping on a sun-bleached skull, thinking a brain that isn’t inside of it anymore is going to wake up. And sometimes you’re just full of shit and whoever is inside is hiding. I remember my mother doing that from time to time when a bill collector came around. I always wondered if they knew we were inside, hiding out on paying the rent we hadn’t earned yet, but would pay, hiding out from paying a car payment, hoping they wouldn’t haul the car away.

I went around back and knocked, but got the same lack of response. I walked around the house with Brett and we looked in windows when there was a window to look in. Most were covered with blinds or curtains, but the kitchen window at the back had the curtains pulled back, and we could see inside by cupping our hands around our faces and pressing them against the glass. There was nothing to see, though.

Finally we went back out to my car. We leaned on the hood.

I said, “You want me to get inside?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I called the police yesterday, well, it was the sheriff ’s department, but they wouldn’t do anything.”

“Not twenty-four hours?” I said.

“Actually, it has been. Over. But the thing is, they’ve dealt with her before.” I didn’t know all the details on that, but I figured as much. Tillie tended to get in trouble, run off from time to time, so they weren’t quick on using man power to chase a sometime prostitute and drug user, and full-time pain in the ass.

“Okay,” I said. “Going to make an executive decision. I’m going to break in.”

There were houses around, but no activity, and I didn’t see anyone parting the curtains for a peek, so I got a lock-picking kit out of the glove box that I use with the agency from time to time, went around back, and got to it. I’m not that good a lockpick, and to tell the truth, it’s seldom like on TV, least for me. It always takes awhile. This door was easy though, so it only took me about five minutes, and then me and Brett were inside.

Brett called out. “Tillie. Robert. It’s Mom.”

No one answered. Her words bounced off the wall.

“Hang by the door,” I said.

I went through the house, looked in all the rooms. There was no one handy, but in the living room a chair and a coffee table were turned over, some drink of some kind spilled on the floor and gone sticky, a broken glass nearby. I went back and told Brett what I had seen.

“Maybe now we can get the law interested,” I said.

Outside, out back, I saw there was a thin trail of blood drops. I hadn’t noticed it before, but now, coming out of the house and with the sun just right, I could see it. It looked like someone had dropped rubies of assorted size in the grass. I said, “Brett, honey. Go out to the car and sit behind the wheel. Here are the keys in case you need to leave. And if you do, leave. Don’t worry about me.”

“Bullshit,” she said. “We’ll get the gun out of the glove box.”

I have a concealed carry permit, but I seldom carry the gun. Fact is, I don’t like the idea of one, but in my line of work, and I don’t just mean watchman at the dog food plant, the other stuff sometimes requires one.

We went and got the pistol out of the glove box, an old-style revolver, and walked after the blood drops.

It trailed into the woods, and then we didn’t see much of it anymore. We went along the trail a bit more, and I saw where something had been pulled into the bushes, mashing them down. We went up in there and found a body lying on the ground. It was lying facedown. I shouldn’t have moved the body, but I nudged it with my foot so as to turn it over. The face looking up at me was that of a young man and it had eyes full of ants and the victim’s nose was flattened and scraped where it had been dragged along the ground. There was a bullet hole in the chest, or so I assumed. I had seen a few of them, and it had been delivered right through the shirt pocket. I could see there was another one in his right side. I figured one shot had wounded him, he had made a break for it, and whoever shot him caught up with him and shot him again, then dragged him in the bushes. I also noted the man had tattoos up and down both arms, and not very good ones. They looked as if they had been put there by a drunk trying to write in Sanskrit and hieroglyphics. Either that or a cellmate.

Brett was standing right there with me. She said, “That’s him.”

“Meaning Robert, Tillie’s boyfriend.”

“Yeah,” she said, and started looking around. Me too. I sort of expected to find her daughter’s body, but we didn’t. We even went back to the house and walked through it without handling anything but the doorknob, just in case we had missed Tillie on first pass, stuffed under a bed, in a closet, or in a freezer. They didn’t have a freezer and she wasn’t under the bed or in a closet.

I put my pistol back in the glove box of the car and called 911.

What they sent out was a young guy wearing an oversized pair of pants and a badge as shiny as a child’s Christmas dreams. He had a gun on his hip that was large enough to think he might have been expecting elephants to give him trouble. He had on a cowboy hat that seemed too tall, the brim too wide. He looked like someone playing shoot ’em up. He told me he was a deputy.

There was another guy with him, older, sitting on the passenger side of the car. The young guy got out and the old guy didn’t. He just opened the door and sat there. He looked like a man waiting for retirement and not sure he'd make it. He might have been forty, but there was something in his face that made him seem older. He had a smaller gun on his hip. I could see that clearly, and he had a cowboy hat on his knee.

The younger man listened to us make our statement. He looked interested, and wrote some stuff down on a notepad. I told him I had a gun in my glove box and I had a permit, just so things wouldn't get dicey in case they found it later. After a time, the older man got out of the car and came over. He said, "You get it all down, Olford?"

"Yes, sir," said the deputy.

I saw then that the guy in front of us had a badge that said SHERIFF on it. It looked very much like those kind of badges we used to buy as kids, ones came with a cap gun and no caps. You had to buy those separate.

He asked us some of the same questions, just to see if we'd trip up, I figure. He didn't look at me much when I answered. He studied Brett constantly. I didn't blame him. She looked fine, as always. Long red hair tumbling over her shoulders, great body kept firm through exercise, and the kind of face that would make Wonder Woman beat herself in the head with a hammer.

"Walk me," said the sheriff to me.

"I'm coming too," Brett said. "I'm no shrinking violet."

"I bet you aren't," said the sheriff. "Olford, you go sit in the car and get your notes straight."

"They're straight, Sheriff," Olford said.

"Go sit in the car anyway," he said.

We walked along a ways. The sheriff, who we learned was named Nathan Hews, said, "Olford is the mayor's boy. Whatcha gonna do?”

“Did he get his uniform from Goodwill?” I asked.

“Don’t be disrespectful,” the sheriff said. “He stole that off a wash line.”

We came to the body. I said, “I turned him over.”

“Not supposed to do that,” Sheriff Hews said.

“I know. But I checked to see if he was alive.”

“When they look like this, facedown or faceup, you got to know they’re dead.”

“Maybe,” I said.

“You know something,” the sheriff said. “You called things in, said who you two were, I made some calls, checked some things out. The chief over in LaBorde, he said you’re a real pain in the ass. That you usually run with a black guy named Leonard.”

“Yep, that’s me,” I said. “I mean, I run with a black guy named Leonard. I don’t know about the pain in the ass part.”

“I think you do,” he said. “Chief told me some things.”

“Blabbermouth,” I said.

When we finished looking at the body, we walked back to the car. The sheriff had Olford get a camera out of their car and go out and take some pictures.

“We don’t have a real team,” he said. “There’s me, Olford, one other deputy, and a dispatcher. Sometimes we get free doughnuts though.”

“That’s keeping in form,” I said.

“You betcha,” he said. He looked at Brett. “You seem to be holding up well, considering your daughter is missing and a man is dead.”

He was still playing us, trying to see we had anything to do with the business that had gone down.

“Trust me,” Brett said. “I’m worried sick.”

We had to stay at a motel for a couple of hours before the sheriff showed up with a lack of information. “We didn’t find your daughter,” he said to Brett. “That could be good news.”

“Could be,” Brett said. What the sheriff had missed in his absence was Brett breaking down and crying, but he probably noticed the red in her eyes. She listened to what he had to say and went into the bathroom and closed the door.

He said to me, “Listen, I’m going to square with you. Going to tell you what you probably have already figured. I’m a one-horse sheriff in a one-horse town with two deputies that are working their first murder case. They’re more suited to chasing down renegade cats and dogs and figuring out who stole whose graham crackers at the nursery school. If we had one. I’m not telling you to go off on your own, and there’s bigger law can be brought into this. But I was you, from what I know about you, I’d tell you on the sly, which is what I’m doing now, just in case you don’t get it, to do some looking on your own.”

I nodded, said, “You got any idea where I should start?”

“I said I was a one-horse sheriff, but I once upon a time did some city work. I came here so I’d see fewer bodies. So far, I’ve seen fewer. This is the first murder that isn’t a suicide I’ve seen in five years. The dead man is Robert Austin, he was for some shit. The girl, your woman’s daughter, word was she did some business, if you know what I mean.”

“That word is probably good,” I said.

“This guy, Robert, sold drugs and sold her. Town like this, people who used her services . . . well, everyone knows. Everyone here knows the size of their neighbor’s turds and can tell one’s stink from the other. Thing is, Robert, he was most likely selling drugs for Buster Smith. Buster runs a Gospel Opry show over in Marvel Creek.”

“I was born there,” I said.

“Then you know the place. Used to be tough as a doorstop and sharp as a razor. All that booze out there on Hell’s half mile. Now it’s a town known for antiques and all the tonks are gone. The Gospel Opry, well, they say that’s a cover for old Buster. Marvel Creek sees him as a pious businessman. Me, I see him as a man gives real Christians like me a bad name.”

“All right,” I said.

“He’s about fifty with slicked-back hair and a very cool manner. Wears awful plaid sports jackets all the time. I’ve met him a time or two, when I was over that way. I even went to the Opry once. Good entertainment. But the word kept drifting back about him, and though it’s rumor, I’ve come to believe it. He’s an operator living a simple life on the surface, putting himself in a squeaky clean front while he does the bad stuff out the back door. He’s got everyone that matters over there in his pocket.

“Another thing, there’s a guy named Kevin Crisper hangs out at the Go-Mart here, sits on a bench out front. It’s his bench. He works his drug deals there, and rumor is, though we can’t prove it, he works for Buster. I keep a watch on him, but so far I haven’t caught him doing what he shouldn’t be doing. He has a guy or two to help him out. They all got a few snags on their arrest sheet, but nothing that keeps them anywhere behind bars. I mean, I know what they’re doing, and I can’t prove it. I can’t do to them what needs to be done. Thing is, though, Kevin Crisper does sales of drugs and gets a percentage. Buster gets the lion’s share because he provides the goods. At least the dope. Tillie, and I want to say this before your girlfriend comes back, she was a self-operator, but word was she was getting pretty deep in the drugs, and that maybe she didn’t know if she was about to shit or go blind. She was down in the dead zone with one brain cell or two for a life preserver, and that was it. Robert, he might have been farming her out through this Kevin. Probably was. And Tillie, like I said, she might as well have been a blow-up sex doll, way her mind was messed up.”

“And you know all this and couldn’t do nothing?” I said.

“That’s right,” he said. “Isn’t that nice? Listen here, chief in LaBorde said you were smarter than you looked, so I’m thinking what I said before. There’s stuff you can do I can’t. Law and all. But, you get caught doing it, I didn’t tell you to do it, and you say I did, I’ll call you a big fat liar. I’ll even arrest you. How’s that for modern law enforcement?”

“I can live with it,” I said.

It took some doing, but I finally talked Brett into letting me take her home. I called Leonard on my cell, but he didn’t answer his. I left him a message. I drove over to downtown Bullock, which was a cross street, and went over to the Go-Mart and found Kevin Crisper. He was a man in his forties trying to look thirty. He had similar tattoos to Robert. Kevin looked like a man who had been soaked down wet and overheated in a microwave. Skin like that was last seen on Tutankhamun’s mummy. That said, he had muscular arms, the kind of muscles some people are born with, long and stringy and deceptively strong.

I walked over to him, said, “I hear you can sell me some things.”

“Some things?” he said. “What kind of things? I look like I got something to sell? Pots and pans? Maybe gloves or shoes?”

“I was told you had some entertainments. Guy named Robert told me. You are Kevin, right?”

“Yeah, that’s me.” Kevin lifted his head, said, “When did Robert tell you that?”

I backdated the time, just in case Kevin had some idea when Robert bit the big one. I added, “He said there’s a girl that could do me some favors, you know. For some money.”

“You heard all that, huh?”

“I did.”

“He didn’t offer just to take care of you himself?”

“He said he worked for you, and that I should talk to you.”

“That’s funny he should say that,” he said.

“Look, you got the goods or you don’t. I got money. I want some services. I’d like to party with a girl and I’d like to make myself right. You know where I’m coming from.”

He nodded. “Say I know how to get this girl, the stuff you want to get right, you think I’d have it on me? Think I got that girl’s pussy in my back pocket along with a sack of blow?”

“That would be handy, if you did.”

“Listen here, tell you what. I like Robert, and since he sent you, I got a place where you can come for the stuff, and the girl. We don’t use a motel. There ain’t but one and everyone knows everyone.”

“So where is this place?”

“You going to be around tonight?”

“Could be.”

“You want some leg and some head-twister, then you got to be around.”

“Head-twister?”

“Stuff I’m selling. It’s a mixture. You take this stuff your dick gets hard, your head gets high, and you’ll have so much fun you’ll drive over and slap your mama.”

“That right?”

“Way I hear. Course, I don’t sample that shit myself.”

“That’s not much of a selling point,” I said.

“Oh, it’s not that. I sample the girl, of course, but the rest of it, that’s product man. You dip into your own product, especially with it being available, you can get in Dutch pretty quick.”

He gave me a time and an address. I thanked him and tried to look excited. I drove over to the one café and parked out front and sat behind the wheel and called Leonard again. I had some idea that the Michigan thing was near wrapped up, that he ought to be driving back down and in Texas by now, but it appeared it had taken more time than expected because I got the same thing. No answer. I left him a detailed message, even told him where I was supposed to be and at what time. I gave him the same directions Kevin had given me. I went in the café and had some coffee and a sandwich. I figured I might want to be fortified. I bought a sack lunch and an axe handle at the feed store and put it in the car, and then I drove out to where I was supposed to meet Kevin. Only thing was, I was four hours early.

I tried Leonard a few more times, leaving the same directions, but whatever he was up to, it didn't involve having his phone on. The location Kevin gave me was not deep in the woods, but it was out of town, which would of course suit his kind of services. But since I didn't think Tillie, possibly the only lady working the grid, so to speak, was truly available, and since I knew Robert was dead as a pair of post-hole diggers, and had a suspicion Kevin knew it as well, I thought I wouldn't rely on his hospitality to bring Tillie straight to me. Me and Brett and Leonard had rescued her once before, a few years back, from something stupid she had gotten herself into that sounded a lot like this, and frankly, there was a part of me that wanted to leave her to it. I couldn't do that because she was Brett's daughter. That was the big part. The other part was I was me. I seem to be one of those guys that would help a rabid dog across the street if I thought it were confused on directions.

I thought over the directions I had been given, and then varied from them. I found a little road to go down, a hunting trail, and then a little path off of it. I parked there and hoped no one found my car and decided they'd like to hot-wire it and drive it off, or, for that matter, just vandalize it. I got my pistol out of the glove box and stuck it in the pants at the base of my spine, and pulled my shirt over it. I got the food I had bought extra, a hamburger and fries and a canned Diet Coke, tucked the axe handle under my arm, and walked to where I understood the meeting place to be.

When I could see the house, which seemed pretty rickety and set off partly in the woods, I was pretty sure my suspicions were confirmed. Anyone coming here expecting pussy and drugs was a dumbass. I wasn't actually expecting either, but I was a dumbass, because here I was. I went to the house and checked the door. It was locked. I went around back. The door there was locked too, but it was thin. I thought that would be my surprise entrance, kicking the door down. I could do it now, and wait on him, but if he came around back, or that was his preferred way of entering, the joke could be on me.

I walked off in the woods to the left of the place and found a tumbled-down tree to sit on. I had my supper, which was alright if you had no taste buds and your stomach was made of cast iron. I only ate a few of the french fries, being as how they were greasy enough to give a garden statue the shits. I drank the Diet Coke and ate the burger. The meat seemed suspicious, but I was already hungry. I always got hungry when I thought I might kill someone or get killed myself.

As it grew dark, mosquitoes came out and buzzed around, and a few bit me. I wondered if they were carrying the West Nile virus, or maybe something worse. I slapped at them. I caught a chigger on its way up my pants leg, heading for my balls; I felt proud to have rescued them.

After a while I saw Kevin drive up and park and go inside the house. I saw a light go on. He didn't have Tillie with him. He didn't seem to have anything with him. He was early too. I thought I would wait a few minutes, then surprise him. I looked at my watch. I'd give him a few minutes to feel secure, then I'd surprise him. Course, if he had a gun, which he would have, the surprise would be on me. Course, I had one too, but when guns come into play, anything can happen.

I thought about this, and I thought about that, and then I thought I felt something cold at the base of my skull, and since this was the dead of summer, even if it was just now dark, I knew it wasn’t a cold breeze.

It was a gun barrel.

I can’t explain how much like a dick I felt. Here I was putting the sneak on them, and they had put the sneak on me. I turned around slowly. A short fat man with a face that looked like it had been used for missile targeting, it had so many pocks, was smiling about fifteen thousand dollars of much-needed dental work at me.

“I could shoot you, you know,” he said.

“Yep,” I said.

“What we’re gonna do is we’re gonna walk up there and see Kevin. Stand up first.”

I stood up, leaving the axe handle on the log. He patted me down with one hand and found my pistol and stuck it in one of his baggy pants pockets. He picked up the axe handle with his free hand and tapped my shoulder with it.

“Walk on up to the house,” he said.

I was getting old, I figured. Any other time I would have been prepared. Or so I told myself. I had thought I was being smart getting there early, but they had put the sneak on me, putting moon-crater face in the woods to wait, and Kevin to come up like a staked goat.

“There’s a road behind the woods here, dickhead,” said Moon Crater. “I come up on that, then through the woods. I hid out and waited. I thought I might have to do some serious sneaking, but you picked a spot not that far from me. It was easy, man. Kevin said he thought you thought you were a smart guy, but you’re not really so smart, are you?”

"I have to agree with that," I said.

In the house Kevin was waiting. He said, "No snatch or juice for you, huh? Course, that isn't what you were coming for, were you? I didn't like your looks from the start."

"You ain't got no mirrors at your house?"

Moon Crater whacked me across the back of the legs with the axe handle hard enough I went to my knees.

"I got a suspicion you got some other reason to see me. I got a suspicion you might be looking for Tillie, or Robert. I got to tell you, I think you know Robert's dead."

"You got me," I said. "I know he's dead. What about Tillie?"

"She's all right, but she won't be long," Kevin said. "Mr. Smith likes to get all the juice out of a product before he lets it go. He gets her hot-wired enough on something or another, he can sell her out until there's nothing to sell, you know. She then gets a hot shot, looks like an accident. They find her in a ditch somewhere with toadstools growing out of her ass."

"Robert didn't look like an accident."

"He proved more of a problem. Things got out of hand. You see, he was dipping, him and the cunt. We don't like dippers, unless maybe it's with chips and dip."

Kevin and Moon Crater liked that. Both of them laughed. I figured they didn't get out much.

"Get him in the chair," Kevin said.

They were ready for me. The chair was arranged in the middle of the floor. I did have a nice view through a window when Kevin moved out from in front of it, which he did from time to time. I could tell he lied about sampling his product. He had some of it in him right then, and it was giving him a nervous twitch. They put me in the chair and Moon Crater tied my legs and arms to it with rope while Kevin held Moon Crater's gun on me. When I was good and tied, Kevin said, "Now you got to tell me what you're up to."

"You can take a running leap up a donkey's ass," I said.

"Oh, that's not nice," Kevin said. "Jubil, hold this gun."

Jubil, aka Moon Crater, took the pistol. Kevin picked up my axe handle. I knew I was going to regret having bought that. He swung it hard against my shins. The pain jumped from my leg to my spine to the base of my brain. For a moment I thought I was going to be sick to my stomach and black out.

"That's got to hurt," Kevin said.

"You think?" I said. It wasn't much, and it wasn't good, but it was something, even if it sounded as if it were coming from a very small man under a pillow in the corner.

Kevin went over and put the axe handle by the front door. He reached in his pocket and took out a long pocketknife. He flipped it open.

"This house was left to me by old Grandma. It's not much, but I come here now and then for things. And I got a sentimental spot for it, even if it is starting to go bad. That being the case, what I want to say is, I don't want to bloody it up, I don't have to. So, for your sake, and mine, you should talk."

"I talk, you're just going to let me go?" I said.

"Sure," Kevin said.

"Bullshit," I said.

"Okay, you're right. I'm gonna kill you. But I can make it quick, a cut throat. Nasty to think about, but it gets over quick. Bleeds out good. Robert, I ended up having to shoot him a couple of times. Not so good. He was in pain right up until that last bullet. You, I can make you last a long time with this here knife."

"So my choice is I talk and you cut my throat, or I don't talk and you cut on me awhile till I do?"

"That's it," he said.

Right then, by the window, I saw Leonard's head go by. I stalled. I said, "So what would you like to know? I might have some answers, long as it doesn't involve math problems."

"Okay. First, who the fuck are you?"

I said, "I'm a census collector."

"That's going to get you cut," Kevin said. "I'm going to have to take an ear."

"Before you do," I said, "I really need to tell you something."

"What would that be?" Kevin said.

"Hell is coming," I said.

At that moment the door burst open, propelled forward by Leonard's foot. Leonard spied the axe handle, and he had it in his free hand before you could say, "My, is that an axe handle?"

Leonard said, striding forward, "Queer, roughhouse nigger, coming through."

He stepped forward quick and caught Moon Crater in the teeth with a left-handed swing of the handle. It knocked Moon Crater to the floor, sending the gun spinning away from him.

The light caught the black gleam of Leonard's close-shaved head, and it danced in his eyes, it danced along the length of the brand-new axe handle. The axe handle cut through the air like a hot knife through butter. When Kevin met the wood there was a sound like someone slapping a belt on a leather couch, and then there were teeth and there was enough blood flying out of Kevin's mouth I was sure Grandma's house was ruined. It splattered on the wall and on the window, teeth clattered on the floor.

Kevin hit the floor on his belly, dropped the knife. He tried to crawl for it, but Leonard stomped his hand and the axe handle came down again. This time it was a sound more like someone chopping the neck off a turkey with a meat cleaver.

Kevin didn't move after that lick, but just for good measure, Leonard hit him again. He went over then to Moon Crater, who was trying to get up, and kicked him in the mouth. That dental work Moon Crater already needed was going to cost a lot more now.

When Kevin came awake, he was strapped to the chair where I had been. Leonard was nearby, leaning on the axe handle, I was squatted down in front of Kevin. Moon Crater was still stretched out on the floor. If he wasn't dead or in a coma, he probably down deep in some part of his being wished he was.

"Howdy," I said.

"Fuck you," Kevin said, but it was hard to be sure if that was actually what he said. He was spitting up blood.

"If you leave here," I said, "and it's possible, you might want to pick up your teeth, not confusing them with the gems that were in Jubil's mouth. You might want to put them in a glass of water and freeze them. I hear they can do wonders with knocked-out teeth now."

"Who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Hap, and this is my brother, Leonard. But you two have already met."

"Glad to make your fucking acquaintance," he said.

I stood up, turned to Leonard. "I didn't think you were coming."

“I was on my way home when you called. Started driving back two days ago, but I was in a blind spot for the phone. Bottom land. I got your message a little late.”

“Not too late, though.”

I turned back to Kevin. “Kevin,” I said, “you and me, we got to talk, and I got to get some answers, and if I like them, I’m not even going to cut your throat.”

They told us Tillie had been taken by the Gospel Opry guy, Buster Smith, and that Kevin and Moon Crater had helped him take her. She was in an old theater. I knew the theater. I was from Marvel Creek, and when I was growing up I went to many movies there. They had a stage at that theater, a movie screen behind it. They had kid shows and they brought out clowns and jugglers and special entertainment. It was awful and I was always glad when they got off the stage and turned off the light, leaving me with the roaches and a movie.

Leonard didn’t want to leave them with their car and he decided he didn’t want to fuck it up. He wanted to fuck them up. I don’t like that sort of thing, but, hey, what you gonna do? They started it.

Leonard put them in the trunk of his car and I followed in mine after he dropped me off. We took them into the river bottoms. Leonard let them out of the trunk. They got out, though neither felt well. Leonard had really laid that axe handle on them. He said, “Thing I’m going to do is break both your legs. One a piece.”

“No need in that, Leonard,” I said.

“I know. I just want to do it.”

“Look now,” said Kevin. “Listen to your friend. We just work for that dickhead. We’re out of it. We hope you get the girl back.”

“Oh, we’ll get her back if she’s to be gotten back,” Leonard said. “But here’s the thing. You were going to kill my friend. Had I not showed up, you would have. So, which leg?”

Kevin and Moon Crater looked at me.

“He’s sort of got his mind made up,” I said. “And you were going to kill me.”

“But we’ll die out here if our legs are broke,” Moon Crater said.

“Don’t be so goddamn dramatic,” Leonard said. “You’ll still be able to crawl, maybe find a stick to support yourself or something. Really, it’s not our problem.

“Which leg?” Leonard said. “Or I choose.”

“Left,” Kevin said. Moon Crater didn’t choose. “But—”

Before Kevin could protest again, Leonard swung that axe handle. It whistled, caught the man on the side of the knee, which is where it’s the weakest. I heard a sound like someone breaking a rack of pool balls. Kevin screamed and went down holding his knee.

“One,” Leonard said.

Moon Crater made a break for it. I owed Leonard one, so I chased Moon Crater down and grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around and threw a right cross into his face, and his face took it. He fell down. Before he could get up Leonard was there with the axe handle. I think it took about three whacks for Leonard to catch him good, I don’t really remember. I looked away. But, I think it was the right leg.

We drove Leonard’s car to a church lot, which struck us as ironic, and I drove us in mine over to Marvel Creek. I said, “What if those guys get out of the woods and call? Warn Buster.”

“It’s miles to their car,” Leonard said. “It’s miles to Bullock. They got broke legs. Besides, it was you didn’t want me to kill them. Up to me, they’d be in the Sabine River somewhere with fish nibbling on them.”

“You are cold, man,” I said.

“Absolutely,” Leonard said.

We thought we’d stake out the Gospel Opry, but when we drove by, there was action there. A big crowd. Leonard said, “They’re loading them inside. What is it? Nine? Ten o’clock? I didn’t know Jesus stayed up this late.”

“True. He’s usually early to bed and early to rise.”

I got my gun and put it under my shirt in the small of my back. We left the axe handle in the backseat with its memories. As we walked up, we saw the crowd was growing.

I said to an old man on a cane, “What’s up?”

“The Gospel Opry usually. Talent show tonight, though. Y’all don’t know about it?”

“No,” I said. “We don’t.”

“It’s more fun than a barrel of monkeys. There’s people who sing and dance and do comedy. Good clean fun.” He looked at Leonard. “You’ll be able to get in, son. I remember when your color couldn’t.”

“My, how times have changed,” Leonard said.

I glanced around and saw a line going through another door, off to the side. I said to the old man, “Who are they?”

“The talent. They signed up to perform.”

Leonard said, “Come on, Hap.”

We got in line at the talent door.

“More fun than a barrel of monkeys,” I said, “and they let your kind in, Leonard.”

“Well, suh, I sho’ is beholding to some peckerwoods for that. Sho’ is.”

Inside there was a little man at a desk. He wore a bad wig. He asked us our name. We gave him our first names. Leonard said we were a singing act.

The little man couldn’t find us on the roster, of course.

“We were set,” I said. “We called ahead and everything. They think we’re the bee’s knees over in Overton.”

“Overton is so small you can throw a rock across it,” the man said.

“Yep, but we’re still big there,” I said.

He thought about it a moment, said, “Look here. There’s a couple of guys who play bagpipes that canceled. Laundry lost their kilts or some such something. I’ll give you their spot. You didn’t get registered, but it’ll work out. So you sing?”

“Like fucking birds,” Leonard said.

The man looked at him, grinned slowly. Jesus didn’t seem to always be at his house. He waved us inside, and we went.

“A singing group?” I said.

“The bee’s knees,” Leonard said.

Way it worked is we were guided backstage. There were a lot of acts there. One old man had on what looked like a sergeant’s uniform. He was potbellied, bald, and looked as if he should have been on oxygen. He had a ventriloquist dummy with him. It was dressed up like a private, with a field cap and everything. I got to tell you, I seriously hate me some ventriloquist dummies. When I was a kid, late at night, I caught an old movie titled *Dead of Night*, an anthology film. One of the sections was about a man and a ventriloquist dummy that takes over his life. It scared the living dogshit out of me. I see a block of wood that might be carved into a ventriloquist dummy, I get nervous. And this dummy looked as if the rats and someone with an ice pick had been at him.

"How long you been doing this?" I said.

He wheezed a moment before answering. "I used to make real money at it. No one will have me now, except these talent shows, some kids' parties. I don't do as well as I once did. They got the goddamn Internet now. Oh, you boys won't tell on me, will you? They like us to watch our language."

"We won't say a fucking word," Leonard said.

The old man laughed. He leaned in close. "Neither of you boys got a drink, do you?"

We admitted that we didn't.

"That's all right, then. Just wondering." He shook the doll a little, causing dust to stir up. "Private Johnson is getting worn out. My wife took a knife to him once, and used him to beat me over the head. It did some damage to him and me. I fart, it blacks me out and I wake up wearing a tutu."

He barked then at his joke, and then he carried on. "I haven't had the money to get him fixed. I act like the one eyelid he's got that droops is just part of the act. It adds character."

"Sure it does," I said. "You'll knock them dead."

I hoped he didn't knock himself dead. He was red-faced and breathing heavy and looked as if he might blow a major hose at any moment. Maybe his talk about farting and blacking out wasn't just a joke.

We all stood there in line, looking out at the stage. There were some dance acts going on out there. The band sounded like cows dying. The dancers moved like they had wooden legs. Next a young, beak-nosed man who played a fiddle so bad it sounded like he was sawing on a log did his act. It was the kind of noise that made your asshole pucker.

"The sisters will win this thing," said the old man. "I ain't seen them yet, but they'll probably show soon. Those dried-upcunt bitches. They enter every week and win the five hundred dollars. It's those damn hymns. It gets the Jesus going in folks, and they feel like they got to vote for them. Shit, I'm up."

The old man waddled out with that horrible doll, picked up a stool on the way out. His act was so painful I thought I might use a curtain rope to hang myself, but at the same time I admired the old bastard. He wasn't a quitter. He wheezed and tried to throw his voice, but by the end of his act the dummy looked healthier than he did.

He came back with his doll and stool. He sat on the stool. "I tried to hit a high note there, when Private sang 'Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy,' and I damn near shit on myself. I think one of my rib bones moved."

"You did fine," I said.

"I did fine about fifty years ago and it was a spring morning and I had just knocked off a piece of ass. I did fine then. Least that's how I like to remember it. Might have been a hot afternoon in the dead of summer and it might have been a stump broke cow."

"Just sit there and rest," I said.

"You're all right," he said to me. "Sure you haven't a drink?"

"Sure," I said.

There was another dance troupe on stage, and a guy with some bowling pins he was going to juggle was next in line. Leonard and I glanced around, trying to take in the place. It didn't look like a joint where a prostitute would be kept, or in this case made to go for free until she was used up. It didn't look like a place where someone sold drugs. It looked like a place full of bad entertainment. That's what made it a good hideout, of course, but I wasn't convinced.

I noticed that the acts that finished were ushered along a certain path, and that there were two guys on either side of a dark stairway. They didn't look like church deacons, but I decided to call them that in my mind. I left Leonard and walked over to the stairway, looked up it. I said, "What's up there?"

One of the men stepped forward, said, "That's private, sir."

I went back to Leonard. I said, "There's a whole nuther floor up there."

"There's a stairway on the other side of the stage too," he said. "You can see it from here. It's got bookends on either side of it too."

I looked. Sure enough, two more guys. If the two near us were not church deacons, those two were not in the choir. Upstairs could have just been a storage place for hymn books, but I doubted it.

"Buster don't work the brothers," Leonard said. "All white thugs."

"It may not seem that long ago to them that your kind couldn't come in, and it may be they liked it like that."

"That really isn't true," Leonard said. "They did come in here, and you know it."

"They did janitor work," I said, "and they used to come up the stairs at the back and sat up there in the balcony."

"Nigger money was good as any," Leonard said. "I know. I sat up there in the balcony once and spat on a white boy's head."

"You did not," I said.

"No, but now and again I like to dream."

We were whispering a game plan, when all of a sudden the little fellow that had signed us in came over. He said, "The Honey Girls are sick."

"Who?" I said.

"The gospel singers I told you about," said the old ventriloquist, who had come over. "Their adult diapers probably got bunched up and they couldn't make it. Or they heard that young girl come on and sing and left. I know they were here. I seen them, the smug assholes."

"That'll be enough," said the little man.

"Sorry," said the ventriloquist, and he waddled back to his stool.

I had my mind on other things, and hadn't even noticed the young girl, not really. But in the back of my mind I sort of remembered her doing a Patsy Cline number, and not badly at all.

"Honey Sisters say they got sick," said the little man.

"Both of them?" Leonard said.

"It hit them sudden, so you two are on next."

"Oh," I said.

Leonard grabbed my elbow, "Come on, I still remember 'The Old Rugged Cross.'"

"You're yanking me," I said. "We're really going out there?"

"I sing in the shower," Leonard said. "I do all right."

"Oh, hell," I said.

Well, we went out there, and I knew that old tune too. I am an atheist, but I like a good gospel tune now and again. We didn't have any music, but there was the house band and they knew the tune, sort of, though I didn't remember it with a tuba solo. We started out with it. Leonard was good, actually; he sounded way all right. I sort of chimed in when he lifted a hand to me, but after a few lines I forgot the words, so I started singing nonsense. An old lady in the front row in a wheelchair said, "Get the hook."

Leonard finished out while I snapped my fingers and tried to look cool. I think had I had sunglasses, I could have pulled it off.

When we finished, or more or less quit, they were glad to see us go. Someone even threw a wadded-up paper cup at me. Fucker missed.

When we exited on the other side, Leonard said, "Damn, Hap. You fucked it up. We could have won that prize money. Or I could have."

"I didn't make us out as a duet, since we have never sang together even once. I never intended to go out there."

"I've always wanted to do that."

"You sounded all right," I said, "but don't be thinking of it as a second job."

"As for you," Leonard said, "you don't be thinking of it at all. Now, let's see if we can find Tillie."

"If she's alive," I said.

"She's alive, they are going to pay for it. If she's dead, they're going to pay for it, and then pay a dividend."

I didn't even like Tillie, but I sure liked Brett. Brett called her a bent twig. She'd say, "Hap, she's a bent twig, but she's not broken. She can weather the storm and come out on the other side."

She was pretty much still in the storm as far as I was concerned, but if the information we had was right, she didn't deserve this; this was even worse than what should happen to politicians. We headed toward the staircase on the side where we exited, near the choirboys. A man over there pointed us toward an exit. He was a chubby guy in a faded, purple leisure suit old enough to belong in a museum. He said, “That was bad, boys. Real bad.”

We ignored him and headed for the staircase.

“Not over there,” he said, and he grabbed my sleeve. I shook him loose and kept going. I had a feeling that most everyone here had no idea what was going on upstairs, no idea that the man who ran the Gospel Opry was about as reverent and kind as the business end of a hatchet.

“Those guys don’t kid,” said the man who had grabbed my sleeve. He was talking about the two boys at the stairs. They stepped out, one toward me, one toward Leonard.

The choirboy on my side said, “You don’t come this way.”

I kicked him in the balls and he bent a little and I hit him with a right hook. He went against the wall and came off of it mad. I hit him again, a straight right to the jaw. He went to one knee and tried to draw a pistol from under his coat. I pulled mine and hit him in the head with it. He went to his hands and knees, and I hit him again. He kind of bent his elbows like he had failed to do a push-up and lay on the floor. It was then that I noticed my leg where Kevin had hit me with the axe handle was really aching. I noticed this because I was going to kick him again and decided against it.

I looked over at Leonard. His man was already unconscious at the base of the stairs. I think he took him out with one good punch. I rolled my man over and took his gun. I had one in either hand, now. I went up the stairs behind Leonard. Back on stage I heard laughter. Someone had finally succeeded at something. A joke maybe.

When I got to the top of the stairs, Leonard had taken an automatic off of the man he had hit and he had it at the ready. I turned and looked down, wondering if the deacons across the way knew what we were up to. If they didn't, they would soon. I figured the man who grabbed my sleeve would tell them. He might not know what really went on here, but he knew who he worked for.

Of course, if we were wrong, and what we expected was not at the top of the stairs, was really a bingo parlor, we would have a lot of explaining to do. For that matter, we could have a lot of explaining to do anyway.

The deacons figured it out. They came running across the stage in the middle of a dance number with a man and a woman in a horse suit. The man was the back end, the horse's ass. I knew this because I came back down the stairs because I heard running. It gave me a view of the stage. The deacons knocked the horse over and the man and woman spilled out of it. The couple said some words you wouldn't expect to hear at a Gospel Opry. God probably made a big black mark in their book right then.

The deacons didn't have guns drawn, and they almost ran right over me they were coming so fast. When they saw my revolver, as well as the automatic I had taken off one of the choirboys, they stopped up short. They froze like ice cubes.

I said, "Do you really want to get dead?"

One man shook his head and started to run, across the stage again, past the horse, which had been put together again. A tinny trumpet was playing somewhere, and a piano. The horse was dancing. That goddamn tuba was hitting some random notes; that guy, he ought to be put down in the ground with that tuba.

The other deacon, the one that didn't run, put his hands up. He said. "You got to at least take my gun, so I can say I was unarmed."

"That'll work," I said. "But pull it easy."

He did, squatted down and put it on the floor and backed up. "I got no beef," he said.

"That's good," I said, "because I am in one shitty mood."

He backed out and went across the stage walking fast. The couple in the horse suit just quit then. The woman pulled off the horse's head and tossed it into the audience. I hoped she hit the old woman in the wheelchair that said to get the hook.

I picked up his gun, a little nine, and went up the stairs again. Leonard was waiting. "Stop to go to the bathroom?" he asked.

"I was disarming a gentleman."

Leonard pointed with his handgun. "There's one door. Shall we see what's on the other side? Lady or the Tiger."

"I think we might get both," I said.

We moved quickly down the hall and Leonard kicked at the door and it swung back and came loose, hanging on one hinge, and then it came looser and fell. It was a toilet. It was empty.

"They were guarding a bathroom?" Leonard said. "Really?"

There was probably some way to get across, but we didn't see it right away, and we were in a bit of a hurry. We put the guns in our waistbands, under our shirts, went down the stairs and behind the stage. The Gospel Opry folks were not deterred. The action, such as it was, was still going on. It was some kind of comedy act. When we got to the other side, we passed the man and the woman that had been wearing the horse outfit. They gave us the hard eye.

“Were you two part of the disruption?” said the woman.

“No, ma’am,” I said, and kept going. We went up the stairs where the deacons had been. We pulled out our guns. There were two doors along the hallway.

“I’ll take one, you take the other,” Leonard said.

We chose a door, nodded at one another, and stomp-kicked them. My door went back completely off the hinges, old as it was. I could hear Leonard still kicking as I went through.

There was a bed in the room, and a little light to the right, and there was a row of four chairs on that side, and I’m dying if I’m lying, there were four men in those chairs, and the one closest to the light was reading a newspaper. It was like they were in a barbershop waiting their turn. Tillie was on the bed, and a nude man was on her, his naked ass bobbing like a basketball. Tillie wasn’t there really. She was in some other zone. She had her eyes open, but they might as well have been closed. She looked skeletal. My guess is she hadn’t been fed in a while, outside of what was in a needle. She looked a lot like Brett, if Brett were a concentration camp survivor, and that disturbed me even more.

The four men stood up. They were all dressed, though one had taken off his shoes and placed them under his chair. One of them was wearing a police uniform and had his hand on the pistol in his belt. He was out for a little on-duty nookie and bit of blow it seemed.

By now Leonard had come through the door. The cop pulled his pistol and I shot him. I hit him in the arm and he fell down on the floor and started going around in circles like Curly of the Three Stooges. He was yelling, “Don’t shoot me no more, don’t shoot me no more.”

Blood was all over the place.

The other three men acted as if to run, but Leonard resorted to foul language that had to do with their mothers. One sat back down, as if still waiting his turn, his mother be damned.

I said, “Where’s dickhead? Buster?”

Nobody said anything.

“He asked you a question,” Leonard said. “You don’t say, and we find him, we’re going to shoot all your toes off. And then your dick.”

By this time the man in the bed had got off Tillie and was standing beside the bed with one hand over his pecker.

Leonard said, “I had a turkey neck like that, I’d keep it covered too. Fact is, I’m an expert on dicks, and that is an ugly one.”

“He does know dicks,” I said.

The man in the police uniform had quit spinning and had stuck his head up under a chair. He said, “I’m hit. I’m hit.”

“No shit,” I said.

I went over and saw that Tillie was breathing hard. I pulled the blanket at the end of the bed over her. I looked at the naked man with his hand over his privates and I just went berserk. I don’t know what happened to me, but I just couldn’t stand to think people like this existed, that they could sit in chairs and wait their turns to top some drugged girl. I kicked the naked man in the balls and hit him in the head with the pistol, and then I went after the other three, but not before I kicked the police officer on the floor once, and heeled his gun under the bed. I started hitting those three guys with the pistols, one in either hand. I was hitting so fast I looked like Shiva. They tried to run for it, but each time they did Leonard kicked them back into play, and I just went to work. I felt wrong. I felt savage. I felt awful, and yet, I felt right.

It didn’t take long before all of them were bleeding. Two were on the floor. One had fallen back into his chair. The naked man on the floor wasn’t moving. He was lying on his side and had thrown up all over the place, and the air was thick with the stench of vomit.

“Okay,” Leonard said. He walked over and put his gun against the shoeless man’s nose. He was the one that had sat back down. “Where is Buster?”

The man didn’t answer. He didn’t need to. A door opened at the far end and two men came in. One had a shotgun. He cut down with it, but we were already moving. I dropped to the floor behind the bed, and Leonard leaped through the door he had kicked down, landed out in the hallway. From under the bed I could see the man’s legs, and I shot at them, three times in rapid succession. I hit him somewhere because he yelped and fell down. I shot him again, this time in the top of the head, cracking it apart like a big walnut. The other man had a handgun and he had been firing it all this time. So far he had hit the bed, killed the barefoot man in the chair behind me, and had put some holes in the wall.

From under the bed I saw Leonard’s feet as he came through the other door, the one I had kicked down, and then he was on that bastard. I got to my feet and started around, tripped over the policeman who had, without me seeing him, started crawling toward the open doorway.

“Stay,” I said, as if speaking to a dog.

He stopped crawling.

By the time I got around to Leonard he had already taken the man down. Somehow the man had shot himself in the foot. I kicked him in the head, just to let him know I was in the game, and then Leonard reached down and took the man's pistol. Considering this guy's aim it was probably best to have left him with it. In time he would have shot himself again, maybe in the head.

"You stick," I said to Leonard.

"All right, but I hear too much gunfire, I'm coming. Right after I kill the lot of them."

I went through the door the two had come through, and by now I could hear yelling down below in the auditorium. The gunfire had roused things up, and was probably more exciting than anything they had seen tonight.

When I got into the room upstairs I saw that it was well tricked out for an old building. Lots of modern furniture, including a big couch. It was pushed back from the wall and I could see feet sticking out from behind it. I walked over there and laid my guns on the coffee table and grabbed the man by the ankles and pulled him out. He tried to hang onto the floor, but this only resulted in him dragging his nails across it. He was a long lean man in a plaid sports coat with hair the color of black shoe polish. I said, "You Buster Smith?"

He said, "No."

I got his wallet out of his back pocket and looked at his driver's license. "Yes you are," I said. "I bet you always got caught when you played hide and go seek as a kid."

He got to one knee. "I did, actually."

I went over and got my guns, said, "I wouldn't try anything. I shoot you, then Leonard will shoot everyone else, and we'll have a hard time explaining things. But you'll be dead."

We didn’t go to jail.

That’s the important part. Let me tell you why. So when it was done and everyone was hauled in, including me and Leonard, they waltzed us into the police chief. This is after interrogations, searches, a rubber glove up the asshole, just in case we were hiding hand grenades. He was a nice-looking guy with his black hair cut close to his head and one ear that stood out more than the other, as if it were signaling for a turn. He sat behind a big mahogany desk. There was a little sign on the desk that read POLICE CHIEF.

“Well now, Hap Collins.” he said.

I recognized him. A little older. Still fit. James Dell. We had gone to school together.

“It’s been awhile,” he said. “What I remember best about you is I don’t like you.”

“It’s a big club,” Leonard said. “Hap even has a newsletter.”

“Me and Jim dated the same girl,” I said.

“Not at the same time,” Jim said.

“He dated her last,” I said.

“That’s right. And I married her.”

“So, you won,” I said.

“Way I like to see it,” James said, “you boys raised some hell. And you shot people. And you hit people. And Hap, you killed a guy. I also got word there’s two boys with broken legs over in Bullock. They gave themselves up to the sheriff over there.”

“Nice guy,” I said.

“One of the men you shot was a police officer,” said James.

“I know. He was waiting in line to rape a young woman. How is she by the way?”

“Hospital. Touch and go for awhile. But she made it. Apparently she's no stranger to drugs, so maybe she had some tolerance. Hadn't eaten in days. Buster Smith, we talked to him. He came apart like a fresh biscuit. He was only tough when his money worked for him. That cop, by the way, he was the police chief."

"Oh," Leonard said. "Then what are you?"

"The new police chief. I should also mention that the mayor is the one that caught a stray bullet and is as dead as an old bean can."

"Mayor. Police chief. We had quite a night," I said.

To make this part of the story short, we had to stay in the jail till our friend Marvin Hanson could get us a lawyer, and then we got out, and then we got no billed, in spite of the fact we had hunted the bastard down and caused quite a ruckus. The former police chief was dead, by our hand, and the mayor was on the deceased list as well, by a stray slug, and the others that had been in the row of chairs were all prominent citizens. It was best to take it easy on us, let them cover their own dirt in their own way.

Thing was simply this: The crime being done to Tillie was so bad, they let us pretty much skate on self-defense. Hell, after all, it is Texas.

Brett and I climbed into bed and she lay in the crook of my arm.

"Tillie is going to be out of the hospital tomorrow," Brett said.

She had spent about three months in there. She had been in a bad way. I had to say this for the kid, she was tough as yesterday's fajita meat.

"I have to go get her then," Brett said.

"All right," I said.

"I know you don't like her."

"Correct."

"You didn't have to do what you did."

"Yes I did."

"For me?"

"You and her."

"But you don't like her."

"I don't like a lot of things," I said, "but you love her. You think she's a bent twig, and maybe you're right. No one deserves that."

"But she sets herself up for it, right?"

"Yeah," I said. "She does. I don't think she'll ever change. Sometime soon, she doesn't, she's going to be dead. She picks men like ducks pick june bugs. At random."

"I know. I tried to be a good mother."

"I know that too, so don't start on how you failed. You did what you could."

"I did set her father's head on fire," Brett said.

"Yes, you did," I said. "But by all accounts, he had it coming."

"He did, you know."

"Never doubted it."

"I love you, Hap."

"And I love you, Brett."

"Want to lose five minutes out of your life the hard way?" she said.

I laughed. "Now that's not nice."

She laughed, rolled over, and turned off the light. And then she was very nice.

Joe R. Lansdale Interviews

Hap Collins
and
Leonard Pine

Q. Hap, I’m going to start with you. You strike me as an intelligent guy. Why don’t you try and make a little bit more of your life?

Hap: Haven’t a clue. I keep thinking I will, but I seem to take wrong turns.

Q. Why not back off from the situations you get yourself into? You deserve a little better, don’t you?

Hap: I get into them before I mean to. It’s like they’re kind of lurking out there. I turn left to avoid them, there’s more trouble comin’ the other way.

Leonard: And he drags me in after him. Can I say something?

Q. Be my guest.

Leonard: Hap’s bright, but doesn’t fully believe it. He thinks because he hasn’t come up with the formula for something like Coca-Cola, or has done him some brain surgery, or cured a disease, he hasn’t lived up to his expectations. Problem with Hap is, he coasts. Ain’t sayin’ he’s lazy. He works hard. When he works. But he hasn’t got any rudder.

Q. Now, don’t take this wrong, Leonard, but what’s your excuse?

Leonard: I don’t make any. I’m doing what I want to do. That’s the difference between me and my brother here. He isn’t entirely happy being him. I’m damn ecstatic about being me. I work hard. I don’t worry that much about the future. A little. But nothing serious. Hap, he’s nothing but a big ol’ bag of worry.

Hap: I thought I was a love machine.

Leonard: You’re a love machine can’t keep a woman.

Hap: You’ve had a bit of a problem maintaining relationships yourself, my good man.

Leonard: Yeah. But, you know what? I think I’ve found a man finally.

Q. That’s another thing. Don’t the people you guys care about seem to . . . well, you know?

Leonard: Yeah, they seem to give us bad luck. We haven’t figured that one out yet.

Q. Well, they’re the ones get killed.

Leonard: Yeah. We haven’t figured that out either.

Q. This one’s for you, Leonard. Do you feel that as you get older you’re gettin’ your temper under control?

Leonard: What temper?

Q. Well . . .

Leonard: Hey, answer the question. I didn’t stutter. What temper?

Q. I was merely sayin’ . . .

Leonard: You haven’t said anything yet. You asked if I had a temper. I don’t have any damn temper.

Hap: Yes you do.

Leonard: Hey, you want a piece of me, brother? You want to wake up with a crowd around you?

Hap: Hey, bubba. You and me get into it, you better brought yourself a sack lunch, ’cause we’re gonna be here all night.

Leonard: Yeah?

Hap: Yeah.

Q. Let's change the subject. You guys seem to survive through pure tenacity and a feeling of quarrelsome brotherhood. . . .

Leonard: Quarrelsome. Who you callin'—

Hap: You're right. We do. There's this, Lansdale. You can have all the money there is, every damn thing, and what it comes down to finally, like it or not, you got to have someone to lean on.

Leonard and I aren't brothers by birth. But we are brothers. Like our lawyer friend Andrew Vachss says, "It's the family you choose that counts." We stand by that. It can be your blood kin, certainly, but it doesn't have to be. Way we see it, we can argue and fight with each other, but no one else better think they can. Least not in any serious manner.

Q. All right. Let me ask this: What are future plans?

Hap: Hard to say.

Leonard: Charlie Blank and Hanson have some ideas for us. They've got a little private investigator's agency, and we may be picking up a few jobs from them. Nothing technical. Just little stuff, you know. Hap here, he'll still be looking for a date. Watching his weight. Sticking to nonalcoholic beer and losing his hair. I'll still be cool and calm in my JCPenney's suit.

Hap: You may be calm, but that cheap suit is enough to make anyone else nervous.

Q. I have just a few more questions.

Leonard: Actually, we got to go. We borrowed the truck we're in to get over here, and we promised to have it back. Our junkers are in the shop. Guy needs this one back to go to work.

Hap: And there's a monster movie showing on channel 38 I want to see.

Leonard: Not that he hasn't seen it about a hundred times.

Q. Well, thanks, guys. And be careful out there. Leonard: Hell, careful's our middle name, man.

An Interview with Joe R. Lansdale,

His Own Self

Editor Rick Klaw sat down with Joe and discussed his writing, racism, violence, Texas, and, of course, Hap and Leonard.

RK: Your work has been called Texas gothic, gothic Texas fiction, Texas noir, mystery, suspense, crime, horror, western, and damn near everything in between. How would you describe your work?

JRL: Lansdale. I think of it as being Lansdale work. I try not to fit into any category. It's not that I purposely try not to, but that I just don't. I'm uncomfortable trying to force myself into a box. I write what I want to write. I also find that if I fit into a mystery or horror category and try to label myself or push myself as that, then if any one of those things becomes passé or not popular for awhile, then I've actually eliminated part of my audience. I don't want people to pick me up and read me for a mystery writer or read more mysteries; I want them to read more Joe Lansdale and that's not egotistical—although maybe it is a little, I don't know—but it's actually trying to find a way of expressing yourself and promoting what you do, instead of the general idea of a certain genre or a label. And I really hate labels like “splatterpunk” and things like that. Those to me, I think, actually constrict your audience.

RK: One issue that is common to all your work is racism. Why is that?

JRL: I think it perhaps is when I grew up—I was born in 1951—and in the South there was a lot of Jim Crow laws. I grew up in East Texas, which is considered part of the South, unlike most of Texas, which is considered the Southwest, so I saw examples of it. The separate water fountains, separate toilets, going around to the back of restaurants to get their food, theaters where they had to be in the balcony, general attitude that they were not as human as whites. I think, too, that a lot of it was just that my mother was very progressive for her time and I think she planted that seed there for me. Then the sixties came along and civil rights was a big issue as part of the sixties. I think that in those early years that it imprinted. I just always felt uncomfortable with segregation and didn’t understand exactly what it was about. I also felt that education and many things like that that had been denied blacks was the thing that prevented them being able to operate in society. I felt that these were things that should be there for everyone. And I didn’t feel they were, and it really struck me deeply. It runs throughout my work, civil rights in general, but I think especially my experience being with how blacks were treated and to a great extent with how women were treated in the fifties and sixties and what their roles were expected to be. My mother defied that and was certainly, as I said, very progressive. I don't use the term "liberal" or "conservative" in that because I don't think that matters, but I think she was progressive in her time. I believe too that put a lot of stress on her trying to do that because that certainly wasn't accepted, because there was a lot of religious fanaticism against the idea of women even working. All the things we take for granted now and are very common were at one time taboo socially—not just in the South but across the United States. Perhaps the racism struck me more deeply being from this area because we had more blacks and there was this ill legacy of the Civil War and people were still fighting the Civil War even when I was a kid. Even though it was over, they were still fighting it emotionally.

RK: Your work is littered with the mixture of violence and humor. Do you find these to be essential elements to your work, and do you feel you always need the combination?

JRL: I don't think you always have to. And I don't think I always have. But I think that it's more common in my work than not to have that. I think that's because I saw a lot of violence when I was growing up. Not necessarily always murderous violence, but in school Gladewater was a tough town—people always gettin' in fights, fistfights over silly things, and they fought hard. But there was a lot of humor in the way people conducted themselves and the way they saw things. I think that rubbed off on me a lot. I think everybody sees humor in violence, even those people who don't think they do. Because even if you are watching Laurel and Hardy or any comedian, whoever it is on these old shows that we grew up on, people are falling off ladders and people are laughing. People have always laughed at those sorts of things. Sane people laugh when they realize that no one is actually hurt. It is intertwined. I think that humor and violence is nothing new. It's always been intertwined. I think that Robert Bloch probably had a big influence on me as a writer because he always recognized that.

RK: In your books, the violence is very realistic. Why do you think you make it that way?

JRL: Like I said, I've seen it, I've been involved in it in the sense that I grew up with people who would fight at the drop of a hat over almost anything. I've been a martial artist all my life and I've actually used it in self-defense. I've also made a point of not using it a few times when I could have. I just controlled the situation either verbally or controlled them physically when they didn't realize that they were being controlled. And though I'm not anxious to get involved in violence myself (I'm not very much a fan of violence), it intrigues me. It's so much a part of the human condition. Some people try to deny it as part of the human condition. One of the things that martial arts does and writing this kind of fiction does is that they allow you to tap into that and let off some of that steam. Which is not to say that if you didn't that you'd necessarily go out and be an ax murderer, but I do believe that in my case that I have somewhat of an aggressive personality to some extent. I am very physical, and I think all those things help me keep my life balanced —which is still not to say I think I was gonna flip out or be an ax murderer or anything.

RK: It seems whenever a new Lansdale book comes out, fans and critics hail it as your most violent book yet.

JRL: I never can tell. To me, I don't notice any difference between this one and that one. I really don't. When I look at *Bad Chili,* I think, "Whoa! That was pretty violent." I always think of it and *Two-Bear Mambo* has the most violent of the Hap and Leonard series. *The Nightrunners* and *Waltz of Shadows,* those are VERY violent. I never think about that. I never think that I'm going to make this scene violent or what. It just sort of arrives. I'll read these other books, and this book is just as violent as my books. Why don't they talk about these people? As other people have told me: "But they don't write violence the same way. They don't have that kind of poetic description." I appreciate that.

RK: Your stories are steeped in Texas. Someone once said you're a writer who practically oozes Texas. Beside the fact that you grew up in Texas, is there another reason? There are plenty of writers who grew up here who don't have as much Texas flavor to their work.

JRL: First of all, as you said, growing up here. But I also believe that my parents were proud of being Texans. I think their people actually come from somewhere else. But my father was a Texan. My mother was a Texan. Prior to that, we weren't generations of Texans. But we epitomized what Texas represents, at least in that mythological sense, as being hardcore, independent people. People who literally did pull themselves up by their bootstraps. My father was a person who could not read or write. And I think he was a vast success. He taught himself how to be a mechanic. My mother bought him a Model T and said take this apart and put it back together until you can do it. And he did. That's how he learned to be a mechanic and, of course, just continued to learn and update his knowledge. He got to where toward the end of his life, he could actually read a little bit and write a couple of sentences here and there. His mother died when he was eight years old and him taking over the family pretty much. His father bein' a brutal bastard and my father, like I said, not being educated and having to work all these hard physical jobs. I look at my mother coming from a somewhat-better situation but still a poor situation. When they were reaching their adulthood, that was the Great Depression, and I think all of that just epitomizes what people think of when they think of Texans. So whether true or not, there's that. Something that appealed to me is that as a child, I always loved mythology. I didn't know that I was living in mythology, because Texas has its own mythology. It's bigger than life. And my father was the kind of person who's a real, everyday, down-to-earth person, but was yet somehow bigger than life. He was what John Wayne thought he was.

RK: Since this is an interview for a collection of Hap and Leonard stories, we probably should discuss the stars. Hap is obviously you.

JRL: To a great extent, yeah.

RK: And Leonard is. . . ?

JRL: Leonard is made up of several people I know, both gay and straight. He's a combination of those. And uh, also the fact that Hap and Leonard in many ways reflect both of my sides, 'cause I've always found that the liberals consider me a conservative and the conservatives consider me a liberal. Somebody once said that I'm an Old Testament liberal, which I thought was one of the funniest things and most accurate things I'd heard, even though I'm not by nature a religious person. However, the concept was just perfect. I knew when they said that exactly what they meant. And even though it would be hard to define what that means, it tapped with me . . . that's exactly right. And I also have a way of just irritating either side, which gets me back to . . . what the hell was the question?

RK: The genesis of Leonard?

JRL: Yeah, so he's a combination of things. And they're also BOTH a combination of me. Hap represents more one side of me than the other and Leonard more the other side. But Hap in personality and, I think, the way he talks in the books and attitude and approach is more similar to me, and maybe if I had been less ambitious and hadn't met my wife, I might have lived like he did. Hopefully not with all the adventures, of course.

RK: You once told me that you were surprised at how popular Hap and Leonard were with older women. Have you ever figured out why?

JRL: I have not. What's interesting is that it's not just older women now. The more the series has been around, the more women are responding to it. I only know that people have said that women will never like this because there's references that they may find offensive. And I think some have.

RK: There are references that we all find offensive.

JRL: That's part of the point.

I think that's one thing that a lot of the readers never understand—that there are some people who are offensive just because they are writing offensively, and there are other people who are using it as a tool and sometimes just for the hell of it. Just for the shock of it. But it's also because this is how a lot of the people I know talk. This is how they really are. And all I'm trying to do is tap into that. A lot of guys have responded to that. They've said, this is the way we really talk. When women aren't around, this is what we say—and you've done that. And the women—another thing that I've heard is that I've had several say, just tell me that Hap is real, please, because I want to marry him. I think what they are responding to somewhat is that Hap is a little bit in need. That people think, well, I can help him out. But the other part of it is that Hap does come across as a good man and that he means well and he's honest and he's trying his best. People respond to that. And they respond to that in Leonard, too.

RK: Do you have Hap and Leonard's lives mapped out?

JRL: No, not really. I have ideas about their lives. I borrow things from my own life, but I also borrow from people I know. It's not always negative stuff, but it's elements here and there. I have a general idea of where they are going, but it's a very general idea. I do some things on instinct. Basically, I'll have a really small idea that stays with me and I won't even know why. They aren't profound. They're little character things, and those will stay with me. The stories come out of the characters; about little revelations and little ideas. What happens is that there will be little things that will change the whole course of the novel. The characters themselves redirect my plans.

RK: Are you planning on incorporating the burgeoning and changing gay civil rights, such as the legalizing of same-sex marriage, in the stories?

JRL: Yeah, I think that will be more of it. It's hard to get a whole lot more, because Leonard's always been pretty damn outspoken. He's never been the bashful type about it. I'm sure that he's mentioned gay marriage a couple of times. I think in this one, there are problems with that because his boyfriend is being affected by all this religious brouhaha about changing your sexual orientation and all.

I think the books are better because they are crazy sort of folk tales mixed with reality, but it's always the social and cultural issues and the two characters that drive the series.

RK: Characters from your other crime novels keep popping in Hap and Leonard. Was this by design all along? Or did it just start happening?

JRL: It's a mixture. Some planned, most not. Sometimes readers see things that aren't there, or are coincidental, and sometimes they're right. I like to let people guess for themselves. It's more fun this way. Also an author touches on similar ideas frequently. Intentionally, or accidental.

RK: Will we start to see Hap and Leonard in your other books?

JRL: I doubt it. Then they might be described.

I hint at what they look like when Hap tells the stories, but actual descriptions by others might deflate the readers' imaginations. But, I never say never.

RK: Will some of these characters, such as Jim Bob and Marvin, star in their own stories?

JRL: Marvin does appear in *Act of Love* and later in "A Bone-Dead Sadness", a long story. Again more of him, or a Jim Bob story is always possible. I think Vanilla Ride is more likely.

RK: You've had periods when you stopped writing Hap and Leonard, including eight- and five-year gaps between novels. Why do you stop, and why do you keep returning to them?

JRL: The first reason is that I wanted a break from the characters. I didn't mean for it go eight years. A lot of other things I was doing got in the way and took more time than I expected. Probably the biggest reason was that I changed publishers. So my backlist was with one publisher and my frontlist with another. A new publisher doesn’t profit much by the backlist belonging to someone else and they’re not as interested in doing one of the books in that series if they’re not gonna have the backlist. So gradually my agent and I worked to get the backlist back, and it took several years. When we got the Hap and Leonard backlist back, then I went to Knopf, and I actually sold them two of the Hap and Leonard books: *Vanilla Ride* and *Devil Red*.

When I left Knopf for Mulholland, I wrote several historical books, including *Edge of Dark Water*, *The Thicket*, and *Paradise Sky*. All the while, I was writing new, shorter Hap and Leonard stories for other publishers, but then Hap’s voice got louder and more insistent, so I wrote the novel *Honky Tonk Samurai*. He still wouldn’t shut up, so I had to write another, which probably will be called *Rusty Puppy*.

The Care and Feeding and Raising Up of Hap and Leonard

Careers have phases, and I've had a few.

My early career was merely struggling to sell. I managed early on to write some mystery material, and then horror, mostly short fiction. I wrote some books I'm proud of in my early career—*The Nightrunners*, *Dead in the West*, *The Magic Wagon*, *The Drive-In*, and *Cold in July* come to mind.

I remember these were all written in a house on Christian Street. I also wrote there the stories that ended up in my first collection, *By Bizarre Hands*, as well as *Stories by Mama Lansdale's Youngest Boy*.

Shortly after I finished *Cold in July*, we moved to the far side of town, another rural area, to have more room for our kids. Before moving, my study became our daughter's room. She had her crib assembled, amid piles of books, next to my desk, which eventually became covered with baby supplies. I ended up ejected and working on a small, wobbly desk in our bedroom.

Our new house was massive compared to our old one. I had an entire floor for my study, for all my books. With this house came a large desk that I have used ever since, although that is about to change. We are moving. I wrote a lot of books and stories and articles and screenplays and comics on that desk in our middle house, as I have christened it. Our children were raised here.

We are in the process of moving, and as we make efforts in that direction, it occurred to me that this is the house where Hap and Leonard were born. Other characters and stories, and some of my best critically received novels, were birthed here as well, but it somehow seems more significant to me that the boys were born here. There has always been something about Hap and Leonard that has engaged readers in a different way than what I might think of as my more “literary” novels. It’s not so much their adventures that keep pulling people back, although that’s part of it, but is instead the guys themselves. The way they interact with one another and others. A true odd couple. I feel as if I can hardly take credit for them. They seemed to leap into my skull whole-born, like Athena bursting forth from the head of Zeus. And, like Athena, their creation was not by design. It was a happy accident.

Let’s back up a bit.

I wrote *Cold in Jul*y in the Christian Street house, the one before the house we are about to move from; it was one of a two-book contract I had with Bantam. I wanted, at least then, to write books that I thought would be like modern Gold Medal novels, Gold Medal being a division of Fawcett Books, now defunct. Gold Medal was known specifically for crime books, although it certainly produced Westerns, science fiction, and so on. But it was the crime Gold Medals that hooked me in my late teens, and throughout my twenties. Outside Gold Medal, I was influenced heavily by the usual suspects—Chandler, Hammett, and Cain. But there was a tone in the Gold Medal novels that was quite different. They were an overall collective of hardboiled deeds, capers, thefts, and poor suckers riding life trains to oblivion, with no chance to brake or leap off.

I loved that stuff. I collected Gold Medal books for years, and still do, when I can find one that isn't falling apart or that I don't already have. And sometimes even if I do have it, I buy it anyway. They are becoming rarer each day. Where they were once stacked in droves at garage sales and used bookstores fairly dripped with them, they are now as unusual to find as the three-toed sloth in your living room.

With my two-book contract at Bantam, I thought it would be fun to riff on the old Gold Medal books, and after a very vivid dream that led to *Cold in July,* I was fired up even more. I thought that one had worked out quite well, and I wanted to do yet another in the same tone. *Savage Season* certainly tasted like Gold Medal, but there was something different about it from *Cold in July*. It was more deliberate, casual, purposely paced, and although it had twists and a dynamic climax, I found I was writing about my past, at least in a symbolic way, about how my life might have been if certain things had gone another direction. They were fiction, of course, but I must 'fess up and say that a lot in the Hap and Leonard books, especially the first three, was taken directly from events in my life, or the lives of others I knew, extrapolated and made a lot more exciting and dangerous.

I was also writing about the sixties, about how that era shook out, at least for me. I found a symbolic way of doing that by writing a novel that took place in the late eighties, a reflective book, with Hap feeling the changes, wondering how one morning it was the sixties and early seventies—because much of the time when we talk about the sixties, we're really talking about the early seventies as well—and then, the world was new and more consumer-driven, far less idealistic, and the music kind of sucked. In the mid-seventies, the Vietnam War finally wrapped up and the soldiers came home. All of us who had yelled about civil rights and an unjust war and so many things—gay rights, women's rights—suddenly felt vindicated. But in the long run, as Leonard says in *Savage Season*, the sixties were just the eighties in tie-dyed T-shirts. I'm not as cynical as Leonard, but there's something to be said, at least partially, for that point of view.

The book I was writing was not then called *Savage Season* but tentatively titled *Ice Birds*. Problem was everyone thought I was saying *Ice Bergs*, so I changed the title to *Savage Season*. It was originally something like *A Strange and Savage Season*, but that was too long and, frankly, didn't quite fit. It sounded a smidgen pretentious. Therefore, the final decision for a briefer and simpler title. I started writing the book, as I said, pulling from my own life, adding things that never happened, and this guy named Leonard showed up. With his arrival at the first of the novel, I knew then it was a buddy story. I love those. But then Leonard surprised me, not only by showing up but by revealing in a sideways manner that he was gay, Republican, a supporter of the Vietnam War, and a war hero. I hadn't known that going in. Hap Collins, my hero of the book, or at least the one who tells the tale, for Leonard is in many ways just as prominent a character, knew that about Leonard, but he didn't tell me until the moment Leonard revealed it. At the time of writing that book, gay characters were uncommon in crime fiction. There were exceptions, but they were rare. Even more rare were black Republicans, and rarer yet, gay Republicans. They existed, of course, but were generally more uncommon than a three-toed sloth in your living room. They were, in fact, as uncommon as a three-toed sloth in your living room wearing a propeller beanie. Also, male gay characters who were, in appearance and action, more masculine were also underrepresented. Yet I knew they existed, so why not represent them as well? I wasn't thinking about breaking new ground, or anything really, just about writing honest characters who weren't all white and straight and middle class.

Anyway, there I was, writing along, and Leonard showed up, and he and Hap were best friends, and different of opinion in many ways, as many of my friends are different from me, but at the core, Hap and Leonard are one and the same. Honorable men, smart men, who took a wrong boat in life and ended up on the ragged edge of the American Dream.

At the time of that writing, I was not far removed from that very position in life. My wife, Karen, was my saving grace. She directed me in such a way that I moved in a straight line, not in circles. She and I worked as farm fieldworkers, ran a goat dairy, butchered our own meat, and raised our own vegetables. Karen had come from a more middle-class background than I had, but she had dove right in with me, making ends meet as best she could, having faith that our life together would be a good one, and that the American Dream, which I believe in—how can I not? I'm living it—was ours for the taking.

We took hold of it, and have kept our teeth securely clamped there ever since. I know it's an elusive dream, and dream is the right word. It's something we all want, and sometimes it's something, through hard work, inheritance, or accident, that we can have. But, for the most part, it's an opportunity, not a promise.

That's all it's ever been, except for the fact that here in our country, that dream is supposedly more obtainable than elsewhere.

Sometimes it is, and sometimes it's not.

That, too, went into the book. In his own way, Hap is, like Gatsby, standing on the pier, reaching out for the green light across the bay. His life is a lot more blue-collar in nature, and the green light represents to him less than it meant to Gatsby. Not great riches and fine clothes and bringing back the past, just less-back-breaking work, a library card, and a TV that gets what was then all three network channels. A home where he can have a good wife and a happy sex life, raise fine kids to whom he can pass along the dreams he holds dear. Fair play. Common sense. A decent bank account. And, with a little luck, a quick death in old age without lingering illness, or a tube in his pecker and adult diapers steaming with shit.

So Hap, in his own small, blue-collar way, is my Gatsby. At least he is in the first few novels. In time, that changes, as all our lives must change.

Leonard, he just wants to be left alone. He doesn't care about anyone's club. He's gay, and he's all right with that. He's black, and if you don't like it, you can ram a stick up your nose. He's a lot less introspective than Hap. He's one of those guys like my dad was. It is what it is. Wish in one hand and shit in the other, and see which one fills up first.

After *Savage Season*, I had no idea that I would ever write about Hap and Leonard again. I didn't intend to, and it was three years before I did. I had moved from Bantam to Mysterious Press by that time, a kind of movement not uncommon to authors, especially in those days when we still had a number of publishers to choose from, and we didn't have computer sales numbers following us around. My then-agent managed to get me a two-book contract at Mysterious, and my first book for it wasn't going so well. I put it aside and very quickly wrote another. When I sat down to write it, Hap started speaking to me, and he took over. Even then, I thought, this is it, two and out. But the book really hit a nerve with the publisher and the readers, and a series was born. And boy, did I love Hap and Leonard.

Savage Season, the first, has its funny moments, but compared to the others in the series, it is a little more dour. It was followed by seven others, funnier on the whole, although still dark in places, and variable in tone and themes. The first was my caper book, or as close as I'll get to that; the second was the mysterious murder that is tied to the heroes; the third was the Bad Town novel; and the fourth was . . . well, wacky. The fifth was a road novel, the sixth a fish-out-of-water novel. I left the series for eight years to write other things at yet another publisher, Knopf, and for one of its paperback lines, Vintage.

At that time, Mysterious Press had the original Hap and Leonard novels, and Knopf wasn't interested in carrying the series forward because of that—hence the eight-year wait. Finally, the Hap and Leonard books went out of print, and Vintage picked them up. I wrote two new Hap and Leonard books back-to-back for it, one a kind of mysterious assassin novel, the other a dangerous cult book. The latest, *Honky Tonk Samurai*, forthcoming in 2016 from my current publisher, Mulholland, is what I call putting the crew together for one big event. It will be followed by *Rusty Puppy*. The definition of that one is yet to be decided. I never know until I'm finished, and frankly, even then I'm not absolutely certain. What remains in all the books are those guys, their close friendship, their personal histories, and the adventures.

I mention all of this to show how long Hap and Leonard have been with me. After the first six novels, I ceased aging them except when they were having books written about them. So the eight-year wait between number six, *Captains Outrageous*, and number seven, *Vanilla Ride*, is in my mind only a few months later, and so on. If I didn't do that, my guys would be in wheelchairs right now, fighting it out in rest homes with villains who were trying to take their desserts and piss in their bedpans.

But between all that waiting, now and again, I wrote shorter pieces about them. After *Vanilla Ride* and *Devil Red*, numbers seven and eight in the series, I wrote a novella, *Hyenas*, about them, and a short story that is among my favorites, a dark piece titled "The Boy Who Became Invisible." My comic-book script for an as yet unpublished comic that I produced for a German publisher is included in this book. I followed this with *Dead Aim*, another novella. Some years before these, however, my brother Andrew Vachss and I collaborated on a Hap and Leonard novella that to my taste is one of the oddest pieces I've been involved with, unique because Andrew is unique. He added a character to the Hap and Leonard mythology, Veil, and he appears in *Veil's Visit*, also included here, and although it's not exactly rare, it's a story that, until now, has been hard to capture. Veil, like my brother Andrew, is smart and unpredictable. A man couldn't ask for a better brother and friend than Andrew Vachss, whom I love and admire, as does my entire family. He thinks outside the box as a writer, as a lawyer, and as a protector of children. For my own children, he is Uncle Andrew, and they love him and think the world of him. Of course, they should.

Another related novella was Marvin Hanson’s first solo adventure since his introduction in my very first crime novel *Act of Love* (way back in 1981). *A Bone-Dead Sadness* is a bit different than much of my crime work, a kind of locked-room crime. Since Marvin is a recurring character throughout many of the Hap and Leonard stories, it’s included in this very collection.

What else is here?

I also had a promotional piece I had written to advertise *Bad Chili,* the fourth book in the series. It was “cleverly” called “Death by Chili.” It went out to reviewers and whoever received galleys of *Bad Chili,* part of a promotional package that included the story and a hot pepper glued to the page. I still have one or two of those promotional packets somewhere.

“Death by Chili” is the lightest of the Hap and Leonard pieces. Something to cleanse your palate. It’s a kind of locked-room mystery, and it’s Leonard’s story, for the most part.

This book also includes an interview I did with the guys, and, better yet, an intro by Michael Koryta and a memoir of Hap and Leonard and me by Bill Crider, who was there at the beginning. To have fine writers like Michael and Bill write about Hap and Leonard, and about me, is humbling indeed. I’m honored to have them here.

On top of all that are two new Hap and Leonard stories, one about their high school years and the other, more a vignette, about one of their favorite hangouts.

I am also grateful to have Rick Klaw, my editor on this book, as a friend. I have known him for many years now. He was nothing but an energetic kid with a lot of plans when I met him. Now he’s an energetic adult who has fulfilled many of those plans and is in the process of fulfilling others. Fortunately, I have been a part of those plans, and I owe him a lot for helping put this book together.

For Hap and Leonard fans who might have missed these stories when they first came out, I hope this will be a small treat. For those who have yet to discover Hap and Leonard, perhaps these short visits will encourage you to come on over and visit them in their truer habitat, the novel.

I would also like to thank Sundance TV; my friend and director, Jim Mickle; and my good buddy, actor/screenwriter Nick Damici, for all their hard work on developing these characters into a series. A special thanks has to go to Lowell Northrop, my friend and co-collaborator, for organizing and presenting this series to Jim and Nick, and for all his hard work and relentless pursuit of a series about Hap and Leonard. He knows the characters better than I do—I think they talk to him more than to me.

I should also mention, with great pride and respect, James Purefoy and Michael K. Williams, two fine actors and equally fine fellows who have brought Hap and Leonard to life on the small screen. Thanks, guys. It has been a treat.

And thanks to my pal Bill Sage, as well as the always game Jeff Pope, the wonderfully intense Neil Sandilands, the remarkable Christina Hendricks, and Jimmi Simpson and the sweetly tough-as-nails Pollyanna McIntosh. She's what we in Texas call "a pistol." You need her to climb through a window, she'll do it. Wrestle a bear, she's ready. Kick someone's ass, where the hell are they?

Thanks to all the crew and actors and everyone involved in the television show for braving mosquitoes; all manner of huge, crawling bugs, including fire ants; alligators; snakes; tornadoes; windstorms; rainstorms; and blistering heat to make this series a reality.

Special thanks to my niece and assistant, the smart and lovely Pamela Lansdale, aka Pamela Dunklin. She kept me focused, provided granola bars when I looked as if I might be losing blood sugar, and made certain things went smoothly. And, of course, thanks to my lovely wife, Karen, for letting me go on a two-month long adventure into TV land. And to my children, Keith and Kasey, thanks for supporting your old man with kind words and humor.

Finally, thanks to the Baton Rouge, Louisiana area, and all the nice people there for letting us pretend it was East Texas. Why not? They look just alike, although I think your crawfish are better.

So here are the stories.

Read and enjoy.

About the Author

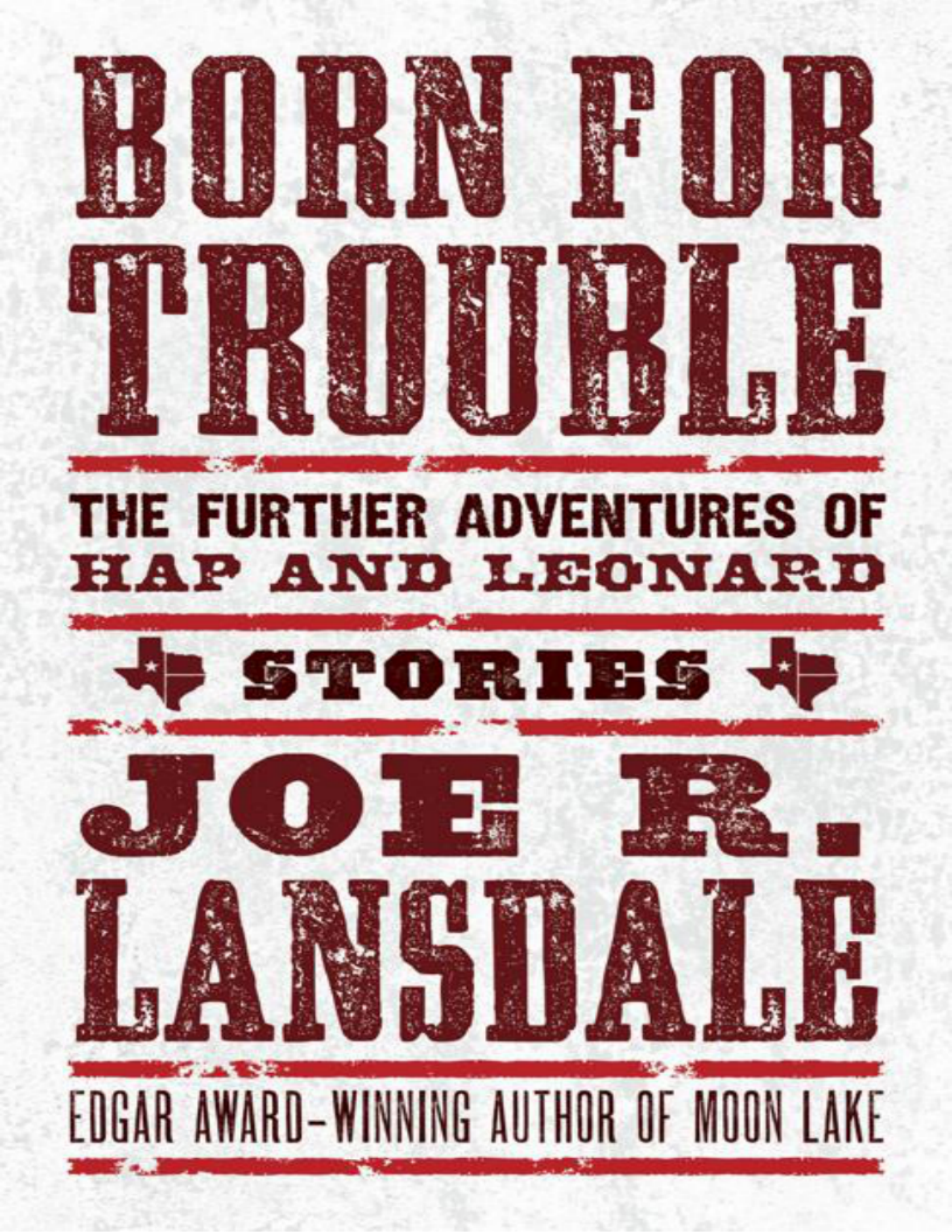
Joe R. Lansdale is the author of more than forty novels and four hundred shorter works, including stories, essays, introductions, and articles. He has written screenplays and teleplays, including for *Batman: The Animated Series* and *Superman: The Animated Series*. He wrote the script for the animated film *The Son of Batman*. His works have been translated into numerous languages, and several novels and short stories of his have been filmed, among them *Bubba Ho-Tep*; *Cold in July*; *Incident On and Off a Mountain Road*, for Showtime's *Masters of Horror*; and *Christmas with the Dead*, which he produced with a screenplay by his son, Keith.

Lansdale is the recipient of numerous awards and recognitions, among them the Edgar Award and ten Bram Stoker Awards, one of which is for Lifetime Achievement. He has received the Grandmaster of Horror Award; the British Fantasy Award; the Inkpot Award for Lifetime Achievement; the Herodotus Award for historical/crime fiction; the Golden Lion Award for his contribution to the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs; the Grinzane Prize; and others.

Lansdale is also a member of the Texas Literary Hall of Fame and the Texas Institute of Letters, and he is Writer in Residence at Stephen F. Austin State University. He is the founder of Shen Chuan Martial Science and has been recognized by the International

Martial Arts Hall of Fame as well as the United States Martial Arts Hall of Fame.

Joe Lansdale lives with his wife, Karen, in Nacogdoches, Texas.



BORN FOR TROUBLE

THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF
HAP AND LEONARD

STORIES

JOE R. LANSDALE

EDGAR AWARD–WINNING AUTHOR OF MOON LAKE

Praise for *Born for Trouble*

"It doesn't get much better than one of the best crime writers in the business serving up brand-new stories featuring his most iconic characters. Lansdale isn't just a brilliant storyteller with heart, he's also funny as hell, with tales of mummified dachshunds, homicidal bookmobiles, and a psychopathic hunt club. This collection is an absolute blast and a gift to all of us devoted fans."
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"If you already know Joe Lansdale, you don't need me to tell you to read Born for Trouble. If you don't, you're in for a hell of a ride. Pulpy, blackly humorous, compulsively readable, and somehow both wildly surreal and down-to-earth. Lansdale is a national fucking treasure."
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"*Born for Trouble: The Further Adventures of Hap and Leonard* will delight Hap and Leonard fans all over the world."
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—Christopher Farnsworth, author of *Blood Oath* and *Flashmob*

"Hijinks and shenanigans anchored by the warmth of camaraderie and a steady flow of excellent jokes."
—Stephanie Cha, author of *Your House Will Pay*

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—Richard Kadrey, author of the Sandman Slim series

"Joe Lansdale's Hap and Leonard stories are right up there with Richard Stark's Parker books to me. . . . An inspiration to all of us who make our living in the crime-fiction section, Born for Trouble is yet another masterclass in how it's done."
—Ed Brubaker, author of *Criminal* and *The Fade Out*

Praise for Joe R. Lansdale

"A folklorist's eye for telling detail and a front-porch raconteur's sense of pace."
—*New York Times Book Review*

"A terrifically gifted storyteller."
—*Washington Post Book Review*

"Like gold standard writers Elmore Leonard and the late Donald Westlake, Joe R. Lansdale is one of the more versatile writers in America."
—*Los Angeles Times*

"A zest for storytelling and gimlet eye for detail."
—*Entertainment Weekly*

"Lansdale is an immense talent."
—*Booklist*

"Lansdale is a storyteller in the Texas tradition of outrageousness . . . but amped up to about 100,000 watts."
—*Houston Chronicle*

"Lansdale's been hailed, at varying points in his career, as the new Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner-gone-madder, and the last surviving splatterpunk . . . sanctified in the blood of the walking Western dead and righteously readable."
—*Austin Chronicle*

Selected works by Joe R. Lansdale

Hap and Leonard

Savage Season (1990)
Mucho Mojo (1994)
The Two-Bear Mambo (1995)
Bad Chili (1997)
Rumble Tumble (1998)
Veil's Visit: A Taste of Hap and Leonard (with Andrew Vachss, 1999)
Captains Outrageous (2001)
Vanilla Ride (2009)
Hyenas (2011)
Devil Red (2011)
Dead Aim (2013)
Honky Tonk Samurai (2016)
Hap and Leonard (2016)
Rusty Puppy (2017)
Blood and Lemonade (2017)
The Big Book of Hap and Leonard (2018)
Jack Rabbit Smile (2018)
The Elephant of Surprise (2019)
Of Mice and Minestrone (2020)

Other novels

Act of Love (1981)
Dead in the West (1986)
The Magic Wagon (1986)
The Nightrunners (1987)
The Drive-In (1988)
Cold in July (1989)
Tarzan: The Lost Adventure (with Edgar Rice Burroughs, 1995)
The Boar (1998)
Freezer Burn (1999)
Waltz of Shadows (1999)
The Big Blow (2000)
The Bottoms (2000)
A Fine Dark Line (2002)
Sunset and Sawdust (2004)
Lost Echoes (2007)
Leather Maiden (2008)
Flaming Zeppelins (2010)
All the Earth, Thrown to Sky (2011)
Edge of Dark Water (2012)
The Thicket (2013)
Paradise Sky (2015)
Fender Lizards (2015)
Bubba and the Cosmic Bloodsuckers (2017)
Terror Is Our Business (with Kasey Lansdale, 2018)
More Better Deals (2020)

Moon Lake (2021)

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Tachyon Publications LLC
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415.285.5615
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Tachyon Publications LLC
1459 18th Street #139
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"Cold Cotton" © 2017 by Joe R. Lansdale. First published by Crossroad Press.

For Rick Klaw, intrepid editor and friend.

And in memory of Michael K. Williams, who brought the character of Leonard to life on the *Hap and Leonard* TV series. I couldn't have asked for a better actor to play the part. Talented, smart, a good human being. You are missed.

— Joe R. Lansdale

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About the Author

Introduction: “The Boys”

I have been writing about the “Boys,” as I call them, for many years, and my children have grown up with them almost as if they are living, breathing uncles. My wife thinks of them as close brothers of mine who can be both humorous and annoying, who arrive on our doorstep with checks in their hands, both for novels and stories and the TV series, even comic adaptations, to help us pay bills and be quite comfortable. So, we don’t fuss much at their occasional bad manners and destruction of the furniture. Not to mention all those vanilla cookie bags and Dr. Pepper cans lying around.

Thank you, Boys, you have done well by us.

Writing about them has given me great pleasure, and thankfully they have given pleasure to others. I get numerous emails, letters, notes, even phone calls, to tell me how much the characters have meant to them. How they have given them relief in difficult times, helped them navigate sickness and death, as much as such a thing is possible, and that information alone makes it worth the creation and writing of Hap and Leonard.

I write for me. I never try and figure out what others will like when I’m writing, but when I finish with a story or novel, whatever form of writing I’m undertaking, I always hope there will be those who feel as I do. That the story I’ve written was worth the effort and that perhaps, just perhaps, it’ll spark flame to some kindling in your thoughts, soul, or at least kill a few hours.

I also include in the Hap and Leonard stories bits of social commentary, ribald humor, and the feelings and look of the East Texas environment. Contrary to what some might think, East Texas is not all redneck ignorance and racism and gun violence, but those things certainly exist. The reason it is so prevalent in my fiction is not that a better and positive side of East Texas doesn't exist; it is that the negative elements are what I wish to comment on, and stories that frequently are about crime or criminal elements will certainly have some bad characters in them. If I wrote about the ocean, there would be fish, and if I wrote about the sky, there would at least be occasional clouds.

That said, the Hap and Leonard stories truly do run the gamut. *Blood and Lemonade* and *Of Mice and Minestrone* both tell about when Hap and Leonard were growing up, and for the most part tend to not be 100 percent crime stories. They are what you might call How We Lived Then stories. They are a kind of autopsy of what ticks inside the characters, Hap primarily, although I have written a few very short stories from Leonard's POV that will in time be gathered together in one volume that I might cleverly call *Leonard*.

This volume is different. It has elements closer to the novels, but with less social background than some, and more excitement. When I wasn't writing Hap and Leonard stories, was busy on a novel, I would sometimes find myself missing them in the way you might miss a family member who had gone on a long vacation and had been completely out of touch.

I would dream about Hap, hear his voice, and abruptly I would have to put away whatever I was writing—tuck it into a computer file to be more accurate—and take a break to let Hap and Leonard speak to me. Most of these are stories of that ilk. Hap showed up. He talked. I took notes.

There are times when I need to take a vacation from Hap and

Leonard, or I am happy to see them pack their suitcases and hit the trail. I sometimes need a rest from those guys, but I am always glad when they come back.

This collection contains some previous visits. They are collected here for the first time together in one volume. I hope they will serve as more than a placeholder until a novel arrives. I think they are good stories, and varied.

A note. This really should go without saying, but some readers say, "Well, wouldn't they be old by now? Unable to do what they do?"

In reality they would be slightly older than me. And I am no spring chicken. Though I'm spry. But here's the thing—as real as they seem to me, they have a different relationship with time than the rest of us.

I let them age, but I have never done it on a year-by-year basis. Like Travis McGee, Philip Marlowe, James Bond, and numerous other fictional characters, they move at a different pace and have multiple adventures that no living person might have in a lifetime, or two.

I consider a year when I do not write about them to be a year in which they remain, time-wise, in amber. When I return to them, or they return to me, the clock starts again, though I don't worry if it's the year it should be after their last adventure. If I wait eight years between novels, or what have you, they are only slightly older than when I ceased writing about them eight years before. Their current adventure will take place in the current year, which means they do not maintain a realistic chronology. I may even decide to write about them when they are younger, or middle-aged. I get to choose.

Some folks are really bugged by this. I'm not sure why, but they are. It pops up in a lot of discussions. At the same time, this approach is one that has been around forever; story heroes are not necessarily subject to the ticking of the clock.

As long as I enjoy writing about them, I will age them slowly, though there may come a day when I age them out. I don't plan too far ahead when it comes to books and stories.

So, folks, bring some vanilla cookies and Dr. Pepper for Leonard, some iced tea and animal crackers for Hap, and let's have a party.

Of course, don't mind me if after the cookies and such, I toddle off to bed early. That bunch, fun as they can be, can wear me out. And unlike them, I do age.

But I must admit, to a great extent, the Boys, with all their boisterousness and frequent juvenile humor, keep me young. I like that.

Joe R. Lansdale
Big Bear Manor
Nacogdoches, Texas

“Heaven goes by favor. If it went by merit, you would stay out and your dog would go in.”

—Mark Twain

Coco Butternut

“All I want you to do is make the exchange. Give them the bag, and they’ll give you Coco Butternut.”

We were all in the office of Brett Sawyer’s Investigations, me and Leonard and Brett, my daughter Chance, and this little, chubby guy, Jimmy Farmer who wore a very bad toupée. He wanted us to make an exchange for him. Give some blackmailer a bag full of money in exchange for a dog called Coco Butternut that had belonged to Farmer’s mother, as did the pet cemetery, a mortuary, and a cemetery for humans called Oak Rest.

Our German shepherd, Buffy, was also present, lying on the couch, about as interested as a dog can be in conversations that don’t involve the words “treat” or “outside.”

What was odd about all this was Coco Butternut was as dead as a stone and mummified.

“Let me see here,” Leonard said. “You got a pickled dog stolen from you, and you want us to give some money to a guy that dug him up—”

“Her,” Jimmy said. He had a condescending way of talking and a face that somehow made you want to punch it. He had all the personality of the Ebola virus. I hadn’t liked him on sight, and I wasn’t sure why.

“Okay,” Leonard said. “Her. You want us to give a bag of money to a dead dog-napper and he gives us the mutt, and that’s it?”

“That’s all,” Farmer said. “Only one of you can do it. He said to send one person to make the exchange. He said I could do it, but I’m not comfortable with that, and I told him so.”

“You two talked person to person?” Brett said.

“No, we . . . does this girl work here?”

“That’s my daughter, Chance,” I said. He had been eyeing her since he first came in, as if she might have designs on his wallet.

“She can be discreet?” he said.

“She certainly can,” Chance said. Chance had her thick black hair tied back in a ponytail, and she was dressed the same as Brett, tee-shirt and blue jeans and tennis shoes. She looked like a fifties teenybopper. Even in her twenties she could have easily passed for eighteen or nineteen. She was so sweet she broke my heart.

Farmer paused a moment, taking time to consider how discreet Chance could be, I suppose.

"Okay," he said. "This thief, we didn't talk face to face. First he sent me a note that said he had the dog.

"I went to the pet cemetery to look. There was a hole where she was buried, an empty grave. No question the body was gone.

"There was a sealed plastic bag in the empty grave. Inside of it was a burner phone. There was a note with a number on it. I called the number. That's how we spoke, and that's when he told me what he wanted. I threw the phone away like he asked."

"You know the man's voice?" Leonard asked.

"No. It may even have not been a man."

"You keep saying he," I said.

"Look, it was one of those synthesizer things. You can't tell who you're talking to. Sounds more male than female on those things. I couldn't tell the sex or age really. Voice said they had my mother's dog, and he wanted money."

"They?" Brett asked.

"What the voice said."

"Why was the dog pickled?" Leonard said.

"Embalmed and wrapped like a mummy," Farmer said. "Not pickled."

"Same thing," Leonard said. "Except for the duct tape."

"No tape. Cloth. Mother had it done five years ago. She died shortly thereafter. The wrapping is stuck to the dog with some kind of adhesive. They embalmed her, and then wrapped her. It's not duct tape."

"Can I ask why?" I said.

"We own a pet mortuary and cemetery. Most dogs are cremated, but we offer a variety of services. Embalming and mummification for example. Coco Butternut was a show dog. A dachshund. She had won a number of dog show awards. Nothing big, but Mother adored her. She had all her dogs embalmed. Coco Butternut was the first one to be wrapped, mummified."

"I know we can become very attached to our pets," Brett said. "But it isn't your dog, and well, it's dead. You sure you want to pay for a mummified dog corpse?"

"I never really cared for the dog," Farmer said. "It bit me a few times. Nasty animal. But Mother was sentimental about it, and I'm sentimental about her. The dog meant a lot to her."

I didn't actually find Farmer all that sentimental, but you never really know someone at first blush, and truth is, you may not ever know someone even when you think you do.

"When you say a lot," Leonard said, "the next question is how much is this sentiment going to cost you?"

"I'd rather not say. Just deliver the bag and bring home the dog."

"I got one more question," Leonard said. "Who names a dog Coco Butternut?"

"Mother," Farmer said.

"Not to step on your mother's grave, but why the hell would she name a dog that," Leonard said. "She just go by Coco, or Butter, or Nut?"

"Dog had a chocolate body, but butternut-colored paws. That's how the name came about."

"Could have just called her Spot or Socks or some such," Leonard said. "Hell, Trixie. I had a dog named Trixie. That's a good name."

Farmer was paying us good money to deliver the bag, and the good money was considerably more than what we normally made for a few hours' work. He really wanted that dog back.

Plan was I would make the drop and exchange, and Leonard would find a place to hide in case things went south. We weren't hired to take the body snatcher down, and in fact, Farmer insisted we didn't. Said things could go wrong if we tried to do that. Thing was make the exchange and keep it smooth and simple.

Leonard went over to Farmer's house, picked up the money and was bringing it to us. I was looking out the office window as he drove up. It was a nice spring day and bright and the young woman downstairs that owned the bicycle shop was wearing shorts and her legs were long and brown and Brett wasn't looking at me right then and Chance was sorting out the lunch she had picked up from a Japanese restaurant. Buffy was watching me, but she didn't care what I was doing.

I kept a steady vigil as the fine-looking shop owner leaned over a bike she was repairing. Those shorts certainly could ride high.

It wasn't that I wasn't fine with my woman. I'm a one-woman man. But I still like to look. I think it's good for my heart or something, maybe even the liver.

Leonard parked and came across the lot, nodding at the blonde as he did. He looked up and saw me at the window and smiled. He came up the stairs and inside and placed the satchel on the desk. It had a clasp lock on it with a ring and through the ring was a tiny padlock.

Leonard said, "Brett, I think Hap was looking at that blonde's butt out there.”

“Daddy,” Chance said.

“I was merely looking out the window,” I said.

“I’ve noticed you do that a lot when she’s out there,” Brett said. “Don’t con me, Hap Collins.”

“Okay, the con is over,” I said. “So I can look at will?”

“I didn’t say that,” Brett said. “I prefer you think you’re being sneaky. It shows you have some pride.”

“That’s one way of looking at it,” Leonard said. “Now, you all thinking what I’m thinking?”

“How much money is in that bag,” I said.

“That’s right,” Leonard said.

“We don’t need to know,” Brett said. “And besides, it’s locked.”

“Hap’s going into this with a bag of money, someone bringing a dead dog to him. I think it might be wise to see how much is in the bag. I don’t like that Farmer guy, anyway.”

Brett came over and looked down at the satchel. “Like I said, we don’t need to know. But, my lockpick kit is in the drawer.”

Chance opened the drawer and removed the kit, handed it to Brett. She took out her tools and worked on the lock for a moment or two. It clicked open.

“He gave me a key to give to the kidnapper,” Leonard said. “But I just wanted to see you work that lock.”

Brett grinned at Leonard. “You rascal.”

“And then some,” Leonard said.

Brett opened the satchel. There were a lot of bills in it, stacks bound by paper binders. She took it out and thumbed through it.

“Jesus,” she said. “There’s something like a hundred thousand dollars here.”

“For a dead dog?” Leonard said.

“This guy must be rich,” Chance said.

“He is. Should have seen his house. You could park my apartment, your house, and this building in it. Well, there might not be room for the couch.”

“Ha,” I said.

“Yeah,” Leonard said, “that putting dead bodies in the ground pays mighty good.”

Brett said, “Now we know,” closed the satchel and put the lock back on it.

We decided first to have a recon mission before we made the actual drop. The team, as I like to think of us, drove out to the drop spot. That means me and Leonard, Brett and Chance. Chance decided she wanted to get in on things, and we decided to let her, as long as it wasn’t dangerous. It was pretty much a family business, so why not.

Drop was to take place at a graveyard, which when you think about it is kind of ironic. Dog was dug up from a graveyard, and was to be returned in one.

This one was an old graveyard for black citizens. It was called the Colored Graveyard by some, and there was a historical marker that called it a Negro Graveyard. It stopped being used mid-twentieth century, and though it was kept up, it was a piss-poor job. Someone hacked the weeds around the graves now and then with what appeared to be a stick. The drop was to happen at a grave for K. Hollis Colby. It was one of the few tombstones that was still intact. It was the only large tombstone and it was one of the few where you could see the name clearly on it. The dates of birth and death were not so clear. Looking at it I thought no matter who you are or where you are or when you're from, time passes away, and so do you and the memory of you. Maybe someone keeps it alive for a few generations, but most of us aren't remembered after the last shovelful of dirt is thrown in the hole.

"So this kidnapper's supposed to bring Coco Butterbutt here," Leonard said.

"Butternut," I said.

"I know. I just don't like that guy, and by proxy I think his dog is an asshole. Who names a fucking dog Coco Butternut?"

"His mother," I said.

"The dog's mother?"

"Now you're being a jerk. Farmer's mother."

"What kind of mother does that? Gives a dog a name like that."

Chance was coming across the graveyard to meet us. She had a device in her hand.

When she came up, she said, "Kind of sad here, isn't it?"

"Oh, I don't know," Leonard said. "They're dead. I'm kind of over it."

"Leonard," Chance said, "you are a turd."

"Just a little bit," he said, and tipped his fedora back. He had taken to wearing it all the time. It wasn't a hat that irritated me, like some he wore.

That goddamn deerstalker I took care of, and I don't think he even missed it, which means he merely had it to mess with me. He walked around in that thing, strutting like a peacock, drawing attention to himself because he knew that drew attention to me, and he knew it embarrassed me to be seen with him in that damn thing. The fedora. That was cool.

"Brett said you have to find some place to put this it can't be seen. It picks up voices good. You plant it, and we'll be back across the way, and we can hear everything."

"Where you'll be," Leonard said, "something goes down, by the time you or Brett get here with a big ole pistol or a long stick, Hap'll be dead and bleeding on ole Colby here."

"Don't be so morbid," Chance said. "He'll be all right. He's got you closer by."

"Girl, you are what we call a goddamn optimist," Leonard said. "You ain't been around your dad enough to know trouble follows his ass around."

"Maybe it's you trouble follows," Chance said. "You two are always together."

"Might be something to that," Leonard said.

There was a thin pine sapling that had grown up in the graveyard, and it wasn't far from the grave where we were supposed to make the exchange.

"Put it there," I said.

Chance went over to the sapling and Leonard walked over to help her. I stood where I was, thinking something about this whole thing smelled like the ass end of a dead elephant. Outside of what we were being asked to do, something else wasn't right.

"We got it," Chance said.

“I think I actually got it,” Leonard said.

“I held it while you fastened it down,” she said.

“Yeah, but I turned it on,” Leonard said.

“Children,” I said. “Back to the car.”

Driving us back to the office, Brett said, “We’ll get there before dark so Leonard can hide in the woods. He’s got a mic, and I got one. We can both hear what’s going down and Leonard will be close if something turns sideways.”

“I can hear it too,” Chance said.

“Of course you can,” Leonard said.

“Uncle Leonard,” Chance said. “I am going to hit you in the eye.”

Leonard laughed. “You are my kind of kid.”

“I’m not a kid.”

“Of course you aren’t,” Leonard said. “You are in your twenties, and therefore you are grown and know all there is to know.”

Chance was in the front seat beside Brett. She leaned through the crack in the seats and popped a knuckle into the top of Leonard’s thigh.

“Damn, Hap, I was hoping she wasn’t like you,” he said, rubbing his leg.

“Me too,” I said.

“What we could do,” Leonard said, “is we could keep the money and shoot the guy in the head and give Farmer back his dog and no one would be the wiser.”

“You talk some shit,” Brett said, “but you wouldn’t do anything like that."

"Maybe it's about time I did. I'm starting to look for retirement money."

"Retirement's a long ways off," Chance said.

"That's what Hap told me when I was thirty-five. Don't worry. We got plenty of time, he said. How'd that work out, Hap?"

"Not so well," I said.

We got there three hours early. Come too close to time, the man making the drop might see us and figure we were planning on nailing him. We weren't planning that at all. We just had the microphones for insurance. Our plan was to make the drop and take Coco Butternut home to Farmer, who was waiting nervously. Then we would cash the check he gave us.

I parked a pickup I had borrowed inside the graveyard, as that would be how I was to haul the coffin away. Farmer said it was a full-sized coffin and wouldn't fit in a trunk or backseat.

Leonard hid in the tree line beyond the graveyard, and lay flat. I insisted he not bring a gun. I was sick of them. Instead he brought a baseball bat. I brought a Yawara stick: a little stick nubbed on both ends, used by Jujitsu folks to strike and lock with. I was fair with it. Nobody was going to give me a job making an instruction video, but I could fuck you up with it, if I needed to. I had it in my back pocket under my coat.

The days were mildly warm, but as winter moved in, some of the nights were a little brisk. I tugged my jacket tight and zipped it up. It was not only a chilly night, but a dark night, and maybe our kidnapper planned on that. I saw him or her coming in a large truck along the road toward the graveyard.

The truck wound down the road and the headlights flashed through the thin run of trees along the edge of the graveyard, and then the truck roared down the dirt drive that led into it, the tires large as those of a semi. If the driver was being sneaky about it, I couldn't tell it. I noticed the license plate had been removed from the front of the truck, and I guessed the back was the same. He'd probably slip them back on when he was out of our sight and continue on his merry way. The headlights were in my eyes, but there was enough residual light from them I could see the truck had been spotted with paint. Most likely a kind of paint you could hose off. It was too dark to know what color paint the spots were, and it didn't matter; it wouldn't be there long enough to make any difference should I want to identify it. The underneath paint was white, though, of that I was certain. Like me, the driver had showed up early, but me and my crew had shown up earlier.

I stood framed in the headlights for a moment and then the driver backed the truck and turned it into the graveyard and bounced across a couple of headstones, knocking them over, snapping them underneath the truck tires like peanut hulls. Rest in peace. The bed of the truck was covered with a camper, and it looked cheap, and my guess was that was more camouflage, and once the job was done, the driver would get rid of that too.

The driver's door opened and someone got out of the truck, and it was high enough from cab to dirt, they had to drop to the ground instead of step.

Then the driver came around in front of the truck with an odd waddle and stood there for a moment. I was certain it was a guy, and I could see he had a gun strapped in a holster on his hip. It was a big gun. He wore a black hood over his head. It had eye holes cut in it.

After a moment of staring at me, he opened the camper at the back with a tiny bit of a struggle, dropped down the tailgate and lifted the top of the gate, the part that had a little window in it.

He gestured for me to come to him. I left the satchel on the grave and went over. He took a small light out of his coat pocket and flashed it inside the truck. I could see a coffin in there. It was rusty looking and it was full size, far bigger than what you'd expect as the last resting spot for a weenie dog.

The man motioned for me to grab the handle of the coffin, and I did. I pulled, and when the end got close to the tailgate, he took the handle on that side. Lifted it out, and we set it on the ground.

He held out his hand, implying I should give him the money.

"I need to see what's in the coffin before I do," I said.

This was something I thought might get me shot for a moment. I wished now I had let Leonard bring a rifle, but then again, another reason I didn't want him to have one is he's not that good a shot. Not bad, but he might just as easily shoot me if things went asunder. Right then I thought we should have switched jobs. I can hit a dime on edge at considerable distance with nothing but a glint of moonlight shining on the dime. It's an inborn knack for someone who really didn't like guns at all.

We stood that way for what seemed long enough for the season to pass, and then he nodded his hooded head, and motioned for me to open the coffin. I could see where it had been pried open before, so all I had to do was lift the lid.

Inside there was a small cloth-wrapped thing that might have been the body of a real dog or a wooden cutout covered in cloth. The cloth had turned brown and was rotting in spots. There was a musty odor, but no real stink of death. The dog was long past that.

“I need to cut the cloth and see what’s beneath it,” I said.

A nod from the hooded man.

I took out my pocket knife and bent over and cut loose some of the cloth. The hooded man helped by shining the flashlight into the coffin. It looked like there were bits of dog under the cloth. Gray, loose skin, and in some places the withered muscles were visible. I decided it was a dog. Was it the right dog? I couldn’t tell. I had done my part. I hadn’t been hired as a forensic expert, which was a good thing.

As I backed off he put his hand on the lid to close the coffin. He had very small hands compared to the rest of him. He closed the lid, placed one hand on his gun grip, and the other he used to make a kind of gimme motion.

I walked back to the grave, picked up the satchel and brought it over. He placed it on the tailgate, opened it for a look, made a satisfied grunt, and closed the satchel and looked at me.

I hadn’t moved.

He pushed the tailgate up and the upper portion down, walked swiftly to the driver’s side carrying the satchel, pulled himself into the cab and closed the door.

I gave the truck a good onceover. Yep, spray paint spots, and I still figured it was watercolor. The truck rumbled and the lights came on, and then it moved away, swiftly, down the dirt and gravel graveyard drive on out to the asphalt road. There was a flash of taillights through the trees, and that was it, he was gone.

Leonard, Brett and Chase all had microphones, so they heard me, and in a moment Leonard came walking out of the woods swinging his ball bat slightly above the ground. I thought he looked disappointed. He hadn't had the opportunity to hit anyone.

A few moments later I saw headlights through the woods, and knew that was Brett and Chance coming around to meet us.

They stopped the Prius, got out and came over.

Brett looked at the coffin.

"So that's all there was to it?"

"Yep," I said. "That was it."

"Silly fool paying for a dead dog, and we're talking one hundred thousand dollars, not a few hundred."

"I think it's sweet," Chance said. "It's not the dead dog, though I can understand that, it's about his mother."

"Yeah, Farmer and his dear old mother," Leonard said.

I went and pulled the pickup around, and me and Leonard loaded the coffin up, and we drove out of there with Brett and Chance following us.

As we rode along in the pickup, I said, "I keep thinking who would know the dog was worth that much to him, and then, why all the mystery, why hire us to do it? He could have done what we did."

"Said he was scared," Leonard said. "So I got a feeling he might know who had the dog, and whoever it was wasn't in love with him. Knew he came to get it, they might take the money and shoot him in the head and that would be the end of it. But if one of us came, the kidnapper might not feel the need to kill anyone he didn't know. Just make the exchange and drive away."

"Could be," I said.

"What I'm getting is we're being made monkeys for something we don't understand, and I don't like that. This stinks more than a dead dog, brother."

"Dog didn't stink that much, actually."

"Well, it stinks to me. I don't believe that Farmer fucker at all."

"You are a skeptical man," I said.

"Find a place to pull over. I want to take a look at that dog myself."

"Already have. Musty. Loose fur. Mummified under the wrap."

"Pull over."

We were still out in the country, so I pulled over by the side of the road near a stand of trees next to a little, trickling creek.

We got out of the truck and the Prius pulled up behind us and killed the lights. Brett and Chance got out.

"Car trouble?" Brett said as she and Chance came over.

"No," I said. "Leonard wants to look himself. He thinks Farmer's story stinks."

"Really none of our business how true his story is," Brett said. "We've done what we were paid to do. I don't think swapping money for a dead dog is illegal."

"Unless you consider that whole extortion thing," I said.

"When you're right, you're right," Brett said.

Leonard had the tailgate on the pickup down and was tugging at the coffin, paying us no mind. I went over and took hold of the other handle and we set it down behind the pickup. Leonard opened it up. He had a flashlight in his pocket, and he was shining it around on the dog.

I said, “Okay. There is one odd thing. The dog is lying on a bottom that’s higher than the real bottom. I didn’t notice that before.”

“I noticed it right off,” Leonard said.

“I have your word for that,” I said.

“Looks obvious to me,” Chance said.

“Remember, I am your dad,” I said.

“Yes, Daddy,” Chance said.

By this time Leonard had lifted the dog out and placed it on the ground. There was a small hole in one corner of the false bottom and Leonard’s finger fit in there. He lifted the false bottom out, and on the true bottom of the coffin lay a corpse.

I couldn’t distinguish age, but enough of the flesh and features had survived that I could tell that it was most likely a woman, way the hips were set, way the wide edges of the bones cut through the rotting flesh.

Chase said, “Yuck.”

“Damn,” Brett said.

Leonard stepped back, pushed the fedora up on his head and looked at me. “What kind of dog is that, Hap?”

Leonard and I took the Prius. Brett and Chance took the pickup and drove the body to the police station. Me and Leonard went to Farmer’s house. We might get our nuts in a vice over that with the police, even if the police chief was a good friend.

Farmer’s home was inside a gate and there was a tall rock wall around it and great oak and hickory trees that might have been around when Davy Crockett died at the Alamo bordered on either side of a long, white, winding drive. We stopped at the gate and pushed the button on the device outside, but the buzzer we heard went unanswered.

I walked up to the gate and looked through. It was a big house at the end of that long, white drive. It loomed like a mountain and was as dark as a murderer’s dreams.

“He was expecting us to deliver,” I said. “So why doesn’t he answer?”

“Might not like the answer to that question,” Leonard said. “Grab a flashlight.”

I went back to the car, got a flashlight out of the glove box and gloves for both of us. They don’t call it a glove box for nothing.

Leonard walked along the fence until he found a thick vine that wound down off the wall. He took hold of it, and pulled himself up and got over the wall, nimble as a squirrel. I followed, doing the same, less nimbly.

We walked along the drive toward the house. A walk like that you damn near needed provisions. The shadows from the trees were as thick as chunks of chocolate cake. A chill wind was blowing hard, lifting dead leaves, tumbling them over us and across the drive in an explosion of crackles and pops. More leaves snapped underfoot like locust husks.

When we came close to the house we could still see no light, not even in the side rooms. There was a brace of dried winter trees and evergreen shrubbery all about. At the back of the house we found a door pried open, as if with a crowbar.

We pulled our burglar gloves on and nudged the door open further and slipped inside. It was a corridor, and we went down it into a room large enough to keep a pet pachyderm. I moved the flashlight around enough to see that the furnishings were expensive and the paintings on the wall seemed to be as well. The frames were all impressive. I got my frames at Walmart, so I might not be an expert.

I found a light switch and hit it and the lights came on. We wandered out of the main room and down another hallway and poked our heads in rooms along the way, switching lights on, but nothing jumped out at us. We turned lights off as we left the rooms. The hallway was very long and the walls on either side were covered in dog photos in nice frames: all weenie dogs. There were award ribbons too, lots of Best In Show stuff, and there was a large photo of Coco Butternut. I knew this due to my superior sleuthing skills and because underneath the photo which was encased in a gold frame was a metal plate that read: coco butternut, my sweetie.

Last room on the left, Leonard turned on the light at the edge of the door and we went inside. More nice furniture, a fireplace you could have roasted a whole hog in. Farmer lay on the floor. He was not napping or watching a bug crawl across the ceiling, which was one of my pastimes. He lay on the floor next to the couch and there was blood all over his head and all over the floor and his head was a lot flatter than when we had last seen him. He hadn’t just been smashed in the head, he had been worked over good. One of his arms was at an odd angle. His toupée lay in a puddle of blood, like a dead kitten.

“Now we call the cops,” Leonard said.

We didn’t need to, because no sooner had we walked back to the main room than we saw flashing lights out the front window at the top of the drive. We stood where we were until someone got the gate open, and then three cop cars came rolling down the drive to park in front of the house.

I turned on a light that gave the front porch illumination, that porch being a giant concrete slab surrounded by shrubs, except at the steps which led down to a concrete walk. Leonard and I walked out there and stood with our hands loose in case the cops thought we were burglars or might be reaching for something.

Chief Marvin Hanson, our friend, got out of the head cop car and came over. “You guys,” he said. “What assholes.”

“What did we do?” Leonard said.

“Brett and Chance gave us the scoop, showed us the body, and we came here to talk to Farmer, and who do I find, but two salt and pepper assholes.”

“That asshole stuff,” Leonard said. “That hurts.”

“You won’t get to talk to Farmer,” I said.

“He not home?”

“Oh, he’s home, but someone in a very bad mood got here before we did and rearranged his head.”

“Yeah,” Leonard said, “he’s all over the place in there.”

“Shit,” Marvin said.

So Marvin and some of the cops took a peekaboo while me and Leonard sat on the steps and shot the shit with one of the officers who had been assigned to make sure we didn’t turn to smoke and disappear. The officer’s last name was Carroll and last time we had spent any time with him was when Leonard was beating the hell out of a dog abuser and Carroll had been called to make sure Leonard didn't kill the guy. Leonard and Carroll got along well and they were laughing about this and that and pretty much cutting me out of the conversation, though I tried several ways by which I might enter into the discussion, only to find myself ignored or given short shrift.

I was still looking for my opening when Marvin came out on the porch and sent Carroll inside to do this or that. Marvin said, "Thing is, we get here and there's a dead body, and we got you guys, and this after making a trade at a cemetery for a dead woman in a coffin."

"We thought we were trading for a dead dog," I said.

"But you didn't call the cops when this blackmail was going on, now did you?"

"We did not," I said.

"Bad us," Leonard said. "You guys really would have cared about a guy trading money for a pooch corpse? That would have been like a priority?"

"Maybe not too much," Marvin said, and sat down on the steps by us. He shooed the other cops away.

"So how bad a trouble are we in?" I said.

"I don't think you did it," Marvin said, "if I take Brett and Chance at their word, and I do, but I'm not sure how a judge and a courtroom would take all this."

"He was our client," I said. "We came to find out why he had lied to us about getting a dog's body back, and there was a woman's with it. We wanted answers."

"You should have come to me," Marvin said. "I'm the law. We get paid to get answers."

"Okay. Here's a thought. Is there some kind of privilege for private investigators and their clients?" Leonard said.

"Only in the movies, boys. Only in the movies."

They took us downtown but didn't throw us in a holding cell. We sat in Marvin's office with Brett and Chance. I had that feeling I had in grade school when the teacher made you write something or another on the blackboard multiple times.

"Here's what we're going to do," Marvin said. "I'm letting everyone go, and I'm saying you told Brett and Chance to tell me that you were going to Farmer's to do a welfare check, cause the guy in the cemetery looked dangerous, and you thought he might be a threat, and you thought you should get there and see he was okay. He wasn't."

"Could be the guy in the graveyard did it," I said. "We were farting around with loading up the body, stopping along the way to look in the coffin, and Leonard gave me bad directions, so it took us an extra ten minutes."

"I gave you bad directions?" Leonard said. "Bullshit, you can't follow a straight line if a string was tied to your dick and to where you wanted to go. Oh, sorry, Chance. No offense meant."

"None taken, but now I got that image in my head."

"Sorry again," Leonard said.

"He's not sophisticated like me," I said. "You'll have to forgive him."

Marvin said, "What I'm going to do is let you two go home, and then you're going to need to stay out of it. This could still come back to you, you know. No use adding fuel to the fire. Stay away from this."

We left out of there and drove our respective rides back to the office where Leonard put on a pot of coffee and got a bag of vanilla wafers out of the desk drawer.

As he did, he said, "These help me think."

"Sure they do," I said.

Brett and Chance drove up slightly after we arrived and came upstairs and into the office.

Brett said, "That was not too smart, boys."

"Yep," Leonard said. "Our usual."

"You know, guy in the cemetery would have to have been in a real rush to get there and do the job before you went over," Brett said. "I mean, he had to figure you might take the coffin right to him. He wouldn't know you were going to spend time looking inside or getting lost, so that would be some chance he was taking."

"Good point," I said.

"Means he probably had him a partner," Leonard said. "That means they get the money and while we're fucking around with Coco Butternuts and a corpse to be named later, he's got this other guy over there playing T-ball with Farmer's head?"

"Butternut," I said.

"What," Leonard said.

"It's Butternut, not Butternuts."

"Whatever."

There were no more revelations in the offing that night, so we all went home. Later, upstairs Brett lay in my arms, her sweet breath close to my face, her hand on my naked thigh.

“You know that gets me excited?” I said.

“I’d be disappointed if it didn’t,” she said.

“That’s why you let Buffy stay downstairs, huh?”

“She likes it downstairs now, since Chance is there. You know, we could do it if we did it quietly. I don’t want Chance or Buffy to hear.”

“Perhaps we could do it in slow motion,” I said.

“I like slow motion,” she said.

“Somewhere in the midst of it, though, we can move a little faster, if that’s all right with you.”

“Sure, but not too soon.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I said.

And it was.

I’d like to say with our great powers of deductive reasoning we figured out who did what and why by the next morning, but we didn’t.

When I came downstairs Leonard had used his key to come in, and he was fixing breakfast and Chance was in her footy pajamas with dinosaurs on them, sitting at the table, sucking at a large cup of coffee. Buffy was sitting at Chance’s elbow, waiting for her to drop something.

“I fed Buffy already,” Leonard said.

“Thanks, bro.”

“Leonard makes good coffee,” Chance said.

“It’s a Keurig,” I said. “Anyone makes good coffee with that. You turn it on, the water heats, you stick a pod in and wait.”

"Gave it my loving touch," Leonard said. "Waved my magic black hand over the pot. Gives it a kind of richness."

"I'm going to have to agree," Chance said.

Strands of her dark hair were loose from her hair tie and some of it clung to the side of her face. It made her look cute and young and made me feel even more fatherly, more protective. I had found out about her late in life, but I hoped I could be as good a father as I could from each day forth, but considering who I was and what I sometimes did, I had my doubts.

Leonard had gone all out with the cooking, scrambled eggs, bacon and cinnamon rolls. I ate a small amount of eggs and one piece of bacon and a cinnamon roll. As I got older, weight and I fought it out on a daily basis. I won for a while, and then it would come back and sneak up on me, climb into my belly and swell it. I worked out, but it didn't seem to matter, least not the way it used to. Fat was tenacious in middle age. I guess middle age is a silly term when you're fifty.

Brett came down in a bit. She was wearing sweat pants and a sweat shirt and her hair was tied back and her eyes were half closed. Time had stopped for her, and her aging was done in inches while mine was done in yards.

"I'll have a cinnamon roll and that's it," she said, and sat down.

I knew what that meant. I stood up from the table and got her a cinnamon roll and poured her a cup of coffee and sat it in front of her. When she had a couple sips of coffee, and had dunked her roll into the big cup, she said, "I think what we got to do is go to Farmer's business and see how things were there."

"He paid us to deliver money and pick up a coffin, and we did that," Leonard said. “Since he’s dead, I don’t see any more money forthcoming.”

“That’s never stopped us before,” Brett said.

“You can’t let it go either, can you?” I said.

“Nope,” she said. “I don’t like unsolved mysteries. I want to know who Jack the Ripper was and if Bigfoot lives in the woods. It’s how I am.”

“I’m curious,” Chance said. “I know it’s not my right to be curious about your work, but I am.”

“Sure it is,” Brett said, and reached out and patted Chance on the arm. “You’re family, and we’re a family business.”

“I’m actually a reporter, and I need to go to work,” she said. She stood up from the table and gave Brett a hug, went around and gave Leonard one, and then me. “I’m still curious though.”

“We’ll keep you in the loop,” Brett said.

Chance went to get showered and dressed. When she left the room, Leonard said, “I think that DNA test was flawed, brother. She can’t have come from you.”

Me and Brett drove over to the mortuary and cemetery owned by Farmer. Leonard went to the cop shop to see if he could pry any new news out of his new friend Officer Carroll.

The cemetery and mortuary was off the main highway and down a dirt road. The road would be dusty in the summer, but for now, during the cool and dry times, it was solid and smooth. We wound our way between trees and pastures and came to the mortuary and cemetery. There was a section for humans, and one for animals. As we drove by, I glanced over the rock fence around the cemetery. Both sections appeared to be pretty full.

The metal bar gate was wide open, and we drove through it and stopped in the circular drive close to the curbing near the main building, which was a goodly size and at first glance looked nice, but at second looked worn around the edges; I knew how the building felt.

I had combed my hair and put on dark jeans and had tucked my shirt in and had on a nice jacket. Brett thought it might be the thing to do, going there. She thought they might see us as more professional. She had on a black business suit with a white shirt, and a business-looking tie made of silk that she wore loose around the collar. The black boots she had on added to her height.

Inside it was a little too cool and it didn't look all that clean either. There was a lady behind a long desk. She was well dressed and a little plump, but it was a firm-looking plump. Fact was, she looked healthy enough to turn over a truck and make it beg for gasoline.

We stood in front of the desk and she smiled at us. Brett said, "We were working for Mr. Farmer. Private investigators. We are doing some follow-up, and would like to ask a few questions, if that's okay?"

The woman studied Brett, then she studied me, and then she leaned back in the desk chair and smiled a smaller smile than before.

"He didn't really operate this place, or had anything to do with it," she said. "He inherited money. Got a chunk of it every month and didn't so much as come in to see if the plumbing worked. It does, but not as well as it should."

"You sound a little unhappy with him," I said.

"I guess I shouldn't speak ill of the dead, but I couldn't speak about him at all until he was dead. Living, he had too much control here."

"Does that mean ownership has changed?" Brett asked. "I mean, the boss is dead so life goes on."

"Like I said, he was no boss. Just collected money. But he was the owner."

"Who owns it now?"

"I guess I do."

"Guess?" I said.

"The will is still being examined, but it looks that way. Jimmy quit having anything to do with this place five years ago, when his wife took off."

"Where did she go?"

"No one knows. She supposedly ran off with the dog mortician."

"How do you mortician a dog?" Brett asked.

"Not with mortician putty. We cremate them and we stuff them with chemicals after we pull out their insides, and sometimes we mummify them. That's extra. Got to be honest. The chemicals don't keep the fur from falling out, so some like the idea of mummification."

"Who in the world would be checking on a dog after it's in the ground?"

"It's the idea of it that the bereaved like. Frankly, it's nothing to me."

"You don't sound like a dog lover," I said.

"I'm not. But I can have them burned up or wrapped up for a nice fee."

"Question?" Brett said.

"Ask it," she said.

"First, to whom am I speaking?"

“Jackie Bridges,” she said. “I guess I should throw in that I’m Jimmy’s ex-wife.”

“Ah, that’s how you got in the will,” I said.

“Nope. His mother did that. She never liked the second wife. I didn’t either, but I wasn’t married to her. I don’t think Jimmy liked her too much. She looked good but wore badly.”

“How’s that?” I said.

“She was a bitch on wheels. Jimmy kept me on here after the divorce, and she didn’t like it, but he wouldn’t change it. Okay, not true. He couldn’t change it. It was part of his mother’s will that I could work here until I didn’t want to or I died. The second wife was given a piece of it too, as his mother didn’t want to alienate Jimmy. She loved him even if he didn’t care that much for her.”

“Why didn’t he?” Brett asked.

“He wanted the entire thing to go to him. He went to a shrink of some kind and got told he had potty-training issues, like not being able to shit right is going to cause you to make stupid choices. They got a lot of stuff for that problem in the drugstore. I don’t think Jimmy minded me working here because that meant he didn’t have to deal with someone new who didn’t know the business, but the wife didn’t work here, not a day, and still got a cut, and I won’t lie to you, that chapped my ass. His mother, bless her soul, had it in her will that if she died I got half of the business and got to stay on. That was a big bite out of things for him. Meant his wife’s share came out of his half, instead of what ought to be my half.”

“So this places makes big money?” I asked.

“Nope. But she has a lot of other businesses and property rentals, so they make big money, and this is a nice foundation. Me and Jimmy and Betty Sue, that's the wife, all got a cut of that. Still do. This place does better than you think, but not as well as I would like. I haven't exactly been on the ball the last five years due to the fact Jimmy wouldn't allow me to make certain changes to upgrade. I had some power, like I said, but there were certain things I couldn't do without his permission, and he wasn't giving it. He didn't want any more cuts to his money, and I couldn't convince him we could make more money by upgrading here and there. Way people are about their pets, hell, we could convince them to dress them in suits and sweaters that we provide. There's all manner of possibilities. One woman wanted us to have her dog put in capsules that she could take every morning until the dog was gone. Nice idea, but it's not sanitary and there are laws against it."

"One more question," Brett said. "Is it possible we could see where the body of Coco Butternut was buried?"

Jackie had a paper with all the graves listed on it, the names of the pets labeled. She gave it to me and I folded it up and put it in my shirt pocket.

"Just for the record, what's your view on cats?" I said.

"Don't like them either. Neither did Jimmy. His mother was the animal nut. I only like to eat them. Not cats and dogs, but animals like cows and such. Them I like with a side salad. Though, I don't know, you fix a dog or cat right, I might eat them too."

We went out and around the side of the building, having been given permission to look about.

"She doesn't like cats and dogs," Brett said, "so she's on my shit list.

But at least she’s an asshole on top of it all.”

“Her husband was probably a worse asshole,” I said.

“Could be. But I don’t like her. I think she was checking me out. You see the way she looked at me?”

“You have scrambled egg on your shirt.”

“Oh. Right. I do.”

Around back we looked out over the field of markers and stones.

“That’s a lot of cats and dogs,” I said.

Walking through the rows of animal graves we came to one that was nothing more than a hole and there was a large marker there made of granite. It read: coco butternut, champion and friend. There were no dates on it.

“Odd,” Brett said. “Someone broke into the dog cemetery and dug up the coffin and carried it out and no one noticed.”

“It is off the main road,” I said.

Brett nodded. “Yep, but it would have taken awhile.”

“Looking at the grave, I think they used a backhoe.”

“So he drove up on a backhoe?”

“Seems unlikely, but not impossible.”

Brett nodded again. I could see she was working some ideas around in her head.

A young man walked up. I hadn’t even noticed him. “Can I help you?” he asked.

He was tall and thin as a shovel handle and had a wad of blond hair on his head that looked to have been styled into a bird’s nest, something for a condor to sleep in. I had never seen hair bunched up like that and so blond it was nearly white. He had a nice face though. At first he looked young, in his thirties, but the more I looked at him the older he looked. Forty or so, I reckoned.

We explained what we were about, and when we finished he nodded.

"Of course. Look about all you want."

"So, obviously," I said, "you work here."

"I'm Jackie's son."

"So you're Jimmy's son too, I take it," Brett said.

"I'm Scanner. Mom named me after part of a science fiction book title. She was married before Farmer, but her husband, my father, James Sundrey, died when I was about ten."

"Sorry," I said.

"No sweat. He was a son-of-a-bitch too, just like Farmer. Can't say I miss him. He was about as fatherly as an earthworm."

"I take it earthworms are poor parents," I said.

"That's my take," he said.

"So what's your job here?" Brett asked.

"Whatever is needed. I have my own business. I make prosthetics and sell them."

"Your own company?" I asked.

"Online, but I make good stuff. Have some patents. I'm catching on. I'm anxious to get out of the pet smoking and wrapping business."

"There's another branch to the cemetery, though," I said. "People."

Scanner pointed. "It's over there, but I don't care that much for smoking or burying people either. What I want to do is end up going to Hollywood, make special effects for movies. I can really do some cool things with prosthetics, you know foam, make-up."

"Good luck with that," I said.

"Thanks," he said. "I guess I'll go now. I have to attend to a few things. Hey, you got something on your shirt there."

"Scrambled eggs," I said.

"Ah."

"Question," Brett asked. "When you do deep burials, and it looks like Coco here got a nice one, how do you dig the holes?"

"Backhoe," Scanner said. "We keep it in the shed."

And he pointed to the back of the cemetery where there was a long, high-roofed building made of aluminum.

A lot of things were clicking as we drove away, and we discussed them.

"Okay," Brett said. "The ex-wife didn't like him, and her son didn't like him, and there's a backhoe in the shed, and yet, it doesn't quite come together."

"If she knew there was a body under Coco Butternut, she didn't mention it."

"Because she knows she's not supposed to know. She's in on it, I bet you an enchilada dinner on it."

"What kind of enchiladas?"

"Focus, Hap."

"You brought up enchiladas."

"I also brought up I think she's involved in all this."

"Guy that drove that truck was a big dude, not a woman and not as skinny as Scanner."

“Still think she’s involved. Maybe we should come back tonight and look in the shed?”

“So they have a backhoe?” I said. “Scanner said as much, and a business like this would have one.”

“Yes, but maybe they have a big truck as well, like the one that brought the coffin. As for the big guy, maybe they got a third partner. It could easily be that way.”

“If they’re the ones did this,” I said.

“I don’t have the proof yet,” Brett said, “but I think we can bumble along until we do based on that assumption.”

“I’m a good bumbler.”

“You and Leonard both,” she said. “It makes me proud.”

Me and Leonard made an appointment with Marvin while Brett went to the office to hold down a chair in case a new client came in, one that wasn’t dead and was paying. What we were doing was now gratis, but damn if we wanted some skunk to use us as a way to get money and kill Farmer.

Day before Leonard had visited with Officer Carroll and asked him a few questions, things that could help us nail the murderer. I called Marvin and let him know we hadn’t been good, and that we were snooping, just what he’d asked us not to do. But when I told him what Brett and I had learned at the mortuary, about the financial arrangements and the will, it stirred his interest.

“I kind of hate you guys,” he said. “You never do what I ask.”

“We’re like teenagers,” I said.

“Assholes,” he said.

Marvin was seated with his feet on his desk and there was a steaming cup of coffee on the desk as well. He had a file in his hand.

“Officer Carroll seems to be talking out of school,” Marvin said.

“He might have been led to think I had your permission,” Leonard said.

“He might have been led that way, might he?”

“Yep,” Leonard said.

“Alright, to hell with it. Maybe you boys are actually onto something.”

We seated ourselves in chairs in front of the desk and Leonard perched his fedora on his knee.

“Can we have some coffee?” I said.

“Go to the break room and get it,” Marvin said.

“Don’t you have minions?” I asked.

“For police work.”

“Get mine too,” Leonard said. “And if they have any cookies, vanilla in particular, bring some of those.”

“We don’t have any cookies,” Marvin said.

“If I ran this place vanilla wafers would be a constant.”

“If you ran this place there’d be a lot of fat cops,” Marvin said.

“I’m not fat,” Leonard said.

“You’re a freak of nature,” Marvin said.

“Actually,” I said, “he’s showing his age some. He recently had to drop ten pounds.”

“So did Hap, and he could drop ten more.”

Marvin eyed me. “I was thinking twenty.”

“You’re probably right,” Leonard said. “He doesn’t work out as much as he should.”

“I have other things to do,” I said.

“He’s lazy,” Leonard said.

“Well,” I said. “That too.”

“Okay,” Leonard said. “About that coffee, Hap. Stir my sugar in good. You know how to fix it.”

“Fuck you,” I said, and got up to get the coffee.

When I came back, Marvin had pulled his feet off the desk and tucked them underneath it. He had the file open in front of him.

“I’m assuming that file has to do with the death of Jackie Farmer’s first husband,” I said.

Marvin smiled. “You arrived at the same place I did. Here she is with two husbands, and they are both dead and with their deaths, money is to be made. The first there was a fat insurance policy, and with Farmer she made money as a business partner as well as a wife, and when they split, she made money just as a business partner. But Farmer’s mother liked Jackie, and it seems that gave Jackie a home court advantage. Then Farmer got a new wife and that led to new complications, until the new wife disappeared. Way I think Jackie had it figured was she was in a good position to get it all, due to Farmer’s mother making her a big dog at the mortuary. With Farmer and his new wife gone, she would own the mortuary, the cemetery, the whole business. And there’s the insurance on Farmer too. The mother put in her will should Farmer die, a sizable amount of the insurance money she had on him would go to Jackie. That’s a really large incentive for murder, you ask me.”

“What Jackie told us,” I said. “She didn’t try and hide it. Though she left out that whole advantage for her due to murder."

"I had to look around for a file on her first husband's death, and that took some work, and it's interesting in what's not in it," Marvin said.

"Like the dog that didn't bark in the nighttime," I said.

"Like that," he said. "The first husband started feeling bad and ended up in the hospital, and the doctors couldn't figure the problem. I think if we dig him up we'll find out what the problem was. I'm guessing poison. I think this Jackie is an operator. She didn't kill Farmer while the money was easy, even after the divorce, but at some point my guess is she thought it was a good idea."

"And Farmer's wife?"

"That might be a bit more complex. Farmer didn't like her much, and there had actually been three or four calls to the police by the missing wife, saying he was abusing her. And there was the whole business about her fucking around with someone, and then suddenly she's gone and so is the guy. Old Police Chief thought it was kind of suspicious, but he couldn't prove anything and Farmer just went on being Farmer."

"And Jackie went on being Jackie," I said.

"Right," Marvin said. "My guess is she somehow knew what Farmer did, kept it in her back pocket. Why not? She wanted to be rid of the wife too, and then one day she gets the bright idea she can get some money for the body, and then get rid of Farmer too. The time was right with the mother dead and her knowing where the body was and the will lined up to make her golden. She could sit around with her feet up and a fan blowing up her dress for the next ten years and not have to hit a lick at a snake."

"What about her son?" Leonard said.

"Checked on him," Marvin said. "Has a jacket. Had a few little notes added to it on a regular basis." Marvin shifted to pick up another folder, opened it. "All of it petty stuff. Peeping Tom, stealing women's clothes at the laundry mat. Stuff like that. He got caught on that one and they found selfies of him wearing stolen panties on his head. His history of panty hats was right there. He's one of those dreamers thinks he's going to be something he's too lazy to be, a special effects artist or some such."

"He told me and Brett just that thing," I said. "But wearing panties on your head is a long way from murder."

"Course," Leonard said, "we don't know the dead woman in Coca-Cola Butterasses coffin is Farmer's wife."

"We should know that in a few hours," Marvin said. "I got some guys in Tyler owe me a favor, so they're making DNA tests. Can do that stuff quick these days, they take a mind to, and there aren't a bunch of cases lined up in front of it. That's where the favor comes in. But I think we know who it is."

"And probably there's a dead boyfriend somewhere too," Leonard said. "You know, the wife is underneath Coconut Butterballs, then there's a good chance that boyfriend of hers is lying under another dog out there. Farmer killed them, the ex-wife threatened to expose the murdered wife, got some money in the deal, then got Farmer whacked. It's a tight idea, you think about it."

"I know I like it," Marvin said, "but thing is, even with one body on hand from the graveyard, we got to have a bit more reason to dig the other body up."

"Why would they care if you dug it up?" I said. "They got what they wanted, the money and Farmer dead. Farmer most likely put him there, so why would they bother not letting you check the graves out? It just puts more guilt on him, I'd think."

"Well, something is bothering them," Marvin said. "We asked and they said we would need a warrant."

"That paints things a different color," Leonard said. "Ah, I got it. The other body, maybe Jackie helped dispose of it. Maybe she helped in the murder of the wife too."

"Yeah, but still all things point to Farmer, not her," I said.

"Jackie may have played her hand too far, blackmailing him and killing him on the same night," Marvin said. "But what I'm thinking is she's thinking there's something in that other coffin that points back to her. My guess it might even be something she can explain away, but if she can get rid of the body, dig it up, cremate it and put the boyfriend's ashes in the flower bed, she's laid out smooth as silk. I think Farmer had a good idea who stole the body. He may not have known she knew he did what he did, but at that point, someone blackmailing him with his wife's corpse, he had to have an idea."

"Why he sent us," I said. "Had it figured right. They wanted to kill him. He thought he'd be all right if he stayed home, that paying her off would save his neck, but it didn't."

"Which brings me to a thought. You see, as Police Chief I have certain restrictions. You know, my hands are tied on some things. But I'm thinking if someone who didn't have those restrictions was able to find some evidence, maybe not too illegally, but you know, real soon, and it was something a Chief of Police could use, and those people, two guys say, were to present it to me in a fashion where I could find out about it in a good way, and I could use it in court, wouldn't that be nice?"

"So, you're talking about us?" Leonard said.

"Maybe," Marvin said. "You know, there might be something at her house, inside, or somewhere. Something like a big, white truck, which would be a nice place to start, though not quite good enough to finish, but what if they had four hundred thousand dollars under the bed in Farmer's satchel."

"That might be hoping too much to find," Leonard said. "Even for those two guys you're talking about."

"I think Jackie is too smart to just poke that satchel under the bed," I said.

"True," Marvin said, "but you never know, and you know what, they might have hidden it at the mortuary, but you see, I got this warrant I got to get, and the best I can do is get it tomorrow, and I'm not entirely sure the judge is going to give it to me, not in time, anyway. He's kind of stickler. But I'm thinking I get enough to pull them in, and get that Scanner fellow in interrogation, I can dangle a fine set of panties in front of him and he'll spill the beans."

"You'd dangle panties in front of him?" Leonard said.

"No," Marvin said, "I think he's the weak link in all this and he'll spill with little more than a cup of coffee and me giving him a stern look, but I thought that part about the panties sounded good, so I said it."

Chance, being part-time at the newspaper, had a day off from work, so we gave her the job of going out to the cemetery road and parking close to where it emptied into a highway. There was a parking lot there that went with a grocery store of some size. She could sit there in her car and see the road clearly.

There was a back way out of the cemetery, but it was a long way, and it stood to reason they would use the shorter route. If they did, if Scanner or Jackie left the place, went home, went anywhere, we would know because Chance would use her cell to let us know. She had on a baseball cap and a loose shirt and shorts and sandals and had her lunch with her in Brett's Star Wars lunch box. I think Chance liked playing detective. The idea of it anyway, but after lunch, if she was still sitting there and waiting without news, she might be less interested.

It didn't take much research to figure out where Jackie and Scanner lived. Scanner still lived with his mom, which was no surprise, and he had a place in the backyard. We knew that because we drove over there in Leonard's pickup and walked along the walk and went straight up on the porch. We had on khaki clothes and caps that could have fit any city worker doing any kind of city job, jobs that might require someone to go from house to house, or do work inside, say on a gas line or a phone line or electrical problems, plumbing perhaps. We could make a lie go in any direction we needed to.

At the front door Leonard took out the lockpicking kit and messed around for a while, and when he clicked the lock, he discovered there was a dead bolt as well and a chain. He locked the door back with his tools.

If they had the front door locked like that, it meant they locked it up inside and went out another way. We strolled casually around the side of the house, next to some ill-kept shrubs, and finally we were at a chain link fence with a gate in it. The backyard was high in weeds, but there was a walk along the side of the house and it came to where we stood at the gate. The gate had a padlock on it.

There was an old travel trailer in the yard with grass grown up around it. Behind that was a large shed and the pines in the yard on either side of it had dropped rust-colored needles on the roof making a thick carpet. We could see a padlock on the shed door from where we stood. The sunlight dappled through the pine limbs and leaves and gave the place a camouflage look.

“Like their privacy,” Leonard said.

“Lot of people do,” I said.

Leonard worked the padlock easy with his tools, and we went inside the yard, closing the gate behind us. “Bet you the kid lives in that travel trailer, and that’s his workshop out back for the things he sells online,” Leonard said. “Also betcha he doesn’t sell much online. I think that’s just his story so he doesn’t seem like the loser he really is. Grown man living with his mother like that, they always got excuses, usually about how they’re taking care of Mom, but it always seems to be the other way around.”

“You used to live with us,” I said.

“You shut up.”

We pulled on gloves and started at the back door of the house. Leonard cracked the lock quickly, and went inside. It was marginally neat, about the way mine and Brett’s place looks before we clean up for company. The air had a cinnamon smell. There wasn’t much of any great interest, some photos on the wall of her and Scanner. One of them he had a mask of some sort pushed back off his face and it nestled on top of his head. I couldn’t make out what it was supposed to be, but my guess was he had made out of foam or plastic. His face beneath the pushed back mask was young and happy. My heart hurt for him. Once he thought he’d have more to life than a trailer in the backyard, maybe have a Hollywood career making masks and such for horror movies.

In that same photo Jackie had her arm around him and was smiling. She looked pretty good. Thinner then, healthier, less angry. Maybe she had just poisoned her first husband and was happy about it. Around her neck was a necklace with a dangling pendant. It was fairly large and silver with a green stone in the center.

We made our way through all the rooms. Leonard stopped to use the bathroom, and then we slipped out back and locked the door again. We went out to the travel trailer. It had a padlock on the door. Leonard used the lockpick and in a moment he clicked it open.

“I’m getting good at this,” he said.

Inside, the place looked to be more a nest than a home. Clothes were strewn about and the sink was full of dirty dishes and the place smelled like old food and mildewed clothes and too much jacking off.

“Yeah, Scanner lives here,” I said.

“Guys like Scanner always got a story about how they’re going to become something or another, but they aren’t going to get there, and they know it,” Leonard said, flashing the light around.

“What about us?” I said. “We aren’t exactly living high on the hog.”

“It’s a higher hog than we used to live on, rose field work and such.”

“Yep. We’re growing up.”

We went through the travel trailer which took us about two minutes. We searched for another ten or so, found some nudie magazines under Scanner’s mattress. “I wouldn’t touch those too much,” Leonard said.

I put them back under the mattress. There was a little TV mounted at the foot of Scanner's bed and a stack of DVDs, all popular movies with lots of explosions and car chases.

We gave the place a bit more of a look, but all we found were some shit-stained underwear on the floor and a drawer full of clean women's panties.

"Scanner's head gear," Leonard said.

We went out and snapped the padlock into place.

"Nothing exciting here."

Out back we got in the shed easy. That lock might as well have been a piece of thread tied across the door.

There was dust in the place and it was moving about in the flashlight beam. There were tables with oddities on them, pieces of this and that. There were superhero masks and chunks of foam, artificial limbs.

"Okay, he really does make prosthetic limbs and such," I said. "And they look like they're pretty good quality."

"I know you, Hap Collins. You're thinking if he'd just had the right encouragement he might not have become a sad asshole who lives with his mother."

"Well. . . ."

"Let me tell you something, he decided on his own to be a sad asshole who lives with his mother. Sometimes there are just assholes, Hap."

I shrugged. "Maybe."

There was a window at the back of the shed and it looked out on a little road that ran up to a fence that bordered the back yard. There was a truck camper on the ground out there. I recognized it. It was the one that had been on the back of the spotted-up truck that night.

I heard a sound at the back of the shed, but when I changed my place and looked where I thought it had come from, I saw nothing. Cat probably. I was getting jumpy.

"Look here," I said.

Leonard looked out the window at the camper.

"That's the same camper cover that was on the truck that night," I said.

"Lot of those out there," Leonard said. "And they all look alike."

"That's it," I said.

We looked around and found more of the same, and then in a closet we found a set of legs and arms and a torso. Not real ones, but prosthetic ones. There was a foam head with eye holes and a black hood was pulled over it.

"No wonder our man at the graveyard walked funny," I said.

"Scanner was wearing this shit." Leonard said.

"Why he looked big and his hands looked small. He had this on to disguise himself, made him look more formidable. With the hood on, gloves and clothes, it being night, I couldn't tell. I just thought he walked a little funny."

Leonard pulled one of the legs out and used his hands to bend it at the knee. It bent easy.

"Feel it," he said.

I took it. It was light as a feather. If Scanner had the whole thing on it would have been a little cumbersome, but I could tell it was easy enough to move around in it if you practiced.

"Okay," I said, "how do we get it so Marvin can come in here and check things out?”

“I was thinking we set the travel trailer on fire and call Marvin and the fire department.”

“So they put it out?” I said. “Stuff we need is in the shed.”

“Leave it to me.”

Leonard took out a burner cell. We got so we carried one each on us or in our car or pickup.

A moment later the call was made.

“Hey, Marvin. This is Leonard. . . . Of course that Leonard. Listen, there may be a trailer on fire out back of a house on Prichard Lane, 303, and it might need to be put out, but you know, the shed behind it, you might come with the fire department, just in case you might need to snap the lock and look inside to see if anyone’s in there. Fire might spread.”

Leonard listened, then closed the phone.

“Okay. He’s coming in twenty, so let’s find a way to set a fire in the trailer.”

Outside of the shed Leonard put the padlock back in place, and then he picked the lock on the trailer again. Inside, Leonard pulled the curtains over close to the electric cook stove and placed the end of one of them over one of the burners. He filled a frying pan with cooking oil and put it on top of another burner and heated up the grease. I understood then. I got some frozen French fries out of a bag in the refrigerator and poured them in the grease, and we let that heat until the potatoes were popping, then Leonard placed the hot pan on the curtain over the other burner and turned that burner on. In a moment the curtain caught and the flames ran up the curtain and along the wall. I poured the oil and potatoes from the frying pan onto the stove and the hot burners caught the grease and then the top of the stove was on fire. We went out of there and locked the door. It wasn't that we thought Scanner would think he forgot and left potatoes on the stove, but it would sure look that way to the fire department at first glance.

"What if it doesn't catch good?" I said.

"Say some driver drove by, saw smoke and called it in but didn't want to leave their name. That driver wouldn't know how bad the fire was, only that smoke was seen. Hell, it might be out by the time the fire department gets here, but they got to go on and take a look, don't they?"

"They do, indeed."

Away from the house we walked along the street and glanced back. No smoke was drifting from the backyard. The fire might be out, but it was the excuse Marvin needed. He'd have the fire department break in there and then he'd say he thought he smelled smoke coming from the shed to, and they'd break in there too, or that's how I figured he'd do it.

In the pickup I took off the work cap and Leonard did too, slipping his fedora in place. I called Marvin on my burner.

When he answered he said he was already en route. I said, "I was you, I'd look close in the shed out back. Fact is, I'd look in a closet there where you'll find the disguise of the guy that brought us the dog and we gave the money. There might be a camper shell out back like the one the blackmailer was using."

I explained a little more to him, and then I picked up my personal cell and called Chance.

"They still there?" I asked.

"They didn't come out this end."

"You can go home now."

"Good," she said. "I'm out of coffee."

We thought if Marvin found the prosthetics and I said that Scanner was wearing that rig when we gave him Farmer's money, it would be good enough and over with.

But it wasn't like that, and of course, thinking back on it, there was no reason it should be.

Marvin came over late afternoon, and sat at the table finishing off coffee with me and Leonard, Chase and Brett.

"We can't go to the DA with what we got. We know the little bastard was in on it, probably his mother too, but we can't prove it. The rig he had, all you can say is you think he was wearing it. You didn't think that until you saw it in the storage building, and I can't say you were there, as they would get your asses in trouble for breaking and entering, and I kind of encouraged that. I mean the fire is suspicious as it is, but it did get us in the shed and we did find the prosthetics, so it's something. But, not enough. We didn't even take the stuff or them into custody. We got a free look, and that helped, but that's the end to it. Have to give me more, if you're up for it, and frankly I don't know what more is, but if you say I asked you for more, I'll deny it."

"Like the way you didn't ask us in the first place," Leonard said.

"Just like that," Marvin said. "Here's the thing, this isn't really your problem, and you could let it go. It's really my job to figure this out."

"Don't have sympathy for Farmer," Leonard said, "but I don't like us being saps in all this."

"I don't like we were handing Scanner money and in the meantime, Farmer was getting his brains knocked out, and right now, I'm figuring Jackie did that herself," Brett said. "If it was Scanner at the graveyard, then Jackie was most likely the muscle. She looked stout enough to swing a tire iron or a bat and make it count."

"You got a bother about it all, then you got to come up with more proof," Marvin said. "And let me tell you, that setting fire to Scanner's trailer was an iffy idea. That could have gone way wrong."

"But it didn't," Leonard said.

"Still, try and play it a little safer, okay? We had Jackie and Scanner come in and fill out some papers, you know, and the general consensus was that juveniles broke into the trailer and set the fire."

"That isn't far off," Brett said.

"Ha, ha," I said.

"Wow," Chance said. "Meeting people in a graveyard to swap money for a corpse. Murder. Arson. Bad language from my father and uncle, a stakeout. I certainly have been living a sheltered life. I like this one better."

After Marvin left, we mumbled about this and that for a bit, but didn't come up with anything constructive, but after we poured ourselves more coffee, Chance said, "I got an idea. It might not be a good one, but do you want to hear it?"

"Right now even a bad idea might sound good," Leonard said.

"In our case, they usually do," I said.

Leonard said, "Wait a sec," got up and pulled out the stash of vanilla cookies we keep for him in the cabinet and put them on the table. He opened the bag and stacked a half-dozen cookies in front of him and started dipping one in his coffee. “All right, I’m ready,” he said.

“Okay,” Chance said. “From what’s been said, it appears Jackie is worried about someone digging up that other body in the graveyard. She told the law they had to get a warrant. Right so far?” We agreed she was.

“She may not be hiding anything. That might just be good business, trying to keep the graves intact. She wouldn’t want her customers to think that whoever, animal or human buried there, will be excavated at the drop of a hat, so she makes a stand. But if she doesn’t want them digging graves up for another reason, could that reason be she knows there’s something in the other grave, the one with the boyfriend in it, that might somehow tie her to the murders?”

“Like what?” I asked.

“That’s where my plan falters a bit,” Chance said. “I don’t know. But that could be it, couldn’t it? And if we got to the grave before she did, that would be good, because if there’s something there, she’ll try and get to it before a court order goes through. She might fight it off a few days with a good lawyer, but she’s got to know in the long run the law is going to win out on this one. Those graves are going to be investigated. She may have dug up the one she needs to check already, but you know what I’m thinking is she’ll wait until late tonight so as not to be so conspicuous. She’s stirred up by today’s events, and by the law’s request to dig up some graves, so she knows that fire wasn’t merely an accident. She’s bound to suspect the law did it so they could snoop. She knows they want in that graveyard bad, and she’s got to figure that court order is coming soon, so that means she’s got to get to it and hide whatever evidence she believes might be in the coffin. She would most likely want to go there late at night to make her move, dig the grave up when fewer people might notice. What we need to do is beat her at her own game.”

“Well,” Brett said, “it’s some kind of plan.”

We didn’t go there when it was fresh dark, but we tried not to wait too long. When the sun was solid set and the stars were high and bright, we drove out there.

Brett was the only one of us that could drive a backhoe, as she had worked for the street department when she was young for a summer, and claimed she could make that machine purr, shit and call other machines bad names. I was her partner in the venture.

Leonard and Chance went in Leonard’s truck, parked at the same place where Chance had waited to keep a look out before. Since the lot was empty, they parked close to the building there to look as if the truck might belong to the owner.

They had a good view of the turn off to the cemetery as long as Jackie or Scanner came from that direction. It seemed the most logical path for them to take. It was the most direct route.

Driving past the cemetery, me and Brett scoped it out. There were lights in the front building and behind that was the dog graveyard, and beyond that was a long building where the backhoe should be, and there was a tall booger light on a pole.

We parked down a ways and walked back. I had a crowbar in my hand and a flashlight in my coat pocket. Brett had a flashlight in her hand, one of those big heavy cop things, but had yet to turn it on. We could see clearly enough. It was a bright starry night and the moon was near full. The air was cool and crisp as a starched collar and the air smelled like pines and it tingled in the nose and throat. As always, doing something like this, I was nervous and excited at the same time. In the sky bats were flying, chasing insects. You could see the bats well enough, and if you looked hard you could see the insects flying in the celestial light with the bats swooping down on them.

When we got to the cemetery the gate was locked. It was one of those tall, iron bar things with the bars pointed at the top, and there was a big lock where the gates closed and hasped together. I got out my lockpicking kit and couldn't do shit with it. Brett took the kit and went to work. It took a while, but she got it. We swung the gate open slightly with a haunted house creak and slipped inside and pulled it closed with the same creaking sound. It locked when it snapped together.

The wall around the cemetery was made of worn stone and mortar. It wasn't real high, but it was damn sure solid. It had most likely been built by the WPA during the Great Depression. Where we were had certainly contained something other than a cemetery back then. I think I had heard somewhere about there had once been a school in this location, but it was torn down in the sixties and eventually the acreage became the cemetery.

We eased along the drive, past the front building and the outside light that was on a large telephone pole, and then we started across the graveyard toward the long, high, storage building.

It wasn't that long a trek, but out there in the bright celestial light it seemed a long ways. I felt as if I were on a hike to Antarctica. You could see us easy from the road, and in fact maybe from the moon.

"If the keys aren't with the backhoe," Brett said, "we get a shovel and I can watch you dig."

"Hoping for keys," I said.

The shed had a padlock on the great doors that were chained together. Brett made quick work of it with the lockpicking kit, and then I pushed the doors open and we went inside. Brett took her light out of her pocket where she had tucked it, and turned it on, flashed it around the shed. It was really more a warehouse than a shed. The roof was tall and the room was wide. On the walls we could see all manner of gardening tools hanging, but the thing that interested us was what was in the center of the building, resting on a concrete floor like a dinosaur. A yellow backhoe, and an orange bulldozer, both of good size. They had cabins surrounded by glass. I guess if you're going to scrape ground and dig holes, you needed the right equipment. More interesting was a big white truck, and even without its spots, I felt certain that was the truck I had pulled the coffin out of. I went over and looked at it and was even more convinced.

"You know we are breaking so many laws right now," I said.

"Yep," Brett said. "I have become as gangster as you."

We looked around a bit and I took some photos on my phone. They might not be legal photos in a court of law, but they would certainly show Marvin that mother or son owned a big white truck and the camper in their backyard would conveniently snap together over it.

Brett climbed up on the backhoe, slid back the glass door and looked inside.

She called down to me. "Key's here."

"And you're sure you can drive it?"

"I said I could." She was already settling herself onto the seat.

"I know, but that's been a long time ago."

"It's like giving a blow job, you just don't forget something like that."

"Ouch," I said.

"By the time you and I got together I had perfected the art."

"Ouch again."

"It's not like I was doing it for pay."

"Ouch even again."

"I'm not making this any better am I?"

"Not much."

Brett turned the key and the backhoe growled to life.

"Climb on up," she said.

The backhoe had a lot of controls. Brett buckled her seat belt. That made me nervous. I didn't have a seatbelt. Why did a backhoe have a seatbelt?

Brett released the parking brake and shifted the transmission into forward. The bucket was already up. She drove us through the open doors and the backhoe rumbled us out into the cemetery.

It seemed obvious to us that if there was another body out there under a dog, it would most likely be next to the grave of Coco Butternut. If Farmer had to get rid of the boyfriend too, it seemed natural and simple that he would do them side by side and be done with it.

Brett stopped the backhoe, said, "Which grave are we digging up, one on the right or left of Coco Butternut?"

"It's a crap shoot," I said. "Go for either."

Brett chose the one on the left and started working the scoop. She had a delicate touch. I knew that already, but it was interesting to see it applied to a backhoe. She dug down a few scoops, and we were already there. I could see a coffin.

I climbed down with my crowbar and jumped into the grave and stuck the bar under the coffin lid and pried. It came open easy. There was a dry, musty smell. I could see right away that the dog inside was resting on the bottom of the coffin. I climbed out of the hole and stood there, shaking my head at Brett.

She went back to work. Two scoops and she scraped the top of the coffin in the other grave. I got down in that grave and did what I had done before. The dog lay high in the coffin and I used the tip of the crowbar to move the false bottom back. There was a human corpse underneath.

I looked up at Brett and nodded.

No sooner had I done that than I heard a roaring and looked toward the sound and saw the bulldozer come out of the warehouse at the end of the cemetery.

“Shit,” I said.

Brett leaned out the side of the open backhoe, said, “You better come up.”

I clamored back inside the backhoe.

“Looks like our watchdogs failed,” Brett said.

“Whoever it is, they came in another way,” I said. “Leonard and Chase wouldn’t have missed them.”

“I don’t intend to fight a bulldozer,” Brett said.

I figured the bulldozer driver had come in to do what we thought they might. Dig up the grave, but we had beat them to it, and then they had fooled us by coming earlier than we expected. That's how it goes. You can't assume shit.

Brett whipped the backhoe around and we started heading for the closed and locked gate. Bulldozers run faster than I thought they might, and it was closing on us. As we came closer to the gate, Brett said, "Hitch up your nuts. We're going through."

"The gate? Really?"

"Easier than the wall."

She gave the backhoe all the juice she could, and away we went. She used the bucket like a knight's lance. It hit the gate and there was a noise like someone skinning a cat, and then the gate buckled a little, but held. We were pushing so hard at it the tires began to smoke. I looked back.

The bulldozer was coming fast, whirling onto the drive, and inside its glass cabin I could see Jackie. She had a look on her face that I can only describe as goddamn unpleasant.

The back of the backhoe lifted up and the front tires smoked like a bonfire. Brett changed gears, and the rear end settled. She went at it again. The gate groaned like someone who had just had their knee capped, and then it snapped open. Brett gunned it through, but the bulldozer was as tight on our ass as a hemorrhoid. It hit our rear end and pushed us through and off the drive and onto a patch of grass beside the main road.

Brett turned the backhoe deftly. We bumbled across the patch of grass and then we were shooting onto the road, the dozer banging against the back of the backhoe as we did.

Another move by Brett, and we swung wide and to the right. The dozer was surprisingly dexterous in its moves, but not as swift as the backhoe, and with that maneuver we got away from the dozer, at least by a few paces.

We raced away, but the dozer was back on track and coming fast. There was a crack in our windshield where it had hit the gate and cold wind came through the crack to add to our misery. I looked back.

Behind us, the dozer dropped its blade so that it skimmed over the road. I knew what that meant. Jackie was going to try and scoop us from the bottom and flip us. Seemed like a good plan that I didn't want any part of. I felt a turd loosen inside of me and thought it might be surfacing soon.

Down the road toward us came a pickup. It was Leonard and Chase. I didn't know why they were coming, but they were. Leonard's truck was bent up in front and I could see there was a third person in the cab with them.

Chance was driving the pickup. Leonard was sitting on the passenger side, and then they were so close I could see who was in the middle. Scanner. It wasn't so much that I could make out his features in detail, but I could see him well enough to know it was him. They were heading right for us at what one could politely call an accelerated rate of speed, and we were on their side of the road. So, there we were, the backhoe flying along as fast as it could go, the bulldozer right on top of us, and Leonard's pickup heading straight for us. It was like me and Brett were about to be made into a sandwich between them, and then—

I hurt a little.

I could smell gasoline.

I woke up in a dry ditch and I could see the stars through the boughs of a pine that draped over me. I couldn't remember how I got there or why I was there, and I don't know if I even knew who I was for a moment without checking my driver's license. That's when I realized I was lying in a ditch. I didn't normally lie in a ditch. Why was I in a ditch?

And then I thought about Brett, and that got me moving, slowly, and then I thought about Chance and Leonard, Jackie and that goddamn bulldozer, and by then I had rolled over and was pushing up with my hands and climbing up out of that ditch. It wasn't a deep ditch, but I felt so damn weak it might as well have been me scaling Mt. Everest.

Chance was driving right at us, and then she veered, and when she did, Brett tried to take the backhoe to the right, but the bulldozer climbed up our butt, and the backhoe did a crazy slide and there was the sound of metal against metal and the sound of our machine blowing a tire; it was like some kind of weird music for the damned, and away the backhoe went, spinning.

When it came to a stop, the dozer hit the machine in the rear, crunching it a little, since it was pushed up against that brick wall that ran for a long ways at the edge of the cemetery. We really hadn't gotten that far.

I remembered the dozer blade being lifted and being smashed down on the back of the backhoe like a giant fist, and then I remember the glass cab shattering and me flying. My moment as Superman, but the landing was my moment as a mortal. Next thing I knew was I was waking up in that ditch. As I climbed out and stood on the road, I moved my parts to make sure they were all there, and they seemed to be. Nothing fell off. I could feel blood seeping at the knees of my pants and my hands were scraped and so was my face.

The dozer had the backhoe pushed across the road and up against the long stone fence, and it was pushing it and crushing it, and I could see Brett still in it, slumped over in the shattered cab.

I tried to dart toward the dozer, found I wasn't darting too well. In fact I was limping like I had one foot in a bucket of solidified concrete. I saw the crowbar I had been holding lying in the road and picked it up.

I glanced right and saw Leonard's pickup was turned over in the same ditch I had been lying in, only a little farther up the road. Gasoline was leaking out of the busted gas tank, and my heart sank. Then I saw Chance slip out of an open window, and behind her came Leonard. They were staggering about like drunks, but they were all right. That's all I needed to know. I didn't give a flying damn about Scanner. I came up the back of the dozer and scrambled up it as it eased back for another run at the backhoe. My pain seemed to go away. I was on top of the dozer and I could see Jackie. She had her back to me and she was shifting gears and the dozer was lurching forward.

I swung the crowbar, hit the back glass and the crowbar bounced back and nearly came out of my hands. I swung it again, and saw Jackie turning her face toward me. A warrior's face. She gunned the dozer backwards and I nearly lost my footing, but I bent low and held on. The dozer's movement paused, I came up and swung the bar again. The glass fell like chunks of shiny ice. I went through the hole to get at Jackie, ripping my shirt and cutting my arms a little on the broken glass. Jackie was up and out of her seat now, and she was like a wildcat. She grabbed me by the throat and rammed me backwards.

We went through the gap in the glass and I felt my arm being ripped by the glass, and then we were tumbling over the back of the dozer and falling to the street.

Jackie jumped astride me and started swing her fists, knocking my head from side to side like a piñata. I had lost the crowbar during all that, but Jackie found it. She stopped hitting me long enough to reach over and grab it and then she lifted it above her head with both hands and was going to drive the sharp end into me. I drew both legs back quickly and put my heels inside her thighs, close to her waist, and kicked with all my might. She went back and the crowbar came down and hit me without design. It hurt, but not as bad as it would have. I grabbed the bar, and then me and her were on our feet. She was a strong woman and I was an injured weak man. We both had hold of the bar now, and I was trying to wrest it from her, or at least keep her from whacking me with it, when a fist flashed out and hit Jackie in the side of the head, hurtling her head over heels without the crowbar. I was left holding it.

Brett was there. Her face was scratched and she was bleeding from the mouth and nose.

"Fuck with my man, and you'll have the undertaker wiping your ass," she said, and kind of collapsed against me. I held her. She was breathing heavily, but she seemed all right.

"It's okay," I said.

"Of course it is," Brett said.

I looked at Jackie. She was out cold.

Leonard limped over with Chance.

"That was some punch," Chance said. She was all out of breath and hopped up on adrenaline. She was vibrating.

"I brought that with me from hell," Brett said, righting herself.

"Scanner?" I said.

"Good thing they own a cemetery," Leonard said.

"It's going to make his burial cheaper."

"How did you know we needed you?" Brett said.

"Didn't," Leonard said. "We saw Scanner drive by and we started following him and he made us and started driving fast, and we thought, well, shit, he knows we're here, so Chance drove faster. Scanner lost control of his car and put it between two trees. I don't know how he did it, but he spun out and flew off the edge of the bar ditch and landed ass backwards in it, his car about three feet off the ground. It was like a goddamn circus trick."

"It was kind of funny," Chance said. "Well, I hate he got killed later, I think. But it was kind of funny right then, that car in a tree."

"You been hanging around Leonard too long," I said.

"I pulled him out of the car and asked him a few questions that he didn't want to answer," Leonard said, "then I interrogated him with my knuckles and he started to talk. His mother had come the back way, she always went that way, he said. A road we didn't even know about. Jackie was going to do what we thought, brother. Dig up the body. She thought she lost a necklace in the coffin. Hadn't thought about it in years, just knew it came up missing, and then when Marvin wanted to dig up the coffin, she got to thinking she had been wearing it the night she saw Farmer bury the coffins. She went out there and dug them up to see what was in them, saw the bodies, realized it was good for her, them being dead, and later she had Farmer's crime in her back pocket. And then she thought maybe that's where her necklace had gone. Had come off in one of the coffins when she was prying the lids open to look inside. Thought it had come loose off her neck and fell in one of them. It didn't turn up in the wife's coffin, so she figured it had to be the boyfriend's."

"It's like I thought," Chance said. "Well, mostly."

“Yep,” I said. “Thing is, I looked in that coffin pretty good. I didn’t see a necklace.”

“It’s probably under a couch somewhere,” Brett said, “and she should not have bothered. She was golden and didn’t know it.”

I looked at Jackie sprawled on the road like a collapsed puppet. She hadn’t so much as twitched a muscle. “That was one hard lick,” I said.

“She wakes up, I’ll give her a fresh one,” Brett said.

Marvin came over later that night after we had all been arrested, and then released, except for Jackie. I don’t know there was enough evidence to nail her even then, but with the death of Scanner—he ended up with Leonard’s truck radio pushed into his chest when the truck flipped—Jackie had had enough. She wanted to come clean. She told Marvin everything, filled in the gaps. Marvin told us we were going to have to pay a fine for digging up the cemetery, commandeering a backhoe that didn’t belong to us and breaking into a closed cemetery, but considering Jackie’s confession, he figured we’d come out all right. We might have to pick up trash along the highway for a few days in orange jumpsuits and pay a fine, but that was the worst of it.

“I’d get to wear a jumpsuit?” Chance said.

“Darling,” Brett said. “Don’t be too proud.”

Here’s some of the stuff Marvin told us. It isn’t all that new, some was obvious, some we guessed, but he had the facts from Jackie now.

Farmer buried his wife and her lover after killing them. Jackie was working late one night at the mortuary, looked outside and saw Farmer using the backhoe, digging up graves. She started to go out and ask him what was up, but hesitated. She watched from behind a shrub on the back walkway out of the mortuary, and watched him dig the holes, climb off the backhoe and pull the coffins out of the holes. They were cheap coffins, too big for dogs, really, but they were bought in mass and were cheap. They were light metal. She watched Farmer pry them open, take out the mummified dogs.

She watched him pull some bags out of the back of the truck, let them smack on the ground. He pushed them into the coffins and fitted in the false bottoms he had prepared, put the dogs on top of those, closed the lids, and pushed the coffins back in the holes, covered them up with the backhoe. Tomorrow he could claim he was doing a bit of cleaning work around the graves, and that's why they looked freshly dug.

A few days later when Jackie knew Farmer was out of town, one night actually, she dug up the graves and found what was in them. She covered them back up. It was to her advantage to have the wife dead, and now she had a secret that Farmer was unaware of. She literally knew where the bodies were buried, and as we also suspected, she waited until the time was ripe to play that card.

It hadn't quite worked out the way she thought.

Jackie also admitted she killed Farmer. Still had a key to the house from when they were married. He never changed the locks. She waited on him in a closet with a baseball bat, and surprised him. It took her one lick to knock him down, and then she finished him with more than was necessary. There was a lot of rage in that lady.

Scanner had been in on it, of course, but Jackie claimed he didn't know she was going to whack Farmer, only knew about the money part of it.

It didn't really matter. Scanner, innocent of murder or not, was as dead as those who were under those dogs.

Some time has passed. The cemetery is closed down now. No new customers will grace its grounds, human or otherwise. I drove by there the other day for no reason at all other than I wanted to.

I parked at the front of the cemetery and walked through the gate, which was still open and wrecked from us ramming through it. I walked over to Coco Butternut's grave. The dog had been reburied there by the county. Farmer's wife and the wife's boyfriend had been hauled away by relatives who finally knew where their kin ended up.

I looked down at Coco Butternut's grave. Thanks to that mutt we had caught a killer.

"Good dog," I said and went back to the car and drove away.

Hoodoo Harry

one

The sun was falling behind the trees as we came over the hill in Leonard's pickup, pulling a boat trailer loaded down with our small boat. We had been fishing and had caught a few. Our usual method was we terrorized the poor fish and threw them back at the end of the day, which for the fish, if you considered the alternative, wasn't so bad.

On this day however we caught about a half dozen good-sized perch and a couple of bass, and we thought we'd clean them and dip them in a thick batter and fry them in a deep Dutch oven full of popping grease.

I've cut back on my fried foods for years now, but once in a while a bit of fried fish or fried chicken sets me right for quite a few months and I thought this would be one of those times. But our intended fish fry was cut short before the fish so much as got cleaned for frying.

As we came over the hill, the trees crowding in on us from both sides, we saw there was a blue bus coming down the road, straddling the middle line. Leonard made with an evasive maneuver, but by this point the trees on the right side were gone, and there was a shallow creek visible, one that fed into the private lake where we had been fishing. There was no other place to go.

The bus seemed to come for us as we veered, and I saw right before impact that there was a black kid at the wheel, his eyes wild, working the steering wheel with everything he had, but it wasn’t enough. He was out of control. The bus hit us with a loud smack and I remember suddenly feeling the odd sensation of the tires leaving the ground and the truck turning over in mid-air. I heard the trailer snap loose and saw the boat sailing along in front of us, and then it was out of sight and we were in the creek, the roof of the truck on the bottom of the creek bed, water coming in through the damaged windows.

I heard a slow groaning of metal and realized the bus was on top of the truck and the roof of the truck was slowly crunching down into the creek bed and the floor of the truck was coming down to meet us. Another few seconds and me and Leonard would be pressed like sandwich meat.

I tried to get out of my seat belt, but nothing doing. I might as well have been fastened to that seat with duct tape. I held my breath as the water rushed in through the shattered windows, but the belt still wouldn’t come loose. A little, cardboard, pine-tree-shaped air freshener floated in front of my face, a shadowed shape against the dying sunlight leaking in at the edges of the side truck windows. A moment later the belt struggle was too much and I passed out, feeling as if I were drowning. Last thing I remember before going out was Leonard had hold of my arm—

That was it.

When I came to, I was lying on the ground on my side by the edge of the creek. I was dizzy and felt like I’d been swallowed by a snake and shit down a hole. My throat was raw, and I knew I had most likely puked a batch of creek water.

I turned my head and could see the bus, which I realized now was a bookmobile. rolling literature was painted in large white letters on the side. It was sitting with its tires on top of Leonard's truck, the windshield blown out. I could still hear the groaning sound as the weight of it slowly squashed the truck and shoved it deeper into the creek bed. Leonard was holding an open pocketknife in his hand, the one he had used to cut my belt loose. He looked exhausted.

"Good thing you come around," Leonard said. "Mouth to mouth wasn't going to happen, pal. Come to that, I was going to be walking home alone."

"The kid?"

Leonard shook his head. "What's left of him oozed out through the bus's windshield. Glass worked on him like a cheese grater."

"Shit," I said, sitting up.

"I was you, wouldn't go look. You don't need that in your head. Bet he ain't more than twelve years old."

Books were floating out of the shattered windows of the bookmobile and were pushed along gradually by the current like dead fish. The water was either red with sunlight or with blood. Night settled in and the red in the creek turned black as ink and the bus looked like a small island out there in the shallow water.

two

Few days later, Leonard and I attended the funeral of the dead kid. We were fine after the accident, but a little stiff, and Leonard had a bit of a hitch in his git-along. That leg had been giving him trouble for years.

The funeral was attended by a half a dozen people we didn't know. The kid was named James Clifton. He didn't have any real family and had been brought up, or more accurately jerked up, in a variety of foster homes. He lived in a small community called Nesbit. Nesbit was named after the black man who founded the place back in the early 1800s. At one time Nesbit had been home to over a thousand black people, surviving after the Civil War in their own communities, selling pulp wood to the white folks out and beyond.

Over time the bulk of the community faded, mostly due to an attack on it in the late 1800s by Civil War vets and those that wished they had been Confederates. The mob decided to kill everyone in the place over the death of a little white girl. She had been savaged and cut up in a manner that didn't designate any known tool or weapon, but it was immediately assumed that "a nigger done it."

After the raid, only a couple hundred residents survived, and most of them hid out in the nearby deep woods and bottom lands for months. When they returned, the community was a shadow of its former self, with all the houses burned down, the businesses destroyed. Over time it built back up to some degree, but it was never the same. A thousand people may not sound like a lot to begin with, but in those days, it had been a sizable population for an independent black community. After the massacre, its independence was over. The surviving residents went to work for white folks. These days people still lived there, but they didn’t even have internet access. A cell phone, forget it. Nesbit was like the ash from a once bright fire.

As a side note, it was later determined the little girl had been savaged by a pack of wild dogs. No apology was made. And in fact there was a sign placed outside of the community on a giant sycamore that said: dead niggers are good niggers, and if this sign comes down, there will be more.

Rumor was it didn’t come down until 1925 when it became so weathered it could no longer be read. When it was removed no one was killed, but within weeks a new sign with the same words on it went up. In 1965, it was finally removed and never replaced.

Nesbit was now only a post office and a general store, not too unlike the one of old that had been set afire. There were a few other little businesses along the street, a garage and tire shop, a small sawmill and lumberyard, a thrift store.

Our buddy, LaBorde Chief of Police Marvin Hanson, had filled us in on most of this, and had ended it with, “Thing is, except for the county, maybe a Texas Ranger that wants to bother, there’s no law in Nesbit, not even a constable. Well, no official law. Gardner Moost at the general store pretty much takes care of what can legally be done, and some that isn’t legal. His wife runs the post office, which means she mostly sits there and reads books. As for Gardner, no one bothers him much if no one gets killed around the place.”

“But the kid got killed,” I said.

"Not in Nesbit. And not in LaBorde. Sheriff's office will poke around a bit, might find something, but they don't have a good record for that part of the county. There's people in that office that are descendants of the Confederates who burned the place down, killed all those people. Some of them are still fighting the Civil War, least in their minds."

"What about the bookmobile?" Leonard asked.

"Eighties bus. Small school bus refurbished to be a bookmobile. It made the route of a number of black communities for years, then disappeared fifteen years ago."

"Wait a minute," Leonard said. "Jump back on that disappeared part."

"That's the curious part. There was a black lady named Harriet Hoodalay who drove it. Everyone called her Harry. One day she and the bookmobile disappeared. I don't remember all the details, but I remember the story. Anyway, her disappearing like that, like a haint, she came to be called Hoodoo Harry. Nobody calls her anything now. Subject doesn't come up anymore. Pretty much forgotten. And until you guys got run over by the bookmobile, it was forgotten as well."

"That damn sure does fall into the range of peculiar," Leonard said.

"Where's the bookmobile now?" I said.

"Police Department impound. Accident may not have happened in our jurisdiction, but we're the ones that have the storage. We're also the ones that are going to give it a once-over and give the info to the county. Odd thing about the bookmobile is except for the window blown out, tires flattened, a few bangs and scrapes, it's in great condition, like it was the day it disappeared."

"What about my truck, the boat?" Leonard said. "Y'all took them in, too.”

“Hope you got insurance,” Marvin said. “You can collect what’s left of them at the junkyard.”

Leonard sighed.

“Question is,” I said, “how did that kid get the bus? I mean, hell, he couldn’t drive. He was all over the place.”

“He drove well enough to take it from where it’s been all these years, just not well enough to keep it in his lane,” Marvin said. “You boys are lucky you’re alive.”

“Yeah,” I said, “but poor James wasn’t that lucky.”

“Since it was us he run over,” Leonard said, “can we take a peek at that bus?”

“Not legally,” Hanson said.

“How about illegally, but we don’t call it illegal?” Leonard said.

Hanson pondered on that. After what seemed long enough for all life on Earth to die off, he said, “Tell you what, if you’ll wear gloves and footies, and don’t touch anything—and I’m especially talking to you, Hap—we might can do that. Come to the impound around midnight.”

“I don’t touch things,” I said.

Leonard and Marvin stared at me.

“Sometimes,” I said.

three

Before it was time to go over to the impound, we did a bit of research, taking advantage of other friendships at the cop shop, the local newspaper and the paper over in Camp Rapture. In some cases they gave us connections to people who had a bit of information they didn't have. What we got when we put it all together still wasn't much.

We discovered that James had been born in Nesbit. His father ran off when he was born, and his mother died of heart disease. Then his grandparents took him in, but when he was ten the grandfather died, and just six months before he ran over Leonard's truck with the blue bus and got himself killed, James's grandmother died. Since then, he'd been couch surfing with his relatives and friends of his relatives. Child Protective Services had missed a beat. No one knew where he'd been staying the last week. He had been out of sight and out of mind, and was now resting in a pauper's grave in Nesbit cemetery. But before he was sent there, his body was examined and it was discovered he had been tortured with burns and cuts and pokes from sharp instruments. He was also malnourished.

Online we read some old newspaper accounts about the disappearance of the bookmobile. It originated out of LaBorde, but its driver, the aforementioned Hoodoo Harry, kept it where she lived. One morning folks woke up to find she was gone, and so was the bookmobile. And no one knew where either one of them were. Or at least no one admitted it. She was supposed to go off on a vacation to visit her sister that day, catch a bus, but if she left she must have left in the bookmobile, as her car remained at home. She never arrived at her sister's.

I went over to Leonard's apartment around 10 p.m. and we had a cup of coffee to stretch our night out more comfortably, and then about ten minutes before midnight, we drove from Leonard's apartment to the city compound, which was more or less just down the street. When we got there, Hanson's car was parked in its place, and out back was the compound fence and there was light poking out of the windows of a large garage tucked at the back of the property. The lot within the fence was filled with cars and trucks and even a couple of boats on blocks.

I pulled out my cell and gave Hanson a call. A few minutes later he came out of the garage and took his time strolling toward the fence.

"It's okay," Leonard called out to Hanson. "Take your time. We're going to set up camp in a bit anyway. We brought supplies."

As Hanson arrived at the gate in the fence, he said, "You're lucky I'm letting you do this. I'm putting my ass on the line."

"Bullshit," Leonard said. "You're the police chief."

"But I'm not Police God."

"In our book you are," I said, "and oh so precious."

Hanson let us in without whacking either of us on the head with a rubber hose, and we all walked over to the garage. Inside it was so brightly lit you could almost see germs crawling on the floor. A man and a woman in evidence protection gear were wandering about.

There was a motorcycle and a few cars inside, but at the back of the place was the bookmobile, mine and Leonard's Moby Dick. The window had been replaced and the side door was open, and water still leaking out of it.

There was a small smear of oil visible to the side of it where it had run out of the bottom of the bus. They had either repaired or replaced the tires to make it easier to maneuver and examine.

A short man, who might have been thirty or fifty, wearing a protective gown, gloves and footies, was standing near the bookmobile. He had a gray face shaped like the blade of a well-used axe, and a build like a stack of mud. The mud flowed when he moved, but he moved very little, just enough to reveal his natural shimmy as we introduced ourselves without shaking hands.

When we told him our names, he said, "Stump. Get suited out."

In a back room full of fresh and folded evidence suits, we dressed along with Hanson.

"Stump isn't much for lengthy conversation, is he?" I asked.

"No," Hanson said. "Bricks in his presence have died of boredom."

"Aren't bricks already dead?" Leonard asked.

"I was reaching," Hanson said.

"You got any news on the kid, or the bookmobile's sudden appearance?" I asked.

"Nope," Hanson said. "You know more than I know."

He said that because while we dressed we informed him the bits and pieces we had discovered, not revealing that in some cases they were people in his department speaking out of school.

When we were dressed we went back to the bookmobile.

Stump was standing pretty much where we had left him. I think he had moved a few inches to the right. Maybe he had peed in the old spot.

"What can you tell us?" Hanson said.

"I can tell you don't screw up my evidence, which is the whole damn bus. They got to do this, Captain?"

"No," Hanson said, "but believe it or not, they have solved a few things in their time. They don't have as much to do as we do, and they are dogged."

"Yeah, well, I guess that's some kind of reason," Stump said.

We went up the metal steps of the bookmobile and eased our way inside. I stood by the steering wheel and looked back through the bus. Though water still leaked from the bottom of the bus, the inside had been dried out after evidence was collected. There were lights strung in there. The books were all gone, and the shelves had warped a bit. In the back there was a curved metal hull that had been put in, perhaps to house a larger fuel tank. A small door was off to the right of where I was looking. The toilet.

It was so clean, I said, "Looks like you've already collected evidence."

Stump, who was behind us, standing on the top step into the bookmobile, said, "I have. But I don't want you adding any evidence that isn't evidence. Get me?"

"Yep," Leonard said. "We got you."

"That hull at the back," Leonard said, touching on what I had noticed first off, "what's it for?"

"Usually they put that kind of thing in to have a large gas tank, all the traveling they do out in the country. That was probably put in the minute it became a bookmobile."

"I've never heard of that," Hanson said.

"You an expert on bookmobiles?" Stump said.

“Point taken,” Hanson said.

“Actually, I only seen a few buses and such with that,” Stump said. “Sometimes it isn’t a gas tank, but a crapper tank. That way the toilet doesn’t need to be emptied out as often. Toilet works, by the way. Everything worked on this thing before it went off the road and took a swim. It has a bit of an oil leak that could be due to the wreck, but I don’t think so. From looking it over I think that’s been an ongoing problem, but other than the window and the original tires gone flat, it’s in remarkably good shape.”

I walked toward the back, looking left and right as I went.

“You two ace detectives find anything, please let me know,” Stump said. “I wouldn’t want to not learn a thing or two from the experts.”

“You don’t know our lives,” Leonard said. “We could actually be smart.”

Stump made a grunting sound. “I got a pretty good idea about your lives, and I’m thinking it isn’t pretty.”

“So you been over every inch?” I said.

“I might have missed a centimeter under the shitter, but yeah,” Stump said. “You see, it’s my job.”

I ran my gloved hand over the top of the backend section, the place where the tank would be contained. “What if it isn’t a tank in here?”

“What else would it be?” Stump said.

“Always ask questions,” I said, “that is the path to wisdom.”

“Fucking Confucius?” Stump said

“Hap Collins,” I said.

“Look, I was about to take the bolts out of that thing. I was even going to lift off the top and look inside. Thought that up all by myself before you got here.”

“Now,” Leonard said, “don’t start selling yourself for more than you are.”

Stump grunted again and left the bookmobile.

“He seems to like you guys,” Hanson said.

A moment later, the man and the woman we had seen wandering the garage entered with battery-powered tools, pushed past us, went to the back, removed the bolts and lifted the top off the covering. They carried it away with them without even looking inside. Curiosity would not kill those cool cats.

When they left the bus with the metal top, Stump reappeared and waddled down the aisle toward the now-open container. He had a flashlight in his hand. He turned it on and looked inside, turned his head from left to right, said, “Huh.”

We went over and looked. Stacked from left to right, six in a row, were oil-covered, time-withered little bodies, and one larger one.

“How about that?” Stump said.

“We told you that you ought to look,” Leonard said.

“And I told you I was about to,” Stump said.

“You say that now,” Leonard said.

“I hate both you bastards,” Stump said.

“You now belong to a sizable club,” Hanson said.

four

You can bet that threw a wrench into things. Where before there was the problem of the long-missing bookmobile and its return due to a twelve-year-old boy driving it for reasons unknown, not to mention his death by accident, now we had six oil-covered bodies to identify, tucked up in the back of the bookmobile.

Who put those bodies there? Where had the bookmobile been for all those years, and why did it look brand-new? And while we're making a list, where was Hoodoo Harry? Was hers the larger oil-soaked body?

Well, I'd like to tell you it all came together, mysteries solved, but it didn't. In fact, a few weeks passed by. They examined the corpses and sent off DNA samples from the bodies, five of which turned out to be kids, but that was all they knew. No DNA matches. The sixth one was a female adult, but if it was Hoodoo Harry, no one had yet tracked down a relative to make the determination. But the search was in progress.

Complication on complication multiplied by more complications.

Me and Leonard felt pretty smart for a few weeks about the bookmobile container, but truth was, we weren't expecting bodies at all. And further truth was, Stump and his forensic crew were minutes from discovering what was there. So had we not shown up, they'd have found the bodies anyway.

As the weeks went by, I began to feel agitated, and had trouble sleeping at night. One night, lying in bed with Brett, I was tossing and turning, and she flipped on the nightstand light, rolled over and lifted herself on one elbow and looked at me.

“What the hell, Hap? You been acting like a jumping bean for a week. Moan and groan all night.”

“I moan and groan?” I said, sitting up in bed, looking at the beautiful Brett, her flame-red hair tied back in a ponytail.

“Yep.”

“I’m bothering you?”

“Only when I’m trying to sleep. Or lie still. And you go to the toilet all night. What’s up with that?”

“Poo-poo.”

“Six, seven times a night?”

“Well, I go in there and read.”

“Why can’t you sleep?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s the kid, isn’t it?”

“Guess it is. Think about him a lot. I close my eyes, I see his eyes, looking out of the windshield of that bookmobile.”

Brett fluffed her pillow and folded it against the headboard and put her back against it.

“You been looking into it?” she asked.

“No. Hanson said it was his case to investigate.”

“That’s never stopped you and Leonard before.”

“It hasn’t, but I guess we didn’t know where to go with this.”

Brett pursed her lips, said, “You know what? Just look up the old route of the bookmobile, and follow it.”

"Marvin's done that."

"But he isn't you, Hap."

"No. He isn't. He's smarter and a good investigator."

"Yeah, well, you do have that going against you. But is he more dogged than you and Leonard?"

"Hanson used the same word. But I think he's the one that's dogged."

"More dogged than you and your bro?"

"I'm not sure how you measure things on a dogged scale. I'm not sure I know what a dogged scale is. I'm not sure there is one."

"I'll tell you right now, you are more dogged. You and Leonard need to get back on the trail and figure things out so I can get a good night's sleep. And here's another idea. How about you look up Cason Statler's friend, the one who runs the newspaper morgue in Camp Rapture. Have him check into things for you. He can find more in a day than the law can find in a month. That guy, isn't his name Mars, something like that?"

"Mercury."

"He has the mind for looking into conspiracies, or whatever is going on here. No one knows odd information and can evaluate it better than that guy. Or so you've told me. Get him to do some kind of . . . I don't know, chart about the route of the bookmobile, then look into missing persons in that area, on the route. Might be something in that."

"You're smart," I said.

"I know that," she said.

"Since you're awake, want to fool around?"

"No. And if you ever expect to again, you better quit tossing, moaning and groaning and talking to yourself."

“I talk to myself, too?”

“Yep.”

Brett turned out the light. “Now, close your little Hap eyes and shut your little Hap mouth, and go the fuck to sleep.”

five

Cason Statler is a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer that works at the Camp Rapture newspaper. We've known him for awhile. Handsome and quirky, quick of wit, he can also hold his own in a fistfight. He's a guy with a bunch of odd friends. Including us. He's a big dog over at the paper. His friend, Mercury, works downstairs in the news morgue, sometimes known as the first level of Hell. Mercury is a kind of a genius. Cason told him about us, explained our problem and left us to it.

Down there they have all the back issues of the paper, as well as all manner of stuff, stacked up this way and that. You have to wind your way through it all to find Mercury. Down there he was king. Of course, he was the only one that worked down there, so the job position was easily filled.

Mercury was blond and pale, but looked strong. His job was to put all the old newspapers on the computer, then send the originals off to somewhere where they were collected by someone for some reason unknown. In his spare time, Mercury conducted investigations of his own. Some of them were nutty. Crop circles. Flying saucers. The Kennedy assassination, involving everyone but Bigfoot, though in time he might work him in as well. But he was smart and helpful, if you could point his nose in the right direction. He loved a good mystery, and he had a way of calculating odd situations into a recognizable patterns.

After we wound our way through the stacks and came up on Mercury, he said, "Welcome to the center of the earth."

The overhead light was thin back there, but there was a bright lamp on his desk, and there was another on a table that was pushed up against it. Both lamps had metal shades over the bulbs, but those had been tilted so as to let more of the light leak out.

On the table were books, assorted newspapers, clippings, an old microfilm machine, and on a chair was a small TV and an old-fashioned VCR. The VCR cord was fastened to the back of the TV and plugged into a plastic power strip on the floor. The wire from his computer was plugged into the bar as well.

"How are you men?" he said.

"We're fine," Leonard said. "Cason says you can help us."

"That depends. He told me what you're looking for, and I've pulled out a few things, got some stuff on the computer I can show you."

Mercury inched over to it, seated himself in front of it, touched a button. The computer lit up like a Christmas display. "There's not a lot here, but what's here is of interest. Here is the path of the bookmobile."

We took a gander at the place he was pointing, a map with a moving arrow.

"You can see that it covered quite a bit of ground, but most of it, the places where Harriet stopped, were right near Nesbit. Made a few stops in areas where there were neighborhoods, if you can call a half-dozen houses neighborhoods. Folks wanted books, they either had to be in town at the post office at the right time, or they had to be at one of these stop areas. Six altogether. Last two stops were well out in the country. Wasn't like it was a money-making business, driving the bookmobile. Harry came once a week, three times a month, then there was a week off. When she wasn't making this run through Nesbit and the surrounding area, she was on other routes. She drove four days a week, three weeks a month."

Mercury showed us a few more routes around LaBorde, a spot or two out in the country that were destinations.

"Those are routes on days when she worked outside of the Nesbit area. Way I'd think about it is Harry was from Nesbit, so that would be the hub of everything for her. Also, there have been missing persons cases around Nesbit in the last few years, couple of kids, and Harriet Hoodalay."

"Quite a coincidence," Leonard said.

Mercury considered for a moment.

"Place small as Nesbit, you want to connect anyone to the missing kids, you could make the case for everyone there, the community being so small, being so few people. And the missing kids came from the area. Also possible none of what happened in and around Nesbit is related, but that's where you can make the case that there might be too much coincidence. The law of averages come into play. Someone in or around Nesbit is most likely responsible for the kids, but are they responsible for Harriet and the bookmobile? Still likely."

"Harry and the bookmobile could have come up missing on one of the other routes," I said.

"Merely saying the most likely scenario is it happened near her home, near Nesbit, and probably someone who knew her, and the two missing kids are related to it all, because that's who a bookmobile is specifically designed for. Anyone can check out a book, but it's bored kids, kids that don't have library access, that they are trying to appeal to. Thing is, now even poor kids have computers and the internet, and with all the lights and bells and whistles, books get lost to a time when we had more patience and less to distract us.”

“We found more than two kids in the bookmobile,” Leonard said.

“Can’t help you there, but if you nose around a bit, you might find more missing than have been reported. I’m going to strongly guess they are all from the same area, and what you’re dealing with is a child predator, someone who likes to stick close to the place he knows. Way it usually works in these cases. And one reason you may not know about the other kids is they may not have been reported. Neglect is just the thing that puts them in a bad spot, causes them to fall between the cracks. Not the only thing, but a major factor.”

“Think it could have been Harry?” Leonard asked.

“Could be, but then we got to ask, where has she been all this time? After she disappeared there were no more child abduction cases reported, so that leans toward her possibly being responsible, but she doesn’t fit the profile, and nothing was known about the bookmobile until it nearly ran you over. The kid inside, that leans toward him being a victim as well, or a potential victim. An escapee. But I go back to what I said before. Just because we have a report of two children doesn’t mean that’s all there is. You found six bodies, and one not a child, that could be folks who haven’t been reported, and the adult could just be Harry.”

Mercury paused, tapped the keys. A new image came up. It was of a middle-aged black woman.

“Harriet Hoodalay,” he said. “What I found from looking through older microfilm. You know about her supposedly taking a bus trip to see her sister, I assume. Her not arriving?”

“Do you know who first reported her missing?”

“Gardner Moost.”

“General store guy?” Leonard said.

“Correct,” Mercury said. “Said he got that information from her husband, Tom Hoodalay. Tom didn’t report her missing when her vacation ended and she didn’t come back. Gardner asked why she hadn’t come home and Tom told Moost he figured Harriet had run off from him.”

“What’s Harriet’s sister say?”

“She never arrived, but she did buy a bus ticket. No one was doing a head count when it came time to get on the bus, and the bus line closed down its hub here years ago. Whoever worked there back then has scattered to the wind.”

“Maybe Harriet found out something about her husband,” I said. “Like how Tom was using her connection to children to do something he wasn’t supposed to. She decided to get away from him, go see her sister. He was afraid she’d spill the beans to the law, so he killed her.”

“Possible, but unknown,” Mercury said. “But Nesbit, that’s where you begin.”

six

We drove over to Nesbit in my car.

It was a nice drive and a nice day. Not too warm for the time of year. We cruised along the highway for several miles, and into an area where the trees grew thick and the houses were far apart.

Nesbit was off the highway, down a roughly paved road. As we came into the community we saw the post office on one side, general store on the other. Tire and mechanic shop, and so on, were all nearby. We were through the place before we knew it, and I had to turn around and drive us back. First place we stopped was the general store.

It was like stepping back in time. The place was chock-full of cool items, things that I forgot existed, like mule plowing equipment. Not a lot of it, but even some was surprising. There were long shelves of canned goods, prepared by locals, sold on consignment, and there were the sort of things you expected. High shelves with bolts of cloth. Tools. There was a series of bins in the middle of the store, stuffed with fresh vegetables and, according to a sign, locally raised.

There was a counter with a lot of old candies and soft drinks I had forgotten about. There was a break in the piles of goods on that counter, and there was an old-fashioned cash register with a black man behind it, sitting on a stool. He was a big fellow, and though he was sitting, I could tell he would tower over both me and Leonard. He had shoulders as wide as a bank vault. He had a red tone to his skin, what in the old days they used to refer to as a redbone Negro, when they were being polite. He had reddish freckles scattered on his cheeks. His hands, which were clutched around a hunting magazine, were about the size of catcher's mitts. He looked to be in his sixties, had a fringe of white hair around his head, just over his ears and nowhere else.

At the counter we greeted him. He put down his magazine and eyed us carefully.

"I help you fellas?" he said.

"Maybe," I said. "We work for a private detective agency out of LaBorde. We're trying to find out about James Clifton. I'm Hap Collins, and this is my associate, Leonard Pine."

"Gardner Moost," he said. "Yeah. Sad story. But what can be done for him now?"

"What we're trying to figure out," Leonard said, "is how he came by a bookmobile that had been missing for years, and what was he doing driving it?"

"Don't know what I can tell you. Poor boy was hard luck. Lost most of his family. Good kid, though. Had him a little part-time job at the tire shop. You know, picking up things a couple hours after school. Old tires, this and that. He was sleeping at different homes. He slept in the back here a few times. I was thinking of letting him stay full-time. Maybe give him a little work on the weekends. Tire shop didn't use him all week. As for the rest, I don't know. I don't think I saw him around the week he ended up gone. I doubt he was going to school. Was supposed to be, but I'd see him walking down the road, not really seeming to be going anywhere. An hour later, you'd see him walk back. I guess I saw him last on a Monday. Then the rest of the week he wasn’t about. Didn’t think much of it. Reason I know he was missing is because he finished up at the tire shop, he’d come over, buy him a pop and a candy bar. Every day. Next thing I know he’s dead, and I hear he was in that old bookmobile. Beyond that, I don’t know a thing about him or the missing bookmobile.”

“Did you know Harriet Hoodalay?” I said.

That gave Moost pause.

“Yes. I did know Harry. Lovely woman.”

“Do you know her husband?” I said. I knew he did, from what Mercury had told us, but I wanted to see where he’d go with it.

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“We ask,” said Leonard, “because Harriet used to drive the bookmobile, then she disappeared. Supposed to be going up North to see her sister but never made it.”

“I never believed that story,” Moost said.

“Oh,” I said, “and why is that?”

“I think she might have meant to see her sister, but I don’t think the bus took a wrong turn at Amarillo and let her out in a pasture, or some such. I think her husband killed her. Tom’s a mean sonofabitch. Me and him don’t get along. He shops somewhere other than here. I banned him from the store when Harry came up missing those years back.”

“You say he’s mean,” Leonard said. “But how mean?”

“He beat on her from time to time.”

“So you and her were close?” I said.

“Look, if you two are going to be snooping about, might as well tell you. Me and Harry, we had a thing. Went on for a while. She told me Tom was brutal. I saw the bruises. She was going to take a bus and see her sister, all right, but the plan was me and her would get together later. She'd get a divorce and we'd marry. But she didn't get a divorce, and she didn't come back. At first, at least a little, I thought she had changed her mind, didn't want what I thought she wanted. But deep down, always figured her husband did her in. Told the cops that, some sheriff's deputy, but they didn't find anything to prove it. They dropped it. I told Tom last time he was in here, years ago, not to come back, just because I didn't like him. Later, I married. Still married. Happily. But me and Harry, we had our moment."

"Slightly off the subject," I said, "but the bookmobile. Did she like that work? Ever have any problems?"

"She mentioned a bit of this and that. Kids stealing a book, acting up. But nothing special. She did seem tense days before she was supposed to catch that bus."

"Tense?" Leonard said.

"Maybe her husband was worrying her. He didn't know she wasn't coming back, but I think right before she left, she might have told him. Couldn't hold it in. Figure they got in a fight, he killed her, and she's buried somewhere out in the woods behind their house."

I didn't say we thought she might have ended up in a compartment in the bookmobile.

"Anything special you remember about the bookmobile from that time?" Leonard said.

"That's been awhile."

"Anything?" Leonard said.

"Just that Turner, over there at the tire and mechanic shop, was going to fix the bookmobile up. Needed new tires, some general maintenance. Always leaked oil. No matter what they did to it, it leaked oil.”

“So her route was closed out for her vacation?” I said.

“They had another driver, and I think Harry was supposed to drive the bookmobile over to him, but then the bookmobile disappeared, and that was it. People out of LaBorde who had been paying for it decided they weren’t going to try and replace it, so that was all she wrote.”

“Who was this new driver?” Leonard asked.

“Will Turner, works over at the tire shop.”

seven

Will Turner was a skinny man that I judged to be in his early forties, dark of skin, almost as dark as Leonard. He had a pleasant face and skinned knuckles, probably from dealing with tools and tires day in and day out, though it was hard for me to imagine a lot of business in Nesbit.

“Yeah,” Will Turner said. “I took the job, but then the bookmobile got stolen, and that was the end of it. So I just work here for Donnie James. I been working here since I was a kid, started just like James did, doing odd jobs.”

“What kind of kid was James?” I asked.

“Quiet. Never said much, so you never knew much about him. Did his work, couple hours a day. Except for that, he was kind of wandering about, sleeping and eating where he could. I don’t really know much about him.”

We were standing inside the doorway of the tire and mechanic shop. It was one of those doors that was wide and made of the same aluminum as the building. End of the day you pulled it closed and padlocked it. It was a small building, and it was stuffed with tires, and there was an upper deck supported by a series of two by eights, and one in particular looked as if it was about to retire from the job. It looked as if insects had been at it. There was a long aluminum building out back of the garage. We could see it through the open back section of the shop. Having the doors open on both ends was a good choice, because a nice breeze was blowing.

"That post there," I said, "it looks as if it's about to give up the ghost."

Will looked toward it. "Yep. I have to go up there and get a tire, mostly for older foreign cars, I'm always a little nervous. Take it slow and easy. Been on Donnie for a year to get it fixed. He can be cheap."

"If you don't mind me asking," I said, "you get a lot of business here in Nesbit?"

Will laughed. "Nope. Still, we got a reputation, and folks bring their cars in from miles around. We mostly make money on mechanic work, but we sell a few tires too. But a lot of business? No."

"Moost was telling us you been working here a long time," Leonard said.

"I have. That's a fact."

"Let me ask you something about Harriet Hoodalay and the bookmobile. She was supposed to pass that job to you, right?"

"That's right. I was only a kid then, twenty-three, working part-time here, and I needed extra money. Driving the bookmobile wasn't much, but hey, it was something to add to the pot."

"Did Harriet drop the bookmobile off with you?" I said.

"Was supposed to, that night. She didn't show, though. Thought she might have got tied up with something and I'd find out about it the next day. Figured she could have left it for me here at the garage. We discussed that as an option and I was figuring maybe she got confused on what we had finally decided. Next day I found out she and the bookmobile had gone missing. And I was out some easy money."

"Did you know Harriet well?" Leonard said.

"Not really. Nice lady, far as I could tell. Saw her around. Knew she drove the bookmobile. She brought it here to be worked on time or two. We talked a little. You know, small talk. Nothing special. I think she liked the job, liked kids. Never had any of her own."

"Okay," I said, "we'd like to talk to your boss, Mr. James."

Will looked at his watch. "Back about two. On lunch break. Takes longer breaks these days."

"What's the building out back?"

"Oh, boss has a tractor, some equipment for this and that. He goes around and does farm work from time to time. Breaking up gardens, sometimes large fields. Side work."

"Where would Donnie be having lunch? Home?"

"Naw. He's not married and he's a terrible cook. He can't put a peanut butter and jelly sandwich together without it tasting like tar paper. There's a little place down the road. Ethel's. Not much to it, open for lunch and dinner. Used to be open for breakfast, but stopped doing that last year. Alright food. Ethel and her husband Bernard run it."

"Thanks, Will," I said, and me and Leonard went out.

eight

Ethel's was indeed small. A little, yellow frame house. What would have normally been the living room had been turned into a dining area. A few tables and chairs were scattered about. A counter had been put in, as well as an opening into the kitchen: a cutout in the wall where the food could be passed to the waitress, who I assumed was Ethel. She was petite, had a look on her face of perpetual worry, as if she feared forgetting a French fry order. Through the gap in the wall we could see a big black man, possibly Bernard, standing in front of an old-fashioned grill, flipping burgers. He looked big enough to turn over the grill.

Waitress said, "Pick a seat."

That was easy, the place was packed, except for one small table in the corner, and we took that. The table wobbled when I put my hands on it.

"Shall we eat?" Leonard said.

"Yep. Let's hope the food is better than the furniture."

"It's packed here," he said. "That's a good sign."

"Choices are limited."

I looked around trying to spot someone I thought might be Donnie. That was easy. A man with tire and mechanic shop written across the back of a khaki work shirt was moving toward the cash register, his ticket in hand.

I got up, went over, said, "Are you Donnie James?"

He nodded.

I gave him the synopsis version of what me and Leonard were doing, convinced him to sit down with us, but not before I agreed to pay his check.

“I got to get back to work, fellas,” he said. “Make this quick. I don’t think I know a thing that could help. Thanks for lunch, by the way. I hope you find out who did what to those children. Saw in the paper about all those kids, and the woman in the bookmobile. Terrible. Coated in oil. Why would anyone do that?”

“Preserve the bodies a little,” I said. “I think whoever did it liked looking at them. Oil probably killed some of the stink.”

“I guess so,” Donnie said.

“How well did you know Harriet?” Leonard asked.

“Not too well. Except for driving the bookmobile, Tom kept her on a pretty tight leash. I was you, he’s the one I’d talk to. I figure he’s got her in a fifty-gallon drum under his front porch. Tom’s a jerk. Always thought men were trying to take Harry from him. One time, right here, they got into it at suppertime over something. He called her a bitch. She got up and went outside and stood by their pickup until he paid up and went out. I was sitting over there by the window. I saw him grab her arm and push her into the truck. He’s a bully, even at his age, retired and always on his front porch or he’s out back in the yard lifting weights. Old as he is, I seen him get into it at the post office with a young man over something. I don’t know what. I’m sure it was Tom started things. But he whipped that young man like he was a heavy bag. Hit him at will, and finally dropped him. Gardner Moost stood up to him, though, about how he treated Harry. I mean, hell, everyone here knows everyone else’s business. Gardner’s owner of the general store.”

“We’ve met,” Leonard said.

“Then you’ve seen Gardner. Tom’s afraid of him, and with good reason. When he was younger, Gardner cleaned out a few bars down Houston way, or so I've heard. But Tom is no slouch either. Got a bum knee, but I think Gardner could take him. Someone like you two, he'd run you together so hard he'd make one of you."

"We talked to Moost," Leonard said. "He told us about Tom, how he banned him. Another thing. James Clifton. What kind of kid was he?"

"Didn't say much. Did some little clean-up jobs for me. Knew he had it rough, so I was trying to help him out. That's about all I got. Who works for who, here? You the boss, white man?"

"I want to be, but he won't let me," I said.

"And he won't let me," Leonard said.

"Brett Sawyer is our boss."

"Who's he?"

"She," I said.

"Ah," he said. "Well, good luck finding out what happened to Harry. She was good people. Like me, she cared about children. That's why I fixed that bookmobile on my own time, even donated tires. It was mostly children got something out of that bookmobile. Me, I was never much of a reader. Always figured by not being one I missed out on things. Might be doing something other than a tire shop if I'd gotten a real education. Then again, folks need tires and they need cars fixed."

"No disagreement there," Leonard said.

"I got to go. Good luck."

Donnie got up and went out.

Leonard said, "Tom Hoodalay seems to get a lot of bad marks."

"Maybe we ought to check Tom's report card personally," I said.

“Not until I get a burger. I’m so hungry I could eat the ass out of a menstruating mule.”

nine

The burgers were good. Much better than I assumed the ass of a menstruating mule would be. We ate, and found out from Ethel, who was indeed the waitress, where Tom Hoodalay lived.

It was a small house not far off the road near the center of Nesbit. It was down a narrow, cracked, concrete drive, and at the end of the drive was a small, dilapidated house with an old brown pickup in the yard.

Weeds grew waist high on both sides of the house, out to the edge of the drive, and the drive seemed to be fighting a losing battle against the weeds growing up between the cracks in the concrete. Another few months, you could film a Tarzan movie out there. There was a small overhang porch, and there was a long wooden bench on the porch, and on the bench sat a man I took for Tom Hoodalay. He was crouched there like a frog on steroids.

We parked in the drive next to the pickup, got out and walked up to the steps. There were chunks of concrete breaking off in the drive next to the step. Leonard put his foot on a chunk and wobbled it with his boot.

“Who the hell are you?” the man said.

Up close I could tell he was in his sixties, but it was a powerful sixties. He had a head like a soccer ball. It was shaved and smooth as an oiled doorknob and glistened in the sunlight. He had a lot of white teeth and his eyes were both red where they should be white. His pupils, swimming in the middle of all that redness, were chocolate-colored. He had very little neck and was almost as wide as Gardner Moost. I thought the two of them went at it, it might be a close fight.

Nesbit seemed to have a lot of large people.

“We’re Avon,” Leonard said.

“The hell you are,” the man said.

“Naw, just messing with you,” Leonard said. “You Tom Hoodalay?”

“What if I am?”

“Might be a prize involved,” Leonard said. This had already gone south. Leonard obviously didn’t like the guy on sight. I wasn’t fond of him either, and all he had said so far was “Who the hell are you?”

“We work for a private detective agency out of LaBorde,” I said. “We are looking into the death of a child, James Clifton.”

“That worthless little nigger? Shit, he better off dead.”

“Why would that be?” Leonard said.

“Ain’t got nobody, ain’t got no future,” Tom Hoodalay said.

“He wrecked a bookmobile that had been missing for fifteen years, one your former wife used to drive,” I said.

“Heard about that,” he said.

“Any idea where the bookmobile was all these years?” I asked.

“How the fuck would I know? I been asked that already. Years ago.”

“Your wife used to drive it,” I said. “I thought you might have some clue.”

“I ain’t got nothing to do with where she went, or where that damn bookmobile went. I ain’t got no concern about neither.”

“You’re saying the kid was better off dead, huh?” Leonard said.

“What I said, ain’t it?”

“Cause you wouldn’t want James to end up . . . like you?”

"What the fuck you talking about, nigger?"

With that, Tom Hoodalay stood up. He was even bigger than I thought.

"Way we got it figured," Leonard said, "is you used to slap your wife around, because you could. What happened, Tommy? Wife catch you with your dick up a kid's ass?"

Tom actually yelled. More of a bellow really. He turned, and slammed his fist down on the long bench. It shattered, some of the fragments hitting me in the chest.

"Damn," I said.

"You showed that bench," Leonard said.

My man Leonard is never one to use common sense in an excitable moment. He's more akin to the guy that throws gasoline on a fire, then goes to get more.

Tom Hoodalay was coming off the porch. He limped a little, an old injury was my guess. He brought a leg of the bench with him, and he was swinging it about, and he wasn't all the way down the steps yet.

Leonard picked up the chunk of concrete under his foot, cocked it back, said, "Bet you flinch," and threw it.

The sunlight caught the white concrete and made it shine, and then it hit Hoodalay right between the eyes. He staggered, came tripping along and collapsed to his knees. David had just knocked the shit out of Goliath.

Hoodalay loosened his grip on the bench leg. Leonard sprang forward, grabbed the leg, said, "Give me that."

And then Leonard swung the leg, caught Tom Hoodalay right upside the head, causing him to go face down into the driveway.

“There’s your prize,” Leonard said.

“So much for asking questions,” I said.

Leonard tossed the bench leg away and looked down at Tom’s unconscious body. “He wasn’t gonna tell us anything anyway.”

“You hit him pretty hard,” I said. “Maybe too hard.”

“I just stunned the hippopotamus,” Leonard said. “Wakes up, he’ll wish he hadn’t torn up a perfectly good bench.”

“Or got hit between the eyes with a piece of concrete and then battered with a board.”

“That too,” Leonard said.

ten

As I was driving us away, Leonard said, “I don’t like that bastard, but I don’t think he killed the kids. Call it instinct, and also the fact that though he’s big, he gets around like a pig on stilts. Maybe he killed his wife, but a guy like him strangles his wife, then tells the cops it was self-defense. She came at him with a paring knife, or some such. I don’t think he’s smart enough to plan what to do with the body, and certainly not smart enough to stay quiet about it all these years. He’s the kind of dumbass brags about a thing like that.”

“Maybe,” I said.

I drove us around a bit, nothing really in mind. We tossed out an idea or two, but we arrived at nothing. Anybody we had spoken to could have done it, and none of them could have done it.

I finally convinced Leonard to let me drive back to Tom’s place, just to make sure he wasn’t collecting vultures.

“He might shoot at us this time,” Leonard said.

I drove back there anyway, and as we came up the drive, I could see that he was no longer lying where we left him. Fragments of the bench had been gathered up and stacked by the porch steps.

“All right,” I said. “He lives.”

We backed out, and I drove us back to LaBorde. There wasn’t anything else left for us to do. I dropped Leonard off at his place, and then I called Brett. She was at the office, finishing up some paperwork on a divorce case she had been working. I hated that kind of stuff, but frankly it was the sort of business that kept us in biscuits.

When I arrived at our office and parked in the lot, the bicycle shop lady downstairs was wearing her shorts, as usual. I noticed, as usual, because I'm biologically driven to do so, then I went upstairs and saw the only woman that really matters to me in that kind of way.

Brett said, "So, find out anything?"

"Found out we don't know anything."

Brett was sitting behind the desk with her hair pulled back into a ponytail. She was working on some papers with a pen. She was dressed in jeans and an oversized tee-shirt, had on slip-on white tennis shoes.

"I got a little bit of paperwork left, then we can get something to eat. Nothing fancy, obviously. I want to stay sloppy."

"LaBorde doesn't have much that's fancy," I said.

"True," she said, and got busy on her paperwork.

I picked up the newspaper on the edge of the desk, started reading. The bookmobile and the murder of James Clifton weren't even on the second page. Third page, at the bottom. The article was thin. James had been driving, he ran off the road, hit a truck (occupants unnamed, but unhurt), and there was an investigation into his death and into the mystery of where the bookmobile had been all these years. Some bodies had been found.

By the time I had finished reading the rest of the paper, which didn't take long, Brett was up and we were out. We traveled in my car. After dinner, I would drop her back at the office to pick up hers.

We went to a small joint that served Ecuadorian food. It was off Universal Street, and it was good. After I dropped Brett back at her car, we met up at the house. It seemed a little empty when we first came in. My daughter Chance had been living with us, along with a rescue mutt we named Buffy. Actually, Leonard had rescued her, but I had ended up with the dog. Now Buffy was with Chance. Until last year, I didn’t know I had a daughter. I missed her. I missed Buffy.

We watched a couple TV shows, then we went to bed. I fell asleep quickly. I didn’t sleep long. When I awoke it was still solid dark. I had dreamed I was reaching for a butterfly that kept flittering out of the way. I had an uncomfortable feeling that butterfly was representative of me having knowledge I didn’t understand. A common problem. Then again, I might have merely been dreaming about butterflies. Thing was, now, I was wide awake.

To keep from tossing and turning, I slipped out of bed, went downstairs and made an early breakfast. After I finished my oatmeal, I sat and sipped coffee, glancing out the kitchen window at the darkness. I tried to collect my thoughts, tried to catch my butterfly. I thought about all of the people we had talked to, thought back on that poor kid’s face as the bookmobile barreled down on us. I thought back to finding those oily bodies in the container in the bookmobile. And then I thought, wait a minute.

I called Leonard on my cell. He was none too happy to hear from me.

“It’s dark outside,” he said.

“All the better for clandestine activity,” I said. “Get dressed. I’m coming to pick you up.”

“You don’t dare come this way for an hour,” he said. “I’m going to eat and shower, but right before that, me and the extra-nice Officer Carroll are going to play rodeo.”

Officer Carroll, as we both called him, was Leonard’s new love interest. Nice guy and a nice cop, one of Marvin's people.

"Don't get any rope burns," I said. "But an hour is too late. It still needs to be dark when we get where we're going."

"Twenty minutes, then," Leonard said.

"Bring protection."

"We use protection."

"No. Bring it, and I don't mean the kind you're talking about. You show up with a Trojan and I'll beat you to death."

"I use one of those big garbage bags, you know, something that'll hold the meat."

"Yeah, right."

I had another cup of coffee, took a quick shower, wrote Brett a note, dressed and drove over to Leonard's apartment. Officer Carroll was coming out as I arrived. He's constructed like a large artillery shell.

"I hope you boys aren't going to get in trouble," he said.

"Us? Heaven forbid."

"Don't tell me anything. I know it's best I don't know."

After I got Leonard hustling along, a granola bar in one fist, a cup of coffee in the other, I told him what had come to me, and then I drove us back to Nesbit.

eleven

It was still dark, and in East Texas, wandering about near people's homes and places of business during the night is the sort of thing that could get you shot. Growing up I had been able to walk to people's houses if the need came about and ask to borrow their phone, or some such, without expecting to be shot into Swiss cheese by some fearful and angry homeowner. The days of close neighbors had almost passed, and in its place was a cloud of anger and suspicion and a lot of hardware of the killing kind.

Still, we parked to the side of the general store and chanced it, walked between the store and the tire shop, wandered out to the big building at the back of Donnie James's place. There was a night-light in front and back of the building, and we stood out like bugs in a porch light. I took out my handy little lockpick kit, and easily defeated the padlock. Once we pulled the door aside, there was yet another door, and its locks were a little more difficult.

"Hold it," Leonard said. "Alarm system."

Leonard had discovered a little black panel on the inside of the second door fastened to the wall. He took out his pocketknife and popped the cover, used the blade to cut a wire.

"Might as well have been on the honor system," he said.

We got that door slid aside as well, then closed it behind us. I took out my penlight and flashed it around. There was a big tractor in the center of the building, some farm equipment attachments, and not much else.

We walked around for a while, but no clues jumped at us.

"Okay," Leonard said. "What are we looking for?"

"I don't know exactly, but I have a strong feeling it's here."

Leonard pulled out his own penlight, and we split up and went around the building looking for whatever might look like a clue.

Reason we were there was I had thought about Donnie James. He had mentioned the boys' and the woman's body in the bookmobile, but then reading the paper, where he said he got his news, I realized that the bodies in the bookmobile had not been mentioned. Marvin had most likely not revealed those things on purpose, to have one up on the killer, so how had Donnie James known about it?

It was possible someone leaked the information, but if they had, I doubted it went all the way to Nesbit and to the owner of a tire shop. Again, possible, but not likely. Marvin ran a tight ship.

We met up by the tractor, turned off our penlights and stood there a moment.

"Nothing," Leonard said.

"Same."

After a brief moment, Leonard turned back on his penlight, said, "Place looks bigger on the outside."

"Yeah."

"Because it is," he said.

I turned on my light again, flashed it around. On the right there were windows in the wall, and on the left there were not. That could have merely been a builder's choice, but something didn't seem right.

I started over to that wall, and Leonard went along with me. When we got there he tapped on it with his fist.

"Okay," he said. "Pretty sure it's hollow."

"No doors. No windows, but a hollow wall means another room."

"Uh-huh. And this aluminum looks fresh, like it's been added lately. Maybe after the kid stole the bus and ran off with it."

That got me excited.

We walked along the length of the wall, and near the front of the building I thought it looked a little odd. I pressed against it. The wall moved a little. There was a separate piece of aluminum that had been used to fill out the wall; it looked all of one piece if you weren't paying attention. I worked with it some more and it slid aside on rollers. It left a gap big enough to walk through, but there was a chain and lock through it and the main wall. We could have slipped under the chain, but I decided to make it easier.

I took out my lockpick kit and snapped the padlock open. Once that was done, we were able to push it wider. We slipped in behind it.

Using my penlight, I found a switch and flipped it. Lights came on along the stretch of hidden chamber. It was a full twelve feet wide, and maybe forty feet long. On the concrete floor was a dark oil stain, and at the far end of the room was a metal chair bolted to the floor. There were leather straps on the arm rest and at the base of the chair. There was a freezer behind the chair, and off to the side a metal box with air holes in it.

It was pretty obvious then. Recently the wall had been put up to hide what had formerly been in the open. Unlikely anyone was ever let in, but after James escaped, paranoia set in, and the wall was built to hide where the bookmobile had been parked, where the kidnapped boys were kept, and obviously tortured. I felt sick to my stomach.

Leonard walked over to the freezer and looked inside.

"Empty," he said. That caused me to let out a sigh of relief.

I went over to the box and lifted the lid. It too was empty. At least there weren't any others.

The bookmobile had been setting here for years, part of Donnie's murderous ritual, that and the oiled bodies that he had eventually put in the tank in the bookmobile, along with Harriet Hoodalay.

"Fits," Leonard said. "Donnie has a bad thing for boys, somehow Harry must have delivered the bookmobile here one night, night she was supposed to drop it off at Will's place, got her wires crossed about where, and in the process of leaving it at the tire shop she must have seen something that got her killed. Donnie hid her body and the bookmobile in here. Must have dug up those early bodies, oiled them all down and put them in the bookmobile with Harry's corpse."

"Sounds right," I said.

"Kept the bookmobile running and in good shape, checked on the bodies from time to time, see how they were marinating."

"Jesus," I said. I could visualize Donnie sitting in the bookmobile, starting it up, listening to the motor hum, feeling the thrill of being in control of the machine that brought children to it; that struck me as something the sick bastard might enjoy thinking about.

Leonard was still piecing it out. "He grabbed James, had him here awhile, but somehow James got loose while they were out, opened the door, stole the bookmobile and got away. Or tried to. Goddamn. Donnie is one sick fuck."

"Not sick, just different," a voice said.

We turned, and there was Donnie standing near the open section of the wall. He had slipped in quietly. He was holding a flat, black automatic.

"I thought I was pretty clever," he said, "way I built this room after the kid escaped. Lucked out he killed himself. If only you two had been killed, that would have ended my problems."

"You almost had me convinced it was Tom," I said.

"What was it, the newspaper?"

"Yep," I said.

"I thought about it later, hoped you wouldn't think about it too hard. You know, I don't mean to do the things I do, but I can't help myself."

"Yeah you can," Leonard said. "You don't want to."

"You could be right," Donnie said.

"There's another alarm, ain't there?" Leonard said.

"Yeah. You killed the obvious one, but there's another. You tamper with one, it sets off the spare. Goes off at the house. Somehow, I figured it was you two. That newspaper slip I made."

Will glided in through the gap in the wall and came up behind Donnie. For a brief moment I thought we had lucked out, but he walked up and stood by his partner.

"Took you long enough," Donnie said to him.

"Came fast as I could," he said.

And then I got the rest of it. Will had worked for Donnie for years, been groomed, and then he became part of the operation. Donnie had created Will in his image. It was the two of them doing the torturing, the killing. I was waiting for the inevitable.

That's when a gun went off. I expected I had been shot, but that's not what happened. I watched as Donnie sagged, slightly. There was another shot, and he went down on one knee and dropped his gun. Blood seeped out of his right shoulder and out of his right leg, splashed onto the floor, looked orange in the harsh light.

Will had darted out of the gap at the sound of the first shot.

I turned. Leonard was holding a little revolver in his hand, an old-fashioned snub nose twenty-two. I looked back at Donnie. He was trying to pick up his gun.

"Nope, nope, nope," Leonard said, "or the next one gives you a hole in the head. Did you see that, Hap? I didn't miss either shot. Course I was aiming for his head with the first one."

I had forgotten I told Leonard to bring protection, and hadn't noticed the gun tucked beneath his shirt. I was glad that for once, he had listened to me.

"Go get Will," Leonard said. "I got this one."

I raced past Donnie, kicking his gun to the side as I went, then I darted out the gap in the wall, through the front door and into the crisp night air. I could see Will running toward the tire shop. He was almost there. I jogged after him.

When I got to the shop, Will had already opened the door and slipped inside. I eased into the dark building and fetched up behind some tires on racks. There was a shot and a chunk of rubber flew out of one of the tires and hit me in the face, hard. That shot had missed me by inches.

I kept moving behind the rows of tires. The son-of-a-bitch had run in here to get a gun, and I had followed him inside, the way he had wanted. I was a duck in a shooting gallery.

There were three more pops, but all they did was ruin a couple more tires. At least he was a bad shot. I bent down behind the tires and tried to peek between a gap in them. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust, and I could make out his shape on the landing above, framed by the moonlight slipping past a little window up there. He was squatting, the gun pointing in my general direction, waiting for me to stick my head out.

I pushed a tire loose from the top rack. It bounced when it hit the floor, and when it did Will popped off a nervous shot. I was already moving, back along the row of tires, and then under the landing above. I rushed my way along until I was pretty near under him. I glanced at the sagging timber that helped hold the top floor up. I charged it, hit it with my shoulder, heard it crack—the board, not my shoulder, though I was certainly feeling pain. I hit it again, and I could feel it move this time, and then a third time and it came down in an explosion of lumber, tires, dust and unidentified crap. I tried to get out from under it, but I was too slow. I don't know anyone could have been fast enough.

Junk was lying on me. It was heavy. I was trapped. Looking out from under the debris, I saw Will rise up from the floor uninjured. I had only succeeded in making him fall, and pinning myself under the wreckage. He looked about, spotted what he could see of me under the junk and lifted his gun. There was a shot, and Will did a bit of sideways dance, then toppled to the floor.

I heard Leonard say, "Got 'em Boscoe," and then I passed out for a while.

twelve

Leonard dragged me outside and propped my back against the tire shop. That's where I was when he slapped me awake.

"Damn, quit that," I said.

"How do you feel?" he said.

"Like a bunch of lumber fell on me and then my brother started slapping my face."

"I enjoyed that a little," Leonard said.

"Did you kill Will?"

"Boy did I."

"Donnie?"

"Yeah. I went ahead and shot him too. He kind of died in a gunfight, but I was the only one shooting. Wasn't like I could tie him up. I knew you needed help. I could hear the gunshots."

"Jesus, Leonard."

"Wasn't like he needed a room with a bunk for the rest of his life, sitting in some cell breathing stale air and making turds. He needed a bullet. You dumbass, you should have took his gun with you."

"I didn't want to kill anyone."

"That's all right," Leonard said. "I did it for the both of us. I'm going to go back down there and fire off his gun a few times to make sure it looked like he put up a fight."

"That's cold, Leonard. He was unarmed when you killed him."

“Yeah. He was.”

thirteen

A crowd of people showed up, due to all the shooting. A light was shone in my face. Before their arrival, Leonard had fired off Donnie's gun so he could claim there was a shootout and that he had prevailed. The noise, along with all the other racket we had made, stirred the locals. By the time they arrived, Leonard was leaning against the wall next to me, his gun lying on the ground six feet away. Donnie's gun was back in the formerly secret room, probably firmly placed in his hand by Leonard.

The county was called out. We ended up in the back of a deputy sheriff's car, watching the car hood shimmer in the red and blue from the light bar. In time they brought us in for questioning and locked us up in county for a few days. Leonard at least had a concealed carry license, so illegally carrying a firearm wasn't added to the list.

Brett came to visit. They let her give us food she brought from outside. I don't think they're supposed to do that, but once the county realized what Donnie and Will had been doing, they treated us well. They had discovered photographs of the kids that dated all the way back to the first murder, and the photos had been ugly. The poor kids' dead and rotting bodies had been stacked in seats in the bookmobile and a timer on a camera had snapped away with Will and Donnie posing beside their wrecked remains like hunting trophies, which, in a way, I guess they were. There were all manner of things found on internet files. There were torture devices in Donnie's house. It was a pretty slam-door case. I don't know if they believed Leonard's story about the shootout. But if they didn't, no one said a word. There was also the fact that Donnie and Will had kept records of who the boys were and how long they had kept them, as well as all they had done to them. Their records solved all the murders. The victims, with the exception of Harriet (a relative's DNA proved it was her), were unwanted kids, lost and forgotten, tossed out like used condoms.

I guess Tom Hoodalay still remains an asshole, and Nesbit needs a new owner for the tire and mechanic shop, not to mention some renovation.

We were back home pretty quick, though there was a bit of talk about us getting into trouble for breaking and entering, maybe a fine, a little jail time. That idea got shuffled and forgotten, thank goodness. No one really wanted to punish us for what happened to those two, not even for the lesser charges.

I brooded for a few days over Leonard shooting Donnie in cold blood, stayed home and didn't go visit with him, didn't even take his calls. Then Brett said, "Get over it. Leonard saved your life. And it isn't the first time."

"I know," I said, "but I got to get right in the head. Killing doesn't bother him. Me, I feel different."

"You've killed, Hap, and if you had to, you'd do it again. Quit feeling sorry for yourself. I'm glad Leonard made sure you came home. Stop being a jackass."

She was right. I called Leonard later that day. He answered, said, "You been pouting, haven't you?"

"I have."

"Yeah, well, I knew you'd get over it."

“When it involves you, I always do.”

“Yep.”

“One question,” I said. “After all that, after all the things we’ve done, the deaths, how do you sleep?”

“Deeply.”

“I don’t.”

“I know.”

“But, thanks, Leonard.”

“You’re welcome. Still sore from all that crap falling on you?”

“A little. Nothing serious. Thanks for pulling that off of me too.”

“Welcome again. But you owe me. We working out today?”

“I need another day to feel bad about who I am.”

“How about you take this day to know that there won’t be anymore kids abused and murdered by those two, and you don’t have a hole in your head and about six feet of dirt over you? Want to do that?”

“That’s exactly what I’ll do,” I said.

“Alright, then. And Hap?”

“Yeah.”

“Go fuck yourself. Talk tomorrow.”

“Good night,” I said.

Sad Onions

Me and Leonard were cruising back from a fishing trip.

We'd been at a cabin Leonard's boyfriend, Pookie, owned on the lake. Pookie couldn't make it, but we had the key, and we spent a partial day and a lot of the night sitting in lawn chairs on the cabin's deck where it overhung the water, sitting with big glasses of iced tea, now and again casting our fishing lines, hiding during the day under the shadows of our wide-brimmed straw hats, pushing them back on our foreheads at night to feel the cool breeze blowing off the lake, rippling the dark water.

We caught four fish and threw them all back. Those fish would have stories to tell. Hope word didn't get back to Aquaman. Things might turn nasty.

Of course, the trip wasn't about fishing, it was about me and Leonard hanging, without distractions, talking. We had been through the mill as of late, and some time off was doing us good, and it probably wasn't hurting my wife's feelings either. She and my daughter were spending a day doing pretty much the same thing Leonard and I were doing, minus the fish.

Now it was over and it was deep night, and I was driving us home. The moon was a silver slice. Shadows hung from the trees on either side of the narrow road like crepe paper at a funeral. We were fifty or sixty miles from home. I was driving Leonard's pickup and he was dozing on the passenger side. There were a lot of curves in the road and the headlights danced around the curves. I wasn't driving real fast, but I wasn't messing around either. I was ready to be home and in my own bed with Brett.

The road straightened out finally, rose up a hill where the trees were thick on my left and thin on my right. As the truck's headlights topped the hill a woman showed up in my lane, waving her hands.

I swerved and crossed into the left lane, wheeled around her, found the right lane again, skidded to a tooth-rattling stop that nearly sent me off the edge of the road, where I would have bumped over a short drop of weeds and rocks, and possibly would have fetched up against a barbed-wire fence. If the fence snapped, they might have found us and the pickup wearing a couple of cows.

Leonard came awake with a shout, looked at me. I didn't say anything. I got out of the truck and rushed back to where the woman stood in the road wringing her hands, crying and yelling, "He's down there."

She was pale of skin, had her blonde hair up in a pile. Strands of it had slipped loose and had fallen across her face like leaking vanilla. By moonlight, and I assumed by any light, she had a very nice face. She was carrying a white purse. It was draped over her shoulder by a long strap. She was wearing an expensive looking white dress and had on a silver necklace and matching double bracelets on both wrists; they clattered together like the wagging tail of a rattlesnake. She wasn't wearing any shoes.

By that time Leonard was with us. His black skin looked like sweat-wet chocolate in the bright moonlight. It was that kind of weather, even late at night.

I said, "I'm going down for a look."

"I'll get her out of the road," Leonard said. "Come on, lady."

Leonard gently touched her arm, guided her toward his pickup. I watched them go away, him walking slow, her balancing on her naked toes like a ballerina, trying to put as little of her foot on the blacktop as she could manage.

I went down the hill. I could see a white Lincoln at the bottom of it. A ridge of trees stood in front of it, and between the trees I could see the barbed-wire fence that ran behind them. The car was mashed up primarily against a sweetgum tree, though part of an oak had got into the act. White smoke was hissing out from under the hood. The windshield was shattered, but still in place, the front of the Lincoln was as crumpled as an accordion.

I looked through the driver's window. There was an elderly black man behind the wheel, the side of his head resting against it, a semi-deflated air bag pushed up against him; it made him look like a man hugging an oversized pillow. His face was turned toward me and the front of his bald head was warped so bad it looked like some kind of special effect. His face was coated in blood, his mouth was open and there were teeth missing. One of them had nestled on his blood-covered chin.

I tried to get the door open, but it was locked or jammed up. I went to the other side, and that door came open. I crawled across the seat and touched my fingers to the man's neck. He was as dead as my youth. When I got out of the car, I noticed the lady's high heels were there by her door, where she had left them to better climb the hill.

I climbed up the hill and got my cell out of my pocket, tried to call 911, but there wasn't any service.

I went to the truck and spoke through the open driver's side window.

"Listen," I said to Leonard. "You take her into town, or get to some place where there's service and call. I'll wait here."

“How is Frank?” she said.

“We’ll let a doctor decide,” I said.

She burst out crying. She sounded like a banshee. Leonard said something soothing, then wheeled them out of there, leaving me beside the road, standing in the moonlight, smelling the heat from the Lincoln’s engine as steam rose up the hill in thinning, white plumes.

I went back down the hill, hoping I was wrong about him being dead. Nope. He was so dead there needed to be two of him.

As I walked around the car, I noticed there was a mark on the back end of it, and as I continued around it, I saw the front left tire was blown. On the passenger seat, there was blood. I hadn’t noticed any on the woman, so I presumed it was the man’s, thrown there by impact and gravity. I noticed too that some of that blood had got on my pants when I crawled across the seat.

By the time I climbed up to the road again, something was itching at the back of my brain.

Leonard came back not long after, but the ambulance and the emergency crew got there first, followed by the law. It was that county’s sheriff’s department, and we didn’t know any of them. We are usually detained or arrested by someone we knew.

The entire hill was lit up by emergency lights. It looked like a night club up there. I answered some questions, gave the deputy, a stout black woman named Celeste Jones, all the information I had. She didn't look down the hill at the car. I guessed she wasn't the one for that. She made it easy for us and let us go.

Going home, Leonard driving, I said, "How was she?"

"Said she was Terri Parker, and she seemed to be rolling with the punches pretty good. She's twenty-seven, and the dead man is her husband, Frank Parker."

"You have that curious tone," I said. "Like the one you get when you realize you have on mismatched socks."

"I'm thinking I got another pair just like them at home. Hell, I don't know, Hap. I got a funny feeling is all."

"You and me both, brother."

When Leonard dropped me off at home, the porch light was on. I used my key, slipped in quietly. My daughter Chance had stayed over. She was sleeping on the couch. It actually folded out, but the thing was far more comfortable if you didn't bother with the foldout bed, which could feel a bit like a torture instrument from the Inquisition.

Her long, dark hair was hanging off the couch, touching the floor. I couldn't see her face. I had only known about her for a short while, never realized I had a daughter until she was an adult. It was pretty wonderful.

I went quietly into the kitchen, got the milk, poured myself a glass, found some animal cookies in one of the shelves, sat down at the kitchen table to snack on them in the dark.

After a while, I crept upstairs to the bedroom, slipped into the bathroom to brush my teeth, pulled on my pajama pants and climbed into bed.

Brett rolled over and put her arm across my chest. I could smell the sweetness of her hair, strawberry shampoo.

"Catch any fish?" she said.

I thought she was asleep and was surprised when she spoke.

"We caught them, looked them over and sent them home. There was something else, though."

She rolled over again and stacked her pillows behind her head, sat up against them. She didn't turn on the light.

"Like what?" she said.

I told her about the woman, the car and the dead man, ended with, "Something didn't seem right."

"You said the passenger seat was bloody?"

"That's right."

"Did she have blood on her dress?"

I thought about that for a long moment, remembered the shimmering whiteness of it. "I don't think so."

"She had her purse, but left the high heels at the bottom of the hill?"

"Yeah."

"Shock can make you do all kinds of funny things, but why didn't she carry the shoes with her is my first thought? Seems staged."

"That's pretty good for not being there," I said.

"I'm amazing. Now I'm sleepy again. Good night."

Brett readjusted her pillows, put her arm across my chest again, and went back to sleep.

I lay there thinking, which can be pretty painful on most occasions, but at that time of night when I should have been sleeping, it was akin to an injury.

I eventually slept.

I didn't go into the office until ten. By that time Brett had already gone to work, and Chance had gone home. Chance left a note.

daddy. you ate my animal crackers.
love you. buy more.

When I got to the agency, Brett and Leonard were there. Leonard was having his morning vanilla cookies, dipping them gently in coffee. Brett had her long, red hair clamped back and she was sipping from a mug of coffee about the size of a fish pond.

When I closed the door, Leonard said, "Brett asked me about the blood, and I got to say, like you, I didn't see a drop on her."

"I think she didn't want to sacrifice the dress," Brett said.

"Yeah," I said, "something about this whole thing stinks."

"Did you shower this morning?" Leonard said.

"You know what you can do," I said, and then I told him. It was anatomically impossible, but I told him anyway.

We spent the day tapping pencils against things, looking out the window, wondering what we would have for lunch. No one came in with a job. No one came in to ask our opinion on anything. There was nothing outside the window but a parking lot, and across the street some houses, and in the oak by the lot a squirrel jumped about now and then, but it was more like it was squirrel duty, no real enthusiasm there.

Brett made another pot of coffee and we sat looking at one another some more, saying nothing. Arguing politics wasn't going to cut it. We'd been there before. Leonard was the only black, gay Republican I knew who was a Vietnam war hero and only listened to country music. There are others I didn't know, of course.

Talking religion wouldn't work either. We were all atheist. So, we talked about the night before, kicked that around a bit, and since it was really none of our business, we got right on looking into it.

Leonard drove me and him out to the wreck site, while Brett stayed at the office and looked into the dead man, Frank Parker. Out at the hill, we parked off the road and made our way down to where the car had been.

It had been hauled off, but we could see clearly in the daylight where the tires had made deep marks in the earth as it jetted off the road. My phone may not have had service there, but it took good photographs, and I took a lot of them.

"One thing I realize now is the tree impacted on her side," I said. "But it was Frank who was all messed up. She came out pretty unscathed. And as has been noted, she wasn't covered in blood, even though the seat where she would have been sitting was. It was a hard-enough crash to make the bag pop, but was it enough to kill him? He had quite a lick to the front of his head, where the bag would have protected him."

"It do be curious," Leonard said.

"Let me add something else," I said. "The back bumper, I could see it well enough last night to see it was banged up."

"Like someone had used a car or truck to push it?"

"Could have been a bang from a previous accident, but. . . . And another thing, there are tire marks as the car goes off the road, but no skid marks."

"Yeah," he said. "Add it to the other stuff, it starts to paint a different picture. And you know what else I think?"

"She had help."

"Bingo."

Back at the office Brett said, "Frank Parker founded Sad Onions."

Chance worked with us part-time, and she was there too, her pretty face alight with youth, framed by that lovely hair, dark as the far side of the moon.

She said, "Sad who?"

"It's a chip company," Brett said. "They dry out onions into chips, and the chips are in a kind of . . . I don't know. Droopy shape. Anyway, Frank called them sad onions, because they're droopy. It's stupid, but hey, it caught. Company also makes chips made out of other vegetables. Get this, after the onions, their biggest seller is made from a dried turnip."

"Who eats that crap?" Leonard said.

"I've had them," Brett said, "better than you think. Some of them are salted, some are peppered, and some are straight dehydrated vegetables with no frills. Frank Parker started out an onion grower, over around Noon Day. Soil there is supposed to be great for onions. Makes them sweet. Anyway, he figured out how to dehydrate them and turn them into chips before every other company was doing it, and he got rich. And he got married."

"Terri," Leonard said.

"Yep. He was seventy, and she's twenty-five," Brett said.

"And a hottie," I said.

"Watch it, Buster," Brett said.

Chance snickered. She liked it when I was in trouble.

On the way to the sheriff's department that had investigated the crime, Leonard said, "I don't think that woman was ever in the car, that's what I think. She was down there waiting for someone to come by. Standing down there today, a car went by, and I heard it a long time before it got there, because that's how sound is at the bottom of that hill. She left the shoes there to support the idea she had been in the car, and to climb the hill faster."

"I think you're right."

"That's a first," he said. "Next thing you'll learn to love guns and quit supporting liberal politics."

"I don't think so," I said.

At the sheriff's department, they let us cool our heels in an interrogation room, something we were professionals at. It was a full thirty minutes before Deputy Celeste Jones came in.

"You wanted to see me?" she said, and took a chair at the table across from us.

“We don’t think that wreck was just a wreck, and we don’t think the lady fair is true and blue,” I said.

Celeste turned her head and cracked her neck. I almost expected it to fall off.

“Yeah,” she said. “Why are you thinking that?”

We gave her our thoughts on the matter, showed her the photos on my phone. She got out a pad and wrote down some notes, then it was over and all three of us were walking toward the front door.

Celeste said, “Something stinks, gentlemen, but the sheriff thinks it is exactly what it looks like. He’s not the sort to disbelieve a pretty, blonde white woman.”

“But you are?” Leonard said.

“Sometimes,” she said. “But I’ll tell the sheriff what you said, how you feel. Up to him to figure out what to do about it.”

It was about 9 a.m. the next morning when we heard someone coming up the outside stairway to the office. I went to the window that overlooked the lot and took a gander. There was a sheriff’s car from the next county in the lot with a crunched front end. The law showing up is seldom good, even if they’re out of their jurisdiction.

There was a gentle knock. I opened the door. There was a young, lean, black man standing there holding his white cowboy hat. He wore a sheriff’s outfit and a deputy sheriff’s badge. He had hound dog eyes and a soulful look, a smile with enough fine teeth an alligator would have envied him.

I invited him in. He shook hands with all of us, sat in front of the office desk and looked across at Brett, which was a view I envied. I sat in a chair at the corner of the desk, next to Leonard, who had his butt parked on the edge of the desk.

"My name is Journey Clover, and really, that's my name."

I figured that was remarked on a lot, and he wanted to clear up questions right away.

"Okay, Deputy Clover," Brett said.

"I came over to tell you that the whole thing with the wreck, the thing you fellows came across, has been wrapped up."

"You came all the way over here to tell us that?" Leonard said.

"Seemed the polite thing to do, considering you came by yesterday to voice some suspicions. I'm here to tell you we have done a thorough investigation, and it was nothing more than an unfortunate accident."

"That's a quick investigation," Brett said.

"We have good people," he said.

"They must be damn good," Leonard said. "Two days later and it's done?"

"Simple case," he said. "Listen, I don't want to be impolite, and we appreciate your concern, your ideas about this, but people, it's done. It was nothing more than an accident."

"And you'd rather we not poke our nose into it?" Leonard said.

"I suppose that's right. I knew Mr. Parker well, by the way, liked him. I used to be an insurance salesman before I went to work at Sad Onions. Sold him some insurance. He seemed like a really nice guy, did lots of charity work."

"What insurance company did you work for?" Brett asked.

"Regency Mutual," he said. "I wasn't much of a salesman. Sold Parker a policy, liked him, and went to work for him in the office. I have an accounting degree. But it didn't suit me, so I ended up in the sheriff's department."

"That means you knew his wife as well?" Leonard said.

"Not much, a little. On sight, that sort of thing. She came into the office, of course, went to lunch with Parker. But, hey, that's all I got. Celeste wanted to keep you in the loop. She said she had suspicions too, but the investigation closed them out. She feels it's all been answered. Well, got a bit of a drive, so nice to meet you. Just wanted you to know."

After Deputy Clover left, Brett said, "Tell me I'm not the only one that found that odd."

"You're not the only one," Leonard said.

I nodded. "Yeah. Drives all the way over here to tell some civilians how things turned out. Usually you can't get a thing out of the law, even if you're the victim."

"It do be peculiar," Leonard said.

"Yes, it do," Brett said. "Follow the money. Meaning I'm going to talk to some insurance folks I know, then see what I can find out about Mrs. Parker. You and Leonard check up on Clover."

Me and Leonard drove over to Clemency, which was the town where Clover's office was located. Leonard was at the wheel and I was sitting in the passenger seat watching the scenery rush by.

“Front end of Clover’s car was smashed in,” I said. “Wonder what the story is on that?”

“You’re thinking like me. What if Clover gave Parker a little push from behind, sent him down that hill into those trees.”

“I was thinking what if Parker was dead before he went over the edge in the car. His head was really bashed in, and it seems to me the airbag would have prevented a wound that bad. I think they killed him and stuffed him in his car and he bled like a stuck hog. Also thinking since Clover knew him and his wife, maybe Clover wanted to be in the clover, decided to help the wife bump the hubby for some insurance money, and she came with it?”

“But why would he leave Sad Onions, become a deputy, if he wanted to be near her?” Leonard said.

“Husband could have got suspicious, so Clover needed to put some space between them.”

“Maybe,” Leonard said.

We stopped in at a greasy spoon that looked like a railroad boxcar. We had caught it at a time when no one was there but us. We bellied up to the counter, ordered coffee and a burger.

The lady who brought us our food was a middle-aged white lady with a tired face, but a sweet attitude. She wore an old-fashioned waitress cap that was precariously perched on her hairdo, which was intended to be blonde, but looked like an enormous wad of pink cotton candy.

If anyone knows the citizens of a town, it’s a café worker, a barber or a bartender. I gave her my most heart-warming smile.

“We’re wondering about an old friend of ours, Deputy Clover. You know him?”

“I do,” she said, “and if you’re such good friends, why are you wondering to me?”

“Touché,” I said.

“Thing is,” Leonard said, “we’re insurance investigators.”

“Yeah?” she said. “So not old friends.”

“There was an accident outside of town, on that high hill. A man was killed,” I said. “We’re looking into some possibilities.”

“Possibilities?”

We didn’t respond to that.

“Cutting to the chase,” Leonard said, “you ever see Mrs. Parker come in with Clover?”

“Nope, not once, but she didn’t act like much of a wife.”

“No?” I said. I tried to say it like the idea of infidelity was something I had never considered or even heard of.

“Way she hung on that woman when she was in here, in the back booth there . . . I just don’t get it. Two women?”

“What woman?”

“The black deputy at the sheriff’s department.”

Click.

Outside in the car I said, “So, what did we learn?”

“We learned that waitress doesn’t like two women together, so I have to make sure to bring my Pookie here for lunch someday and rub up against him, see how she likes two men."

"You are such a devil," I said.

"We also learned that Deputy Jones talks a good game, but by acting concerned about the event, and then clearing it as an accident, it seems she may be throwing suspicion off herself."

"But what about Clover? He's the one that came over to talk with us, and his car has a banged bumper. Might have come from pushing Parker's car off the road."

"You know, we ought to go to the department, thank Deputy Clover and Deputy Jones in person for keeping us in the loop. See how that plays."

We drove over there, didn't find Deputy Jones, but Clover was still around.

In the breakroom at the sheriff's department, Deputy Clover said, "You came all the way over here to thank me for what you already thanked me for? We talked yesterday."

"We're very polite," Leonard said.

"Sounds to me like you're piling up something I might need hip boots to walk through."

"Your cruiser, man, it took quite a lick to the front," I said.

He studied us for a moment. I kept expecting him to pin us and mount us on a board.

"That's Deputy Jones's car. Borrowed it while mine had some general inspection. Just did a favor for her, letting you guys in on things."

"Where is the good deputy," Leonard said, "so we can thank her in person?"

"Her day off. I'm starting to try and figure how I can make things difficult for you boys."

"Boys?" Leonard said. "You call an alligator a lizard?"

"You should go now," Clover said.

When we were in the car, the phone rang. It was Brett. I put the phone on speaker.

"Insurance payout for Parker's death will be plenty," she said. "Enough to live on for the rest of your life."

"Would it be enough for two?" I asked.

"Maybe for four, five, as long as they didn't trade their Maserati in every year."

I told her what we found out.

"Hang on," she said.

I could hear keyboard keys clicking. In a bit she came back said, "I got Celeste Jones's address for you."

Deputy Jones lived in a simple house outside of town, somewhat secluded. There was a cruiser parked in front of the house. There was no garage or carport.

We went up to the door and Leonard knocked. While we waited, I glanced at her cruiser. It was in good shape. Had it already been fixed?

No one answered the door.

"You know, Hap, I'm not feeling good about this."

I walked over to one of the windows, cupped my hands together, looked inside.

“You’re about to feel less good,” I said.

Leonard came over for a peek, said, “That’s not good.”

“No, sir, it isn’t.”

We could see Deputy Jones sitting on the couch, her head thrown back. She looked very comfortable, not a care in the world, and this was due to the fact that she was as dead as Christmas past.

We hustled around back and used my lock pick to enter through the back door. Deputy Jones hadn’t become undead and gone into the kitchen for a soda. She was still in her position on the couch. She had a small bullet hole right between her eyes.

“Up close and personal,” Leonard said.

“I think Mrs. Parker may have decided she didn’t want to share the money,” I said.

“Bingo,” said a voice sweet as Georgia honey. It was Terri Parker, of course. She was holding a shiny little revolver, and it was pointed at us. “Sit on the couch.”

“By her?” Leonard said.

“Yeah,” she said, “by her. She won’t bite.”

We sat on the couch, away from the blood as best as possible. Terri stood near us, held the gun like someone who knew what they were doing.

I heard a car drive up. From where I sat I could see directly out the window. It was another sheriff’s cruiser. I felt a moment of hope, but when I saw Clover step out of the dented car, I knew we were in a deeper pit than expected.

Terri unlocked the front door and let Clover in. He looked at us and the deputy on the couch.

“Should have left things alone,” he said to us.

“I’m thinking kind of the same thing,” Leonard said.

“I had to shoot Celeste,” Terri said to Clover. “She grew a conscience. Then these two losers came in.”

“That’s all right,” Clover said. “Splits better two ways.”

It clicked then. It had really been Terri and Clover all along, and the whole thing with Deputy Jones had been a cold-blooded attempt to make her sympathetic, help clear up the investigation. But Jones got covered in guilt, so she had to go.

And now, so did we.

When night had settled in good, we were walked out to Clover’s cruiser, forced into the backseat, along with Deputy Jones’s body, which we had to carry. We propped her up between us.

Clover had wrapped Jones’s head in towels and then put a black trash bag over it, tightened it around her neck with a bathrobe belt. Leonard and I were both put in handcuffs. I wished for a moment that I had just taken the chance before that was done, been shot out in the open and had it over with.

As Clover drove, Jones’s body rocked between us.

“You two have made things kind of messy,” Clover said through the wire grating between the seats.

"That's our bad," Leonard said.

"However, there's a nice old abandoned gravel pit full of water where I think Jones and you two will be real comfortable," Clover said.

As Jones wobbled between me and Leonard, I managed the lock pick out of my front pants pocket, and was casually using it to unlock the cuffs. They went easy. When Terri glanced away, I passed Leonard the pick across Jones's body. He sat quietly and looked out the window, but his hands were working.

The car stopped at the end of a narrow road in the depths of the woods. We were near the gravel pit. We were eased out of the car at gunpoint. We could see into the pit, and it was filled with water; it was near big as a lake. The moon was up high and it had grown a little fuller. Its image lay on the dark water like a slice of fresh cantaloupe.

We had the cuffs draped over our wrists and we held our hands close to us. I was shuffled from my side of the car to the other by Terri and her six-shot accessory.

"Drag her out, drop her in the water," Clover said to us, nodding toward Jones's body.

"That's messed up," Leonard said, "us dragging her out and then you shooting us and putting us in the water."

"No," Clover said, "we'll shoot you on the edge of the pit. We won't have to do any carrying."

"Well, you thought that through, didn't you?" Leonard said.

"Get the body," Clover said.

"Sure," Leonard said, moving toward the open back door, "but Hap, first, the elephant of surprise."

That had become a kind of code for us. It meant do something, anything, and do it now.

I wheeled, let the cuffs drop, went low, clipped Terri at the knees, sending her flying over my back. I turned in time to see Leonard fling the cuffs in Clover's face and kick him in the crotch.

Clover staggered, but didn't go down. He fired awkwardly and missed. By that time, me and Leonard were running like gazelles down a wide path and into the woods. The path turned behind a thickness of trees. Several shots were fired at us. They rattled through the leaves like rain, and one of them nipped at my hair.

A moment later, we heard the cruiser fire up, and lights were cutting through the trees. Clover was driving the cruiser back down the path, trying to find us.

The trees were too thick with briars for us to hide in, so we ran down the curving trail until we came to where it ended, the gravel pit, dark water, and the floating moon. It was about twenty feet down to the water and there was a lot of garbage visible. Couches, washing machines, a broken dresser. It had become a dump, and that crap was probably stacked all the way to the bottom. Jumping wasn't going to turn out any better than being shot.

The car came around fast. We were trapped at a dead end. Me and Leonard split up. He went left, and I went right, into the woods on either side where the briars had thinned.

Clover skidded to a stop, got out with his pistol. Terri stayed in the car, slid behind the wheel. The window was down on the passenger side, and I could see her waving her gun through the open window. She couldn't wait to shoot somebody.

"I'm going to make you suffer if you make me hunt you," Clover yelled out, like it was incentive for us to just come on out and be shot.

I looked around, found a piece of pipe that had been tossed in the woods, tried to pick it up, but it was nothing but rust and came apart in my hand. Then I saw an old baseball that had been tossed out. I picked it up. The cover was mostly off, but it was firm enough, and it was all I had.

Clover was moving close to where I was hiding. I couldn't go toward him, because of the gun, and to go through the woods behind me led to the pit. I was between a killer and a wet spot.

I cocked the ball back, stepped between two trees, into the open. Clover saw me. I flung the ball. It was a good throw. There was some real meat behind it.

It sailed beautifully across the moonlit trail, and glided over Clover's shoulder. I felt like an idiot.

Clover looked at me, grinned, raised the pistol.

That's when someone screamed.

Clover wheeled to look, and I dropped back into the woods, out of the line of fire, near the edge of the pit. I saw from my hiding spot the source of the scream was Terri. Leonard had come out of the woods on the driver's side, surprised her, and grabbed her gun arm, which she was hanging conveniently out the window.

Clover stepped to the center of the road, aimed at Leonard and fired. But the shot went wide, punched a neat hole through the windshield. I saw Terri's head fly back, and then, dying, she reflexively stretched out, stomping down hard on the gas.

The car jumped and Clover didn’t. It hit him so hard it knocked him flying ten feet in front of it, over the edge of the quarry. The body of Deputy Jones flew forward and hit the wire grating, dropped out of sight.

I watched as Clover’s body hurtled down and smashed against a washing machine with a cracking sound like a rotten limb. It bounced over some more junk and slid into where the water was deep.

The car came right after him, shot downward like a bullet, right where Clover had gone under. The car hit with a splash and the moonlight shook on the water. The impact drove Deputy Jones’s body back against the rear windshield. Her bagged head hit it hard enough to cause a spider web of cracks, and then she fell toward the front of the car and the car went under.

I walked into the road, stood on the edge of the quarry and looked down. Leonard joined me. The car’s taillights creeped beneath the gurgling water, where they glowed momentarily, then went out. The water rippled for a time, finally went still, and it was done.

The Briar Patch Boogie

“Whose idea was this?” Leonard said.

“I think it was yours.”

“Yeah, probably.”

“You know it was,” I said.

“Hap?”

“What?”

“Can I have a drink of water?”

“If you get up and go get it,” I said. “There’s plenty water in the well. And probably snakes and dirt, and since the outhouse is up the hill, might be some of that in there as well. Who puts an outhouse at the top of a hill so the water might drain in the well? What kind of moron does that?”

“We have bottled water?”

“In the car,” I said. “You drank the last bottle we brought in.”

“You won’t go out and get it?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not thirsty.”

We were lying in cots across from one another in a little fishing cabin out at Caddo Lake. It was not a nice cabin, but it was cheap. It was not near other cabins and there were a lot of woods around it. It was deep East Texas, near Louisiana, and it could pass for either state. The lake had a lot of good fish in it and there were alligators and all along the bank there were big drooping trees that made thick shadows.

We had been there two days. We had caught a few fish and had fried them in butter with corn batter and had eaten them. The fishing had been so-so, and the boat we had rented had a leak in it. There were a couple of large tin cans, and we had no idea why they were in the boat until we were way out in the lake and the water began to ease in. We used the cans to bail it out. When we got back to the bank of the lake, we were so pissed at the guy who rented the boat to us, we pushed it back into the water and sat on the side of the lake and fished and watched the boat float out a ways and slowly take on water and sink.

We cheered when it went down.

“So, you won’t go get me a bottled water?

“No.”

“I’d do it for you.”

“No you wouldn’t,” I said.

“Would too.”

“No you wouldn’t.”

“I bet I would.”

“Okay. Go get me one.”

“I asked you first. Look, if you were sick. Say you had a fever, or were dehydrated, and you asked me to go get you a water, I would.”

“I’m not sick.”

“But if you were, I’d get you a water.”

“You’re not sick, so why should I get you a water?”

Leonard thought about that for a moment.

“I really don’t want to go get it,” he said.

"Aha," I said. "Now the truth comes out."

"This seemed like a good idea at the time," he said. "I thought it would be fun. We used to do stuff like this."

"We have been civilized to some extent, Leonard."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"I'm sick of eating fish, and small fish, I might add. We sunk the goddamn boat, and now all we got is bank fishing, and that hasn't been good, and there's not a proper toilet, and there's no running water."

"It's been really hot too."

"It's the summer, Leonard. What did you expect? Seals and polar bears?"

"That would have been nice. I like seals and polar bears."

"You have known neither."

"I've seen them on TV," he said. "You know what would be cool? A goddamn penguin."

"All of them would die of heatstroke."

"Yeah. They would. I'm pretty warm myself. Maybe I have heatstroke."

"I am not going to go out to the car and get you a water. Besides, it would be warm water."

"But it would be water. Hell, it's major hot. Devil's butthole hot."

"We don't need no air conditioning, you said."

"Did I say that?"

"Yep."

"Maybe if there was at least a plug with electricity we could use the fan I brought. That would be okay. One plug. Might be nice too—we didn't have to shit through a hole in the outhouse."

"No electricity and you brought a fan?"

"It's a small one," he said.

"At least it won't work any worse than a big one without electricity."

"See there, Hap. A bright side. Damn. I thought there'd be electricity. The brochure said it was a nice comfortable cabin. I didn't think of it as nice without electricity."

"We used to sleep in tents out in the woods on ground cloths, fish and camp for days," I said. "We didn't have electricity then."

"We were younger then."

"That's true," I said.

"And remember, we had marshmallows on a stick?"

"We did at that."

"I don't guess you brought any marshmallows?"

"Did not," I said.

"That would have been nice."

"Yep," I said. "We could have set this shithole cabin on fire and roasted them in the flames."

"You need a small simple blaze," Leonard said. "That would have been too much. And very warm."

"The marshmallows would have burned," I said.

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," Leonard said. He took a deep breath. "I don't know. Guess it's all right. It's closer to nature."

"Lying under a tree on leaves and dirt with chiggers on our balls would be closer to nature," I said. "I grew up with nature, and I love it. But I like going home to my house and my bed. That has become my true nature.

And I miss Brett."

"She and Chance are probably having a good time," Leonard said.

"Don't you know it," I said. "They're watching old science fiction movies and popping popcorn and the dog is on the couch with them. I think Brett said they were going to make hot chocolate too. I don't know for sure, though, because my cell phone doesn't work out here. Oh, wait. I lost my cell phone in the lake."

"Can't blame that on me," Leonard said.

"I can, and I will."

"I don't know," Leonard said. "We used to get along fine without phones. I think it's not having electricity that makes it suck out here."

"That certainly is a factor," I said. "The only electricity nature likes to provide is a lightning bolt."

"How did we get used to a cell phone? How is that? Why is that?"

"I didn't want pussy until I had some, and then I wanted it from then on."

"A cell phone is like pussy?" Leonard said. "No wonder I'm queer."

"I admit that was a bridge too far as a comparison."

"Maybe if we were home and someone ran a bulldozer over this place and sent us a picture it would be all right. We have caught fish, though. You have to admit that."

"Some extremely small fish. Other fish don't even recognize them as fish. You overcooked them too."

"I'm not used to a wood stove cooker."

"I can't even read."

"You should have learned how," he said. "You went to school."

"That's some funny shit, Leonard. Reading by candlelight is hard."

"Lincoln read by lamplight," Leonard said.

"He wasn't used to anything else," I said. "We're spoiled. We're back to the parable of the phone. Besides, you're the one complaining about how bad things are and how it isn't what you expected."

"Yeah," Leonard said, "but you're thinking it. And if you play fair, you have to admit some of what you're saying sounds like complaining too."

"I'm complaining about you. This was your idea."

"It seemed like fun. We haven't gone off and done something like this in a long time."

"Might be a reason for that," I said.

"This can't be the best cabin the guy has to offer."

"Oh, I don't know, this place may be the pick of the litter."

"All the other places in the brochure cost the same."

"Then they're all like this," I said. "Of course, we may be special with the old spoiled well and the extra smoky wood stove."

"The picture looked good."

"They always do," I said.

"Next time I want to do something like this, will you kick my ass?" Leonard said.

"How about I just kick it twice every Tuesday, just in case you're thinking about doing something like this?"

"That seems fair," Leonard said.

We lay there in the dark on our cots for a while. I kept trying to go to sleep, but that wasn't working out. A mosquito about the size of a chicken hawk was buzzing around my head. I imagined I was a ninja master and I could catch it between two chopsticks. Actually, I wasn’t having much luck swatting it with my hand. He was a wily bugger.

“Hap,” Leonard said.

“What the hell now?” I said.

“Can a mosquito be so big as to have a landing gear?”

And so it went.

Late in the night I fell asleep, and then the rain woke me up, but in a reverse way, it helped me go back to sleep. It rained well into the morning, keeping the sky black. Being tired from talking a lot of the night, we slept on. It was nearly noon when I woke up and got off the cot.

Leonard was still sleeping. I considered smothering him with a pillow, but went out to the car in the rain and brought in a flat of bottled water and set it on the one table in the room, near the wood stove. The table wobbled under the weight.

I used some tender and got a fire going, put a few slivers of larger wood in the stove, and when that was blazing, I put in a larger, split piece of pine. It caught, and then I added more wood, larger pieces. At least the cabin had come with split wood. Eventually, I had even-burning fire. It made the room hot and sticky. I poured bottled water into the old-fashioned coffee pot, and then dumped in some coffee grounds; that’s how old the pot was. It wasn’t even an old-time percolator. It was one of those things that Davy Crockett would have had coffee out of. At home Brett had this coffee maker you stuck little pods of coffee into, then you pull down a lever, and that made the perfect cup, and fast. I missed her and I missed the perfect cup. I missed my daughter Chance. I missed our dog Buffy. I missed my books, television set and my pantry with food in it. I even missed our cell phones. Mine was residing at the bottom of the lake and would have to be replaced. Maybe a perch was making a call to Brett right now, trying to find out if she was having fish for dinner. Leonard had let his run out of juice, and now there was no electricity, and he didn't have a car charger.

I wanted to cook with electricity, not wood, and have something to cook besides bad coffee. We didn't even have fish for lunch now. A can of potted meat with a pull tab would have been exciting right then. I missed the refrigerator back home where I kept my pitcher of iced tea and my carton of Sharps non-alcoholic beer. I really had come a long ways from a fellow who lived in the country on the fringe of the woods into who I was now. A guy who wanted to go home.

While the coffee was making, I looked over at Leonard, and could see under his cot a vanilla cookie bag. That bastard had eaten them all and hadn't offered me one. I didn't even know he had any with him, though I should have guessed. He was about those cookies like a druggie is about crack. He may have had them in a sealed bag stuffed up his ass for all I knew. Of course, it was far more likely he had brought them in with his sleeping bag.

When the coffee was ready, I poured a bug out of one of the two cups we had, left two dead flies in the other, and poured that one full of coffee for Leonard. I poured myself a cup and sat on the cot and sipped it. It was god-awful, tasted as if it had been strained through a used jockstrap owned by someone with a rampant venereal disease.

"Leonard," I said. "Rise and shine, easy money. The coffee's ready."

He moved a little, rolled over, smacked his lips and finally swung out of bed.

"Oh, for shit sakes, Leonard. Put on some drawers."

He got up and rummaged in his backpack and came up with a pair of sweat pants and pulled those on.

“I’d known you’d gone to bed naked,” I said, “I’d have slept out in the rain. Your coffee’s on the table.”

He got his cup and sat on his cot and sipped.

“Damn. You shit in this?”

“Not quite,” I said. “You know what would make this a lot better? A vanilla cookie. Oh, wait. You ate them all.”

“I didn’t mean to,” he said. “I just got started and couldn’t quit. You know, woke up hungry.”

“You meant to.”

He drank his coffee, then spit one of the flies on the floor.

“You knew that sucker was in my cup,” he said.

“I wouldn’t do that to you, Leonard.”

“You might,” he said.

“Okay. I might. Watch out for the other one.”

We went outside. It was still raining. It was a misty rain, and we wore our slickers with hoods and our good boots that laced up high and tight and were oiled to help shed water.

From where we stood we could see the lake and we could see the water sloshing against the shoreline.

“If we had a boat we could have better fishing,” Leonard said.

“Like the one we let sink out in the lake?”

“That one precisely,” he said.

"We can walk in the woods, there, fish close to all those tree roots growing out in the water."

"Tangle our lines."

"Might. But I bet there's some catfish there we could tie to a boat and have them pull us across the lake."

"If we had a boat."

"Yeah, if we had a boat."

"A boat like the one we sunk," Leonard said.

"That would be the one, yes."

We wandered into the woods. It grew dark with the shade from the trees and the clouds from the rain. The mist was nice, as it kept mosquitoes off a little and it made the air taste like greenery and dirt, but it lay on our faces like damp cobwebs. It made me think of when I was a kid growing up, and I'd go out in the mist and the rain until my mother caught me and called me in for fear of lightning.

We walked on, and a few hours later we found a place where the land rose up and was sprinkled with trees and tangled undergrowth. Near our feet a water moccasin crawled out from under a wad of dead leaves and slithered toward the water. As it plopped into the lake, Leonard said, "Won't be any fish there for a while."

"And I won't be anywhere near there for a while myself," I said.

As we topped the peak of the hill, a sound struck us.

Someone was moaning.

We left our fishing gear up on the rise and found her at the bottom of the hill lying in the leaves with her head on a rotting log. She was a young woman with long blonde hair, in her thirties I figured. She might have been pretty before, but the way she had been beat, it was hard to tell. She wasn't wearing much, a formerly white blouse now mostly the color of the leaves and dirt. She wasn't wearing pants or underwear. Her head was swollen and she was bruised on the arms and legs, and her bare feet were a bloody mess. She was lying in an ant bed and was covered with ant bites.

All of that she could get over in time, but the wound in her side wasn't something that merely required bed rest and a couple of aspirin. Something was sticking out of her. I looked. It was an arrow with plastic feathers on the end of the shaft.

I brushed the ants off of her, and we picked her up, Leonard at her head, me at her feet. We carried her to a pile of leaves that was better than the ant bed.

Her eyes were slits. She had taken such a beating she couldn't quite open them, at least not completely. She looked up at me and cried.

Leonard said to her, "We'll get an ambulance."

"They're out there," she said, and when she opened her mouth I could see her front teeth were chipped.

"Who's out there?" I said.

"Those men."

"How many?" I said.

"Two men and two women. They rented me. Like a carnival ride."

"You saying you're a working girl?" Leonard said.

She nodded.

"They're after me. They're hunting me."

“Who’s after you?” I said.

“Them.” By then she hardly had the breath to speak.

I took my canteen off my belt, slipped my hand under her head, lifted her up and gave her a drink of water. She gulped greedily. I only let her have a small amount to keep from making her sick, then I laid her head down gently on the leaves.

“They took me off a Houston street,” she said. “I do it for my daughter.”

“No judgment from us,” Leonard said.

“They spent days raping and beating me, and then they took me out here, drove out onto a trail, made me walk deep in the woods. They raped me again and set me loose, said I had an hour. They caught up with me and shot me with an arrow, but I got away. I don’t know how I did it, but I got away. But they’re coming. They’ll find me.”

“Take it easy,” Leonard said. “When did you last see them?”

“I don’t know. It was night. That’s what helped me. Oh, Jesus, my head is swimming.”

“It’s all right,” I said.

She quit talking and lay still.

“We got to get her back to the car, drive her to a hospital,” Leonard said.

My thought was she wouldn’t make it that long. That wound in her side was bad and she had lost a lot of blood.

“Hap,” Leonard said.

She had stopped moving. One moment she had been talking and now she wasn’t saying anything or making any sounds, no moaning, no breathing.

Her face was slack and her lips were turning blue.

I put my head to her chest. No heartbeat. I touched her throat to feel a pulse. Nada.

“She checked out,” I said.

“Damn. . . . Do you believe her story?”

“There’s an arrow sticking out of her. She was either telling the truth or Robin Hood missed a shot at a deer.”

That’s when we heard a noise, someone coming, being loud, purposely. My guess was they wanted her to hear them coming and cause fear.

Two men began to call out.

“Come on out, whore. We have a few points to make with you.”

“Yeah,” said another voice. “You might as well give it up, cause these points really hurt.”

The voices were coming from out in the deeper woods.

“Come on,” Leonard said. “She’s gone, and she said they had weapons.”

We rushed up the hill, and no sooner had we laid flat amongst the brush and were spying downward, two men came into the clearing beneath us. The two women she had mentioned did not appear.

The men were dressed in camo, carrying modern bows and quivers of arrows strapped to their backs. One of them had arrows fastened to his bow in such a way he could pop them loose and load them up quickly. They had machetes strapped to their sides in scabbards. They had canteens of water on their belts. One of them was wearing a backpack with his quiver of arrows strapped to that. Both wore high-top, waterproof boots. One of them was stocky, but solid, and had on a green baseball cap. The other an Aussie-style hat with one side pinned up.

Making their way down the hill they came to the body and stared at it.

“The arrow is ruined,” I heard the one in the cap say.

“Yeah,” said the other. He was taller. He took off his Aussie hat and ran his hand through his hair and put it back on. “Shaft’s bent, but it made a hell of a hole. Forget the arrow. It was a good shot, one of your best.”

“Bitch,” said the stocky man wearing the baseball cap. He laid his bow on the ground carefully, pulled his machete out of its scabbard and went to chopping on the woman with it, hacking at her legs and privates and chest. She was still fresh enough to bleed, and she bled a lot.

Leonard started to rise up, but I grabbed him. He looked at me. I shook my head and spoke to him by forming words but not saying them. “Not yet.”

Leonard tried to relax and lay still. He managed, but just barely. Leonard is the kind of guy that will attack a rhino barehanded and expect to come home with its horn. Sometimes you have to remind him he’s just a man.

Baseball Cap hacked on the poor woman some more. It was all I could do not to stand up and scream at him and run down the hill with my hunting knife. But the other guy was holding his bow, and from the way they carried themselves I knew they were trained woodsmen and hunters. There was a good chance me or Leonard would look like a porcupine by the time we got down there. A good bowman can thread several arrows and fire far more quickly than you can imagine.

When Baseball Cap grew tired of hacking, he wiped his face with his forearm, took a deep breath and then hacked one more time, cutting off the woman’s head. I heard Leonard let his breath out, or so I thought, and then I realized it was me. Still, I hadn’t been too loud. We were still safe and hidden.

There were strands of flesh still attached to the neck and the head. The man chopped again until the head was free. Aussie Hat brought out a bag, and Baseball Cap put the head in the bag, leaned down and rubbed the machete across her shirt to clean the blade, and then he put it away. Aussie Hat fastened the bag to the back of his pack, which for a moment he had removed, and then re-slung it.

“I forgot the camp shovel,” said Baseball Cap. “Shit. We can push her off in the water, I guess. Gators, fish and the heat will take care of her in a few days.”

“Hell with that,” said Aussie Hat. “Who the hell comes all the way back in here? There are thousands of acres. She’ll rot quick, and then there’s the ants and animals, all this fresh blood. No guarantee a gator will find her, but something will.”

“That’s right,” said Baseball Cap.

“Sure it is,” said the other.

They started walking back the way they had come, and when they disappeared into the trees, I said, “We got to call some law. Bring them back here.”

“By the time we get to the car and find a phone, they’ll be long gone,” Leonard said. “There won’t be any justice for that poor woman. Those guys might never be found. They hunted her like a deer. And you can bet they’ve done it before, and will do it again. We got to track after them. Keep them in sight.”

“You mean more than that, don’t you?”

“Maybe.”

“I’ve seen enough killing in my time,” I said.

“Listen. You go back, drive and find a phone. I’ll stay after them.”

“She said there were four, remember? Where are the other two? Hell. I’ll come with you. I can’t let you go up against four. You might hurt them.”

“There you go,” Leonard said.

We went down to her body for a look. It was sickening.

“Can you believe that shit?” Leonard said. “Chopping off her head.”

“Have to,” I said. “Saw it.”

“We ain’t got time for a burial, Hap. I know that’s what you were thinking.”

That was exactly what I was thinking.

“Yeah,” I said. “I know. And we got nothing to dig a hole.”

We went after them.

The rain had blown out, but with the heat of the day rising there were ribbons of fog in the low land, and it wrapped around us like damp serpents. The trees seemed to come out of the fog and then go back into it. It didn’t take long before we lost them.

We paused to examine the ground and find tracks, but the fog was too thick and too close to the earth for us to see well. We stopped beneath a tree as it warmed up, waiting for the fog to lift, hoping we could follow their tracks as we were once able to do, back when we were younger and had grown up near nature.

We drank water from our canteens and split a granola bar. Until then we hadn’t had anything for breakfast or lunch but bad coffee and some sips of water. The sun melted the fog like cotton candy. Now we could see their tracks, and the limbs they had bent while moving through the brush. They might as well have left us a map.

Looking where they had gone, we saw that there were a lot of ancient cedar stumps in the middle of a long patch of brackish water. It went on for some distance. There were only a few grown trees; most of the others were scrubs. It was patched like that for a long distance, and in the distance we could see those two moving along at no particular pace, seeming to take their time about it, not worried in the least. I figured, why worry when you thought no one had any idea what you had done and where you were.

And then I thought: Well, you sons-of-bitches, we know, and if you knew us, you'd start worrying.

They got well ahead of us, and we let them. We tried to stay near the larger stumps and the clumps of greenery as we went. There were long leaves that grew out of the water, looked like blades, and they were sharp too. We hid behind those when we thought we ought to, and when we had to truck across large expanses of water, we made our way so as not to make the water splash too loudly, in case our prey might look back and see us. We were too far from them to do anything, but with their arrows, they weren't too far from us.

They had planned all this well, let the woman off in the thick of the swamp and hunted her down. Now they had time to walk out and be a great distance away from her body. The question was, where were they going now, and why were they carrying her head in a bag?

Snakes swam all around us, and once we saw an alligator hustle along between two stumps in our direction, but it turned, went out where the marsh was deep, and with a flick of its tail it was gone. Let me tell you that took my breath away.

In time the woods swelled up again and the swamp water thinned. Before long we were in tall grass, and then the grass gave way to even more woods, a lot of thin trees growing close together. The sun had begun to crawl up high. A bit of water had seeped into my so-called weatherproof boots.

Far away we saw a split in the woods and we could see water beyond the split, not brown, but blue. We were coming out of the low-level muck, and to the bank of the larger and cleaner-looking Lake Caddo, the only natural lake in Texas.

I added that because I learned it in school. I wouldn't want you to think I wasted my education.

There was a line of willow and cypress trees along the water, and we could see the men walk out of the green growth, and keep walking onto the water, which for a moment gave me pause until we came up a little higher on the rise, ducked down behind some swamp grass and saw they had stepped onto a large barge. It was like a great, high-setting raft and there was an enormous cabin in the center of it with a band of large windows that went around as far as we could see. Inside the cabin was where the wheelhouse and living quarters would be. The part of the wheelhouse we couldn't see would have to be glass as well, and it would give a good view of the water ahead.

As they stepped onto the barge, two women came out of the cabin and each grabbed a man in turn and they hugged, and then the man with the head in the bag took it out and showed it to them.

You would have thought it was Christmas and their birthdays all rolled into one. The women giggled with glee. They were long, sun-browned women, one with her dark hair tied back, the other with short blonde hair cropped close to her head. They looked good in tight tee-shirts and shorts and flip-flops, and it was obvious both were braless and could make that work. They didn't look like monsters.

Leonard turned and looked at me, his forehead scrunched.

I shrugged. I didn't get it either.

The man with the woman's head, which he was holding by the hair, put the head in the bag, and the women went inside the barge.

We eased back behind the rise.

"What kind of people are these?" Leonard said.

"They're not people," I said.

Easing through the weeds, crawling on our bellies, we made our way down to the trees along the bank near the barge. I took up behind a cypress, and Leonard eased into a clutch of small willows.

Aussie Hat picked up a pole lying in a groove on the barge and pushed at the bank with it. Baseball Cap had already unhooked a line tied to a large root sticking out from the shoreline. He picked up a pole and helped Aussie Hat push off. The motor began to hum, and then the barge began to move. One of the women was motoring them away.

"Damn," Leonard said.

"Wait," I said.

They glided along on the water, not going far from shore. We watched as the barge chugged around a bend in the lake.

"They seem to be staying close to land," I said. "Maybe they're not going far."

"All we can do is follow around the edge of the lake and hope," Leonard said.

We got up and trucked along the way they were going. It was hard work. The trees were thick and there were a lot of mosquitoes now and they moved in little black swarms like living clouds. The sun was dipping and the sky was already dark from clouds filled with rain.

It was a slow slog, and finally it began to rain. It was a soft but steady rain. We stayed close to the curve of the lake and only went away from the shoreline for any distance when we had no choice; when the bushes and trees and vines grew thick enough to make a fence. We went wide then, but we always made it back close to shore. We could see the barge had lights on inside the cabin. It was still close to the bank. Finally it came to a place far up from us and drifted over for a moment, then chugged back out into the lake.

"What was that about?" Leonard said.

"Maybe they thought they'd camp there, decided not to."

"Doesn't matter," Leonard said.

We took a breath and drank some water and split another granola bar, which was good. I was so hungry my stomach was starting to gnaw at my insides.

After a few minutes we got our wind back and started onward. A surprised nesting of birds startled by our presence flew up in a burst, causing me to nearly pass a turd.

Before long the barge pulled over again and stopped and the man in the baseball cap came out and secured a line to shore. He went back inside. It was growing darker, and the lights in the barge looked warm and inviting, even if the people inside were as cold-blooded as a snake. Rain had begun to come down like bullets.

I pulled the hood on my slicker close around my face and we eased closer to shore. We could see through the windows, and we could see people in the light. There was hard rock music coming from the barge and Baseball Cap was dancing with the women. The dark-haired woman was holding up the decapitated woman's head as she danced. I glanced at Leonard.

Leonard pulled his knife from its scabbard. "I say we surprise them and kill their asses."

"The women too?"

"I don't see any difference," Leonard said. "You and your chivalry are going to get you killed some day. I don't make one whit of difference in them."

"We could still go for help."

"They'd be gone by the time we come back, and they'll never get what they deserve."

"I'm kind of worried we might get what we don't deserve," I said.

"Here's what I will do," I said. "We make a citizen's arrest."

"What?" Leonard said.

"I'm not going to kill these people, go back to the cabin and go fishing. When I said I'd had enough of death, I meant it."

"I thought we'd kill them, go back to the cabin, get the car and go home. We might stop somewhere for a burger."

"No."

"So, we going to go in and say 'Citizen's Arrest,' hang out with them and a decapitated head hoping some cops show up?"

"I thought we'd surprise them, tie them up, use the barge itself to make our way back to where our cabin is. We can put them inside the cabin, one of us can watch them, and the other can drive out and get the law and bring them back."

"How about this?" Leonard said. "We make a citizen's arrest unless we have to kill them."

"You're opening a door I don't want to open," I said.

"And they might just kick that door open in our faces, brother. Say we do our best not to hurt anyone, outside of kicking their ass a little and tying them up? But if things get a little wonky, I'm going Attila the Hun on them and I expect you to bring the horses."

I thought about that. Leonard was right. They'd motor away and escape. It might not even be their barge. It could be stolen. They could do this again. And they would.

"All right," I said. "We go for the compromise."

"Good," Leonard said.

Behind us we heard a slight crack of someone or something stepping on a branch. We whirled about. A light came on. The light was a little thing fastened to the top of a pistol, and there was a man behind it, and in that instant I realized something obvious. We had only seen one man in the cabin with the women. I guess we logically thought the other was in the shitter or pausing in a back room to consider the nature of the universe, but now I knew we were a couple of dumbasses and our logic had been full of holes.

"Howdy boys," said a voice. That would be Aussie Hat.

I knew then that when the barge pulled over it was because they knew we were after them, had spotted us. Aussie Hat got off at that stop to sneak up on us. And he had done it well. Until that stick cracked, he could have come up behind me, combed my hair and wiped my ass, and I wouldn't have known he was there. He was that good.

Aussie Hat and his pistol pointed us forward and he trailed behind. He led us to the barge and said for us to step on board. Then he called out, "Open up."

Shadows tumbled through the windows and moved along the wooden deck, and the music went away. Baseball Cap opened the door and the light came with him. He and the women stepped out on the barge deck. We all stood in the rain.

"Well, well," said Baseball Cap. "What have we here? Heckle and Jeckle?"

"Told you I saw someone," Aussie Hat said.

"Hey, we're just fishing," I said. "We don't want any trouble."

"Where's your fishing gear?" said Aussie Hat.

It was back on the hill where we had left it when we started following them, but I said, "We ditched it after we got lost. We been trying to find our way out."

"Have you now?" said Aussie Hat.

"Yeah," I said. "We don't mean you guys any harm."

"You know," said Aussie Hat, "I doubt that."

The short-haired blonde said, "Fresh meat."

"Get their knives and canteens, the belt packs," Aussie Hat said.

Baseball Cap took them away from us and gave them to the blonde woman, who took them inside somewhere.

Aussie Hat beckoned us into the cabin. It was tight in there. There was a fold-down table attached to the wall and there was a gap in the wall where it folded up. There were snack foods on it. Beneath the windows were benches. There were a couple of folding chairs on hooks on the wall. There was a door off the little cabin. It was closed. I assumed it would be the bedroom and off of that would be the wheelhouse. The woman’s head was on a silver platter on the table next to a bowl of pretzels.

Baseball Cap removed the platter and head, placed it on the bench, then he put the food away inside the other room, came back and folded the table into the wall, fastened it there with clamps.

“You boys sit down on the other side,” he said.

We sat on the bench there. I couldn’t take my eyes off of that poor woman’s head.

Aussie Hat nodded toward the head and the platter. “If you didn’t know what we were all about and are just lost fishermen, well, now you know something about us.”

“Is that real?” I said.

“Oh come on,” said Aussie Hat. “That was lame.”

“You guys shooting a movie?” I was still working it.

“It may end up starring you guys,” Baseball Cap said.

The blonde woman giggled. Her hair was wet and plastered to her head, and though she was pretty, something about the way she looked at us reminded me of a ferret. The dark-haired woman’s hair looked like a damp helmet.

“Let’s take them outside and shoot them in the head,” said the short-haired blonde. “I want the black one. I want to shoot him.”

Aussie Hat turned off the light attached to the pistol. He sat by the head and let the gun rest on his thigh. I was watching for my moment. I knew if I went after one of them, Leonard would be on the other like a duck on a june bug. But they were watching us intently. Aussie Hat was probably hoping we'd make that move. He looked like he was itching to shoot that pistol.

The barge bobbed in the water and we could hear the wind picking up and the rain was brutal now. Aussie Hat took off his hat and shook the rain off of it and put it back on. He hadn't let go of the pistol in his other hand.

"Good thing you're inside," Aussie Hat said. "You won't get as wet, and you aren't lost anymore. Isn't that good?"

"It's a fucking treat," Leonard said. "If I had some clout, I'd get you guys some kind of Samaritan medal. . . . You better hope the first shot kills me."

"Oh, it will," said Aussie Hat. "And the second will kill him. I'm a good shot."

"He is," said the dark-haired woman. Then to Aussie Hat, "You're not going to let them ruin our fun, are you?"

"Nah," said Aussie Hat. "We got fun coming out of the ass."

"Let's just do them and toss them overboard," Baseball Cap said.

"Can't we have their heads?" said the short-haired blonde. She was watching me carefully, licking her lips. "For target practice. Like the others."

Aussie Hat said to the short-haired blonde, "I don't like the way you're looking at him."

"What do you mean?" she said.

"You look like you want to fuck him."

"I want to fuck him over," she said. "Not fuck him."

Aussie Hat looked at me. “You want to fuck her? I think she wants to fuck you. That’s what I’m getting here.”

“Actually, that was the farthest thing from my mind, and I’m sure from hers. But I was wondering if maybe you had a cup of coffee, some of those little chocolate doughnuts, and then maybe later, I’d settle for a hand job from any one of you. Provided you’re gentle, of course. And just for the record, I like it dry.”

“You’re not getting coffee or doughnuts,” said Baseball Cap.

“So I could still get that hand job?”

“Just shoot him,” said Baseball Cap.

“We don’t have any doughnuts,” said the dark-haired girl. “But we got coffee.”

We all looked at her.

“Not that I’d give them any doughnuts if we had them,” she said. “Or coffee.”

“You hunt humans,” Leonard said. “And like most hunters, it’s not sport at all. There’s nothing fair about it. You catch defenseless women, run them through the woods and shoot them with arrows. That’s some sport. That’s some brave business. That’s shit. That’s what that is.”

“We give them plenty of a head start,” said Aussie Hat.

“Yeah,” Leonard said. “But they got nothing.”

“They got a chance, and that’s more than they deserve,” said Aussie Hat.

“Some chance,” Leonard said.

“They’re whores,” said the man with the pistol.

“Unlike these two upstanding young ladies,” Leonard said.

Aussie Hat lifted the pistol in our direction. I flinched. Leonard didn't even blink.

"The whores we kill," said Baseball Cap, "they're just a waste on society. Spreading disease. They could do better if they wanted. They are at the bottom of the food chain by choice, by laziness."

"You think so?" Leonard said.

"I think so," said Aussie Hat. "We pick ones that are on the downhill slope, ones that never darken the doorway of a church."

"You are one choice dumbass," Leonard said. "Jesus always said, you don't go to church, you get hunted in the woods with a bow and arrow. I think you can find that in the scripture marked Assholio, first chapter, first verse. What do you do, mount their heads like deer?"

"Of course not," Aussie Hat said. "We're not crazy."

Aussie Hat stood up, pointed the gun, said, "We got to tie you up."

"No," Leonard said. "I don't think so."

"You think you get to choose?" said Baseball Cap.

"You got to get me tied up first, and that will be one hell of a fight."

"Then we got to shoot you," said Aussie Hat.

Leonard shrugged. "What's the difference? Shot tied up, or shot untied. I'm not going to make it easy for you. You're not tying me up, at least not without working for it or killing me."

"What about you?" Aussie Hat said to me.

"Me? Oh, I'm with him. I'm not going to let you tie me up. Shoot or fight, that's what you get from me."

"You can fight now," Aussie Hat said.

"Well," I said. "I'd rather not get shot, as I have plans next week, and I don't mind being cooperative to keep from being shot. But not that cooperative."

"Difference is you two might get a chance to live," said Baseball Cap.

"You don't seem like a couple of fair and square boys to me," said Leonard. "Suddenly when you want to tie us up, you're talking chances?"

I thought: Leonard do not antagonize them too much. Do not poke the dragon too hard. But that was like politely asking a starving dog not to eat a greasy pork chop.

"You let me and him go, you'll never catch us in these woods," Leonard said. "You haven't got any chance unless it's with someone doesn't have the strength to run, or experience in the woods. Your idea of sport is breaking a deer's leg, giving it five minutes' head start with a sack over its head. Me and him, we can give you a run for your arrows, we get loose. We'll give you some real sport."

"Just take them out on the deck and shoot them," Baseball Cap said.

"You shoot us," Leonard said, "it'll probably be right here. I don't have to do a goddamn thing you say. I'd rather get shot right here than make it easier for you to clean up the blood out there on the deck."

"You know," said Aussie Hat. "I think he means it."

"Shoot them," said Baseball Cap, "and then we'll clean up the mess."

"Oh, sure," said the blonde. "You know who ends up cleaning up the mess? It won't be you two. It'll be us. Women's work. Think the black one's right. I think you boys don't want to give someone a fair shake. We don't get to hunt. We get the shit jobs and you two have all the fun."

"Life is just full of little disappointments," said Aussie Hat, as he turned and looked at the blonde woman. His voice was so raw I could feel paint peeling off the wall behind me.

The blonde shut up, looked at the floor and tried to grow small. It was as if she realized for the first time she wasn't the one wielding power. Sex could only take you so far. Step on a man's pride, he can be silly. Step on a psycho's pride, and he can go crazy. A man steps on it, that's bad, but a woman steps on it, that's terrible.

"I'm sorry," said the blonde. "I'm just tired."

Aussie Hat kept staring at her, eventually eased his gaze back to us.

"You're not going to shoot them here, I say we take them ashore," said Baseball Cap. "I say we let them run. Won't be any different than any other time. We'll catch them, cut off their heads like all the others. I say we take their balls too, bat them around a bit."

"Hope you got a tow sack on board," Leonard said. "You'll need it for my balls. And maybe some kind of special knot to keep them hemmed up inside. Kind of got a mind of their own."

The dark-haired woman looked at Leonard and smiled. It wasn't a smile that made you want to start skipping through the tulips. It was a bit more the way a cat looks at a mouse it's cornered against a wall. I think she liked thinking about Leonard's balls in a sack.

"I don't know," Aussie Hat said. "Let me think."

For the next few hours I felt sick to my stomach and scared, but I didn't let them see it. I had dealt with bad people before, and some as bad as this, and the thing is, you got to not let them see how frightened you are. It feeds their passion.

After a while, liquor came out and everyone got drunk, except the man with the pistol. And us, of course. Aussie Hat didn't drink, didn't lose focus. Finally, the women went into the back room with Baseball Cap and closed the door. We could hear them in there, going at it. The barge rocked.

Leonard said, "What's the matter with you? Can't get it up? That gun about as much as a dick as you got?"

"You are asking for it, aren't you?" said Aussie Hat.

"They're in there slamming together like hogs in heat, and here you sit."

"You want a bullet in the teeth," Aussie Hat said.

Leonard was trying to pull the ole Uncle Remus Brer Rabbit trick. The one where Brer Fox catches Brer Rabbit, and the rabbit tells him to go on and do whatever he wants, kill him, whatever, but please don't throw him in the briar patch.

Brer Fox hears this, thinks, so, that's the worst thing can be done to that ole rabbit, so I'm going to do it. Brer Fox throws Brer Rabbit into the briar patch, and Brer Rabbit calls out, "Born and raised in the briar patch, Brer Fox. Born and raised." And away went Brer Rabbit, doing the briar patch boogie.

If they were to throw us into the woods and come hunting us, they'd be throwing us into our briar patch. Born and raised in the woods, we were. Born and raised.

Okay. It wasn't exactly like that. We were offering to head into the briar patch and show our skills there, but in a way, it was the same kind of challenge. Don’t shoot us, Bad Guys, as that’s too easy. Make it hard for us, and show us what sportsmen you are. Throw us in the briar patch and see what we got.

“Listen to that meat slapping in there,” Leonard said.

“Don’t worry about my love life,” said Aussie Hat. “I get plenty. We all share.”

“For the record,” Leonard said, “I have not for one iota worried about your pathetic love life.”

Aussie Hat lifted the pistol and pointed it right at Leonard. Leonard didn’t flinch. After a long moment where my heart quit beating, he lowered the gun.

“Just shut up,” said Aussie Hat.

The night crawled along, and after what felt like about three thousand years and a long afternoon, the morning light came through the barge windows and spread over the floor and lay on the woman’s head on the platter. There was blood leakage in the platter, and the blood had the look of congealed strawberry jam. There was a faint odor of decay from the head, like a refrigerator that had been unplugged for a few days with a ham roast in it. Aussie Hat sat beside the head on the bench and placed his left hand on top of it and held the pistol in his right, resting it against his thigh, his unblinking, lizard eyes focused on us.

“Good morning, assholes,” he said, stood up, touched a switch on the wall and turned off the cabin lights.

It was still raining and you could hear the drops falling into the water like plums falling off trees. The man who had spent the night with the women came out looking the way you might think a man would look who had spent the night banging two women. Then the women came out behind him. It was still slightly dark outside.

The man had his baseball cap in his hand and he put it on his head and then went to adjusting his belt. The four of them spent a few moments watching us, like we were monkeys in the zoo. Like a monkey, I wanted to throw shit on them.

“Move us to the spot,” Aussie Hat said to Baseball Cap, then to the blonde: “Make us some coffee.”

The blonde knew she had pushed a little too hard the night before. She tried to sound sweet. “Sure. Them, too?”

“No. Not them, too. What’s with you two cunts and the coffee?”

“I’d like some coffee,” Leonard said. “We both take it black, though Hap here, now and again, likes some artificial sweetener, though he’s picky on which kind.”

“Cream’s all right if you got it,” I said.

“Fuck you,” said Aussie Hat.

“Oh, that’s a wish you won’t fulfill,” Leonard said.

“Depends on the definition,” Aussie Hat said.

Baseball Cap unfastened the mooring line, came back inside, trudged into the bedroom and on through to the wheelhouse. I knew that because we heard a door open on the far end, and shortly thereafter he started the engine. The barge eased away from the shore, chopping at the water, chugging like a large lawn mower.

Through the row of windows across from me I could see the night had lifted and the rain had stopped. An early morning fog was hovering over the water, twisting in amongst the shoreline trees. Within moments the fog that had so quickly arrived started to lift and fade. Big, white birds dipped into the water looking for a fish breakfast. Blue morning shadows formed by the shapes of trees along the lake made patterns on the water. Squirts of apple-red morning poked between thick limbs. The sunlight fled over the water and made it look brightly dyed, and then the red water gradually became yellow as polished gold, and the sunlight rose higher, and all the woods began to glow, the evergreens shiny with rain, sighing in the wind, their bare limbs shedding sun-sparkled drops of water like tears.

I wanted to feel and see and smell it all. If this was going to be my last time in the woods and on the water, I wanted it to be as much on my terms as I could manage; I wanted to go out with the world I loved nestled in my head.

Throw us in the briar patch, assholes. Throw us in the briar patch and let us run.

The barge chugged along for a while, and then around a bend in the river. The trees cleared considerably there. There was a great patch of darkened land where lightning had struck and trees had burned.

The barge churned toward that spot, and we came up against the shore slightly, bouncing the barge back a bit. The blonde woman, trying to get in Aussie Hat's good graces and be as helpful as possible, jumped ashore with the docking line and tied it off. The barge motor coughed a little, there was another bump, and then we were as still as a craft can be on water.

"Get the whore's head?" Aussie Hat said to the dark-haired woman, and motioned us ahead of him and out the door. I thought as soon as we were on the deck of the barge, where the blood would be easy to clean, he might shoot us in the head.

I considered making a leap for it, hit the bank and keep on running, but I didn't. I gambled there were greater opportunities for us, but I've never been a good gambler. Besides, I wasn't going to leave Leonard behind. We ran together, or we went down together.

Aussie Hat waved us on shore with the pistol, and we went. The others came after, except for Baseball Cap. The dark-haired woman carried the head and sat it on a low, charred stump some distance away, then went back to the edge of the water.

Baseball Cap came out carrying two bows and two quivers of arrows. He gave one bow and a quiver to Aussie Hat, handed the blonde the pistol. She held it on us while he swung the quiver into place, threaded several arrows onto the rack on the bow after stringing it.

He turned then and an arrow flew from the bow almost without effort. It hit the dead woman's head and tore so cleanly through it, it didn't even knock it off the stump. They all cheered like a touchdown had been made.

Baseball Cap fired his bow, and the arrow went into one of the eyes, lodged there, deep in her skull. I thought, you don't get much worse than these assholes, and if you do, it would be so bad as to be otherworldly.

Aussie Hat took his pistol back, and handed the dark-haired woman the bow. She notched an arrow and shot at the head. The arrow stuck in the stump just below where the head was mounted.

"That's why we do the hunting," Aussie Hat said.

"Let me," said the blonde. She took the bow from the dark-haired woman and took a shot. She hit the head in the cheek and the head tumbled off the stump and rolled across the damp, blackened ground.

“That was alright,” said Aussie Hat. “But you shoot it right, arrow hits so hard it’ll go right through it, might not even knock it off, it can be such a clean shot. You got the edge of her face. But it was good. It was good.”

“You think so?” she said.

“Sure,” he said. “It was really good. Hey, give me the pistol.”

Baseball Cap gave the pistol to Aussie Hat. I thought, well, this is it for us. Aussie Hat held the bow in his left hand, held the pistol in his right hand. He said, “Lois.”

The blonde looked at him and he shot her square between the eyes, spraying blood on Baseball Cap. She hit the ground so fast it was as if her legs dissolved.

“What the hell?” said Baseball Cap, his face was covered in the blonde’s blood.

“She talked back to me last night,” Aussie Hat said. “I couldn’t let it go.”

“Jesus, Cameron,” Baseball Cap said. “Jesus.”

“Churchgoing pussy is a dime a dozen, same as the whores we kill.”

Okay. Convictions of any kind were out the window. Jesus had been tossed overboard. I could feel my nerves tightening inside my body like the strings on a well-tuned harp.

The dark-haired woman stood extremely still, as if she might be able to disappear if she didn’t move.

Aussie Hat laughed. “You can relax, Mavis. You’re all right. Nothing’s going to happen to you.”

“I can’t believe you did that, man,” Baseball Cap said. “Lois was all right. Damn, I liked her."

"She had a mouth on her," Aussie Hat said, and gave Baseball Cap a long study.

"All right," said Baseball Cap. "You're right. She talked too much about the wrong things."

"Woman ought to keep her mouth full of dick to keep from talking, way I see it," Aussie Hat said. "You agree with that Mavis?"

Mavis nodded.

"Good, cause your mouth is going to be full of my dick a long time tonight."

Baseball Cap said, "What about them?"

"It's going to go bad for them. I was thinking we could cut Lois's head off and put it on the stump, do the same to these boys, have a few hours of target practice, but you know what? I think we let them go, see what kind of sport they are. But I'm not giving them an hour. I'm giving them fifteen minutes because they're such smart-mouth boys. I don't like smart-mouths. Ask Lois. Well, never mind on that."

I was hoping Leonard wouldn't say anything at just that moment, wired as Aussie Hat was, and thankfully he didn't.

Aussie Hat held one of the arrows up. "See that point," he said. "That's real fine steel. That point, I've shot it through old refrigerator doors. Went right through it and ripped the feathers off the shaft."

"Yeah, but we ain't no refrigerators," Leonard said.

"No, you are not," said Aussie Hat.

"Giving us less time, why not make it a little more sporting?" Leonard said. "Give us our knives and canteens back."

"You're not going to live long enough to need a drink," Aussie Hat said. "Shit, give them their knives, not that it'll matter. No canteens."

Mavis, wanting to make an impression, hurried to get them.

No one said anything until Mavis came back with the knives. She handed them to us, and then looked at Lois's body on the ground. A fly had lit on one of Lois's blue eyeballs. Mavis trembled ever so slightly.

"I knew her for years," Mavis said. It was something that just slipped out.

"Well, you won't be knowing her next year," Aussie Hat said. "You got any complaints you want to lodge, baby?"

Mavis shook her head.

"So, you got no problem with holding down the barge and not going hunting? Am I right?"

Mavis nodded.

"Am I right?" Aussie Hat said again.

"Yes," Mavis said. "You're right."

"Thought I was. All right, then. Fifteen minutes for our Daniel Boones here, and then we pincushion their asses. See that path there? You are clear to begin there, and you get a fifteen-minute start. After that, hell's coming."

"So far we're still standing here without a countdown," Leonard said, "and I can smell your rotten breath from over here. I'd like to move on, if you mean it."

I saw Aussie Hat's eye twitch.

Leonard could do that to a person.

"Go now," Aussie Hat said. "Or I'm going to kill you both right here.

Mavis, mark the time."

Mavis grabbed Baseball Cap's wrist, lifted his hand and looked at his watch. Baseball Cap let her. His face looked as if it were full of Novocain. I believe he was still thinking about Lois. Even he had been surprised at that.

"Starting . . . now," she said, and dropped his arm.

We started running across the burnt clearing and into the woods where there was a wide deer trail. It went straight for a while and we went straight with it. When the trail bent around behind some trees and we were concealed by them, we darted into the first slightly clear spot we saw in the underbrush, hunkering low, crawling through gaps in the greenery, raising up when we could, running hard when we were able to.

The sun was full up now, and we wanted to go in the direction from which it had risen—East. That led back across the water, back to our crummy rental cabin and to our ride. We could drive out of the deep woods then, down the red-clay road that led to the highway.

We came to a small run of water that wetted down our boots and jumped on the other side of it and ran along the edge of it. It was down below the main trail bordered by brush and trees and wads of vines.

The assholes had actually waited fifteen minutes, or so I estimated, because we could hear them running along the main trail. They hadn't figured out we had gone off the path, thinking maybe we were complete rubes. Soon they would realize our footprints weren't showing up, and they'd backtrack and find where we had dodged into the thicket.

On the other side of the thin run of water was another hill, but we didn’t go up that. If they were to come through the brush fast as we had, along the path we had made, they would see us up on that hill, and with their weapons they wouldn’t have to be close to get a bead on us. We continued along the edge of the little creek, leaving tracks, but too much in a hurry to worry about it. Finally the hill sloped off sharply, and there was a rent in the trees to the left of the creek. That’s the way we went, along another animal trail, this one much smaller than the first.

We eventually halted long enough to see if we could hear them coming. We couldn’t. They could have been sneaking, but I didn’t think so. They were confident and had been charging about like bulldozers. Not being able to hear them meant they had gone the wrong way, or had paused and were trying to figure which way we had taken. If they had any hunting skills at all, that wouldn’t take long.

“We ought to fix ourselves up,” I said.

“You got an idea?”

I found a small tree and bent it over until it snapped. Where the little tree had broken off there was a somewhat sharp point. I edged this keener and shaper with my knife, trimmed the small limbs off until I had a spear of about seven feet long and about half as thick as my wrist. Leonard did the same with another young, thin tree. When we had spears made, we started moving again. I was beginning to feel thirsty, and I might have been hungry as well. I couldn’t tell if the gnawing in my stomach was a need for food and water, or the churning acid of fear.

They found the way we went, because we could hear them back there. Pretty soon they would cross the creek and be on the path we were running along, and they could come quickly too, and they could shoot at us with the arrows or the pistol, and they could do it from a distance.

Without really talking about it, we found a path between two great oaks, and we took that. It didn’t go far before the trees were entwining and it was hard to go that way, but by then there was no going back. We kept at it and fought our way through. After that we came to the swamp we had crossed before and started wading into it. It wasn’t deep, but as before, it was a slow slog. Snakes were everywhere, though I only saw one moccasin; the rest of them were water snakes of one sort or another. The water was a scummy-silver in the sunlight.

Through the trees to our right was a slope, and down the slope were weeping willows, and between them you could see the lake. The slope actually rose up like a rim at first, and then where the water was high it flowed over a little in a shiny waterfall, more of a trickle really.

About halfway across the swamp, with thicker woods in sight, an arrow passed over my shoulder with a sound like someone sucking in their breath real hard. It missed me by less than an inch.

I glanced back, and there they were, stringing arrows and sending them at us. One clipped the top of Leonard’s ear, shooting up a little streak of blood. Leonard veered right and yelled for me to follow. To stay where it was swampy was suicide. They could stand where they were for a long time and have us in range as we mucked along.

Toward the slope we went. Another arrow slipped between us, close enough had I been an inch thicker I’d have been wearing it. We jumped down the slope, still holding our spears, slipping and sliding on our asses, coming to the willows below. We both laid on our backs and let the wet slope of wild grass coast us down. I went right through a split in willow trees and was jettisoned off into the lake with a splash as loud as if an anvil had been dropped from an airplane. I tried to cling to the spear, but lost it. Leonard was hung up between willows by his spear, the ends of it sticking out on either side of his body. He turned it so it was straight, pushed off, and was sailed out into the water near me.

By this time I realized the water along the bank was shallow because of sand deposits, and I had recovered my spear. When I looked up, the two of them were at the top of the slope. I could see them through the trees.

Aussie Hat was stringing his bow, and about that time Baseball Cap, who was standing too close to the edge, slipped, and down the slope he went on his belly, losing his bow and the arrow. I watched as he sailed perfectly between the trees I had gone through, and then he shot up and out, like he was doing an impression of Superman. I stuck the butt of my homemade spear in the sand, buried it deep, and lined that point up with him, the way a Masai warrior might do on dry land with a leaping lion.

He came down on top of the spear point with a hard impact. I could hear the thud of the spear, then a ripping sound. Baseball Cap screamed and the force of his hit rocked the spear backwards and I lost my grip and he went sailing over my shoulder, speared on my crude lance.

Leonard had managed his way back to shore, where he picked up the bow Baseball Cap had dropped. The bow had three arrows in the special rack on the side of the bow. Leonard pulled one into position as an arrow whizzed past him, lifted it and shot. His aim was terrible. He might as well have been trying to hit a gnat on the other side of the swamp.

“Hap,” he said, and gave me a look of frustration.

I half-walked and half-swam to him and took the bow and pulled another arrow in place, just as Aussie Hat, who had now dropped to one knee on the edge of the swampy slope, was aiming down at us. I don't know how to explain it, but I have an unerring aim with most weapons, rifles, shotguns, handguns, and from past experience, I knew I wasn't any slouch with a bow and arrow either. I pulled the arrow back, the bow cord groaning as I did, and let it go. The arrow flew straight with a whistling sound. Aussie Hat moved to one side, so it didn't hit him in the throat like I had hoped. Still, he took the shot in the shoulder, grunted, dropped his bow and fell back out of sight. His bow tumbled down the hill and caught up amidst the willows. We waited to see if he would show with the pistol, but he didn't. A few minutes later his hat came floating down on the water slide and hung up in some brush growing out of the side of the slope.

Edging my way along the bank, I found a place where I could get behind some trees. I strung another arrow from the bow rack, crouched, peeked between the trees and waited, but Aussie Hat didn't poke his head over the slope.

I looked back in the water. Leonard had gotten the spear I had stuck in Baseball Cap, and he was using it to guide the body to shore. Except Baseball Cap wasn't dead. He was stuck like a fly on a display pin. He groaned slightly and blood ran out of his mouth. His cap floated between his legs.

Leonard got hold of his head, pushed him under water and held him there. After a glance up the slope, assuring myself Aussie Hat wasn't in sight, I slipped back down and into the lake, and partly swam and partly walked over to them.

"Leonard," I said. "Let him go."

"He's going to die anyway."

"Let him die then. Let him go."

"You're no fun."

Leonard let him go and dragged him up so that his head and shoulders were on the bank. He stuck his arms through roots growing out from the bank, and they held him in place. The back end of the spear stood straight up out of his chest.

Baseball Cap, minus the cap, coughed blood and water. I eased over to him. He looked up at me.

"You're the only ones ever got away," he said.

"Told you we would," Leonard said.

"Goddamn it," he said. "Lois. She was all right."

He gulped big and was still, his eyes open and unmoving.

"One down," Leonard said.

Leonard and I went wide of each other, made our way up the slope. It was a hard go, but we made it by using the willows and wet roots sticking out of the grass on the incline. I had taken the quiver from Baseball Cap's body. It was one of those things where the arrows are well-fastened in them and are not easily able to fall out. They had survived his slide and his dunking in the water, not to mention a spear through him where the point came out of his back and moved the quiver to one side. I gave Leonard three arrows, and I took three. Leonard found Aussie Hat's bow, and he took that. Now we were both armed. Leonard couldn't have hit an elephant in the ass with one of those arrows, if he was standing twenty feet away, but it was something.

When I got to the top of the slope, Aussie Hat wasn't there, nor did he seem to be lying in hiding. He didn't take a shot at us from concealment.

It made sense to us that he would try and go back toward the barge. He was wounded now and it seemed smarter of him to try and escape than to stay with the hunt. But a guy like that, you couldn't be sure.

Wet to the bone, and sliming with the swamp and the lake, we stayed apart, but within eyeshot, and made our way back the way we had come. When we got out of the swamp water, we found blood in the brush and against trees. Aussie Hat was making his way back the way we had come. When we came to the last true trail we were on, we found him lying in the center of it with his back against a tree and the pistol clutched in his hand, his hand on his right thigh. The arrow I had shot was sticking out of his shoulder.

It was obvious he was dead.

"Bleed out," Leonard said.

I took the pistol. We decided we'd go back to the barge and get Mavis, and use the barge to make our way around to the part of the lake where our cabin was, but when we got to where the barge had been, it was gone. Lois's body was gone. The head of the poor murdered woman was still there.

Without any recourse, we started back through the woods, past Aussie Hat's body and on through the swamp. Eventually we passed the woman's headless body. It took some time, but finally we came to the cabin and our car. We didn't get anything out of the cabin. Leonard had the keys with him. I put the pistol on the seat between us, and Leonard, without a word, drove us out of there.

Not a whole lot to tell after that, but I will say this. We were jailed for three days. They wouldn't let us go and show them where the bodies were, and they didn't believe our story. It was obvious they thought if anyone was dead out there, it was because we killed them. They were partly right.

Finally they let Leonard call Marvin, our cop friend in LaBorde, and some words were exchanged between the chief there and Marvin. We spent another night in the cell, Leonard on one cot, me in the other across the way.

Silver lining was they gave us plenty of water to drink, and they were serving macaroni and cheese again for the third time in a row. For lunches we had been having peanut butter sandwiches with water, but it wasn't perfect. What kind of heathen serves a peanut butter sandwich without a glass of milk?

Marvin came, and at first that didn't help much, but finally he talked them into letting us lead them to the bodies. We showed them the woman's body first, and in that short time it had already started to decompose in the heat and as the two men had predicted, animals had been at it. It had been pulled about ten yards from where we had seen it last, and it was ripped up good. Ants and maggots had done their work as well. We took them on a guided tour that ended up with the bodies of the men, Baseball Cap still floating partially in the lake, and Aussie Hat still holding down his spot on the animal trail. The barge and Mavis, and Lois's body, were still gone, of course.

We described Lois and Mavis to the cops. Three days later, they found Lois's body on the barge, which had been abandoned, tied to the shore in a narrow cove off the lake, about a mile from where it had been the last time we saw it.

They found the skulls of other women at the spot where the barge had been parked. All the skulls had arrow or bullet holes in them. They finally took our detailed statement and let us go home.

To shorten it up, the two men's bodies were identified. Both had been in prison, and though there had been suspicions about them before for other crimes, none of those suspicions had anything to do with missing women. Nothing had been proved, but much had been considered.

Lois was discovered to have been a hard worker in the medical profession, a party girl who liked to run with a rough crowd, or so her co-workers said. No one really claimed to be her friend, but her penchant for men on the bad side was well known. And though the cops were certain once they found Lois it would lead to them finding Mavis, none of the people Lois worked with had heard of anyone named Mavis. In spite of her party girl persona, no one could believe Lois would be involved in what she was involved in. Mavis went unfound.

I checked six months ago and they still hadn't found her. I hope they do, but I have this odd and unfounded feeling they may not. I figure soon as those two men traveled down that trail, she had dragged Lois out of there as a sign of respect, and then sailed away, severing ties with the men because she had realized that she, same as Lois, was expendable, nothing more than a warm body to pass the time with.

Yet, she wasn't one of life's innocents. She may have taken Lois's body away from there, but I had seen her dance with a dead woman's skull, and didn't have one ounce of sympathy for her. I hoped she was somewhere in a dark room hanging from a rope with a turned-over chair at her feet.

Me and Leonard got lectures from the cops, but in the end we got a nice write-up as heroes in a few newspapers. Our involvement in the whole mess was ruled as two citizens trying to find out who the killers of the young woman were, and it was more importantly decided those two who had died at our hands were killed in self-defense, which was true enough.

The woman we had come upon, the dying lady, had been named Sally Ernst. She had a daughter. I wondered how the kid was doing.

So far, neither me nor Leonard have talked about going fishing again.

Cold Cotton

one

“You know I’ll love you, no matter what,” Brett said, “but I think maybe you ought to get something.”

“Something?” I said.

We were lying in bed. I had just made an attempt to make love to my wife and had failed. It was starting to be a regular thing. I had the urge, and just looking at her always warmed me up, but now my mind warmed, but the tool for the job didn’t.

“You aren’t a spring chicken anymore,” Brett said.

“But we aren’t that old, either,” I said.

“I know I’m not,” Brett said, “but we’re talking about you.”

“Oh, that’s nice.”

“Okay, here’s the thing. You can’t get the sock to fill up, you can always do other things.”

“I’m all for that,” I said, “and we already do other things, but what’s the end game for me?”

“Yeah, I guess it ought to be good for you too.”

“Ha, ha.”

“All I’m asking is you go see your doctor, ask him about it.”

“Don’t think I need pills.”

“You can be sure with a checkup.”

"What's he going to ask me do, get a hard-on in his office, jack me off? I don't think so. It's all guesswork."

"Right now, it's not any kind of work."

I turned on my side and looked at her. She showed me a Bugs Bunny grin.

"Love you," she said.

Who would have thought me worrying about my erection problem was going to lead to murder?

two

“I think I’m okay, just tired,” I said.

I was in the doctor’s office and he had me sitting on the end of one of those tables they have, a paper cover stretched over it. I was only wearing my shorts and socks, as he’d given me an overall exam. I noticed one of my socks had a hole where the big toe goes.

“You’re okay, but you can’t get it up?” Doctor Sylvan asked.

“I haven’t been able to get it up lately. It’s a phase.”

“How long is lately?”

“I don’t know, couple months.”

“You are older, but you know, we can fix that.”

“You can make me young again?”

“Very funny. All the king’s horses, and all the king’s men, they couldn’t put your ass together again.”

“You mean Viagra?”

“Perhaps. You know, Hap, been your doctor a long time, and we’re close. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve had my finger up your ass feeling your prostate—”

“Always my favorite part of an exam,” I said.

“And mine. You are about as affable as anyone I know, a little smart-mouthed, but considering I have that disease, I let that go. Thing is, though, there’s rumors all over town about you and Leonard.”

“About our clandestine sexual encounters in the men’s restroom at the bus station?"

"No. About how maybe you two have done some things that are, shall we say, on the dark side."

"Rumors. Said it yourself."

"Lot of rumors, and some from good sources, and listen here, any of what I've heard is true, you're doing what a lot of us would like to do."

"Really?"

"I too would love to fuck sheep, but, you know, I have to be careful, being a doctor."

"Oh, fuck you."

"Look. Not kidding. I know you and Leonard have had your moments with miscreants. I tend to believe those stories. Some of the scars you got, I didn't sew those up, and some of the work looks like it might have been done by a veterinarian."

"Their work looks different?"

"Not so much, but I can spot a different kind of stitch, also, some of those scars you got, they look to me to have been from knives, and gunshots."

"I've been in the hospital for being stabbed, Doc. You know that. You were there."

"Uh-huh, but a lot of those wounds, don't remember those."

"I was out of town. I live a clumsy life."

"Here's what I'm getting at, Hap. I'm all for giving you a pill that will turn your pecker into a Zeppelin, but I'm not eager to give out things like that if I think there might be another reason."

"You're buying that whole thing about me being tired?"

"Nope. You look pretty perky to me, and you're in good health for someone your age."

"I think Mickey Mantle said if he knew he was going to live this long he'd taken better care of himself."

"What I'm going to suggest is you see a therapist."

"A therapist? What the hell for?"

"If, and I say if, you have done what I think you've done, you might ought to talk to someone. Things like I think you might have done, and we'll say it in code, killing a lot of fucking people, might build on your conscience. This tough guy thing, I don't buy it."

"I'm not really trying to sell that image. And by the way, that wasn't code."

"No?"

"No."

"Gonna give you a name. See her a couple times, and there doesn't seem to be something under the surface, we'll talk about Viagra. Thing is, though, if it is something other than needing lead in your pencil, and this other stuff is causing it, it's probably affecting you in other ways as well."

He leaned over and tapped my head with his finger.

"Might be a lot of stuff in there you're dealing with and you just don't know it. Little therapy might help you do more than get a stiff one back."

"I don't know Doc."

"I'll go get her card."

three

The name on the card was Carol Cotton.

I sat out in the car in front of the doctor's office for a few minutes and looked at the card and thought about things. I could go see her, spend money I didn't want to spend, and really, what could she tell me that I didn't actually already know?

I had killed a lot of people.

I'm mixed on the whole idea of therapy. I think it's more of an art than a science, and I felt like I would be a kind of art project. Still, I knew of people therapists had helped, but I wasn't sure I was one of those it would do much for. As for those people who went to see them because they had been named after a successful father, and just couldn't live up to the name, or some such problem, fuck it. Get over yourself.

I had some real shit in my lunch pail.

I had done my killing in self-defense, and in some cases for justice. Saying that was the way I made myself feel better about it, but all of it haunted me from time to time, though I had learned as of late to deal with it better. It didn't quite settle the reptilian stirrings and the dark red memories at the back of my brain.

Recently, I had died and come back, gone way down there in the big deep dark, and had resurfaced, seeming whole, and feeling whole for quite some time. Then the deep dark rose up again.

That was the problem. I knew that as I sat there in my car in front of the doctor's office and wondered how I could explain that to anyone who had not been there. Leonard had been there, and talking to him helped. Both of us had been close to death a number of times, but the thing about Leonard was when something was over with, it was over for him. Oh, I can't say I know what all went on deep down in his brain, what memories he carried from being in a war, and what memories he carried since we had been friends, but whatever they were, he could tote that water better than me.

How do you tell those things to a shrink, let them in on your innermost thoughts? Tell them you have killed and nearly been killed, and that things would be fine for long periods of time, and then one day you can't get it up because you are riding the nightmares while solid awake. How do you do that?

I decided I couldn't.

I drove home.

four

Me and Brett had finished up a light dinner of salad and iced tea, and were about to sit on the couch and snuggle and watch television with bowls of popcorn, when my cell phone rang.

I picked it up and went into the living room and sat on the couch.

It was my doctor.

“Did you call her?” he asked.

“Who?”

“Don’t play games with me, Hap. You know who. Carol Cotton.”

“Are you minding my business after your business hours?”

“I am. I contacted her, didn’t tell her a damn thing about what your problem might be, didn’t mention the rumors, but told her you might call and set up an appointment.”

“That is nosey of you,” I said.

“I told her you’re a smartass.”

“So are you.”

“Yeah, but I wasn’t recommending me, I was recommending you.”

“I thought about it, but I didn’t call her.”

“You should. She’s good. I had a time or two when I talked with her.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I got a few war memories.”

“It helped?”

“It did. It’s not like a headache, you go in and take one session like you take an aspirin and the headache quits. But it helps."

I listened to the microwave humming in the kitchen as Brett popped corn. I turned my head and watched her move about, filling our tea glasses up while the popcorn popped.

"You still there, Hap?"

"Yeah. Thinking. I hear you. I'm not miserable, but I'm not good either," I said.

"Call her."

Brett came into the living room as I clicked off the phone. She was carrying two bags of popped microwave corn. She gave me one, sat the other on the coffee table. She went back into the kitchen and came back with two glasses of iced tea. She placed them on the coffee table, sat down and tore open her bag of corn. The aroma of it filled the air, and the memory of trips to the theater in Marvel Creek filled my head, then faded away.

"Anything important?" Brett asked.

"The doctor. He gave me a card today. A shrink."

"Oh. How do you feel about that?"

"I don't know. I mean, do I tell a stranger about what I've done, what we've all done, and let her ride around with the guilt of being my doctor and not being able to say a thing about it to the law, and then me worry she might anyway? I don't know."

"Draw a line."

"What?"

"Decide you will tell only so much, and don't tell the stuff like that. Hint at it maybe. I don't know, but don't tell it all."

"Wouldn't that go against what I'd be trying to accomplish?"

"It could. Hell, Hap. I don't know. But I can tell you're aren't quite yourself, and I'm not just talking about sex. Doctor says you seem fine physically, then it might be in your head. You might need to get it out, or learn to find some place comfortable inside your head to put it, some way of dealing with it."

"I'll think it over," I said.

We watched an old silent film on a movie classics channel, *The General* with Buster Keaton.

I laughed a lot. Maybe a little too loudly.

five

I didn’t call Carol Cotton after all, but she called me two days later.

I was sitting at the kitchen table, sipping coffee, reading the *New York Times* headlines on my cell phone, when it buzzed and I answered.

After she introduced herself, I said, “I thought I was supposed to call you? I wasn’t sure I was going to.”

“Understand,” she said. She had a nice voice, and I couldn’t help but imagine that she was lying in bed as she called, nude, nice-looking. For all I knew, she was seventy-five years old, sitting on the toilet working out a big one, and that gave her the throaty sound, but I liked the other idea better. Of course, even if my gal let me date, I probably couldn’t get it up with a rope and a pulley.

“I’m not sure I need a doctor,” I said.

“That’s up to you, and frankly, it’s not why I called.”

“What else could you be calling for?”

“You’re a private investigator, right?”

“I work for an agency and I’m private, and I investigate with my boss, Brett Sawyer, and my brother, Leonard Pine, so I guess I am.”

It was still hard for me to think of myself as a private eye. In my mind, real private eyes, they actually knew something about investigation. All I knew was persistence. Also, unlike private eyes in stories, I didn’t drink or smoke cigarettes or chase women. I had the woman I wanted. I looked at the supplies and fantasized about it now and again, but I wasn’t shopping.

“That’s why I’m calling. I need your services. Maybe we could find a way to trade our expertise. If not, I can just pay you. But I need someone.”

“To do what?”

“To make sure I don’t get killed.”

six

"Who's trying to kill her?" Leonard asked.

Me and Leonard and Brett were at the office. They were seated. I was standing at the big glass window that looked out at the parking lot, two stories down.

"She doesn't know," I said.

"But someone is?" Leonard said.

"That's what she wants us to find out," Brett said.

I had already told Brett about the call, and what Carol Cotton had told me.

"We go over there around eleven, have an early lunch at her house, and she's going to give us the whole nine yards and a fat retainer," I said. "She has had threats and she doesn't know who it is. She said she had a whole roster of patients, some of which might want her dead, simply because they are disturbed, or have somehow latched onto her in an unhealthy way."

"Disturbed means crazy motherfuckers, right?" Leonard said.

"It just might," I said. "But she doesn't know it's a patient. That's merely a possibility. She may just want a bodyguard for a while. It could be nothing. I mean, the threats might be real, but then they might be idle. She thinks that's possible too, but reasonably, she wants that sorted out. She said someone killed her cat."

"That's low," Leonard said.

“Could be it merely died, she said, but she thinks it was poisoned. She admitted that because the cat is dead and the threats are real, she decided they were connected, but they might not be.”

Brett glanced at the clock on the wall.

“We better saddle up,” she said. “Hope she’s serving something good. I’m hungry.”

seven

Carol Cotton's therapy business looked to be booming. Had to be. She lived behind a high wall with an electronic gate. When I leaned out of my open window and told the speaker who it was, the gate snapped open instantly, and I drove us inside.

First thing we saw was a very nice three-story house only a little smaller than Buckingham Palace, but maybe with a better lawn.

We drove up the winding drive that curled around to the back of the house and parked next to a tennis court. On the other side of the court there was a pool house about the size of the house where Brett and I lived, and there was a large heart-shaped pool near the tennis court full of bright blue water. Between the pool house and the pool there was a gazebo with a table and chairs inside, a curtain of netting around the gazebo to keep out flies and mosquitoes.

Inside the netting a woman sat at a table. She had on a white pool robe and as we parked and got out of the car, she stood up, came through the netting and started walking around the pool to meet us.

As she walked toward us, the robe swung open and I saw she was wearing a two-piece bathing suit, and both of those pieces were having quite the workout. The bottoms were light on material and hid only the main goodie. The top barely contained her breasts the way a thimble contains a cantaloupe. Her hair was short and black and shaped her face beautifully. She had tanned skin and long legs. Perhaps there is a god after all.

"That can't be her," Brett said. "She looks to be in her twenties."

"Maybe she is real smart and got through college quick-like," I said.

"Has she cured your problem already?" Brett said.

"Very funny, dear."

As she got closer, she pulled the robe together and tied it with the cloth belt. Woman like that could make a eunuch grow balls.

"Pardon me for the informality," the woman said, extending her hand to Brett. "I let the time get away from me."

She and Brett exchanged names, and she was in fact Dr. Carol Cotton. She shook hands with me and Leonard. She had long fingers, warm to the touch, that wrapped around my hand like a sweet little spider.

"If you would like, you can wait under the gazebo and I'll dress and be right back out." I will say this, she didn't have that nice throaty voice I had heard on the phone, but it wasn't bad.

We agreed it was fine that we would wait for her. She sashayed to the main house and we trucked on out to the gazebo.

Inside the netting, Brett said, "She let the time get away from her? Shit. I think she just wanted to show off the merchandise."

"It is nice merchandise," I said.

"You think you aren't getting any now," Brett said, "keep at it."

Leonard said, "How about them Mets?"

"She isn't what I expected," Brett said. "I've decided you don't need therapy. Not with her, anyway. I had in mind someone like Doctor Ruth."

"She's dead," I said.

"No. It just seems that way."

Leonard said, "Aren't we here about something else other than Hap's pecker? Threats?"

"She doesn't look all that scared to me," Brett said. "Sitting out here in her underwear."

"That's a high-priced bathing suit," I said.

"How would she have felt had I worn mine to this meeting," Brett said.

"Jealous," I said.

"Oh, you are winning back some points," Brett said.

It was then that Dr. Cotton came out of the main house and headed toward us. She had put on jeans and a white tee-shirt and was still wearing the pool shoes.

When she pushed aside the netting and stepped into the gazebo, she wore a big smile but no bra; she bounced under the shirt. This was either a woman comfortable in her own skin, or something of an exhibitionist.

"Thanks for coming," she said. "Linda is bringing out lunch."

Linda was a short, stocky Mexican lady whose birth name was probably not Linda. She came out with a younger woman who looked like a younger version of her, minus the stocky. She was cute and had a nervous smile, and like Linda, she had a tray with food on it. She said her name was Mindy.

The two women looked at Dr. Cotton, both with expressions that were hard to read, except to say they were uncomfortable.

"Thanks so much, ladies," Dr. Cotton said.

The women put the trays on the table and we thanked them and they smiled.

"They are so sweet," Dr. Cotton said.

The sweet ladies stepped off quickly and went into the house while Dr. Cotton told us about how much she liked tennis and swimming, and then from the house a woman dressed in jeans and a loose, blue top, blonde hair swinging around her shoulders, was walking fast toward us.

Leonard had just picked up a finger sandwich when the woman came through the netting carrying a tote bag. She looked at Dr. Cotton, and said, “Katherine. Sugar Muffin. You know better than this.”

Dr. Cotton, a.k.a. Katherine, giggled, got up and nodded at us, walked by and touched my face with the back of her hand, and then she was through the netting and heading toward the house.

The blonde lady, who was a fine-looking woman herself, probably in her forties, said, “So sorry. You might say that’s one of my patients. I’m Dr. Cotton.”

eight

"Does this mean we're still having brunch," Leonard said. "I'm damn sure hungry."

The real Dr. Cotton laughed, and sat down. "Of course. That woman is my niece as well as a patient. It's a long story. She was supposed to be in her room. She isn't really sick, she just has . . . well, a need to be noticed."

"Don't we all?" Brett said.

"Not like her. She has to be the constant center of attention. I probably shouldn't tell you much about her condition, but, since she's my niece, and not really an official patient, I can say it. She's sexually dysfunctional, or what they used to call an exhibitionist with nymphomaniac tendencies."

"Is that a bad thing?" I said. "I mean, it sounds functional."

Brett slapped me on the shoulder with the back of her hand.

"Don't mind him," Brett said. "I rescued him from a wolf den, where he was raised."

The doctor laughed, and she had an even throatier voice than on the phone; it seemed to come from someplace dark but sweetly nasty. "I'm really more of a caretaker, and I am her therapist as well, but not in an official way. It's personal, and I'm aware that I have limitations when I'm dealing with my own family. She has an official therapist for that."

"Is it helping?" Brett asked.

"Sometimes you don't know until you do know," Doctor Cotton said.

"I know that sounds vague, but that's how it works."

Leonard was eating another sandwich when Carol said, "Go ahead. Dig in."

We ate and drank ice tea for a bit, and then I said, "Doctor. Seems to me you're playing it pretty loose here if you're being threatened."

"The wall around the house is reasonably high, and there are cameras and alarms. So, I don't know there's much more I can do as far as normal security. That's why I want to hire your agency."

She said that like we were part of some big network of investigators.

"Tell us about the threats," Leonard said. He had moved onto the cookies by this time. He ate one delicately, nibbling around the edges. Had it been a vanilla cookie, especially a vanilla wafer, he'd have been all over it like a termite on rotten wood.

"I have my office here, and I've decided to put my practice on hold for the time being—briefly, I hope. I have inherited money, so that's not the problem, but wanting to get back to my patients is, but right now I'm scared to let anyone in that isn't vouched for. Doctor Sylvan was your voucher. But frankly, I'm just being cautious. I don't think it has anything to do with my patients. I don't have any with violent tendencies, nor have I ever felt any of them pose a threat. What happened was I began to receive things in the mail. . . . A dead rat in box. A letter with a photo of my face attached to a nude foldout from some men's magazine. And then it got worse. Notes made from letters cut from magazines or newspapers, very crude notes saying what they wanted to do to me."

"You have them?" Brett said.

Doctor Cotton picked up the tote bag and rummaged through it and came out with a fist full of letters. She handed them to Brett. They were all copies.

“Where are the originals?” Brett asked.

“Police. I went to them first.”

“Wise idea,” Brett said, and she began splitting up the notes, handing me and Leonard a few. “They didn’t find prints, anything like that?”

“Nothing,” Doctor Cotton said.

I looked at the notes. They were all vulgar and said things about what they’d like to do with her, and maybe they were sexual, and maybe they were just mean, and maybe they were lots of things I couldn’t figure, but one thing was certain, they were indeed threating. Some had photos taken of Doctor Cotton in public, and they had arrows drawn through her body, and one spelled out how the note maker would like to cut Doctor Cotton’s head off and shove it up her ass, and how there was a way to do that if the ass was cut open wide enough. It was more than a prank, that was sure. Were they meant merely to unsettle Doctor Cotton? Maybe, but she was wise to take them seriously.

“When did you get the last one?” Brett said.

“Yesterday,” she said.

Doctor Cotton leaned over her bag and came out with one last note, as if it were the saved pièce de résistance, and handed it to Brett. “I copied it, and had it sent to the police as well.”

It was a note like the others, only it had a photo stapled to it. It wasn’t a very good photo, but it was of the area where we now were. It had been taken at night, and as I said, not a good photo, but clear enough to recognize the location. Someone had been inside the walls.

"Damn, girl," Brett said. "And what did the police say about this one?"

"They came in, took a look, and they have a patrol car drive by, but that's it. Something to do with their budget."

"Yeah, chief before Marvin Hanson, who's there now, spent all their money on riot gear, as if that's our big problem here in LaBorde," I said. "They even have a military assault vehicle. I think it did get used once to take everyone at the cop shop to Dairy Queen for ice cream. All that money was eaten up for stuff like that, you know, but not real police work."

"All I know," Doctor Cotton said, "is I'm scared. I have a gun in this bag. I carry it in my purse when I go out, and frankly, I rarely go out. I have it on me at all times. And I hate guns. I've become paranoid."

"Being paranoid don't mean they ain't out to get you," Leonard said.

"Popular therapy joke, actually," she said. "What I figured is maybe you could find out who this is, and in the meantime, give me some protection. I can pay whatever you require."

"You know," Leonard said, "I don't want to be a jackass about this, but did you consider maybe your niece?"

"I knew that might be your thought. Police had the same one. But she's harmless. I love her, and she loves me. I take care of her since my sister couldn't. She became very ill, and then died."

"All right," Leonard said, but like me, I knew he was thinking just because you don't think a person is dangerous or incapable of a thing, didn't mean they weren't dangerous and capable. But, on the other hand, the doctor struck me as someone who knew her business.

"What we can do," Brett said, "is start by giving you a bodyguard, and in the meantime, we can see if we can figure out what's what."

"I still don't know why the police couldn't do it," Doctor Cotton said. "Budget or no budget."

"Because they have a number of crimes to attend to, bureaucracy, and we don't," Brett said. "We can devote pretty much full time to it."

"Thing I figure," Leonard said, "is I'll stick around first, as a bodyguard, and I'll need to look through the house, get the lay of the land, that sort of thing."

"Of course," Doctor Cotton said.

"I will need a couple boxes of vanilla wafers."

"We'll provide those," I said.

"You know, I think I have a box, for banana pudding," Doctor Cotton said.

"If I wasn't gay," Leonard said, "you'd be the woman of my dreams."

nine

Leonard stayed behind with a pistol of mine he took from the glove box, and me and Brett drove over to the police station, caught Chief Marvin Hanson in.

"Hey," he said after we were buzzed into his office, "one of my favorite people, Brett Sawyer, and one of my least favorite, Hap Collins."

"It never grows old," I said.

We were in his office and we all took chairs, and Brett told him we were taking the job with Doctor Cotton.

"Ah. Well, I hate we couldn't do more. I tried to have a cop put there for a week, but the money folk didn't like that idea. They agreed to having a car drive by a couple times a day. I send it a little more than that, a lot more than that, but it depends on someone trying to do something bad while they're driving by, and being visible while they're doing it. She's got a good rock fence and all, but frankly, someone wanted to get over it and inside, it's not that hard. Course, she's got the alarm and the cameras, but that wouldn't stop someone determined and didn't care if they were seen, and from the nature of those notes, I'm thinking it's a nut. It could be someone merely trying to scare her, get her goat, but I recommended you guys to her."

"As did Doctor Sylvan," I said. "Well, indirectly."

"We were wondering if you had any ideas," Brett said. "Thought we'd start with you, and also so you can let your drive by know we'll be around. We don't want to get shot doing our job, cops thinking we're someone else."

"I'll do that the minute you leave," he said. "As for anything else, we had the original notes dusted for fingerprints, but they only had Doctor Cotton's on them, her niece, who is a piece of work, and her servants. The niece ended up opening a couple of the letters herself. Doctor Cotton says she does that. She invades privacy, among other things. I'm afraid that's all I got. Other than saying it all feels screwy. Since your main man isn't with you, I assume you left him at the doctor's place."

"Good assumption," I said.

"Well, that's a good choice," he said.

"Did you consider the kooky niece could be behind this?" I said.

"Did, but nothing led there. Then again, as you know, we were sort of in and out."

"That's what she said," Brett said.

"Really, Brett," Hanson said.

"Yeah. I know. Been around Hap too long."

"Five minutes around him or Leonard is too long," he said.

"All right," Brett said. "Good enough. We're out of here."

ten

So, we got it going, the three of us taking turns for the first few days, and then we got Leonard's boyfriend, Officer Curt Carroll, known to us as Pookie, to come in now and again on his day off.

Me and Leonard and Brett had the one pistol between us, as we felt that was sufficient fire power. We traded out each time we had the changing of the guard. Pookie, he had his own gun and always brought snacks, even though anything he could have wanted was provided by Doctor Cotton.

After a couple weeks, we hadn't seen a thing, and Doctor Cotton hadn't received another message. Each time it was my turn, I spent at least an hour a day fighting off Katherine, a.k.a. Sugar Muffin, who would have screwed a doorknob and called it sweet baby.

Brett said she even tried it on her, but Brett said she told her, "I'm on duty, and the only thing you're going to get off me is a black eye for taking my mind off the job."

Brett also assured her that she was batting for a standard team.

Harsh, but effective. Sweet Baby decided she was through bothering Brett.

Leonard said she tried it on him, but he was on a different team too. He said, "Hey, I only suck dicks," and it was over for him. He said Pookie had a similar experience, and he had to explain his position being similar to Leonard's, though I suspect his comments were kindlier. Pookie is a nice person.

That left me. She knew my affiliation.

It was a big house, and when on duty we wandered throughout, not really expecting anybody, but it was part of the job, checking the place for ninja assassins in the sock drawer or the shower stall.

What I figured, due to the nature of the threats, was whoever was doing this would hope to scare his target for a while, then maybe come in by means of subterfuge, claiming to be someone they weren't, or catching Doctor Cotton out doing errands. We put an end to the errands, took them over for her.

One late morning, Sweet Muffin made the usual play for my Johnson. We were both sitting on the couch. Suddenly she was sitting very close. I could smell her perfume and something more primal drifting off of her.

She put her hand on my thigh.

I turned and looked at her. Her eyelids were heavy and her lips seemed fat and desirable. I like to think it wasn't just my erection problem that cause me to make the choice I did.

I gently lifted her hand off my leg and placed it on the couch, said, "My gal doesn't let me date."

"She wouldn't need to know."

"But I'd know."

Katherine turned to pout mode and moved away from me and sat on the far end of the couch. She said, "I'm not being threatened. I should be able to go out."

"They might use you to get to your aunt," I said. "Sorry, we got to wait until they make a play or the threat seems to be gone."

"Haven't heard from them in a week," she said.

"That's not very long."

"It is when you're horny."

"Don't you have any toys?"

"Plenty, but I've never found it to be the same."

"We can agree on that," I said. "But really, Katherine, you have to go somewhere else and play."

"I don't think I like you, Hap."

"There's a club you can join," I said.

She got huffy then and left the room.

Doctor Cotton was entering the room as Katherine was going out.

"I heard her," she said, "and I'm sorry."

"Not a problem. I figure she's doing the best she can about the whole business. I think she's tired of being cooped up in here."

"I know I am," she said, "and I'm sure you are."

I shrugged. "It's the job. Beats working at the chicken plant."

"I'm about to make myself lunch. Would you like a sandwich?"

"I would," I said.

We went into the kitchen and I sat on one of the stools at the long bar there.

Doctor Cotton opened the refrigerator and pulled out some cheese and lunch meat, slices of tomato, mustard and mayonnaise, a few odds and ends, put those on the bar. Then she got bread from the shelf by the refrigerator and put that with the other goods, grabbed us both Diet Cokes.

We had done this routine before with me and her.

She placed silverware on the table with plates, and we made ourselves sandwiches.

"Katherine really can't help it. It's the same as if she were an alcoholic."

"I understand," I said.

"But you played it right. I'm sure that's not the first time you've had to with her."

"We've all had to," I said. "But it's fine."

"So, Leonard and Curt?"

"She's hit on both of them, even though they're gay."

"I think she likes the challenge, Hap. And she can't help herself. So, Leonard and Curt, they are a serious item?"

"We call Curt Pookie. And yes. They are an item. Pookie really seems to make Leonard happy."

"And you and Leonard are good friends?"

"We are closer than good friends. We're like brothers."

"Yeah. Well, it's obvious Leonard is crazy about Curt. Sometimes he stays a second shift when Pookie is here."

"It won't keep them from doing their job," I said.

"Oh, I know that. I didn't mean that. I like it. It's sweet."

"This is a red-letter day. Someone has called Leonard sweet."

"I was wondering, why no more messages? They came like clockwork before."

"I was wondering the same thing. Whoever has been threatening you knows we're here, and they haven't bothered. I think whoever is doing it needs to scare you, and with us here, I don't think you getting a note or some such is going to be the same to them. They know you have us to fall back on. They want you on your own and afraid."

“Do you think it’s one of the servants? I can’t imagine that, they’re so nice, and I like to think well paid and appreciated, but I won’t lie. I wondered.”

“That was considered, of course, and Brett looked into it. Nothing seemed to point in that direction. They appear to be hardworking people, end of story. No. This is someone who knows you, or knows of you, and they want you scared, distracted.”

“You’re still thinking Katherine?”

“I don’t really know what I’m thinking,” I said. “But there’s something screwy about the whole thing. Who could be that mad at you, and why?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t. I’ve been taking care of Katherine ever since my sister died. She had her problems, but I have a hard time believing it has to do with her. Still, the notes and threats have stopped since you’ve been here, and she’s been under closer surveillance, not allowed to leave.”

“We really can’t tell her she can’t leave, but we don’t mind giving her that impression. Maybe . . . well, let’s say we consider her. Why would she do such a thing?”

Doctor Cotton shook her head.

“Could she be mad at you for monitoring her sex life? Mad at you because she’s obviously immature for her age and doesn’t like being told no? Another thing is there’s no one on your cameras from past events, no recordings of anyone that shouldn’t be there, I mean. Whoever is doing this knows how to avoid the cameras. Have to so they can put notes in your mailbox.”

“Meaning my niece again.”

"She has to be considered."

Doctor Cotton nodded. "I suppose so."

We ate lunch and went on about our day, and things continued like that for another two weeks, and no note.

But the next week, on Wednesday, a note was found in the drive when Leonard drove in to trade places with Brett. I got a call, and joined them.

The message was not sealed, but was inside a loose-flapped manila envelope. Leonard gave it to Brett and Brett looked at what was inside. Then I showed up where they were waiting for me in the driveway outside the gate. Brett showed me and Leonard what was inside the envelope. It was certainly a surprise. I got back in my car and drove inside and parked near their cars.

We went and got Doctor Cotton, who was dressed in a white tennis outfit, and we all went out to the gazebo. Brett placed the envelope on the table.

"Would you check your cameras from last night until now before you look at the envelope?" Brett said.

Doctor Cotton got up and went inside to look at her monitors.

We sat there a while and I tried to tell a joke, but neither Leonard nor Brett would listen. After quite a while, Doctor Cotton came back.

"The cameras were turned off last night," she said.

"Do they switch off inside or outside, or more than one place?" Brett asked.

"No."

"Okay," Brett said, and tapped the envelope.

Doctor Cotton pulled the envelope to her and opened it, looked at what was inside. The tan drained out of her face, her lips trembled and she let out a little gasp, one hand going to her chest as if to hold her heart in place.

“Oh, my god,” she said.

eleven

It happened kind of quick. Doctor Cotton was on her feet, stomping across the concrete, and then the grass, toward her house. After a moment, Brett said, "I think Sugar Muffin is about to get the shit stomped out of her."

"We better stop it," I said.

"Let's give her a moment."

When we heard the screeching inside the house, we sauntered over, went through the sliding back doors. Katherine was in the living room and Doctor Cotton had her by the hair and had pulled her head to the side, and with her other hand she was knocking knots on Sugar Muffin's head faster than a cobra can strike.

Brett went over and caught Doctor Cotton's arm with her own, and then she twisted and threw Doctor Cotton over the back of the couch and onto it. The good doctor rolled off the couch and onto the floor.

Sugar Muffin went for Brett, as if to claw her. Brett stuck a finger in Sugar Muffin's jugular notch, causing her to gag and go to one knee.

"Uh-uh, sister," Brett said. "You might find yourself in need of a nose job and a wig."

Katherine sat on the floor and started crying. By this time, Doctor Cotton had gotten up, brushed herself off, straightened her tennis dress and fluffed her hair. She was once again a professional.

"I apologize for that," Doctor Cotton said.

"Nah, that's all right," Leonard said. "Brett can handle herself, and

Sugar Muffin had it coming.”

twelve

I suppose you could call it puppy love, sweet, sweet, puppy love, but not exactly the kind you might be thinking. They were photos of a woman, obviously, photos of Doctor Cotton in her teens, nude, lying partly across a bed with a Rottweiler mounting her. I shit you not.

There were several shots that showed Doctor Cotton's good angles, and the Rottweiler's as well. I think the dog looked best from the left side. He looked happy in his work. His tongue was hanging out.

There was also a note inside the envelope requesting five hundred thousand dollars or the photos would hit the internet with explanations of who was in them. Something like that could be devastating. At least the dog wasn't around for the humiliation, though my guess is he could have gotten over it.

Within minutes the lady servants appeared, drawn by the racket. Linda and her daughter stood close enough together they were almost Siamese twins.

Doctor Cotton looked at them and smiled. "It's quite all right," she said. "A bit of a misunderstanding."

"Yes, ma'am," Linda said, took her daughter's elbow and walked her out of the room.

Doctor Cotton didn't look directly at us when she said, "I can't tell you how embarrassed I am. About those old photos, and doing what I did."

"Like I said," Leonard said. "She had it coming."

Doctor Cotton went out of the house and we followed her to the gazebo. We all sat in chairs. She picked up the envelope, said, “I was young and stoned, and my boyfriend had a dog. Katherine is not the only one who had problems with exhibition and what you might call kinky sex. I was pleasing someone important to me, doing what I thought I was supposed to do. He took some of the photos. The rest were taken by my sister, Katherine’s mother. She did it for the same someone. My god, a Rottweiler.”

I wondered if she would have felt better had it been a German shepherd. Somehow, I couldn’t imagine a chihuahua that could do the work without a footstool.

“I didn’t know those pictures still existed. They must have been in my sister’s stuff. After she died. She died of a drug overdose. I had her stuff brought here. Her personal items. Katherine has been looking through those. I encouraged her do that. To get in touch with her mother that way, to deal with her death. But those photos, I thought I had destroyed all the copies. They were taken before the internet was the big thing and there were only a few copies, or so I thought, and I was sure I had destroyed them.”

“Could it be the person who you made these photos for?” Brett said.

“No. It can’t be him. He died years ago. Car wreck.”

“Why would your sister keep them?” Brett said.

“To hold them over my head at some point. She was always jealous of me, my becoming a doctor, changing my life. Taking control of my sexual problems. It had a lot to do with how we were raised. Part of a commune that lasted up into the nineties. Way past the expiration date. It was started in the early seventies by a preacher, a hippie preacher. Only he was more of a pervert. Cult leader. He thought all the females were his, like we were cows and he was the bull. I was very young when he started having sex with me.

Eleven. My sister was a year older. It messed us up, and in turn, my sister messed up Katherine. It's complex, but those are the roots, an explanation in a peanut hull."

"The preacher was for the dog business?" Leonard said.

"Yes," she said. "He took some of the photographs."

"Bless the beasts and the children," Leonard said.

I elbowed him.

"One thing, though," Brett said. "It looks as if it's been your niece all along."

"It does," Doctor Cotton said. "She could only have gotten those photos out of my sister's things. What an idiot. Like I wouldn't know where they came from, wouldn't figure she was behind all this. Oh, hell, sure she knew I'd know. Goddamnit. She wanted me to know. She constantly torments me. I don't know why I put up with her. I should put her out. I really should, but I don't know where she'd go, what she'd do. She's pretty helpless, really. I'm all she's got."

"That's one way of looking at it," Leonard said.

"What do you mean?" Doctor Cotton said.

"I think she's an ungrateful shit," he said. "She gets out there and has to asshole and elbow it a bit, she might get over a lot of things."

"It's not that simple, Leonard," Doctor Cotton said. "It's like telling you to stop being gay."

"No," Leonard said. "It ain't a damn thing like that."

Doctor Cotton sat with her head hung. I think she was beyond argument now, beyond believing she knew shit from wild honey or piss from lemonade.

After a while, she picked up the envelope from the table and put it in her lap. “I suppose I won’t be needing your services anymore.”

“Listen,” Brett said. “I know it seems obvious your niece has been behind this, but maybe she isn’t.”

“No one else would have the photos,” Doctor Cotton said. “They had to be in my sister’s stuff. It’s her.”

“Still, there might be more to it.”

“No. It’s Katherine. My sister reaching out through her beyond the grave. I would like to ask that you never mention this. I’m going to destroy the photos, look through my sister’s stuff, see if there’s anything else of this sort. I hate to admit it, but there might be. This gets out, my career is over. Not to mention my life. I won’t be needing you anymore. Please leave, and send me your final bill.”

“All right,” Brett said. “But if you think there’s more to it, need us back, you have our number.”

“I do,” Doctor Cotton said. “But I won’t be calling.”

thirteen

We thought it was over.

It wasn't.

We'll come back to that.

That night Brett and I lay in bed in the dark. She lay with her hand across my chest. She said, "Why would you fuck a dog? Is that some kind of neurosis? You didn't get a puppy when you were little? Dog was the only one that seemed to love you? What is that all about?"

"Like I'd know. I think it has to be about pleasing whoever asked her to do that, the preacher. Probably did as she was told, thought it was god's will because it was coming from a man of the cloth. Hell, she had been groomed to be a plaything, like her sister. Others I presume."

"I can see nymphomania being a mental or emotional condition, but dog fucking. How do you get there?"

"Again, not about the dog," I said.

"When you're getting off, you look a little like that dog," Brett said.

"Do I?"

"Oh yeah."

"Grrrrrrr."

"Down, Rex, or I'll get the rolled-up newspaper."

"The problem is I haven't been able to get it up, let alone off."

"I thought the growl was a sign of things to come, so to speak."

"Dogs growl to fool people into thinking they are fierce. And you know what else, I lost my therapist to be. So now I don’t get to find out why losing my teddy bear at three is keeping me from laying pipe.”

“Poor baby.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll get there. The other day when you bent over at the stove, I thought I felt it rustle in my jeans.”

“This is where I say things are looking up.”

“It’s not you that’s the problem,” I said. “Wanted you to know that.”

“Hell, I know that,” Brett said.

fourteen

The next day was the day of the discovery of the mass murder. Murders happen in LaBorde and on its outskirts with greater frequency than would be expected. But nothing like this.

We had just made it to the office. I was standing at the window looking out at the parking lot. Leonard had parked outside and was walking toward the stairs. I watched him saunter. Today he had on his fedora. That and cowboy hats were what he rocked best.

By the time I heard him coming up the stairs, the office phone rang. I turned and watched Brett pick it up.

The moment Leonard came in the door, Brett said, “Oh hell. Yeah. We’ll be there.”

Chief Marvin Hanson wanted us there due to our association with the victims. Pookie was there too. He wasn’t in uniform. Marvin had us all meet at the curb in front of Doctor Cotton’s house.

We could see the cop cars parked directly in front of the house, but not in the drive leading to the gate. Pookie was standing with Marvin on the short lawn that divided the curb and the big house. From a distance, they looked like a salt and pepper shaker.

We parked down the street some distance from the house and walked over.

“So, what exactly?” Brett said, after we had all nodded at one another.

“You saw them last yesterday?” Hanson asked.

Brett nodded, started answering Hanson's questions. They're the things you expect a cop to ask. None of us believed he thought we did it, but certain questions had to be asked.

"Can your people tell when this happened?" I asked.

"Not yet," Hanson said, "but since everyone was in night clothes, they think last night."

"Doctor Cotton and a young white woman?" I said.

"And another woman," he said. "Mexican. Cuban. Whatever."

"Hispanic," Pookie said.

"There you go," Hanson said.

"The Hispanic lady?" I asked. "Older, younger?"

"Middle aged, I guess. Certainly not getting any older."

"Probably Linda," Pookie said. Like us, he hadn't seen inside, and because he had been helping us part time, he was not at this point allowed to be part of the case, lest there was some great conspiracy between him and us.

"I'm going to need you folks to put on some footies and a paper suit and come with me," Marvin said. "Since you knew them a little, I need some identification."

fifteen

The paper suit was blue, which brought out Pookie's eyes. The suits rustled when we moved, and the footies made crunchy sounds as we walked.

We went through the open gate and just inside the gap was a large pile of cut flowers heaped on the driveway, wilting in the heat. They were all manner of colors. There were enough flowers there for an Easter Parade float. A cop was there filming the flowers and moving the camera around to take in other things.

"What's the flowers about?" Brett said.

"No idea," Marvin said.

We were led by Marvin to the pool.

He stopped and stood at the edge and we joined him, looked down. In the pool, strapped with duct tape to a chair, was Doctor Cotton's nude body. The chair sat on the bottom of the pool and there was blood in the water, and though there was a lot of blood, there was more water. The blood gave the water a thin, crimson sheen you could see through. Doctor Cotton's hair floated up like seaweed above her head. The blood was spreading slowly. Pieces of flesh had been peeled back from her face and breasts but were still attached; the pieces drifted in the water.

Taped to another chair, this one turned over, was Linda, fully clothed. Through the thin haze of blood, I could see her eyes. They were open and the whites appeared red. She hadn't been cut up from what I could tell, maybe a closer look would reveal otherwise.

"It didn't happen here," Brett said. "Not enough blood."

"You been reading again, haven't you?" Hanson said.

"I've seen a thing or two," she said.

"Come on," Hanson said.

We went in the house, on back to one of the bedrooms. It was neat, even Katherine's corpse was neat. It lay on the bed with her hands crossed over her chest. She almost looked peaceable, except for the bullet hole in the center of her forehead. Where the bullet had exited the back of her head, the blood had soaked into the pillow, into the sheets and the mattress. There was a lot of it. You could smell it in the air, a kind of coppery smell.

"Now here's a surprise I saved," Hanson said.

He walked us around to the other side of the bed. A young Hispanic male lay on the floor, face down. He didn't look as tidy. His leg was bent and his arms were spread. His head was turned to one side and we got a good look at his face. What was left of it. He had been shot with a larger caliber in the back of the head, and the entry had scooped some skull, but the exit wound had knocked a hole in the front of his face about the size of two fists pressed together.

"Who is this?" Hanson said.

"Ain't anyone we know," Leonard said. "Or if we knew him from somewhere else, we don't recognize him now 'cause he hasn't got much of a face. Right gang?"

Brett, Pookie and I nodded.

"This," Hanson said, "is what we in police work call a goddamn mystery."

"Do you?" I asked.

“No,” Hanson said. “I just thought it sounded cool. We already ran his fingerprints. His name is Jaime Cabalas. Ring any bells?”

“Nope,” I said.

Pookie raised his hand. “My bell rang. We arrested him and his brother, separate times. The brother for breaking and entering, the younger brother, the fellow you see napping before you, on shoplifting cold medicine. He had a face then. Nice-looking kid.”

“So, his dear old mother had a cold,” Leonard said.

“Probably not,” Pookie said. “He stole a case of it out of the back of the store’s warehouse. The case meaning several boxes taped into one container setting on a forklift. He also stole the forklift. Might have got away with it had he driven the forklift into the back of an enclosed truck, but no, he drove the forklift down the road. It being a forklift, and it being about three in the morning, he was thought suspicious right off. The only thing missing was a pirate flag waving off the back of the forklift.”

“That happened when?” I asked.

“Some time back,” Pookie said. “Spent some time in jail, but he paid off the theft, and got out pretty quick, all things considered. He was going to sell the cold medicine to some tweekers to make meth. I guess the forklift was going to be his around town ride. He’s been a good boy since then.”

“He’s a really good boy now,” Leonard said.

“Going to show you another little something,” Hanson said. “I shouldn’t, but hey, if you’re going to get the tour, why not the whole tour. And, you knew Doctor Cotton, and maybe you’ll shake an idea loose if I show you around.”

“Didn’t know her that well,” I said.

“Knowing her at all is more than I know,” Hanson said.

In another room, we saw a large painting had been removed from the wall and leaned against a dresser. There was a place in the wall with a large safe stuffed in it. The huge painting had obviously hidden it. The door to the safe was wide open.

“There was money in it at one point, is going to be my guess,” Hanson said. “I think they tortured the folks here to find the safe, to get inside. It hasn’t been blown, so I think it had to be cracked, or more than likely Doctor Cotton or Katherine gave it up and they took what they wanted, what they had been blackmailing her about.”

I told Hanson about all that, about the dog picture.

“Ah, a nice family portrait,” Hanson said.

“Thing I got to wonder about,” Leonard said, “what’s the Mexican boy doing here, and how did he end up dead?”

“He ended up dead because someone shot him in the face,” Hanson said.

“Ah,” Leonard said. “Part of the mystery solved.”

“Someday I think I’ll get tired of you jokesters,” Hanson said.

“Our personalities remain fresh,” I said.

“And I have good legs,” Brett said. “And I’m smart.”

“Yeah,” Hanson said, “but that don’t explain the other two guys or why you hang around with them.”

“Hap has nice legs,” she said.

As we came out of the house, I said, “Linda’s daughter works here too. Didn’t see her. I’d find out if she’s home and okay.”

“I’ll do that,” Pookie said. “I’ll do it now.”

"You're not on duty," Hanson said.

"I can be, though," Pookie said.

"Cameras?" I said. "Anything there?"

"Another sweet thing, the cameras and the alarms were turned off. So, nada. Come on, let's stroll."

We left the house, and as we neared the front gate, one of the uniforms came over and said to Hanson, "We got a little treat for you, Chief."

He walked us over to where the shrubbery was thick and up close to the fence. Between the fence and the shrubbery, off the ground due to being caught up in the shrubbery, was a dead man. Or he was very good at being still and looking dead.

A closer look.

Nope. Dead.

He had a large hole in his chest and his mouth was twisted into what could have passed as an ironic smile.

"Seems to have been trying to climb over the fence, and someone popped him, fell back here," said the uniform. "My guess is the shooter, and maybe some compatriots, hoofed it out pretty quick after this, as I don't think this was a silenced weapon. Lady down the road said she heard some loud pops about four a.m. last night."

Hanson said, "Okay, does anyone know him?"

"Yep," Pookie said, "That, sir, is Vincent Cabalas, the young faceless Cabalas's older brother."

"I can see the family resemblance," Hanson said. "They both have a hole in them."

sixteen

That night I dreamed the world was full of marching people, marching around the globe in circles, and I was with them, and we marched over the oceans because they were covered in concrete.

We were in rows, all of us marchers, but we were no more than an elbow length apart. We were marching and we couldn't stop marching. Space kept getting smaller, filling up, and there were people with whips. Fat people with meat-greasy lips and protruding eyes, very froglike, very satisfied looking, and the rest of us were part of this marching system, and I realized our marching was turning the world, and all of us were making it happen, the world turning for the fat frogs who I guess owned everything, and as we marched, our clothes were rotting off some of us, and there were some men and women marching who were completely nude, and the flesh was falling off many of them, as if their skin was the same as the rotting rags. As I marched, I began to wish for a plague to kill the fat frogs, maybe kill us all, and then I came awake.

I got up and went to the bathroom and washed my face and sat on the commode with the lid down, sat there and gathered myself. I felt as if I were trying to figure my place in the new world, one where everything that was good seemed to be going backward, and everything that was bad was moving forward at a high rate of speed, and all the poor people, all those who might have been considered well off some time back, were now not so well off, and were marching for the big, fat frogs. Keeping the machine working. I couldn't shake the dream, silly as it was, and silly as it was, it made me sad and scared and disappointed, and not sure of what it was I was dreaming about.

The kind of greed that destroys everything, maybe. The kind of greed that drives people to kill other people, the kind of greed that allows someone to lock themselves behind a wall and think they're safe, removed from the daily grind, avoiding brushing up against the unwashed masses, and there were those among the unwashed who wanted to be less unwashed, wanted what the big frogs had, and they were willing to do whatever it took to have a piece of that, even murder.

As I sat there, my legs felt as if they were hurting from all that walking.

seventeen

Hanson stopped by mine and Brett's place the next morning about nine. I invited him in and fixed him some buttered toast and a cup of coffee.

Brett, who had been showering for a late entry into our office, came out of the bathroom dressed in jeans and a loose shirt, barefoot with her damp hair mounded up under a towel.

She came over to Hanson's chair and gave him a hug, then she joined us at the table.

Hanson sipped coffee, said, "I didn't want to take Linda's daughter in, on account of she might be illegal, and with things insane like they are now, I fear she'll be on a bus to Mexico, compliments of Immigration. You know, she's been here so long, she doesn't even speak Spanish. Don't get me wrong, she had something to do with the crime, I'll put her behind bars so fast the door will lock before I close it. Otherwise, I might have a witness, or a suspect being shipped across the border, and might not can get them back."

"And you've come to us why?" I said.

"I need you and Brett, Leonard if he wants, to go over there and talk to her, obviously not in a police capacity. She knows y'all a little, and she might be more comfortable talking to you. Way her mother, everyone at the house was murdered, Mindy thinks she might be next. She's scared to death. That's about all I could get out of her, really."

"Maybe she's scared with good reason," Brett said. "Seems Doctor Cotton and us thinking the niece was behind it were wrong."

“You did warn her to not drop us right away,” I said.

“Whole thing looks like an inside job, and she’s the only survivor. Got to consider her for it, at least a little. Maybe she had help. Might have been responsible for the threats, building up to blackmail, scaring Cotton, and then she found those pictures, and figured it was time to go for the whole enchilada. Another thing, she might have seen how this would make Katherine look, and that meant Doctor Cotton would decide it was her niece and she didn’t need you guys for protection. That would damn sure make it easy for her and accomplices to get inside and do what they did.”

“But her own mother?” Brett said.

“I’ve seen enough to think people are capable of anything,” Hanson said.

“They seemed close,” Brett said.

“Still, I got to think scenarios. Find out what you can for me, and that’ll take care of some of the favors you guys owe me.”

“Fair enough,” Brett said.

“Here’s another little tidbit. Photo of Doctor Cotton and the canine. It’s on the internet this morning. Dead or not, someone still went after her. Maybe someone posted the photo out of spite. If Doctor Cotton were alive, she’d been selling up and packing out, maybe looking for a job in dog porn. Tell you another thing, whoever tortured Doctor Cotton the way they did, they didn’t do it for money. They did it for fun. First time they cut her face she’d have told them where the safe was, gave them the combination and helped them carry the goods to the car. No one is that tough, not when they’re having their skin ripped off. People did this, I think they got the combination, and after checking it out, taking what was inside, they decided to finish what they started. Maybe Cotton gave them the combo without them laying a hand on her. Could be they just decided to do it because they're mean. Think that's why they went ahead and posted the photo. It can't hurt Cotton now, but it shits on any reputation she might have had. Whoever did this is into slash and burn."

"You got Mindy's address," Brett said, "soon as we can get out of here, we'll go over and talk with her."

eighteen

We decided to fill Leonard in later, tell him what we found out. We thought it might seem less overbearing for two people to show up instead of three.

When we got there, we saw that Pookie was parked down from the house in his own car. He saw us and gave a little wave but didn't get out. We waved back and went on up to the house.

Mindy answered. She looked as if someone had run over her with a truck. She seemed barely able to stand.

She grabbed Brett and hugged her. "Oh god," she said, "it is so horrible, horrible."

"I know," Brett said. "And we're so sorry."

Mindy began to bellow and bawl. It was tough to listen to. It made me sad and sick.

Brett eased her back into the house and I shut the door and followed them into a modest living room with cheap paintings of Jesus and biblical scenes on the wall. A large cross hung above a small screen TV, and another had been placed above the portal of the doorway we came through.

After we were in the living room, Mindy sat on the couch, which was covered over with a plastic protection sheet, and Brett sat by her. I sat in a stuffed armchair across the way. The air smelled clean and sharp with disinfectant and a sheen of lemon deodorizer.

A few minutes passed with Mindy clutching Brett, and Brett holding her back, saying soothing things to her. Eventually Mindy got control of herself.

After I let a few more moment pass, I said, “I know it’s horrible to discuss, but why weren’t you there last night, when this happened?”

“Mom asked me to stay home. She said things were tense at the house, and Doctor Cotton was feeling private. My mom had worked for her so long, the doctor felt comfortable with her. Me, I had just started working there. I was still a bit of an outsider.”

“Did you know of Katherine having a boyfriend?” I asked.

“She had plenty, but she had a main one,” Mindy said. “I knew that much.”

“Katherine seemed a little too, shall we say, *free-spirited* for a boyfriend,” I said.

“I heard her tell Doctor Cotton her boyfriend didn’t mind what she did with other men, that he liked the idea. That they belonged to some group, sliders or some such.”

“Swingers?” Brett said.

“That’s it. Katherine, she was always talking about things like that, to embarrass me, and she even tried to get me to go to bed with her once, but I hit her. I thought I was fired. I busted her lip. But she put her finger to the blood and looked at it and laughed at me. She was very strange.”

“This boyfriend, he come around?” I said. “Ever see him?”

She nodded.

“What did he look like?”

“Not so tall, kind of thin, and good-looking. Mexican, illegal like me.”

The general description fit the body by the bed, except I couldn’t say about the handsome part. He didn't have a face.

"Do you know anything about the boyfriend, where he worked, anything?"

"Katherine said he was going to be a painter. His brother was a painter."

"When you say the boyfriend wanted to be a painter," Brett said. "Do you mean an artist?"

"A house painter. He was trying to start his own business with his brother, but he didn't have the money for it. I heard Katherine say that. He came to the house once, no twice, which is how I know what he looks like. Doctor Cotton didn't like him. She wouldn't let him come back."

"Do you know why she didn't like him?" I asked.

"She said because she thought he was no account, but I think it was because he was Mexican, same as me. We were all right, me and my mom, because we worked for her. Had he been the yard or pool boy, he'd have been fine. She used to have men who worked there daily, doing the yard and the pool, but Katherine wouldn't leave them alone, so she let them go. Got a service to come in and take care of things. They did their work and left."

"Did you ever meet the boyfriend's brother?" Brett asked.

"No."

I said, "I'm getting a vibe here that you think Doctor Cotton wasn't really as open-minded as she seemed?"

"I got that feeling," she said. "I don't know. Maybe with all what's going on, way people talk about us, way I got to worry about being picked up and sent to Mexico, I might not be thinking straight. . . . You aren't going to send me back, are you?"

"We don't do that," I said. "We're private. You know that."

"Yes, but. . . ."

"We're white?" I said.

She nodded and looked slightly embarrassed.

"Far as we're concerned, you're fine. Listen, any idea where we can get in touch with the boyfriend's relatives?"

"Like we all know one another," she said.

"No," Brett said, "like maybe you heard something through Katherine."

"I'm sorry," Mindy said. "I'm feeling sensitive."

"No problem," Brett said. "You have that right."

"I think he worked for a painter in town, but I don't know the name, but I think he did. Like I said, he wanted his own shop."

"I know the police didn't tell you all that happened, merely that your mother, Doctor Cotton and Katherine were dead," I said. "But, Katherine's boyfriend, or who we think is her boyfriend, and the boyfriend's brother are dead as well."

"I don't understand," Mindy said.

"That's all right, no one does," I said.

Mindy sat quietly for a moment, her hands folded in her lap.

"You know, I think they said something about Smatterly Paint or some such," she said. "You know, I'm not sure. But something like that."

"Let me ask something else," I said. "The safe. Who knew where it was? Did you?"

She nodded. "We all did. It wasn't a secret. I knew it was there and so did everyone in the house, and we all knew Doctor Cotton had expensive jewels in it, as well as money.”

“Who knew the combination?” Brett asked.

“I don’t know. I didn’t know it. Mother didn’t.”

“What about Katherine?” I said.

She shook her head. “I don’t know. But I got the impression that Doctor Cotton was the only one.”

nineteen

We couldn't locate a business by the name Mindy gave us, but we did find one called Smallette's Painting. We thought that might be close enough to be the right one. Me and Brett drove over there.

It was on the loop well outside of town, and it was a large building with a larger fenced-in area off to the side and attached to the main building. Signs said they painted houses, cars, and there was a sign that read: if it isn't moving, we can paint it.

Behind the desk, toward the back, was a middle-aged woman with her hair combed straight back and tied with an orange scrunchie. She didn't wear makeup and had on coveralls. She was a little plump and was leaned back in her chair doing damage to what looked like a leaky meatball sandwich.

Me and Brett walked up to the desk. The lady reluctantly stopped eating, stood up and walked over. She was tall and broad-shouldered.

She looked at Brett. "Damn, aren't you the pretty thing?"

"You ought to see me on Tuesdays," Brett said.

"We're looking for the owner," I said.

"No, you're not," she said, "you're looking at her."

"Ms. Smallette?"

"Small. My mother and father called me Smallette as a joke, 'cause I was the youngest and the only girl, only I turned out bigger than they expected. My dad never could quite get over that. I think he wanted a girly-girly who didn't like girly-girls, but that isn't how things shook out. He stopped calling me Smallette when I reached my twenties. Everyone else kept calling me that, though. When Dad died, I took over the business because both my two older brothers, and my mother, are in prison for fraud. I decided to call the business Smallette's instead of Small's."

"That's really interesting," I said, but really, I didn't give a shit.

"What you need painted?" she said.

"Nothing," I said.

"You're looking for the taxidermist, that's down the loop a little."

"No," Brett said. "We're looking for you."

"Oh, that's nice. I hope you're especially the one looking."

"We're married," I said.

"So are a lot of people," Smallette said.

No way to contradict that.

"The Cabalas brothers worked for you?" Brett asked.

"Still do, but after today they may not. Didn't show for work last couple of days. Course the day is young enough. I'm flexible 'cause good painters are hard to find, but they may be asking me to be too flexible."

"You know," I said, "you might want to put a want ad in the paper for a painter."

Smallette studied me for a moment.

"Something happen?"

"They got dead," I said.

twenty

Smallette brought us behind the desk and into a small office with a struggling air conditioner. She sat behind a desk that took up too much room, and Brett sat in the only other chair while I leaned against the wall and listened to the air conditioner try not to die.

From where I stood, I could see she had a pistol on a stool next to the desk. If you were sitting where Brett was sitting you wouldn't be able to see it. It looked like a .22 revolver from where I stood.

Painting business must be a tough gig. Then again, in Texas, every asshole walks around with a gun and thinks they're Wyatt Earp. I tell you straight, it doesn't make me feel safer. Even preachers have guns.

"Man, that's some shit," Smallette said after we explained what happened to them, told her about Doctor Cotton, her niece and maid. She didn't seem all that torn up about it actually. We could have told her they were having a two-for-one sale on socks at Walmart, and it might have got more of a reaction. "Any idea why?"

"We got some thoughts," Brett said, and we did. We had discussed them in the car on the way over. I thought I'd give Smallette a taste of our idea, see if that elicited anything. I gave her a general rundown on what had happened, that the doctor was murdered, very general stuff, then laid out some things that were more specific.

"Way we're thinking," I said, "is the brothers, along with the murdered doctor's niece, were trying out intimidation, which was a plan to have Doctor Cotton real scared before they tried out blackmail. They finally got there, but that didn't play out the way they wanted. We're thinking the brothers wanted their own paint business, and we're thinking they had partners to help them get it, but those partners wanted the jewels and fewer partners."

"So, they were going to leave my ass," Smallette said.

"We're here to see if you got anything you can give us that will help us figure out who the brothers were in with," I said.

"Not an idea one," she said. "Thought you said this doctor laid you off."

"She did," Brett said, "but you might say we feel unfulfilled."

"That so. Well, they were good painters and will be missed, but you know Mexicans wanting work are a dime a dozen. They hadn't been in some kind of bad business, they wouldn't be dead."

"You have an address for them?" I asked.

"Yeah, I think so. I got cell phone numbers, but I bet no one answers," she grinned when she said that. "Hey, they were going to fuck me over, leave me high and dry, start their own paint business. Oh, hell, bless the goddamn dead and their family, of course, but one thing I don't need is more competition."

Charming.

I got a card out of my wallet. It was a little dog-eared. I gave it to her. It had the name of the agency on it and two numbers, the office landline and my cell. Each of us had the same cards, except our personal cards had our individual cell numbers on them. Brett had a set of cards with all our numbers on it, written on the back. On the front was brett sawyer investigations, and under her name was the silhouette of a bloodhound.

“Think of something, anything might help, give a call,” I said.

“Sure,” she said. “Shame the way they were done. Tortured and murdered, the safe robbed, and that being a walled home in a good neighborhood. You can’t be too careful these days, no matter where you live.”

“This is true,” Brett said, and we walked out.

twenty-one

Outside the paint business, I said, “She didn’t seem particularly curious.”

“No, she didn’t,” Brett said, “First thing I want to do, we leave here, is buy today’s paper.”

“And I know why,” I said.

We passed the fenced-in section. Through the fence, we could see three men air-blasting a travel home. Well, one was doing the blasting. The other two were standing around, as if holding the concrete flooring in place.

I found the gate and opened it and we stepped inside.

As we got nearer to them, one of the men who was watching one of the others use the air blaster noticed us. Or rather he noticed Brett. You can always tell when they notice Brett.

Brett showed them all her teeth, including the caps she had on a couple of back teeth, and said, “How are you boys?”

The boys all looked pretty much alike, except one of them was very tall, six-seven, if I had to guess. They all wore gray coveralls and gray caps and work boots, had long, ragged beards that rested on their chests, had faces that looked like the seats of a well-worn saddles. They had small noses, noticeable small, as if genetics was all out of the good noses the day they were born, so they had to take the emergency back-up children’s variety.

“Damn, ZZ Top,” I said. “As I live and breathe.”

“Well, we do have a band,” said the one switching off the blaster, turning to give Brett the once-over. “We ain’t any good, though. We was going to be rock stars once, twenty years ago. Turned out we can barely carry a tune in a bucket with a lid on it."

The third man, the smaller of the three, was standing by the travel trailer. He looked at Brett and actually licked his lips. Not something I enjoyed seeing, but Brett was a big girl, and no doubt luscious looking, so I decided not to kill him.

"You work for Ms. Smallette, of course," Brett said.

"We got a piece of the pie here," said the man with the blaster.

I held out my hand. "Hap Collins."

The air blaster man put the blaster on the concrete and shook my hand.

"Wilson Small. That goober by the trailer, that's Rat, least that's what we call him, and this fellow by me is Too Tall. We're brothers."

No surprise there.

"Smallette is your sister," I said.

"Yeah. She kind of runs the business."

"No offense," Brett said, "but Ms. Smallette said her brothers and mother were in prison."

"That's right, but we're the other brothers."

"Oh," Brett said.

"Yeah, there's a bunch of us," Too Tall said. "Us three are fancy-free and looking for love."

He showed Brett a big smile when he said that.

"I'm sure you're going to be a fine catch for some nice woman," Brett said.

"Hell," Rat said. "We don't want them nice."

The brothers laughed together, ended up making snorting sounds. Ain’t genetics wonderful?

We told them the same thing we told Ms. Smallette, and they said that was too bad about the brothers, but Rat added, “Them spic brothers wasn’t good workers anyway. Jaime, he could paint, but he was slow as Christmas on a crutch. Always had to get everything just right, like people can tell two coats of paint from one.”

How picky of him, I thought.

We gave them our cards and went away.

twenty-two

We drove over to the newspaper office. They have machines out front, and they have papers in them. We bought one and went back to the car and sat there. Brett read about the murders on the front page.

"Here it is," she said. "I was thinking Marvin wouldn't have told reporters all the details. There's nothing about torture or a safe, so even if Smallette read the papers this morning, how would she know that?"

"Maybe she's psychic," I said.

"I'm thinking it might have something to do with her being in on that shit," Brett said. "That's what I'm thinking."

"Me," I said, "I'm sticking to psychic."

"Sure, you are," she said. "I think Smallette not only was in on it, but so were those bearded, moronic brothers of hers."

"Do we tell Hanson?"

"No, we caught this one and we dropped the ball, so we got to pick it up."

"Doctor Cotton dropped the ball," I said.

"Still, I feel we have to pick it up. I think we start by checking florists, see if anyone bought a hell of a big load of flowers this morning. Something they took from the florist to deliver themselves. My guess is that's how they got through the gate."

She didn't start the car up though.

"Little turns of fate can sure mess a person up," she said.

“Fucking a dog on camera is bound to lead to bad things,” I said.

“That was years ago. She had changed her life, was trying to do good for people.”

“You were less on her side when we talked about this before.”

“I’ve had time to think. Doctor Cotton didn’t start this, the niece did. The ungrateful bitch was going to rob her. She knew her aunt knew her boyfriend. Which means to me, she might have planned to kill her aunt and the maids right from the start. She was bad as the Smalls. Then she got snookered. There’s some cold irony in that.”

“I’m thinking the boyfriend shot Katherine,” I said. “I like to think they forced him to. She was the only one that was killed in a, pardon the term, comfortable way. Lying in bed with her eyes shut. They let him do that, and then he thought he was still going out with the money and jewels. But he wasn’t. They killed him. The brother made a break for it, and Smalls nailed him too.”

“There’s a reason those other Smalls are in prison,” Brett said. “They’re a family of vipers.”

“Now, now, don’t insult vipers.”

twenty-three

Brett took me to my car and caught up with Leonard and filled him in with what me and my lady were thinking.

"I was thinking that too," he said.

"So now you're going to pull that," I said. "Me and Brett do all the work, and all the thinking, and you're going to claim you were all over it."

"I was."

"No, you weren't."

"I kind of was."

"You are priceless, Leonard."

"I have my fedora on."

"Yes, you do. And I'm sure glad you explained that, and here I sit looking at it on your head. That's something," I said, "but it wouldn't surprise me if you had your underwear turned around backwards."

"You want to check, don't you?"

"I do not."

"I think you're thinking about it."

"Don't change the subject," I said. "You didn't know shit."

"Where's Brett?"

"You're changing the subject."

"Am not."

"Am too. . . . She's checking out florists," I said.

"What are we doing?"

"Lunch," I said. "Brett wanted to do the florists by herself. She likes flowers. I'm also supposed to tell you not to tell Pookie what we think we know. We're keeping the law outside of this. Brett wants to get even with the sonofabitches did this, let it be us that proves what they did and turn them in."

"Brett knows what the fuck is up," Leonard said.

We went to the El Salvadorian restaurant we like and had a light lunch, and then to a coffee shop on North Street. I had hot chocolate, Leonard had coffee, and a couple sitting at a booth against the wall almost had sex. I think they were getting the better deal.

"Let's change seats," Leonard said.

We took our drinks upstairs and went out on the veranda that overlooked the parking lot.

"You know, one of the cops at the scene might have blabbed to someone about what was found and seen at Doctor Cotton's, and this Small lady picked it up from somebody who heard it from somebody."

"Maybe, but then again, let's see what Brett says about the florist."

"By the way, how's the old pecker?"

"The pecker is fine, just a little limp lately."

"Man, Hap Collins with a limp pecker. Who'd have thought it. Listen, my man. It happens. Even my very well-trained anaconda has days. I get up, fix breakfast, my oatmeal is lumpy, I get backed up and can't shit, lose my keys, spill my lunch, you know, a bad day, and when I have one like that, well, the snake can go to sleep."

"No matter how bad my day is, I don't normally have that problem. Getting the tool to work usually makes a bad day better."

"Now, though, I'm thinking you might want to go into the priesthood.”

“Shit, they get more nookie than I do these days. Sometimes what they get they shouldn’t get.”

“Yeah, they use priests to scare children now,” Leonard said. “You better be good, or the priest is going to molest you.”

“Watch out for the politicians too,” I said.

“Yep, they fuck you then pass a bill that makes you the rapist.”

The phone rang.

It was Brett.

She’d found the florist.

twenty-four

We stayed where we were and Brett drove over to join us. She came upstairs with a coffee and sat with us on the veranda. We were the only ones out there. The air was beginning to become sticky, and out to the west we could see a bit of darkness as rain clouds drifted in our direction. It would be drizzling by nightfall, if not sooner.

"The florist said a lady paid in cash for the flowers, didn't give her name, but had them loaded into a large van. That's where Small messed up. The van had Smallette Painting written on the side. A name like that the florist remembered."

"So, Smallette did, in fact, set this all up," I said.

"Yeah," Brett said.

"Wow," I said. "We did some detective work and it worked."

"And I think the robbery, the whole thing, went down pretty much like we were thinking it did," Brett said. "I looked into the Small family, the ones in prison. They were in there for fraud all right, but they were also in there for jewel robbery. Pretty big heist in Houston."

"No shit," Leonard said.

"And the rest of the family was under suspicion for the same thing," Brett said. "Wasn't enough proof. I'm thinking if Smallette and the Small brothers have the kind of jewels I think they got from Doctor Cotton, they haven't moved those yet. They'd be the kind of things you wouldn't deal out to a crooked pawnshop dealer. You'd need professional fences, and to do that, to get top dollar, they’d have to wait for the theft to cool.”

“Look at you,” Leonard said, “all robbery expert and such.”

“I know where this is leading,” I said. “You think they stashed the jewels.”

“Yeah,” Brett said. “And my guess is somewhere at their place of business. They aren’t suspected by the cops, so that’s safe enough. Stuff can cool down there, and the whole family is around, so no one has to depend on anyone else to watch the goods. They may have already spent the money from the safe, or they’ve split that. May never find that, but we just might discover the jewels. We do, their gooses are cooked.”

“That means we got to go take a peek,” I said.

Brett sipped her coffee, said, “That’s about the size of it.”

twenty-five

I'm a feminist, but that only goes so far. I insisted that when we arrived, Brett should stay in the car. She had done things that showed she was tough, but still, me and Leonard were way more used to the rough and tumble stuff, and besides, if she heard gunfire, she could call the cops. Sue me. I didn't want my woman hurt.

My hope was they wouldn't be around, and Smallette would have packed up the jewels in a nice tote bag and left them on her desk with a note that read: here they are.

We veered off the loop and parked off the main road not far from the Smallette Paint business, among some trees, and unless you were looking for our car, you couldn't see it from the road, not the way the shadows clung.

It was starting to mist a bit, and now and again I could hear a rumble of thunder. I got my automatic out of the glove box, and Leonard left his fedora in back and took my sawed-off club from under the seat, stuck it in his pants, beneath his windbreaker, and away we went, two soldiers in the mist.

Well, Leonard was a soldier. I was just some guy with an automatic pistol and a dick problem. But we did have matching black windbreakers. Brett insisted. They had deep pockets for lockpicks, our flashlights, and my pistol.

Still, the windbreakers were heavy for the sticky weather. I was sweating like a goat at a barbecue who had just realized he was the guest of honor.

As we came up on the paint shop, we avoided the lights that were out front of the place, the ones out back as well. We took to the side fence where it was dark, and stopped at the gate. Leonard went to work on it with his lockpick. Bolt cutters would have been better. Enough time passed with him working that lock I almost walked back to the car to see if Brett could drive me into town to pick up some coffee.

Finally, there was a faint clicking and the lock snapped open and we cracked the fence gate and slipped inside. There was the obvious smell of drying paint in the air, chemicals I couldn't identify. The travel trailer was still in its place. Off to the side were black, metal barrels containing who knew what. No junkyard dogs reported for duty.

We crossed the fenced-in lot and came to a back door. It was locked, of course.

Leonard went to work again with his lockpick.

This one was much harder than the first, but with diligence and a lot of soft cursing, the lock finally opened and we slid inside. We were damp from the mist in the air and sweaty from the windbreakers, and inside it was as stuffy as having a wool sock forced over your head.

We took out our flashlights and turned them on and poked them around. On tiptoe we went along, hoping not to trip any burglar alarms, but there didn't seem to be any.

It was easy.

twenty-six

Easy up until it wasn't.

Let me tell you. I been to a bunch of county fairs, a dozen goat ropings, and once saw a fat tourist woman in Mexico so drunk her ancestors were drunk get up on a bar, drop her drawers and pick up a cigarette lighter with her snatch, and that didn't surprise me as much as the sudden coming on of the lights in the paint shop.

I felt as if Leonard and I were on stage under a spotlight and that we should break into song. We had actually done that once, but that hadn't worked out too well. This looked to work out worse.

When my eyes adjusted, I saw Smallette and the ZZ Top imitators standing in a kind of horseshoe shape no more than twenty feet in front of us. Too Tall had a shotgun pointed at us, the opening of which looked about the size of Carlsbad Caverns. The others looked as content as if they'd just had a wet dream.

"You've brought a little friend, huh," Smallette said. "Bad choice for a playdate, but I'm glad you're here. I was afraid you'd go to the police, on account I realized I slipped up. No one knew about the torture but us."

"Let's just go on and blow their heads off," Wilson said. "I got to get home and set the DVR."

"I like to gloat," Smallette said, and then to us: "My cousin works at the florist shop, told me that redheaded smoothie talked to her manager. Overheard her. Ain't that some shit for you?"

"Ain't it," Leonard said.

"So, she tells me we was asked about, and I think about the ego that redhead has got, how the only real proof would be the jewels, maybe the flowers, but I'll figure out a lie around the flowers eventually. But if you were to get your hands on the jewels, well, that could cook our gooses. That redhead, I figured she'd want to solve this herself, or send someone to do it for her. And here you two are. By the way, where is she?"

"Bali," I said. "Took a vacation."

"I don't think so. I think we got to find and kill her too, and I tell you, I hate that. I could lick that redhead's ass until her crack grew flowers."

"Eeeeeewwww," Wilson said.

"Just 'cause you don't never get any," Smallette said, "ain't no reason to wish it on others."

Now she gave us her full attention. "Come on, assholes. We got a room with a drain in it. Easier to clean."

"What the fuck, sis?" Too Tall said. "You a James Bond villain? Let's get this over with. Come on prune balls, march."

"She's talking to you," Leonard said.

I started moving slowly, and Too Tall stepped to the side to let me get in front of him. Me and Leonard know each other's moves as well as a trapeze act, so when he sort of shuffled a step, looking like he was moving forward but wasn't, I yelled out, "The Elephant of Surprise."

That was code for the element of surprise, and that's when Leonard moved, hit the shotgun up and it went off. Leonard twisted the weapon from Too Tall's hands, but he couldn't hang onto it. It sailed away, went clattering into cans of paint, tipping them.

Smallette produced a pistol from inside her coveralls, that little dear of a weapon I had seen on a chair in her office. A bullet whizzed by my head as I gave Rat a left and a right so fast it was almost subliminal. He went down.

Leonard kneed Too Tall in the balls. Too Tall staggered. A bullet from Smallette's revolver nipped the air, but didn't hit anyone. Too Tall was bent over, grunting in pain. He managed to say, "Goddamn, sis. You near shot me."

Me and Leonard dodged behind some racks of paint cans as another bullet punched a hole in one and paint shot out like a geyser, splashing my shoulder with a very attractive blue color. We hustled down behind another row of paint cans, and then veered off, heading toward the door through which we entered. We pushed a rack of paint over as a distraction, then bolted toward the door. The space between there and freedom seemed the length of a football field.

As I pulled the door open, a bullet smacked into it. Glancing back, I saw Smallette and Wilson running at us. Too Tall was in the background, still bent, spinning around and around like a top, clutching his balls.

We went through the door and I jerked it closed. As we hustled toward the gate, I saw that Rat had got his shit together and had made his way through the main building, out to the gate, into the misty rain, and what was now a high wind. That little fucker was quick and, like a real rat, had good recovery skills. I saw too that he had produced a pistol from somewhere.

"We got you now," he said, and it certainly appeared that way. I heard Smallette and her brother coming through the door behind us.

"Trailer," Leonard said, and we darted toward it.

twenty-seven

We jerked open the trailer door, thankfully unlocked, and jumped inside. Rat's bullets smacked the door and the side of the trailer. Fortunately, the Smalls were all terrible shots; they couldn't have committed suicide with a shotgun under their chin.

I locked the door and pulled my pistol out.

"Now you draw it," Leonard said. "That's like closing the toilet lid before you shit."

"Is it?" I said. "Is it really?"

I lifted my head and peeked through the window, yelled, "Duck."

A shotgun blast took out the window, raining glass down on top of us.

"Guess who's up and running?" I said.

"That would be Too Tall," Leonard said.

I yelled out to them, "You're going to have to repaint, I think."

"Come on out and get yours," Too Tall said.

"Nice invitation, but no," I said.

Leonard had pulled the club out from under his windbreaker. Considering the situation, he might as well have pulled a toothpick out.

I heard something rolling then, but I was afraid to look out the window again; I figured they were focused on it. I moved to the rear of the trailer. There was a kind of bunk bed, and near the top bunk was a small, round window. I climbed up on the top bunk, eased my head up and looked out the window, saw what was rolling.

It was a big black barrel, and it was being rolled on its side toward the trailer by Wilson. He stopped it about six feet from the trailer, grabbed a crowbar off the floor, jammed it into the edge of the lid and popped it.

A clear liquid chugged out and fled toward the trailer.

Even inside, I could smell what was in the barrel. Paint cleaner.

Smallette moved out of the shadows and into view, walked over to the barrel, pulled a cigarette lighter from her highly practical and well-pocketed coveralls, and flipped it open. A little flame popped up, guttered savagely in the wind, so much so that Smallette cupped the flame with a palm.

“Ah, shit,” I said. “We’re about to get lit up.”

With a shit-eating grin, Smallette flipped the lighter into the paint thinner.

Let me tell you how it rose, the fire I mean.

It jumped, baby, and I mean jumped.

There was a roar and a flash of light, and I guess the shifting wind was the bulk of the intensity, though that paint thinner had an intensity of its own. But the wind, like the proverbial worm, had turned, and it wasn’t blowing in our direction. The gust caught the flames and carried them to Smallette.

Once, when I was a kid, my friend, Richard, stuck a feather in the ground and doused it with gasoline and lit a match to it. Having some fear of gasoline, I stood back a few paces, and when the feather lit, it went up in a rocket of flame and the flames licked high above the peak of the feather.

That’s how it was with Smallette. That flame grabbed her and wrapped her up as it blew off the gurgling paint thinner. Almost simultaneously the can, which still had the bulk of the thinner in it, exploded.

Shrapnel rattled through the air. Some hit the trailer, but most of it blew over Smallette and her family in a wave of fire. One moment she was standing, and in the next she was a blackened shape within a wad of flame. She crumpled to the ground and ash wafted up from her and spun away on the wind.

The fire kept whipping, and I could see shapes moving in and behind the flames. I heard shots, and then I heard screams, and then I could see the far fence through the flames, and I could see police cruiser lights flickering on the other side of it.

It was like an arsonist’s Christmas.

twenty-eight

We got heated up pretty good inside that trailer, and then the heat wave passed, and it was merely warm.

Leonard was looking out the window below the bunk, now. He said, “I think Smallette is well done, and them other motherfuckers are kind of medium rare.”

I slipped off the bunk and came down for a look. The flames had spread and the building to the right had caught on fire. I guess all those paint products weren’t helping. Cans were popping, flames were leaping up here and there, but there was a gap in front of the trailer and to the side where the fence ran.

We didn’t even consult one another. We headed out the door and went to the left. We climbed over the fencing. The fence was warm, but not too hot to climb. We went over it like squirrels. That fire was a great motivation. Barrels exploded behind us, nearly knocked us off the wire.

Dropping to the other side, we looked back as the flames hopped and crept across the lot.

Hanson and Brett and Pookie came around on our side, hustling toward us.

“You dumb motherfuckers,” Hanson said.

“Hey, how’s it hanging?” Leonard said.

“Goddamn you, Leonard,” Pookie said, grabbed him and kissed him like it was the end of World War II.

Brett came over and grabbed me. I held her, and we walked around to the front of the place. We stood for a moment in front of my car, which Brett had driven up, and watched the flames. Wilson had not only been burned, but shot by the police. He was lying on the ground next to a cruiser, his hands handcuffed behind is back. He was dark as inside of a hog, smoking like an overheated hot dog. I thought the handcuffs were probably not needed. He was done.

Rat was handcuffed and smoky, but alive. He was leaning against a cruiser. His beard and hair were cooked off, his face blackened in spots, raw pink in others. He looked stunned.

We could see what was left of Too Tall cooking inside the flames. The fire had jumped him too quick for him to escape, and police bullets hadn’t helped.

Smallette was little more than a bent crisp of meat, though I could make out her hands, clutching inward like talons.

Hanson said, “Good thing Brett called. We’re going to need the fire department.”

“Yeah,” I said, “my guess is what they stole is inside the shop, so you might want them to try and save that first. Whoops. There goes the travel trailer.”

It had caught fire now with a re-shifting of the damp wind. It cracked and wrinkled and began to collapse.

“Damn, that’s quick,” Pookie said. “If you had been inside, Leonard.”

“I wasn’t. But if I was going to go I had good company.”

I reached out and patted his arm. “Thanks, Leonard.”

“I was talking about the Smalls.”

“Fuck you, Leonard.”

twenty-nine

We didn’t know about it for a couple of days, but the fire department got there in time to save the shop, and they did find what was stolen. Some of it was jewels, some of it was money, and there were some odds and ends from the house in there. Expensive crystal, that sort of thing. It was all worth close to a million dollars fenced, which split four ways beat splitting seven ways.

“Well,” Brett said, after Hanson phoned and told us all the skinny, “our client is dead, robbed, and the bad guys are burned up, and you can say with confidence we lost money on this deal. We may not get in too bad trouble for breaking and entering and trespassing, but Hanson said a fine might be in order.”

“And I never did get that therapy.”

thirty

That night I showered and readied myself for bed, because I realized that the whole excitement of what we had done, some of it successful, some of it not, had cleared my head a little. I felt good about myself. Maybe Leonard was right. We were doing our best and we were doing it for good, and that was all you could ask.

If I thought too long, I would start defining good, and then splitting hairs, and trying to make a chart in my mind, positive on one side, negative on the other, but tonight, I didn't want to go there.

Brett had been in the bathroom a long time, and I had been reading a bit of Lewis Shiner's novel, *Black and White*. I had just laid it aside when Brett said from the bathroom, "Turn out the light."

I did.

The bathroom door opened and there was light in there, but it was a blue light, and then there was a click of machinery in there, followed by music, Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers singing "Little Bitty Pretty One."

I knew the song from the first moment it began.

That humming is magnificent.

Brett's long, naked leg appeared, gently kicking the air, a red high heel on her foot, and when Frankie got to the lyrics, Brett shook out of the bathroom, dancing, wearing as little as one could wear without being naked, and somehow, it was sexier than if she were nude, a red bra, red panties, and high heels, a blue light behind her, and a shimmy vigorous enough to make the statue of David have an erection and cause California to slide into the Pacific.

When she turned, and worked her butt left and right, up and down, I can assure you any feelings of needing a therapist went south, and I knew I was back because I had reconciled things with myself, at least for now. I was for the moment off the trek around the world, across the concrete ocean, turning the earth with a crowd. I was free.

Brett moved toward me, and as she did, she worked her red bra loose and dropped it. She swung it over her head and all about, snapped it off and over the bed and out of sight. She stopped dancing as the song neared the end, brought her legs together, pushed at her panties, let them drop. There was a bright red nest in the fork of her tree, and I wanted to live there.

And then the song was over and she was in bed with me and I was holding her. She touched me in the right place and said, “I see Little Hap is back in the game.”

“He’s been on vacation.”

She took hold of me, “Welcome back, honey,” she said.

I rolled her over and kissed her and she kissed me back. She said, “Had that song had one more lyric, I would have fainted, and let me tell you, try doing that in high heels.”

“I’ll leave that to you,” I said.

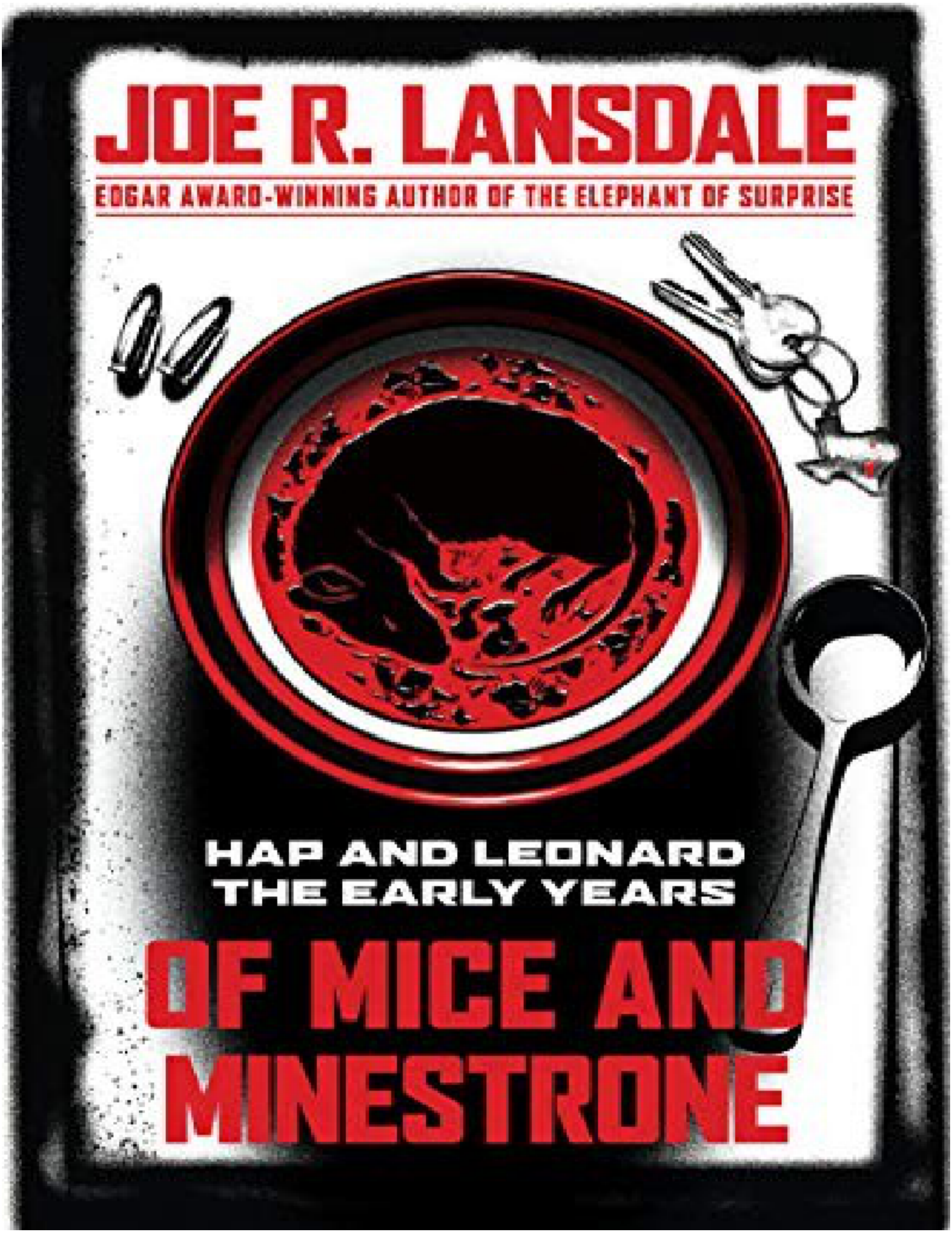
She wrapped her legs around me and clicked those heels together behind my back, reached between us and pushed down my pajama bottoms.

“How about an expedition to the cave?” she said.

“Packed and ready,” I said, and indeed I was.

About the Author

The author of more than fifty novels and short-story collections, **Joe R. Lansdale**'s prodigious output also includes work for comics, television, film, newspapers, and magazines. He has won multiple awards in crime, western, fantasy, horror, and science fiction. The crime thriller *Cold in July*, the cult classic *Bubba Ho-Tep,* and Sundance Channel's hit show *Hap and Leonard* number among his many stories to be filmed. Founder of the martial arts system Shen Chuan, Lansdale was inducted into the International Martial Arts Hall of Fame. He lives in Nacogdoches, Texas, with his wife, Karen, and their pit bull, Nicky.



JOE R. LANSDALE

EDGAR AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF THE ELEPHANT OF SURPRISE

HAP AND LEONARD
THE EARLY YEARS

OF MICE AND MINESTRONE

Praise for *Of Mice and Minestrone*

"An absolute treasure trove for Hap and Leonard fans. Going back to the beginning only deepens our love and appreciation for these guys. This collection proves once again why Joe Lansdale is one of our very best."

—Ace Atkins, author of *The Shameless*

"*Of Mice and Minestrone* is the last bit of connective tissue missing from the Hap and Leonard Mythos, which is one of the most entertaining series in modern literature. This book, which deals with abuse, friendship, violence, growing up, race, food, and justice, is full of the wit that's made Lansdale a star."

—Gabino Iglesias, author of *Coyote Songs*

"Five stories, four of them new, filling in more of the early years of that imperishable East Texas duo, Hap Collins and Leonard Pine. Kathleen Kent's brief introduction suggests that the running theme here is 'Kindness and Cruelty.' An even more precise motto might be 'Violence Is Inevitable,' since Lansdale consistently treats the often lethal outbursts of his characters in disarmingly matter-of-fact terms, as if the boys couldn't help it . . . laden with the same irresistible combination of relaxed badinage and playful threats that sometimes spiral into serious consequences while still remaining playful. The 17 down-home recipes contributed by Lansdale's daughter, Kasey, many of them as chatty as the stories, are a bonus."

—*Kirkus*

"There's a place in East Texas where story shades into memory, where violence and tenderness are just part of the wonder of living, and that's precisely where Joe Lansdale lives, and writes from, and we're all the better for it. The eating's pretty good there, too, as Hap's recipes more than attest. You leave this book hungry, both for food and to start the whole series all over again, live through it one more time, maybe just live there a while."

—Stephen Graham Jones, author of *Mongrels* and *The Only Good Indian*

“In these character studies of his two most charismatic protagonists, Joe Lansdale takes us to the dark side of Mayberry—authentic tales of small town life in the heart of the twentieth century that also provide an unflinching look at the violence that charged the last gasps of Jim Crow, with all the force of the Sabine River at flood stage.”

— Christopher Brown, author of *Tropic of Kansas*

Praise for Joe R. Lansdale

“A folklorist’s eye for telling detail and a front-porch raconteur’s sense of pace.”

—*New York Times Book Review*

“A terrifically gifted storyteller.”

—*Washington Post Book Review*

“Like gold standard writers Elmore Leonard and the late Donald Westlake, Joe R. Lansdale is one of the more versatile writers in America.”

—*Los Angeles Times*

“A zest for storytelling and gimlet eye for detail.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

“Lansdale is an immense talent.”

—*Booklist*

“Lansdale is a storyteller in the Texas tradition of outrageousness . . . but amped up to about 100,000 watts.”

—*Houston Chronicle*

“Lansdale’s been hailed, at varying points in his career, as the new Flannery O’Connor, William Faulkner-gone-madder, and the last surviving splatterpunk . . . sanctified in the blood of the walking Western dead and righteously readable.”

—*Austin Chronicle*

Praise for *Hap and Leonard: Blood and Lemonade*

“*Blood and Lemonade* is the best of Lansdale and the best of Hap and Leonard. As urgent as it is timeless. As fun as it is thoughtful. It haunts you while it kicks your ass. Joe never lets you down, just shows you over and over why he’s the best.”

—Jim Mickle, director of *Cold in July*

“A brilliant ‘mosaic’ novel. An amazingly vivid style that feels like Hemingway. Themes that are especially important for our time. With these early adventures of his compelling Hap and Leonard characters, Joe R. Lansdale hits a new high.”

—David Morrell, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Murder as a Fine Art*

“Magnificent storytelling.”

—*Char’s Horror Corner*

Selected works by Joe R. Lansdale

Hap and Leonard

Savage Season (1990)

Mucho Mojo (1994)

The Two-Bear Mambo (1995)

Bad Chili (1997)

Rumble Tumble (1998)

Veil's Visit: A Taste of Hap and Leonard (with Andrew Vachss, 1999)

Captains Outrageous (2001)

Vanilla Ride (2009)

Hyenas (2011)

Devil Red (2011)

Dead Aim (2013)

Honky Tonk Samurai (2016)

Hap and Leonard (2016)

Rusty Puppy (2017)

Coco Butternut (2017)

Blood and Lemonade (2017)

The Big Book of Hap and Leonard (2018)

Jack Rabbit Smile (2018)

The Elephant of Surprise (2019)

Other novels

Act of Love (1981)

Dead in the West (1986)

The Magic Wagon (1986)

The Nightrunners (1987)

The Drive-In (1988)

Cold in July (1989)

Tarzan: the Lost Adventure (with Edgar Rice Burroughs, 1995)

The Boar (1998)

Freezer Burn (1999)

Waltz of Shadows (1999)

The Big Blow (2000)

The Bottoms (2000)

A Fine Dark Line (2002)

Sunset and Sawdust (2004)

Lost Echoes (2007)

Leather Maiden (2008)

Flaming Zeppelins (2010)

All the Earth, Thrown to Sky (2011)

Edge of Dark Water (2012)

The Thicket (2013)

Paradise Sky (2015)

Fender Lizards (2015)

Bubba and the Cosmic Bloodsuckers (2017)

Terror Is Our Business (with Kasey Lansdale (2018)

OF MICE AND MINESTRONE

HAP AND LEONARD THE EARLY YEARS

JOE R. LANSDALE

TACHYON SAN FRANCISCO

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For my niece Pamela Lansdale Dunklin,
lady of many talents

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Good Eats: The Recipes of Hap and Leonard

by Kasey Lansdale

INTRODUCTION

KATHLEEN KENT

WESTERN WRITER J. FRANK DOBIE said at the beginning of his novel *Coronado's Children*, "These tales are not creations of mine. They belong to the soil and to the people of the soil." Joe R. Lansdale, one of the most prolific and natural-born storytellers I've ever known, seems to summon up his far-ranging narratives not so much from the heady ether of the Literary Muses, but from the Martian-red dirt of East Texas.

He's written at least forty-five novels, thirty short story collections, many chapbooks and comic book adaptations, but while I've spent several weeks reading this newest collection of early Hap and Leonard stories, *Of Mice and Minestrone*, there's a good chance he's published even more. Some of Joe's awards include ten Bram Stoker Awards, a British Fantasy Award, an Edgar Award for *The Bottoms*, and a World Horror Convention Grand Master Award. There are many other awards, both national and international. He's been inducted into the Texas Literary Hall of Fame, and several of his novels and short stories have been adapted to film.

I'd already been a fan of his, especially of his darkly majestic novel *The Bottoms*, but I'd never met him until we were on book tour together and at the Texas Book Festival in Austin. We shared the same publisher, and he'd just launched *Rusty Puppy*, number twelve in the Hap and Leonard series. I found to my delight that his growing up in East Texas mirrored a lot of my own childhood experiences, including the Piney Woods lexicon of Guns, God, and Grits (and usually in that order). Shared also was the frequently challenging work of rising out of the black tar of, as Joe would put it, "not being poor, just broke," and of subsequently being rescued by books, reading, and writing.

This new collection of Hap and Leonard stories takes the duo back to their youth, and illuminates, on a very personal level, the origins of their friendship. Sometimes painful, sometimes hilarious, the stories may not be completely autobiographical, but there is a strong thread of authenticity in the development of Joe's characters. The people he writes about who inhabit the sometimes-fictional towns behind the Pine Curtain *feel* real. The reader loves Hap and Leonard because Joe Lansdale loves them. They bleed, and sweat, and make love, and do actual work. And even the most despicable of the villains in the series are lovingly drawn, even if they are developed with a very dark, nightmarish ink.

A lot of Joe Lansdale's writing, whether it be westernthemed, science fiction, or contemporary crime, is violent. He has the soul of a poet, but he's also a realist and understands the often-confounding truth of living behind the Pine Curtain. “In East Texas,” Joe has said, “there’s a kindness and a violence that’s like a two-edged sword. You can find the kindest, most hospitable people here—and they’ll shoot you over what I might think of as a mere slight.”

If there is one theme running through all the Hap and Leonard stories within this collection, it might be “Kindness and Cruelty.” The tension throughout the narratives is not *if* the violence will erupt, but *when*. In “Sparring Partner” a boxing coach named Dixie says to Hap, “Leonard would make a hell of a boxer . . . Could go all the way. And you too, except you got a streak of kindness in you.” That streak of kindness does not in any way prevent Hap, however, from beating someone’s ass when the occasion calls for it.

There is a strong sense of the moral “rightness” of things that seems inherent in both Hap and Leonard, even if—as is illustrated in the title story, “Of Mice and Minestrone,” where Hap tries to rescue a battered woman—no good deed goes unpunished. But there is no preciousness, no sentimentality to these moral corrections from the two friends, and often the lesson is learned through the criminal’s blood, sweat, and tears.

The stories are redolent with details of growing up in East Texas, a place that is not really the South, and not really like the rest of Texas. The weather is hot and humid, the vegetation lush, the spiders and snakes venomous, the women often more so. But Joe Lansdale’s true genius lies in revealing his characters’ strengths and weaknesses through dialogue—sometimes sparse, sometimes loquacious, but always true to the time and place. And, often, the simplest dialogue addresses the most weighted social issues, like racial injustice, sexual and family violence, and the repercussions of fighting in foreign wars. In the story “The Sabine Was High,” Leonard talks about his time in Viet Nam: “You know, I’d be lying there in the jungle . . . and I could hear people praying, but I didn’t pray, because, like you, I’m not a believer . . . But I damn sure believed in hope then, because that’s all I had to believe in, except being ready.”

These stories deepen and enrich the already iconic standing of the Hap and Leonard series. Although, the adventures are new, they all feel as comfortable and familiar as a long-anticipated homecoming. As Hap says, “There are some people you don’t talk to for a couple years, maybe more, and soon as you see them, it’s like they have only left the room for a moment, and that’s how it was with me and Leonard.”

Kathleen Kent

http://www.kathleenkent.com

HAP AND LEONARD, THE EARLY DAYS

Hap and Leonard have been with me a long time, and since their source comes from the well of my experience, in another way they have been with me even longer.

I have enjoyed writing about them over the years, and they are without a doubt my favorite character creations. I might have written some stand-alone books that will register higher on the critical meter, but the characters and their conflicts and adventures have gone on steadily to my delight, and gratefully, to the equal delight of the readers.

This book is a collection of short stories written about the duo in their early years. In the TV show *Hap and Leonard* they met as children, but that was TV. In my world they met later, as teenagers, and it wasn't until they were young men out of high school, one coming back from prison, the other from the Vietnam War, that their friendship was solidified to the status of brothers.

A previous volume, *Blood and Lemonade*, deals with this meeting in a story titled "Tire Fire." The stories in that book deal mostly with Hap and his parents, and some with Leonard, and they are all tied together by a connecting tissue that is a kind of story unto itself.

I had great fun writing those stories, as I did with these. Here Hap and Leonard are together much more, and as the stories continue, they are about the both of them. Navigating their world, growing tough and, in Hap's case, disappointed in love (hinted at) and in his lifetime ambitions.

There are other stories about the pair I may eventually tell. I've wanted to write about Hap's meeting with Trudy and how he chose to go to prison to protest the draft, and how Trudy, who encouraged him to do just that, abandoned him while he was behind bars, sent him divorce papers. But that story is yet to come.

The first story, "The Kitchen," more of a vignette really, sets the tone for who Hap was, and the last story sets the tone for who he has become. "The Sabine Is High" deals with the aftermath of Hap's marriage and his time in prison, and at the same time deals with Leonard's return from Viet Nam, and how they both have some heavy experiences to deal with, which may in ways explain at least some of their penchant for righting wrongs and dealing with both the light and the darkness in their souls.

One thing that is unique about this volume is not just a few stories were written for it, rounded out with already published stories. This volume contains only one story that has been previously published, “The Watering Shed,” and all the others appear here for the very first time, and currently this is the only place you can read them.

Another unique element is the recipes. They are inspired by the food mentioned in the stories, and my daughter Kasey provides those. We thought they might be a fun addition, since food is important to the Hap and Leonard stories, the same as music.

I hope you enjoy reading these stories as much as I enjoyed writing them.

And so, from the wilds of East Texas, I bid you adieu.

Joe R. Lansdale

Nacogdoches, Texas

June 2019

THE KITCHEN

I MUST HAVE BEEN SIX or seven at the time, and it was an event that went on for years, this gathering of relatives. Neither do I remember the occasion, or if there was one. Meaning it had nothing to do with Christmas, Thanksgiving, or any holiday. I believe it was just a visit to Grandma's house. She lived about an hour from us, in a big old house on about thirty acres. She was quite old then, but still very mobile. She was the only living grandparent I had. The others had died long ago.

My grandmother had been born in the 1880s and had come to Texas as a child in a covered wagon from Oklahoma Territory. She had seen Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, and she had seen men land on the moon. She lived to be nearly a hundred years old, until a bout of pneumonia killed her chance at achieving a centennial.

On this day it was cold. Not common in East Texas, but we have a couple, sometimes three months or so, when it's that way. It wasn't icy or wet, just cold.

The smell of chicken frying in lard after being dipped and rolled in flour and eggs and dropped into the hot grease was the smell that woke me up. I don’t remember what day of the week it was, but my father wasn’t there, so it was most likely a workday. That could be any day from Monday to Saturday, and sometimes on Sunday, though my mother and other religious folks didn’t like the idea of working on the day of the Sabbath.

“Let God come get me,” my dad used to say, and I could envision him whipping God’s ass. My dad inspired a lot of confidence.

When I got up, my mother fixed me breakfast. I remember I had what she called cornmeal mush. It was essentially grits with butter and a tablespoon of sugar and a dash of milk. It was my favorite breakfast food at that age. Now and again I added a sliced banana.

While I ate, my mother dipped the fried chicken out of the deep skillet with tongs, and put it on a plate covered with paper towels, and then she covered the chicken in paper towels.

After my breakfast, I got to mix the cornbread batter with a wooden spoon so big and long I had to rest it on my shoulder. When that was done, she made cornbread in the oven, and then we packed everything in boxes and brown paper sacks to be loaded in the car. I don’t know what kind of car it was, but it was green. She let me carry some mixing bowls and a sack that had some cooking utensils and a box of Lipton Tea, which most East Texans back then viewed as the nectar of the gods.

I still do.

Mama drove us to Grandma's house. Her house smelled of food, and I think it was then that food began to matter to me, not just to eat, but to smell and delight in.

No food has ever tasted as good to me again as the food our family shared.

Grandma's cooking smells were of dried pinto beans being made less dry, simmering on the stove. It was a gas stove, but there had been a wooden one in its place only a few years back. I had never seen her cook on that stove, it was before I was born, but the stove was in the barn out back. My uncle had pointed it out to me.

My grandmother lived with my uncles, and they had just begun to move into the present with a gas stove, and though they had electricity, kerosene lanterns were placed about the house and not too long back, my mother told me, that was all the light they had.

Other conveniences were to follow, though I remember drawing water up from the well in the backyard with a rope, bucket, and pulley. The only thing I hated about visiting my grandmother, and my uncles, was the outhouse. I hated the smell and the discomfort of sitting there in the heat waiting for a turd to pass, wiping my ass on magazine pages, a method that only slightly had the edge over dried oak leaves. Another worry was there always seemed to be a nest of wasps or yellow jackets in the corner of the ceiling.

My aunts from both sides of the family were there when we arrived, as well as my cousins, and I had a lot of them. We were close then, and saw each other frequently, but over the years moves and adulthood responsibilities had displaced us. At family gatherings we were close and played chase and hiding-go-seek outside while the grownups cooked and talked about bills and illness and a better job.

My grandmother had a huge table in her dining room just off the kitchen. She had photos framed on the wall of family members, living and dead. I remember one of my uncles when they were kids, standing with a goat between them. My Uncle Charlie leaned on crutches, his reward for having had polio. My Uncle Jimmy stood straight and tall with his chin slightly lifted. He had served in the Philippines during the war, and kind and gentle as he was, there were shadows in his eyes, and as I grew older, I knew why. He had been part of some of the hardest fighting that had occurred. Now, as an adult, I recognize those same shadows in my eyes, but for different reasons. And, from time to time I see and recognize the darkness lurking in the eyes of my best friend and brother Leonard.

As time for supper neared, the cooked food was pulled from the stovetop and oven, and the already cooked goods were re-warmed. I was told to go out to the smokehouse and fill a large straw basket with potatoes. The potatoes were kept in burlap bags, and on the opposite side of the log-and-lumber shack meat hung, cool and snug, smelling of salt and hickory smoke.

I was always unnerved to go out there. I had seen those hogs alive earlier that year and had patted one on the head. I wondered if that hog was one of those that was split and cured, hanging from a rafter with his friends and family.

I dug around in the bags and filled the basket with red potatoes. I was about to leave, when a long chicken snake slid out of the stack of potato bags and decided to stop right in front of the closed door, the smokehouse's only exit.

I knew from experience it was a chicken snake. We had a chicken house out back of our house, and we had rows of chickens there who laid eggs in straw-lined boxes. A few times, when I had gone with my father or mother to gather eggs, I had been startled by the same sort of snake. But I had my parents with me then, and my mother always kept an old hoe inside the door for just such incidents. Chicken snakes ate eggs and baby chicks, and we ate eggs too, so it was a survival of the fittest.

I didn't have my parents and I didn't have a hoe, but I had a chicken snake and a closed door. I decided I had to make it move, so I took potatoes from my basket and threw them at the snake. Frightened, it rose up and extended itself, its body cocked to strike. I didn't know then a chicken snake wasn't poisonous. All snakes were venomous in my view. I had heard tales that snakes could bite their tail and roll downhill like a wheel. I had heard of milk snakes that latched on to the udders of cows and sucked their milk. I heard of snakes that could fly.

For me snakes were all a dangerous and mysterious breed of crawling critter. Armed as I was with spuds, I continued to throw potatoes, and finally the snake zipped off, between the other lumpy potato bags. I raced to the door, and leaving it open as I stood just outside, I picked up the potatoes I had thrown, and put them back in the basket.

Rushing back to the house, I had my snake encounter to chatter about, hoping I would be rewarded for my bravery. Instead, my grandmother said, “Oh, that’s Charlie. He’s all right. He eats the rats that get in there.”

My mother said, “Oh, I hate snakes. Even the rat eaters. I’m always reminded of the Adam and Eve story, and how the snake convinced Eve to eat the forbidden fruit.”

“Charlie’s all right,” Grandma said. “I don’t think he and the Bible snake are kin.”

Some laughter went around, and then the women—my grandmother, mother, and aunts—reached into my basket of potatoes and sat in chairs placed in a circle with newspapers placed on the floor in front of them, and began to peel potatoes, the peelings dropping onto the paper, later to be tossed into the garden to naturally compost. The potato peeling went fast, and the potatoes were fried up fast in deep fryers of hot lard.

Eventually my father and uncles showed up from work. My crippled Uncle Charlie came in on his crutches, and they all spoke to me and ruffled my hair, except my dad, who merely said, “Son.”

Before long the food was all cooked, and the latest and strongest smell was off the French fries and pinto beans. With the recently cooked food, and the food brought for the event by the family, there was so much food one would have thought it was our plan to feed the local chapter of the National Guard.

It was all placed on long folding tables with folding metal chairs pushed up under them. All the kids were called in, and we all had to wash up. It was done in a big pan of water that was set into a basin, and we made a line in front of it that trailed into the living room. We took turns, and my Uncle Jimmy emptied the pan from time to time by standing in the backyard doorway, pushing the screen back, and tossing the water into the grass. He would then pour fresh water from the well bucket into the pan, and the line of hand washers would continue until we were all finished.

The youngsters' table and chairs were directly under the pin oak tree. We sat, and food was brought to us on plates. We didn't ask for anything in particular; the food was prepared for us, and there was no question of what we would eat.

We ate until we couldn't eat, and then the short day ended and the night came in, and with it the sounds of crickets, and the big bullfrogs down by the creek. Had it been the right time of year, the night would have been filled with fireflies.

A big metal oil drum with an opening cut into it set in the yard near the pin oak. It was stuffed with kindling and logs and the faint aroma of kerosene. It was lit by my Uncle Jimmy, and the fire licked out of the top and through rusted gaps throughout the barrel. The logs crackled, and the air several feet from the can was warmed.

When the food was eaten, the adults had coffee and the coffeepot was sat on top of the barrel to keep warm. And then came the sweets.

My grandmother, mother, and aunts brought paper plates, cloth napkins, metal forks, and covered pies and cookies, German chocolate cake, which I hated, and thick but soft bricks of pecan bread. It all smelled wonderful. I zeroed in on my favorite: rich chocolate pie with high-mounded meringue.

These treats were stuffed into already full bellies, and in time my cousins wandered off to play chase in the dark, as was often done, and I played too, but soon I found myself back at the circle, listening to the adults. They were beginning to tell stories.

Stories of the Wild West Show, Billy the Kid, how my grandma and her kids had been so poor during the Depression that they had nothing to eat but a tow sack full of onions. And then my father told why he wouldn't eat mashed potatoes under any circumstances. As a child he had lived off of them for several months, potatoes being the only available food. He didn't care if they had butter on them, gravy, or were coated in bacon grease, the mere thought of them made him sick.

The stories dribbled out as it got late, and cars filled with the cousins, aunts, and uncles, and went away. We went away last, loading Mom's pans and plates and some of the leftovers into the back of her car. Every car had departed with leftovers.

Daddy went on ahead to the house in his work car, and we followed.

I sat in the back with the sacks of food, listened to pans and empty platters rattle in the trunk. I finally leaned against the car door. I could see bright stars in the clear night sky. I felt warm and sleepy.

The moon made the road in front of us shine, as if waxed. I drifted off. I dreamed of space travel like I had seen in the comic books or in the Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon serials on TV. I imagined I was a space captain, and my family always stocked my spaceship with home-cooked food before I started my space adventures with my trusty ray gun and extreme confidence. My spaceship, like those of Buck and Flash, spurted sparks and blossomed smoke, and the smoke ridiculously floated up.

Even dreaming, I smelled the aroma of fried chicken and pies and biscuits and cornbread. Smells of family gatherings and the warm kitchens where it was all cooked. The smells of contentment and security, all the grand things that a child adores before the illusion of magic and endless possibilities is broken by experience and time and life’s plans tumble like meteors from the sky.

But in that moment, in that warm car with all those smells, I was as close to nirvana as a being could even be, or would ever be again.

OF MICE AND MINESTRONE

PART I

THAT SUMMER I got a job at the police station, which was also the city jail. These days a kid wouldn't be thought of for such a job, but back then it wasn't so uncommon, and a kid, like me, worked cheap.

It was in the little town of Marvel Creek, tucked tight in the East Texas pines, near the meandering brown river called the Sabine.

The police station was positioned near the center of town, and there were big oaks and massive pecan trees in the front yard, and it was cooler there in the summer than in a lot of places, because the trees had a nice shade. Inside the building it was comfortable too, because it was built of large blocks of granite and they stayed cool. There was an industrial-sized water cooler in one of the windows at the end of the hall, and if you came in during the dead of a hot summer day, it was pleasantly damp inside and the wind from the fan was enough to ruffle your hair.

I was sixteen then, and I was trying to make enough money to put gas in my car. My mother and father were far from well-to-do, but they had bought me a very fine used car, a bronze ’64 Impala, and I thought I might actually start being able to date, taking a girl to the one theater in town, or driving her over to Tyler so we could go to movies there, or drive-in theaters, go out to eat, maybe just ride around, the evening culminating in a parking place somewhere that was romantic and quiet under a dark sky and bright stars.

The job made me feel older than my sixteen years. At the jail I heard a lot of cussing from inmates and cops, and that’s where I stored up a lot of future verbal ammunition. There was one cop, Hilo Barnes, who I thought was exactly what a cop ought to be, just from the way he looked. The police department were all white guys, and wore uniforms, but the uniforms were tan and looked more like the sort a sheriff’s crew would wear. They all had cowboy hats and .38 revolvers, and every man, for there were only men then, wore cowboy boots. All of them had blackjacks or slamjacks that they either carried in a back pocket or strapped to their gun belts. Hilo had dark sunglasses, and when you looked at him you could see yourself in them. He walked tall and had a kind of confidence that radiated off of him.

There were people behind the bars of the three cells much of the time, and it was usually the same drunk who got hauled in on Friday night, and sometimes even voluntarily showed up to arrest himself, so that he might have a place to sleep it off. The other two usually held black prisoners who were in trouble for a variety of infractions, most often drunk and disorderly, fighting, and in a few cases certain things that were listed simply as “too uppity.” Meaning that they had been acting too much like a white person, not strictly following the unwritten code that was the Jim Crow laws.

I would sweep and clean up and deliver meals to the prisoners, and most anything they needed there, and at the end of the week, on Friday, the eagle flew, as they used to say, meaning we were paid.

One late afternoon, not long after work, I stopped at a filling station on the way home. I pulled up at a pump with a car parked on the opposite side of it. A woman was sitting in the car on the passenger side, looking straight ahead, and the driver’s side seat was empty.

Back then it was common for someone to come out and run your gas for you, wipe your windshield, check your oil and transmission fluid, make sure your tires had the right amount of air. It was part of the service.

But the station I stopped at was a one-man operation, and frequently the customers pumped their own gas, and paid afterward.

I got out of my car and got the pump going, put the gas nozzle in the tank, and started pumping. I didn’t have enough money to fill the car up, but back then a dollar’s gas would go a long way, even though it was almost as hard to come by as twenty dollars is today, maybe more.

The gas was pumped, and I went to hang up the nozzle, and as I did a bit of the gas inside of it splashed out, and as fate would have it, that’s right when a burly, balding man stepped up to take the nozzle next, and some of the gas splashed on his boots.

The man said, “Goddamn, boy.”

“Sorry, sir. I didn’t mean to.”

“You don’t watch what you’re doing.”

“Sorry.”

His face had turned red, and his shoulders looked tight under his loose-fitting black T-shirt, and he had rolled the T-shirt’s short sleeves even shorter and tighter to show off his arms, which sported biceps only slightly smaller than a fat baby’s head. He had on cuffed blue jeans and big black motorcycle boots that had almost seen their better days.

“Way to be more careful is to take an ass whipping, boy.”

“I apologized, sir.”

“Apology don’t do my shoes no good, now does it?”

“No, sir, but it’ll wipe off.”

“That’s the thing, boy. I shouldn’t have to wipe them off at all. I think you’re going to wipe them off, and you’re going to do it with your shirttail.”

“No, sir. I’m not going to do that.”

He was bigger than me and no doubt more ruthless, but even at sixteen I was stout and quick and had been training in boxing and wrestling and had just started training in judo at the Tyler YMCA. I hadn’t arrived at where I was going to arrive in that training, but I had been in more than a few fights, a couple of them of a serious survival nature, and I knew one damn thing for sure, I wasn’t about to wipe that asshole's shoes with my shirt, or anything else.

"I say you are going to do it."

That's when I heard the car door open, and the lady got out and grabbed him by the arm and said, "Dash, he's just a kid. He didn't mean nothing by it."

He turned his head slowly. It seemed dreamlike the way he turned his head, and as he did I saw the woman sort of sink inside herself and lift her hands, and then the left hook came, and it knocked her hand aside and caught her a solid one in the right eye. She staggered like a drunk and fell back against the fender of the car and sat down on the ground.

"You son of a bitch," I said, and right then the station owner, Mr. Carlson, came out carrying a nightstick.

"Dash, now you go on, or I'll have to wrap this stick around your head. Get your wife there, load her up, and go on."

"You ought not get into my business," Dash said. "You might end up with that thing stuck up your ass."

"Now, you go on. Get Minnie and go on. She may be your business, but this place here, it's my place of business."

Dash did that slow head turn again and looked at me. "It's your lucky day, punk."

He turned and grabbed the woman under the arms and pulled her up, leaned her against the fender, opened the door, then grabbed her as she started to sink again and put her in the car with all the delicacy of a carny folding up a circus tent.

Turning, he studied me, raised his hand and made a finger gun of it, and brought his thumb down slowly, said, “Pow.”

He got in his car, an old Dodge, started it up, and drove out of there.

That night when I got home Mom was fixing some pinto beans she had soaked, adding whatever goodness it was she added to them, and she was heating up some collard greens in a pan next to them. The greens were what was left from the night before, and she had made two pans of cornbread. One had jalapeños in it like I liked, and the other didn’t, like Dad liked. They had been pulled from the oven and were on the wooden block on the drain board, ready to be sliced and lined with butter.

“You all right?” she said. “Look like you walked over your grave.”

“I’m fine,” I said.

“Well, okay. You sure?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

“All right then, supper’ll be ready before long.”

I went into the bathroom and took a shower, combed my hair in front of the mirror, wrapped a towel around my waist, and went into my room.

We didn’t have much in the way of money, but being an only child allowed me to have my own space. It was dark in my room. I pretty much kept the curtains drawn. There was an air conditioner in the window, and I went over and turned it on and soon the stale air in the room began to fade and turn cool. I dropped the towel and put on some underwear and went over and laid down on the bed and thought about what had happened.

I wasn’t sure why I didn’t tell my mother about it, but I think it was because I was a little ashamed. I hadn’t stood up for that woman and she had stood up for me. But the worst of it was she had gone home with Dash, as he was called, and if he hit her like that in public, what the hell did he do in private?

Not long after that, Dad came home from work. I heard him come in, heard my mom say, “Supper’s near ready,” to him.

I got up and put on some jeans and a T-shirt, slipped on my socks and shoes, and went to eat.

I thought about the event for a few days, dodged going to that station when I needed gas, went to a Conoco on the other side of town, which was no great journey, as town took about fifteen minutes to cross.

After a while, the whole thing faded from my mind, but I was in the downtown Piggly Wiggly one day, shopping for a few things for Mom, when I saw the woman from the filling station come in. She walked slowly with her head down, and through the front plate glass I could see Dash’s Dodge in the parking lot, and he was outside of it, leaning on the hood, smoking a cigarette, dressed just as he had been the day I first crossed his path.

The woman moved swiftly past the checkout counter, on into the depths of the store, grabbing a buggy as she went. She was about to start shopping when she looked up and saw me. She looked like a raccoon. Both eyes were black, and the bruises were fresh. She had a knot on the side of her head that was lumped up like there was a rock under her skin. It was the first time I got a good look at her, and without the knot and the black eyes, I could see an attractive woman there, someone who had given up on being attractive. Her hair was tied back severely, as if to match her existence, and when she saw me looking at her, I knew she recognized me too.

She turned quickly with her basket and went down a row of groceries. I couldn't help myself. As my dad once said about my mom and me, if something was not our business, we'd be sure to stick our nose into it.

I tried not rush up behind her, but instead went along the left side of the aisle, as she pushed her cart along the right side. She turned and looked as I came up on her left, said, "Now you go on."

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry he hit you because of me."

"He hits me on account of anything. But you stay out of it. It's husband and wife business."

"It's not the way my parents do it."

"It's the way Dash does it, and that's my concern. It's in the Bible."

"What is?"

"A woman obeying her husband. I smarted and got corrected."

She had stopped pushing the basket now, and we were standing in the aisle talking. She wouldn't look directly at me, kept her head turned slightly to the side.

"That may be, but you don't have to take this kind of thing. You don't have to. Call the cops on him."

"I did. Know what they said? It's husband and wife business, not our business, not law business."

"If this isn't their business, I don't know what is."

"I know this. I got a worse beating after that, and I've learned to live with it."

"You call this living?"

"Who are you to know anything. You're a kid. Let me tell you something. Enjoy being your age, and skip marrying. You do, your life is over. It's all downhill after that. Life is a misery. I got the next life to take care of me."

You can't argue with people who are that deep in religion, so I didn't. I said, "I don't know it has to be that way, but if you get tired of it being that way, why don't you leave?"

"A wife is supposed to stick with her husband through thick and thin."

"And he's supposed to be a husband, not use you for a heavy bag."

"You go on now, ain't nothing going to change. I take too long in here, he sees me talking to you, it wouldn't be good for either of us."

She abruptly shoved the basket forward and went down the aisle, pausing to pick up some cans of soup and drop them into the buggy.

I got the RC Cola I had come in for and a bag of peanuts. I paid for them and went out. I glanced at Dash. He wasn't looking at me. He was still leaning on his car, smoking a cigarette. I walked on down the sidewalk and out to the side of the Piggly Wiggly and got in my car. I opened my drink with a church key I had in the car. I drank a bit of the cola, then opened my bag of peanuts and poured them down the neck of the bottle and listened to the salty nuts fizz in the soda. When it settled, I took a swig and chewed the wet peanuts. I felt like I ought to do something about that poor woman, but I didn't know what.

I backed the car out with one hand and held my drink in the other, and then I drove home to shower and go on a date with a girl I had wanted to go out with for some time. I began to think about that. I didn't think about the woman anymore. Like before, she and her situation drifted to the back of my teenage mind as they had before and rested there silently.

Several months crawled by, and one day as I was driving up to the Piggly Wiggly to do some shopping for Mom, I saw Minnie going inside. She looked older to me than the time before, stooped, walked as if dragging a ball and chain.

Inside I caught up with her as she pushed a basket down the aisle.

She said, "You again."

"Listen. I'm not trying to meddle."

"That's exactly what you're doing."

"Sorry. Fair enough. I'll go on."

Before I had made more than a couple of steps, she said, “Thank you. If there was something I could do, I would do it.”

I moved closer to her. “You can leave.”

“And go where?”

“Don’t you have any relatives?”

“I have a sister in Lubbock.”

“Are you on good terms with her?”

“Yes. But I haven’t spoken to her in several years. Dash doesn’t like me talking to people. Anyone, but especially men. He’s outside in the car, you know, listening to the radio.”

I thought for a moment, said, “Listen, here’s what I can do. I have enough in my pocket to put you on a bus and send you to your sister’s, if you’ll do it. I’ll give you a little more so you can buy something to eat.”

“That’s expensive.”

“Not really,” I said, though I knew I would be spending my money plus the money Mom gave me to buy groceries.

She stood there for a long moment, thinking.

“You’d do that?”

“I would.”

“He’s watching for me to come out, you know.”

“I’ll pull around back. He probably doesn’t even remember me or my car.”

“Enough he blacked my eyes and . . . Well, it was rough.”

In that moment, when she looked at me with her bottom lip fat and cracked, her face aged, her body bent, I wanted to kill that man.

But what I said was, “You decide to do it. I’ll drive around back and pick you up and take you to the bus station.”

She nodded. “Okay. Okay. But please, don’t let him see me. He stops me, he might kill me this time.”

I went outside and spotted Dash sitting in his car behind the wheel, nodding to music. I couldn’t hear what it was because the windows were rolled up. I was glad for that. I would have hated for it to be a favorite song of mine that I would ever after have to associate with him.

I drove my car around back and went inside there, walked through the storage area, waving at a friend of mine who had a summer job working for Coca-Cola putting out bottles of Coke.

“What’s up, Hap?”

“Nothing much,” I said. “Giving a friend a ride.”

Inside the store she was waiting, having abandoned the buggy. I guided her through the back and past my friend, who waved again, and we went out to my car and I drove her to the bus station.

Inside I bought her a ticket and gave her some coins to call her sister. When she came back from the pay phone, she said everything was all right. That her sister wanted to help, and so on. If she hadn’t wanted to help, I guess I would have been out a ticket. I gave her the rest of the money I had, and then I sat with her for about an hour until the bus arrived. I walked her out to the bus. She looked miraculously younger; her chin was lifted, her eyes had a sparkle.

As she was about to step on the bus, she said, “I’ll never forget you."

"All right if you do," I said. "I hope everything is fine with your sister."

As she stepped on the lower bus step to go through the door, I said, "Good luck, Minnie."

She nodded at me and got on the bus. The door hissed closed, and I went back to my car and drove home, needing to explain to my mother that her grocery money was on its way to Lubbock.

I continued to work part-time at the police station and jail, sweeping and mopping, feeding the prisoners, who were mostly overnight visitors who couldn't stay away from the bottle. I became friendly with the chief and his officers. I can't say I felt like one of the boys, but I felt good enough.

As for the woman, Minnie, I felt good about that, and sometimes when I tucked in for the night, I thought of my good deed and felt like a comic book hero, even though all I had done was buy a bus ticket and give her some lunch money.

I even saw Dash at the station one night, roaring drunk. They had him come in and sit on a bunk in one of the cells, left him there for a while without locking the door. They had me make him coffee, which I brought to him, a bit nervous-like, but he didn't recognize me. He drank the coffee, and a little later he was less drunk, and he napped, and then he woke up and had a pulled pork sandwich they brought in for him.

Hilo came in shortly before my shift was to end. They had given me extra hours on my summer job by adding a night shift. I was working about six hours a day. Three in the morning, and three at night. During the middle of the day they had what we called a colored man back then come in and polish the cops' shoes and do more severe cleaning than I did. They called him Pop. He had a limp from when a tire he was airing up at filling station got too much air and blew and the rim hit him in the leg and crippled him a little. He always walked like his right leg was sleepy and couldn't keep up.

Hilo sat with Dash, who was groggy, but doing okay, and they laughed about how drunk he'd been, and so on. The whole thing made me uncomfortable.

Seeing Dash in the cell earlier made me think of the woman that night when I crawled into bed, and I wondered how she was doing and what kind of life she was having. I had a hard time sleeping.

It was the very next day that I saw her. After school I drove over to the Piggly Wiggly to get myself an RC and a bag of peanuts, and when I parked and got out, I saw her walking away from the store. I thought at first it was someone who just reminded me of her, but there was something about the way she held her head, how she walked, but with a worse limp than before, that had me walk and catch up with her as she passed the corner of the store. I wanted to see if it was really her, and damn if it wasn't.

When I got up next to her, she shifted me a fearful look, reminding me of a mouse that had seen a hawk's shadow. She looked terrible. Her eyes were blacked and her nose had a knot on it and her lips were busted and scabby.

"Minnie. What are you doing here?"

"You go on now."

"No. What are you doing here?"

She hadn't stopped walking, and I was walking with her.

"You don't want him to see you, now."

"You went to Lubbock. Why did you come back?"

She stopped, looked at me. "Oh, kid. You don't know nothing. He come and got me. He come and got me that very week. He knew where I went. Where else was there for me to go?"

"You didn't have to go back with him."

"Yeah. I did. It's in the Bible. I'm to obey."

"Oh, hell, Minnie. That isn't true, even if it is in the Bible. Some Old Testament bullshit."

"Don't talk like that."

I didn't normally talk like that around women and adults then, but in that moment, I sure did. I couldn't hold it in.

"Look what you've come back to. Why?"

"Didn't have no other place to go, and he come and got me and put me in the car, and I've accepted that. I smart-mouthed him and he gave me this just this morning. I've learned my lesson. His word is law, and that's how it is. That's my life."

“That’s no life. You don’t deserve this.”

She lifted a hand in the direction of her face.

“I had it coming.”

“No you didn’t.”

“You go on and leave me alone now. Nothing you can do for me. Nothing anyone can do for me. You go on. Don’t bother me again.”

I stood on my spot and watched her limp off down the sidewalk with the attitude of an outcast leper, limp on across the park where there were seesaws and swings and tall oaks and pecan trees, and the shadows of the trees lay over her like a shroud.

PART II

I WAS DOWNSTAIRS in the police station, sweeping up the corridor with a dust mop, when he came staggering in the front door and partially collapsed near the receptionist's desk, leaving tracks through a place I had just mopped. He kind of heaved himself forward, made as if he was about to burp, defeated the need, said, "I think I done been poisoned."

What?" Constance said. She was a middle-aged lady with a pile of dark hair on her head stacked so high she almost needed a donkey ride to reach the top of it.

Right then the man went to his knees and his wad of greasy dark Elvis hair fell on his forehead and into his eyes. He tried to get his feet under him, but they weren't interested. He let out with a groan like he was passing a turd full of razor blades, then fell on the tile.

I knew the man, and what passed through my mind was pretty cruel. Whatever was wrong with him, it couldn't happen to bigger and more deserving asshole than that guy.

I had two weeks left on the cop shop job before I started back to school. It was my last year. I liked the money I was getting, but I was bored with the job, and to tell you the truth, the whole thing just depressed me. You can only be around drunks and crazed rednecks so long before you either go numb or you start to be like them. I wanted to finish up my senior year and get on with my life, do whatever it was I was going to do. I wanted out of Marvel Creek. You might call it a one-horse town, and if you did, that horse was crippled and blind in one eye and needed to be put down.

It was Dash, Minnie's husband. He had threatened to fight me once, but since then I had seen him a couple times in the jail, sleeping off a drunk, and he didn't seem to recognize me. Maybe it was because my hair had grown out a bit, but more likely it was because the alcohol didn't help his memory any.

Hilo came out from the back. A lean, handsome cop who always looked crisp and polished, a man I had once admired. Over time, I liked him less, if for no other reason than he was a friend of the wife-beater, good ole boy, Dash.

I put my mop aside and went over and helped Hilo lift Dash up and we stretched him out on a bench and put a book from the receptionist's desk under his head. It was a thick and ragged hardback of *Gone With the Wind*.

"Dash," Hilo said. "Can you hear me, fella?"

Dash couldn't hear him. He had grown as white as the peaks of the Himalayas except for little pink clouds that spotted his skin around the cheeks. I could hear him breathing. It didn't sound like distressed breathing, but nonetheless, it didn't take Ben Casey to tell he was in bad way. Lassie would have given up on him.

Constance called an ambulance, and since they were pretty much next door, they were there in a matter of seconds, parking outside at the curb, then coming up the walk between the pecan trees with a stretcher. I held the door open for them.

They put Dash on the stretcher and carried him out, one arm dangling, his knuckles nearly dragging the ground.

Hilo said, "I want you to go over to the hospital with him."

"Me?"

"Who the hell else am I talking to?"

"I'm not a cop."

"No, you ain't. But I'm all that's here at the station now, and you have just been promoted to cop helper. Go over there and find out what the doctors say and come back and tell me. If he's been poisoned, I want to know how. He may have just got some spoiled food, but the way he came in, I got to wonder. Now go on. Drive over there. No use getting in a hurry. They got him."

This was a fine howdy-do. I hated that bastard, and now I had to go check on him, babysit a bit. Hilo, of course, didn't know I had been in a situation with him, and I didn't tell him. I just went out the door and started walking to my car, which was parked out to the side in the parking lot next to a line of sweetgums.

The wind was stiff and hot as a mad dog's pecker. I felt heavy and tired immediately in the summer heat, as if the weather had a wool-gloved hand and was pressing down on the top of my head. I was instantly coated in sweat, and inside my car, the back of my shirt stuck to the seat covers.

I didn't get in any rush. I drove to the Dairy Queen and stopped and went inside and got myself an ice cream cone and ate it sitting in a booth, then I bought a tall paper cup of Coke with shaved ice in it and drove over to the hospital. I finished the Coke in the car and got out and made my way inside as if I were going to my own execution.

Not everything was air-conditioned back then, but the hospital was, and the cool air made the sweat on the back of my shirt feel good. I went to the registration counter, where a woman with hair that could compete with Constance's sat in a chair and smiled at me. She wouldn't tell me anything about Dash's condition, and for some reason, she was reluctant to tell me what room he was in. I told her I was sent there by the police, but if she was moved by that information, she concealed it.

I found a candy striper who was hustling through the hospital. She was a cute brunette girl and the outfit made her cuter. I knew her a little from school and would have liked to know her better. I stopped her and told her who I was looking for, stressing I worked for the police department, to see if I could impress her. Like the receptionist, if I had she held her excitement close to her chest. But she did show me where to go by walking down the hall with me. Her perfume was heavenly and prominent enough I could have closed my eyes and followed her scent.

When I was at his room, my candy striper companion headed out and left me feeling sad and wistful. The door was partially open. I looked inside. He wasn't in there, but I understood then this was the room where he would end up.

I went and sat in a chair in the hallway and watched some more candy stripers go by in their cute uniforms. They were all pretty. I recognized some of them from school but didn't really know any of them.

I sat there hoping Dash would die, and his wife Minnie would be free, and then I felt bad about it for a time, and then I decided I still wished him dead, and kept wishing, as if that really mattered. As my dad said, "Shit in one hand, wish in the other, and see which one fills up first."

After a while they wheeled Dash into the room assigned to him. I went over and spoke to the doctor when he came out of the room, told him I had been sent over by the police department, and they wanted to know how he was and what was wrong.

"I can only talk to the police or a family member. You're neither."

"Cops sent me over."

"Tell them to send someone else over. With authority."

That gave me a way out. I went back to the station, but they were still short-handed, including the chief, so Hilo told me to drive over to Dash's house and see if his wife knew that he was in the hospital, did she even know he was sick and maybe poisoned somehow. He gave me the address.

The idea that anyone would do that now, have a citizen do the cops' work for them, is unthought of. But back then, in the sixties, in small towns, they sort of made up their own rules.

I drove over there, and it was out in the country a little, down a red clay road. A car in front of me was driving fast, and the dry red dust rose up in clouds, and when I drove through the clouds, the dust coated my windshield.

I was thinking it was a good day to be home in front of the window fan, reading, or maybe out fishing with my friend Leonard. Me and him, we knew all the good fishing holes.

When I came to the house, I parked in the dirt driveway. It wasn't a good house. It was small and had last been painted about the time of the Pliocene. Gray shingles flapped on the roof like hot tongues begging for water. Where they lifted up, I could see tar paper. There was tar paper over some of the windows too, and the steps in front of the door sagged a little to one side.

I walked with hesitation up the drive, mounted the leaning steps, and knocked on the door. No one answered. I went around back, and as I did, I had a queasy feeling if I knocked on the back door she might answer this time, and I would see her wearing her raccoon eyes and knotted forehead from his blows. Her nose might be broken, her lip fat. I didn't like the idea of that. I knocked, but no one answered back there either. There was a fan humming in the window by the door. It had a screen wire netting over the back with flies resting on it.

There were always flies resting on the back of a cooler, or most anything that time of year.

I walked around front and got a little notepad and a pencil out of my car and wrote out a note and stuck it in the crack between the screen door and the door frame and drove out of there.

I hadn’t gone more than a mile when I saw some crows rise up, startled by my motor. They flew off quick, having come out of a swirl of blackberry vines that grew alongside the road. Beyond the vines was a ditch, and because I was coming up on a hill I could see down into it, and there was something odd in it. At first, I thought it might be a store mannequin, what we called a dummy back then, but I recognized what the shape was wearing. The same dress Minnie always wore, thin and gray and sad-looking.

Feeling a knot growing in the pit of my stomach, I parked the car on the edge of the road, got out, and made my feet move, went over to look in the ditch.

It was indeed poor Minnie.

I gathered myself and slid down into the ditch and took a look at her. Flies were buzzing on her eyes and in her open mouth. Her face was battered and she had fat finger marks against her neck. I shooed the flies and went back to my car and got an old blanket I had in the back seat and took it down and put it over her after I shooed the flies again.

Her feet stuck out under the short blanket. She had on one shoe. I found the other one nearby, and for whatever reason, I slipped it on her bare foot, which was more difficult than I would have imagined. She was pretty stiff. None of this was something you should do with a crime scene, but I didn't know that back then, and frankly, I'm not sure a lot of our police knew it, and I don't know if it would have mattered to me. I felt she should be covered and have her shoe on. Great police work was most likely unnecessary. We had our share of murders in and around Marvel Creek, but it was usually obvious who did it, and I felt this was pretty obvious as well.

When I got back in the car, my hands were trembling, and I could hardly turn the key. I wanted to go to the hospital and smother Dash in his sleep. I wanted to do a lot of things to him, and none of them good.

Finally, I got the motor humming and drove back to the station.

There was quite a bit of excitement over the next couple of days about Minnie's murder and Dash being in the hospital. It was a real-life murder mystery, the paper said, but it didn't seem that mysterious to me. I had gotten Minnie away from that horrid bastard once, and then she had gone back to him, and now this.

I gave my statement to Hilo, and then a reporter came around to see me, but I didn't tell him much. I had him talk to Hilo.

Next day I heard them chatting around the station. Dash had indeed been poisoned. Arsenic was suspected, rat poison the culprit. Found on the stove at Dash's house was a large pot of minestrone soup, and at the bottom of the pot two rats, dead of poison it was surmised.

No doubt about it, Minnie had boiled a couple of poisoned rats in his soup, hoping to put him down. It was suspected that she had liberally dosed the soup with rat poison too.

Hilo had been to the hospital to talk to Dash a couple of times, and he said Dash grinned and said, "I thought it was some of the best soup she had ever made. The rats gave it flavor for once."

As for Minnie, well, a woman who picked up soda bottles to sell came into the station the day after I found the body, and said, "I seen that woman that got killed. Seen her picture in the paper. One that boiled the poisoned rats in that man's soup."

I was mopping the lower floor bathroom, the one the receptionist and the cops used, when that woman came in, but I could hear her talking clearly. She sat in a chair at the receptionist's desk, and Hilo pulled a chair up for himself, and Constance wrote down what the woman said in shorthand to be typed up later.

"I like to pick up pop bottles. I carry me a bag, and if I have a good day, I can darn near fill it. I fill it, well, then I can't carry it. I walk that road once a week to get them tossed bottles, but I won't no more, not since they found that woman dead, and then of course, there's the colored man."

“Who would that be?” Hilo said.

“I seen him that very day. He was walking along the railroad tracks. It was that fella that sharpens lawn mower blades and such.”

“You mean Calabash?”

“That’s him. Yeah. I seen him walking along the tracks, and then when I heard they found that dead woman, well I put two and two together and come here to give you my arithmetic.”

I backed out of the bathroom, still mopping, listening.

“You see, it was along about the same time the paper said she must have been killed. I figured that big buck got her.”

“That makes some things clear,” Hilo said.

I thought: what’s clear is Dash killed her.

I went mopping along the hall, and pretty soon I was at the end of it and couldn’t hear them anymore.

About a half hour later, I couldn’t stand it, so I found Hilo. He was in his small office with a rotating fan on a table next to him. He was rocked back in his chair with his feet on his desk, drinking a bottle of grape soda.

He looked up as I came in, almost smiled.

“Hey, boy. Take a load off.”

I sat down in the chair in front of his desk. The fan rotated my way and cooled me for an instant before turning back toward Hilo and leaving me in the heat.

I said, “Hilo, I know you know Dash beat his wife.”

“Now and again.”

"He hurt her pretty bad and she reported here but wasn't nothing done about it."

Hilo's face soured. "Listen here. We know Dash and his wife fought. Husbands and wives do that."

"I'm not talking about having an argument."

"Some women, they just don't know when to shut up. Dash had to pop her one now and again. It was for her own good."

"Her own good? How is her being dead in a ditch for her own good?"

"Whoa now. Dash is a good ole boy. He didn't kill her. Fact is, pretty sure we know who done it. You know the big nigger works here shining shoes and such, takes your place in the summer."

"Pop? He gets around so slow Minnie would have had to strangle herself. Besides, he doesn't sharpen lawn mower blades."

"I mean Pop's son. He was the one she seen near the railroad tracks, not far from the ditch where you found Minnie."

"That don't mean he did it."

"It means he likely did it. He's been in prison for rape and was suspected in a murder once. His own cousin. She had gone off with him and was found in the river bottoms next day, naked with her throat cut. He's had a bit of trouble around town more than once after that. Had light fingers. He seems likely for it."

"But Dash beat his wife regularly. Gave her a limp. She reported it to the station here. No one did anything."

"She could have left at any time. Staying was her choice. Again, boy. Husband and wife business."

"Sounds to me like murder is Dash's business."

Hilo's face colored, and he pulled his feet off his desk and settled into place and slammed the bottle of grape soda down on his desk hard enough to make me jump a little. Little beads of the drink bounced in the air and splashed on the back of his hand and onto the desk.

"You ain't no goddamn policeman, boy. I've known Dash all my life. We hunt and fish together. He's a good ole boy. His wife, she was a real bitch. She had ideas about how she should do this or that, and he didn't want her to. Man has the say, not the wife. She had to be corrected now and then for smartin' off or trying to wear the pants in the family."

"Did that correction and those pants get her in that ditch?"

"You talking pretty sharp to a man you work for. You got about a week and a half to go. You don't have to finish out."

I thought of the gas I wanted to put in my car, and I shut my mouth. I'm not proud of that. All I can tell you is I was seventeen.

The storm cloud on Hilo's face went away, and he grinned. "It's all right. You're just saying your piece. But now you've said it. Go on back to work, now. We won't talk about it no more. It's best we don't, hear?"

I nodded and went out, ashamed of myself for agreeing.

I was coming back from the café after lunch, when I saw a struggle out front of the station. There were three cops, Hilo one of them, grappling with a big black man, trying to get him up the steps. He was throwing them loose of him like a dog shedding water.

He knocked one of the cops out in the yard and up against one of the pecan trees. The thrown cop got up like he didn't really want to and went back at it. Finally, one of the cops dove for his legs and Calabash fell and his head cracked on the steps, and it was a loud crack, like a car tire rolling over a walnut. They eventually got him up and into the station, and I came in as they were trying to wrestle him upstairs to the jail cells.

It was quite the fight. Smacking his head on that step outside hadn't worried him long. Hilo came rolling down the stairs, tumbling out on the lower floor. When he went back up, his face red with embarrassment, he pulled his slapjack from his belt and went to work on the big man while the other cops held him.

It was a horrible beating. Blood was on the stairs and on the walls along the stairs, and some of the blood had flown down and spotted my face where I stood in the lobby. The big man was still standing, and though he stood for a long time, even he could only take so much. He went to his knees and Hilo hit him a few more times with the slapjack, each blow hard enough to drive a nail.

They got him upstairs, and I watched them disappear around the edge of the stairway and the wall.

I don't know exactly why, but I followed them up, and when I got up there they were still working on him. Now they were punching and kicking him, and Hilo was using that slapjack like he was swatting flies, only what that poor man was getting was a lot worse than what he'd have gotten from a fly swatter.

They got him in a cell, threw him in there, and closed the door and poked a key in the lock and penned him up. The prisoner got up and stumbled to the bars and took hold of them and tried to shake them, but they were so imbedded in concrete King Kong couldn't have made them move. He did that for a moment, blood running down his face and all over his once-white shirt. His teeth were gritted in a fence of anger and were stained with blood. He sat down suddenly on the floor. His legs had turned to rubber, and once he sat, he wavered there a moment, then fell back on the cement, turned over as if to crawl, and then he was still as stone.

"Hope that nigger dies," Hilo said.

Hilo, who was always crisp and neat, looked like a long-haired cat that had been groomed with a machete. His hat was gone, his hair was sticking up like weeds in a briar patch, and his shirt was torn as well as one of his pants pockets. There was blood on his face and on his shoes. He looked in better shape than the other two.

Then he saw me. "What the fuck you looking at, boy? Get a mop. Clean this place up."

I almost threw in the towel, right then, but I had a little more than a week left, and then I was back in school. Still, I didn't move. I stood my ground and the cops passed me and went down the stairs, fuming and cussing.

I went over to the cell and looked in. The big man had woken up. He put his hands under him and made a sound a little like a dying mouse, and then slowly, as if he were building himself into place, bone by bone, muscle by muscle, he made it to his feet. He saw me looking at him.

“Go on, kid. Get the hell away from me.”

I went and got the mop out of the closet, and the mop bucket, and filled it with water and floor soap, and went to work mopping up blood on the second floor and on the stairs. Blood sheds easier than it cleans, but I got it mopped up and the walls wiped.

When I had that done, I went downstairs and told Constance that she ought to call a doctor, because the man upstairs was in a bad way.

She got up and went into the chief’s office. I didn’t even know he was around. He had been out for a week or so. He came out of his office with his thumbs hooked in his gun belt. He was Hilo’s cousin. He was about ten years older and he was a little fat and worn-out looking.

“Is that what all that ruckus was about? A nigger whipping?”

I didn’t say anything, but he could tell from my face that that was what it was about. He hadn’t even bothered to come out of his office with all that fighting going on, perhaps for fear of having to deal with the big man himself.

“I was trying to do some goddamn paper work. Hilo!”

Hilo came out of the downstairs bathroom wiping his face with a bloody towel.

“What the hell happened to you? Look like you got caught up in a lawn mower.”

“Nigger trouble. Jake and Earl, they’re patching each other up in the back.”

“He whipped all three of you?”

“He’s the one in the cell.”

“But it took all three of you?”

“I hadn’t never had hold of anyone like that. It was like fighting a goddamn octopus.”

“He the one that lady, whatever her name is, reported?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I assume you asked him if he’d come in before you decided to flail on him?”

“Yes, sir. He didn’t have a mind to come in. Said he didn’t do nothing.”

“Might not have.”

“Well, sir. He’s got a record.”

“Investigate it. Maybe give him a solid interrogation, if you know what I mean. But I think you’re going to need more men and maybe a hammer.”

Hilo didn’t like that he hadn’t been able to handle the man upstairs better than he had. And, of course, now I knew they were talking about Calabash, the one they decided had strangled poor Minnie.

Pop's hands were like leather mitts and his face looked to have been irrigated, his wrinkles were so deep. His hair was snow white and cut close, and his eyes were as sad as those paintings of Jesus on the cross, and they had scar tissue above them, thick as tree bark and similar in appearance. He was big and slightly bent, and when he walked, he lumbered and limped. When I saw him, he was usually carrying his shoe box. He worked at the barbershop now and then shining shoes and was brought into the police station to do the same for the cops from time to time, and when the summer was gone, he would be my replacement at the jail and police station as janitor and errand runner. There was a rumor that he had once been a professional boxer.

He came into the station without his shoe box and asked politely at the front desk if he could see his son, and got the nod. He went upstairs behind me. I was carrying my mop bucket up to do some work in the back room, and frankly, when I realized he was going up, I started ahead of him, being curious.

I went on into the janitor closet just beyond the cells, near the room where they interrogated people, sometimes with words, sometimes with fists. I slowly went about pouring dirty water out of the bucket down the drain and refilling it with fresh hot water from the floor sink.

I got the bucket full, added a bit of floor soap, and put a new mop head on the mop. Pop had arrived and pulled up a folding chair that had been against the wall and parked it in front of the cell and eased himself into it. I could see him through the crack in the door as I went about my preparations.

“What you done got yourself into, boy?”

“I didn’t do nothing,” Calabash said.

“You’ve done something before.”

“Said I didn’t do nothing. Before ain’t now.”

“You always doing something.”

“Back then, yeah, not now. How come you don’t never stand up for me?”

“You got to stand up first.”

“Self-righteous, ain’t you, old man? You always got the do-right talk, but you ain’t nothing but an old Uncle Tom. They snipped your nuts long ago.”

“You weren’t behind them bars, I’d slap your face, boy.”

“Tell them to let you in.”

“You ain’t the bad man you think.”

“Tell that to all them cops it took to put me in here. Tell them that. You fought some in the day, but you ain’t nothing now. Not a thing. I could bend you over my knee and paddle your ass way you used to do me.”

“You’re not tough. Not in the way it counts. You’re just mean and low down. I never could understand you.”

“No. You never could.”

I had the rolling bucket ready now, so I pushed it out of the closet with the mop and gently closed the door. Pop looked up when I did. It was like he had just noticed I was upstairs.

Pushing the bucket along, I made my way to the back room. I could still hear them talking.

"You done this, you ought to come clean, boy. You done this, you got to pay."

"Ever nigger ever born pays, old man. Even the Uncle Toms. Where's being the good nigger got you, huh?"

"You don't need to use that word about our people. Let the white man use it, not you."

"We let them do it a lot."

"Our day will come."

"You still counting on Moses to bring you to the promise land, old man?"

"I'm counting on time."

"Not in your time, old man. You got maybe a year or two left, and you'll be leaning on the door to hell."

"That's your place to go," said Pop.

"You want me to tell them I did it so I can fry like ham in the electric chair? That what you want?"

"It's your soul I'm worried about."

"I ain't got no soul."

"I hate to hear that, son. I really do."

"You ain't got one neither. Ain't no one got none. Us niggers ain't even got a toilet in town. Got to piss out behind a building, and heaven help you if anyone sees you do it. Then you're showing your stuff. Can’t buy a goddamn hamburger without going through the back door. I’d like a place to eat and I’d like a place to shit in town, same as white folks. Look over there at that commode. I ought to rip it out of the wall, lean up against the bars, and shit through it. Mess on the floor there.”

“You just being vulgar. Ought to be a man, Calabash. That’s what you ought to be. Your mama—”

“Don’t bring her into this. She done worked herself to death. She worked herself to death for Jesus and Heaven tomorrow. When it come tomorrow, she just died, old man. Just died.”

“You don’t know a thing about her. She raised you, and you don’t know a thing about her.”

“Go on now. I’m through with you, Uncle Tom. I’m ashamed to say you my daddy. All you did was shoot some juice in a good woman. You ain’t no kind of daddy.”

“Don’t talk like that.”

You just say what’s supposed to be right, and ain’t none of it right. Come up here close, old man. I got something to tell you. You want to hear something, I got it for you.”

I heard Pop’s chair scrape closer, and they said something else to each other, something soft. I swished my mop past the open door, and Pop was close to the bars looking in at Calabash. I could just see Calabash’s face. He had it pressed tight against the bars and he was saying something to Pop, something mean. I saw Pop sink in his shoes, and then he started shuffling toward the stairs.

“Put that in your pipe and smoke it,” Calabash said as Pop moved away.

Pop looked at me as I swished back across the doorway. He smiled a little. It was a habit smile, not a real one. It reminded me of one I had seen him give the cops in the station, right after they insulted him: a hard, little smile full of pain and remembrance.

Nodding, he went on down the stairs and I went back to mopping.

“Hey, white boy,” Calabash called out to me.

I left the mop in the bucket and went over to where Pop had left the chair.

“Hey, boy. Why don’t you drop your pants and back up to the bars here and I’ll fuck you. You’d like a black snake, wouldn’t you?”

I didn’t say anything. I took the chair from where Pop left it and put it against the wall and went back to mopping. I could hear Calabash laugh and then he was quiet, and then I thought I heard a noise like someone with a cold, and then he was quiet again.

Later, when I put the mop up, I glanced in the cell. Calabash was lying on his cot with his arm flung over his eyes.

It wasn’t none of my business, so I got right on it.

I went over to the hospital to see Dash, but he wasn’t in. They had let him go home, though I was assured he was doing poorly. I think the nurse who told me this thought I was on a police matter, a helper they had sent for information, and I let her believe it. No one had before, or no one thought it mattered, so it was all right to have a moment of power, minor as it might have been.

Driving over to Dash's house, I was trying to figure how I would go about what I had in mind, but nothing presented itself, so I just drove there and got out and knocked on the door.

After a long time, the door opened, and there was Dash. The poison had given him a stroke. He limped along on his left leg, his left fist clenched.

When he saw me at the door, I could tell he didn't recognize me. He never did. Right then, though, hating him as much as I did, seeing gray in his hair he hadn't had before, him weak and pale like that, I felt sorry for him. I'm always like that. So is my mother. My father is kind, but he isn't sentimental about assholes. I sometimes think I'm sentimental about everything and everybody.

"Who are you?"

"I work at the police department. You've seen me there."

"Yeah. Long-haired kid. What do you want?"

"Calabash. I don't think he killed your wife. I'm thinking it was you."

For a moment his pale face had some color.

"Who the fuck did you say you are? You're not old enough to be a cop. Shit, boy. I didn't kill anybody, but I could start with you."

"I think if the next line is 'I'm going to get my gun,' you should note that I got you beat if it comes to a foot race."

"You think you're a funny little fucker, don't you?"

"I think there's an innocent man about to be railroaded for murdering your wife, and you did it."

"She damn sure deserved it, but it wasn't me. It was that nigger. Calabash. He did it. Get the hell out of here. I don't want you around. Why'd you come here?"

"Just wanted you to know someone knows, even if there may not be a damn thing I can do about it."

"You don't know your ass from a hole in the ground."

"I'm the one who put her on a bus so she could see her sister. But you went and got her."

"That was you . . . Oh hell. I know you. I not only seen you at the jail, you was the one at the filling station. See that now, you long-haired motherfucker. I should have kicked your ass."

"Should have tried, but instead you took it out on a woman that might have weighed a hundred and twenty pounds with rocks in her pocket. She wanted to be away from you, but you made her stick. You treated her like she was a cow you bought at an auction."

A crooked smile crawled across his face.

"Not quite. You can fuck a cow, but you can't get them to do laundry. Besides, I went to her sister's, and she was ready to come home. She didn't have no money, except what little I gave her."

"It had to be very little."

"You need to go on and get out of my business. I'm going to phone Hilo and tell him about you. You won't have that job long."

“Go ahead. I just wanted you to know I know, and I think the law and such know, but it’s easier to pick on some black man who can take the fall for you. Hitting a woman like that. Shit, you ought to have poisoned yourself and been glad to do it.”

“Go on, kid. I’ve had enough of you. I was at myself I’d whip your ass all over the yard. Shit, boy. What you think? They’re going to arrest me on some suspicion you got? Them boys know me. Hilo especially. Women, you got to keep them dick-whipped. Man’s woman is a man’s woman, and she has to know her place. The Bible says that.”

“That’s one reason I gave up religion. As for her place, I think she sure showed you yours. How were those poisoned mice in minestrone?”

“Get off my place.”

“Gladly.”

I hadn’t really accomplished anything, but I wanted that mean, poisoned, crippled son of a bitch to know someone knew, and Minnie mattered to someone, even if I only knew her from a few short conversations.

Dash went back inside, maybe to get his gun, and I went out to the car, walking pretty fast, just in case he had that gun close and handy.

I didn’t have any doubt my sweeping and mopping days at the jail were done, and probably before I could get back there. Dash would be on the phone already.

I didn’t give a shit. I had had it up to the top of my head with all the crap that went on down there, all the crap I was learning that went on underneath the façade of my little Andy of Mayberry town.

Driving up to park in front of the station, next to the curb near the great pecan tree, I saw Pop limping up the steps and going inside. He had his shine box with him. They had probably called him over to shine cop shoes, which struck me as brutal, considering his son was in a cell upstairs. The back of Pop’s shirt had a V of sweat on it and it was stuck to him. The sides of the steps had a concrete support, and he had the box in one hand and the other on the support, using it to help him move up the steps. All in all, he was moving swiftly.

I got out of my car and saw a squirrel at the base of the pecan. He gave me a cautious look, then jetted up the trunk and into the green leaves above.

The air was still and smelled like an oncoming rain.

When I was inside, I saw Pop turn up the stairs. I decided before they fired me, I would go up and tell Pop goodbye. I stopped and let him reach the top before I started up. When I got to the top of the stairs, Hilo was there, coming out of the back room. He had his hat in his hand and his hair was ruffled from having been cooling himself off in front of the window fan.

“I got a call, boy.”

“I know,” I said.

“You might as well pack up anything you got up here and take it with you.”

“You don’t get to fire me,” I said. “I quit.”

“Think of it any way you like. Chief done told me you’re through here, now, next year, anytime.”

“Glad of it.”

“Don’t get smart with me.”

“I’m not getting smart, I’m getting my work shoes, and then I’m saying bye to Pop, and I’m gone.”

That’s when I noticed Hilo wasn’t looking at me anymore. He was looking down the gap that led to the cells. His brow was wrinkled. He dropped his hat.

I turned and looked down there too.

Pop had a pistol. It was a big revolver and looked old enough to have been used in the Civil War. He cocked the hammer back and pointed it at the cell where his son was.

I glanced back at Hilo. He was drawing his gun. He had it halfway out of his holster when his left eye and half his face jumped away from him and slapped against the wall with a sound like a wet rag. The wall smeared red.

I turned and looked at Pop. The gun was pointed in my direction. He studied me for a long moment. He turned back to the cell.

“You ain’t never gonna do right,” he said, and cocked back that single-action again.

I took one step forward without even realizing it. I should have gone down those stairs like a hurricane, but I took that one step for whatever reason, and when I did, I could see Calabash standing in his cell, his hands on the bars.

“That’s right. What you can’t fix you shit on,” Calabash said.

“You sure can’t be fixed,” Pop said.

“Go ahead. Do me a goddamn favor.”

The gun snapped and nothing happened. The load was bad. Pop cocked back the hammer again, causing the cylinder to rotate.

“It’s best, son.”

“For who?” Calabash said, and lost his nerve, backed away from the bars. The gun fired. I heard a sound like someone coughing, and then Pop cocked the gun again, and it jumped in his hand once more. Then he walked over to the cell, stuck the gun through the bars and popped off another shot. Way he was standing I couldn’t still see in the cell.

I put my back to the wall as he turned and looked at me.

“Wasn’t nothing for it,” Pop said. “Told me he killed and raped that girl, just like last time. Said he liked it. I turned out his light, boy. I turned it out.”

He dropped the pistol and walked past me, then turned and went back and got his shine box, like he had an appointment to polish shoes. He passed me again with his box, his old face suddenly smooth as a baby’s ass, and went around the side of the wall and started down the stairs. I realized I had been holding my breath. I moved away from the wall and went over and looked in the cell. The back wall and floor were red with blood and Calabash was on his side. He had big red blooms of blood on his chest and abdomen. His eyes and mouth were open. He looked like a man who had found a snake in his mailbox.

I hurried back to the stairway, eased my head around the corner, saw Pop going out the front door with his box. I turned and looked at the wall. Part of Hilo's face was stuck there, but it was sliding ever so slowly down the wall, like a slug on a windowpane.

When I got downstairs, the chief was standing in front of the reception desk. He had a pistol in his hand. He looked and saw me and the pistol pointed at me. If he had looked any more frightened, there would have to have been two of him.

"Pop shot Calabash," I said. "And Hilo."

"They alive?"

"Not likely."

"I guess I better go get him." But the chief didn't move.

At home that night I would have thought I wouldn't have had an appetite, but it was as if I was a hollow in the earth that couldn't be filled.

I told my parents what had happened, and my mother tried to talk to me, but my dad said, "Let him be."

I sat at the table like always, and Mom brought out what she called Mexican Mess, and put it on my plate, and cut me some jalapeños and grated some cheese on top of it, and then brought out Mexican cornbread and butter, and all manner of other things. When we had the food, she always cooked like she was expecting the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

She kept looking at me like she expected me to levitate or something.

Dad glanced at me now and again, but he didn't try to hold my gaze. I must have had that thing they call the thousand-yard stare. He leaned out from his chair and touched me on the shoulder gentle as a butterfly, then turned to the food Mom was heaping on his plate.

I ate more than Dad did. I ate more than anyone did since the creation of the world, and Mom even made me oatmeal on the stove after that, as I kept saying how hungry I was. By bedtime I was sick to my stomach, and ended up throwing up, and if I ate more than anyone since the creation of the world, since humans walked the earth, I also puked more than anyone ever. I thought my insides were coming out. But when it was all over, I felt marginally better, dissolved some baking soda in a glass of water, drank that to settle my stomach, and went to bed.

My life was a staggering blank for a few days, and I saw things different from then on. Colors changed, then wind blew strange, and the rain was the heavens' tears. People's voices sounded piped in from afar, and when I spoke my own voice sounded strange to me, and when I looked at people I saw flesh bags full of blood and bone, all of them heading for a ride in the hearse, a hole in the ground. My own face in the mirror was strange and pale, and my eyes were small holes that I kept staring at, trying to rediscover myself inside of them.

For a long time, I slept poorly, with the closet light on, the door to the closet partially open to spread the light across my room. Most nights I dreamed I was in the cell and Pop was pointing the revolver at me. I would then see Hilo's face on the wall, oozing down in what looked like strawberry jam spotted with bone and a clinging eyeball. I saw Calabash on his side, his eyes open, and one night, in a dream, Calabash winked at me, said, "Do me a god-damn favor."

It seemed so real I jumped awake with a yell.

Dad came in the room then. He sat in a chair by the bed. I noticed in the thin moonlight from the window that he looked tired and old for the first time in my memory. Maybe I just hadn't been paying attention. Wrinkles covered his face like map lines, and his missing teeth on one side had caused his jaw to sink. He had pulled them out when they were bad by tying a cord to a doorknob, then the other end to the tooth, and then he would slam the door by kicking it with his foot. It was cheap dentistry.

I was already sitting up when he came in. I was sweating cold sweat.

I didn't say anything to him. He sat silent for a long time, but it felt fine to have him near. I had once seen him bend a crowbar across his chest, crush an apple in his hand as if he were wadding up cellophane. If there were haints, they would fear him, not the other way around.

It startled me when he spoke.

“Thing like that, it don’t never go away completely, but you learn to get on with things.”

I didn’t ask him how he knew what I was dreaming about. He just knew. I’m sure it wasn’t the first time I had yelled in my sleep since it happened, though it was the first time it had brought me awake in the manner it had that night, and it was the first time it had brought Dad into the room, that I was aware of anyway. It was like all those nights and all those dreams had been building up to this explosive moment: the Vesuvius of nightmares.

“I thought Dash did it,” I said. “I was sure he killed her.”

“Another day, he might have.”

My dad always thought a black man was prone to that kind of thing, murder and rape, but tonight he didn’t say that. He held that back. I think he didn’t want to start a fight. Not that night.

“A fella can see something like what you saw, and it can hang in the back of his mind like a goddamn bat, but finally that bat will fly off. Sometimes it’ll come back and nest, but it won’t be around as much as it’s around now.”

“How do you know?”

“Things happen in life, you live long enough,” he said.

And in that instant I knew he too had seen some bad things. I didn’t ask him what. I didn’t want to know right then. Maybe later. But I realized, with some kind of odd comfort, that we were now, father and son, part of some rare and not-so-coveted club.

He got up and went out and came back with a damp washrag, gave it to me. “Wipe your face down, son.”

I did that. He took the rag.

“Here’s a thing I’m going to tell you that’s all I know about a thing like this. You move on. You got to. You don’t, well, that bat never flies out of the cave, just hangs around inside of it. Things that can’t be changed won’t be changed. You want some milk to help you sleep?”

“Okay,” I said.

Dad went into the kitchen, and I heard him pouring milk into a pan, and I knew the next move would be to heat the milk on the stove.

After a bit he came in carrying a glass of warm milk with a pot holder. He sat the glass on the nightstand and left the pot holder with it.

“Don’t burn yourself.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“You better?”

“Yes, sir.”

He gave a bit of a grunt and went out.

I drank the milk, and when I went back to bed, I thought of my dad in the next room with Mom. I thought of the sad club we belonged to, and for some reason, knowing that, I slept much better, and as the days passed, better yet. As Dad predicted, the bat flew away more often, but now and again, in an unsuspecting moment, asleep or awake, it flapped back into the little dark cave inside my head and made its presence known.

After the shooting Pop had walked down to the café and gone through the front door like a white man and found a table and sat there and placed his gun on the chair beside him. He called out for a hamburger and fries and Coke, and you can bet he got those. He sat there looking around, taking in the café, a place he had never been allowed to enter, and when the food came he started eating. One of the black cooks slipped out the back and went and fetched the police.

The chief finally arranged for some cops to get there, and they came and it was easy. Pop went without incident, giving up his gun. He only asked to finish eating the hamburger, and they let him. He went away with them then, pleaded guilty, ending up going to prison, and then the electric chair. My uncle knew a fellow worked at the Huntsville prison outside of Houston, and that fellow told him Pop had a cheeseburger, fries, and a chocolate shake for his last meal, and ate every bite. He carried a Bible with him to the execution chamber and a reverend walked at his side praying.

“The reverend walked with him,” my uncle said. “He thinks niggers got their own heaven, that’s what my friend told me. I ain’t so sure about that. My friend, they call him Captain, said Pop looked happy to go, like he was starting out on vacation. He had his head shaved, and Captain said it was so shiny in the lights it made you have to look away, but Pop didn't have his head hung. He kept it up. Captain said he didn't have that wild dog look in his eyes they get, and when they put the cap on him he smiled and asked if it would take long.

"'Naw,' said Captain, 'but you might jump a little.' But he didn't. They hit him the first time and he was gone quick, his skull smoking under his metal hat, but by the time they gave him the backup jolt, he had done crossed Jordan in a motorboat."

They buried Calabash in a colored graveyard out in the country, and I don't know who or if anyone came to the cemetery to see him go down. I only know he got buried. I don't know where Pop ended up, but my guess is the prison graveyard, most likely unmarked.

Dash, he got better and was still alive last time I heard. I really don't want to know any more about him. Not now, not ever.

THE WATERING SHED

When me and Leonard were young men, we decided to drive out to the Watering Shed to drink. We were underage, but we heard Shank figured if you could drive and had money, you could drink. I didn't even drink, but the Watering Shed was a kind of rite of passage, and we wanted to go there just to prove our balls had dropped. It would be our first visit.

Leonard, being black, wasn't exactly welcome. Though on the books East Texas was integrated, a lot of white folks were having a problem embracing it.

I think Leonard half-hoped he'd be denied, and that he could cause some trouble over it. Leonard has always been kind of angry, and he may have been even more angry then.

There was also this: he was queer as a six-toed cat and proud of it, and was as tough as a nickel steak and so masculine he made the macho tough guys look like they wore lace panties and shaved their balls.

The Watering Shed was well out in the woods, down by the river, and there were stories about how people went out there and didn't come back, were later found in the river. Shank was known to settle some matters with a baseball bat or a cutoff shotgun he kept behind the bar. As for the clientele, well, let's just say they weren't sophisticated.

Frankly, I don't know how it happened, but since Leonard and I met, we had become friends, and had bonded because of certain incidents, and truth was, we were moving beyond mere friendship and were becoming like brothers. Him being black and me being white broke some unwritten rules, and me hanging with him and him being queer, that just made it all the worse as far as many Southern folk were concerned.

When we got to the Watering Shed, there were a few cars parked out front, and the night was settling down on the world, and there was a glint of silver moonlight on the tin roof. We went in, Leonard bold as a cold, bare titty at a strip show, and me a little nervous, like a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs.

When we entered, you could have heard a microbe drop.

There was tobacco smoke in the air, and it was a little warm, and it smelled funny, an accumulation of sweat and alcohol. It wasn't packed inside, just a few folks here and there. Near the door was a round table, and there were four men at the table playing cards and drinking beer.

At the bar were two others, and in the back, at two different tables, a couple of men sat sipping beer. Joe Shank, who I knew from around town, was behind the bar. There wasn't a woman in the place.

It wasn't me they were looking at, of course, it was Leonard, black as an eggplant, cocky as a rooster. He sauntered over to the bar like Wild Bill Hickok, leaned on it, said, "Bartender, how about a beer?"

"How about some money?" Shank said.

Shank was a big redheaded guy with a big belly, but he gave you the immediate impression of someone who would charge a rhino, thinking he was going to run into its mouth and come out its ass.

Leonard paid for the beer, and Shank placed a bottle of Jax in front of him and used a church key to pop the top.

I ended up sitting on a stool next to where Leonard was standing. There was a large, flyspecked mirror behind the bar, and the bottom of it was covered by the tops of liquor bottles. I could see the men at the table by the door in it, and it was easy to turn my head and see those who were at the end of the bar and in the back. They seemed to have gone into comas, but the ones at the table by the door, they looked alert, like hungry lions that had just noticed a gazelle had wandered into their path.

"You want a beer, Hap?" Leonard said.

"No," I said.

"You might ought to have one," the bartender said.

"That's all right," I said.

"No," said the bartender, "you might ought to have one. You're taking up a drinker's space."

"You got ghosts for drinkers?" Leonard said, taking the beer Shank had set in front of him, tossing back a deep swig. "It's not like the house is full and there's a line at the door."

Shank made a grin so thin you couldn't have slipped a razor blade between his lips.

"Come into this bar, you buy a drink. You can pour it in your boot or take it in the shitter and pour it down the drain, you want, but you buy one. That, or some other liquor. What will it be?"

"A beer," I said.

"Don't want it, don't have to buy it," Leonard said.

"Yes, he does," said Shank. "He has to buy it."

"It's all right," I said.

"Not if you don't want it," Leonard said.

"Want it or don't, he's got to buy one," Shank said.

"He's gonna buy a beer," said a man at the table. I glanced at him. He was the only man at the table below thirty, probably not a whole lot older than us. He had a long face and fat lips and a lean body made hard by work, and a gleam in his eye like a man looking for a slight.

"You buying?" Leonard said, looking over his shoulder at the man at the table.

"What's that?" said the young man, turning his head slightly, like maybe if he did, Leonard's color might change.

"You heard me."

"Don't think I did."

“Ought to get your ears checked then,” Leonard said. “Get them flushed out or some such, ’cause I know I’m talking clearly. You heard me, didn’t you, Hap?”

“I heard you.”

Shank said, “That’s enough. Kid, buy a beer or hit the road.”

“Sure,” I said. “Jax. Whatever.”

The two men at the far end of the bar picked up their beers and drifted toward the back, to a free table.

Shank went to a cooler and brought me back a bottle of Jax and set it in front of me and used the church key to pop the top off. The beer hissed a little and foamed over the rim, and I could smell the alcohol from it, a smell I’ve never liked.

“Enjoy,” Shank said.

I looked in the mirror, at the young man at the table. He was staring at us, and not because he was trying to figure our dress size. I let the beer stay where it was, forming a wet ring on the bar, and carefully watched him in the mirror.

Leonard had turned around so he could lean his back into the bar, and he was looking at the young man and smiling between sips. He has a great smile, like a shark.

The young man said, “Shank, I think you’ve done let this establishment go to the fucking buzzards.”

Shank said, “That’s enough, Philip. That’s plenty. Times change. I get paid whoever buys a beer. A turkey comes in here, wants a beer, I’ll sell it to him he’s wearing pants and he’s got money.”

“Turkey came in here, he might get plucked,” Philip said.

“Only in that I jack up the prices,” Shank said.

“Ain’t that the truth,” Leonard said. “I could have had a beer and barbecue sandwich for the price you ask.”

“Then you need to go somewhere where they got a barbecue sandwich,” Shank said.

“But I’d miss the company here.”

“Yeah, well, it might not be as good as you think.”

“Naw,” Leonard said. “It’s fine here. Right, Hap?”

I didn’t answer. I eyed the front door without being too obvious about it. I wondered if we could make it if things got out of hand.

“I don’t like your kind of business, Shank,” Philip said.

“That’s all right,” Shank said. “You don’t have to like it.”

One of the men at the table gently scooted his chair back, creating a bit of distance between him and the conversation.

“Bottoms up,” Leonard said, and drank the rest of the beer with a series of gulps. He put the bottle on the bar, said, “How about another one?”

“You pay, you drink,” Shank said, and went to get another Jax. He came back with it, placed it in front of Leonard, opened it with the church key, nabbed the empty, and carried it away.

“There was a time when a nigger knew his place,” Philip said.

“All right, now, goddamn it,” Shank said, tossing the bottle into a big can behind the bar. “I told you enough is enough. You need to hit the road, Philip, and now. Don’t let your shirttail catch in the door when it closes.”

Philip turned red as a new rose.

“I can’t believe you’d talk to me like that,” Philip said. “I come in here all the time and spend good money, and this nigger and his nigger-loving friend come in, and now you’re on their side.”

“I’m on my side,” Shank said. “I’m running a business.”

I glanced at Leonard. He was sipping his fresh beer, and didn’t seem to have a care in the world. It was like he might be gathering up thoughts for future plans that evening, though I was beginning to feel any plans we might want to make were about to be cut short.

It was then that I noticed he had slipped his free hand into his pocket, and I could see something in his hand as he pulled it out. My guess was it was a pocketknife. I knew he had it set so he could thumb the blade open. It wasn’t long but it was sharp. He used it to clean fish and squirrels, and I had seen him at work with it. He was as smooth as a surgeon operating on his own child.

I looked at Philip. I could see something behind his black eyes, dark and mysterious, dangerous and bold. The air was thick with tension.

“Maybe we should go,” I said.

“Sounds like a good idea,” Philip said.

“No, I don’t want to go, not if I’m made to go,” Leonard said. “I want to leave on my own.”

“Don’t cause trouble, you can stay,” Shank said.

That surprised me somehow. I thought Shank would tell us to leave, as we didn’t exactly fit in out there, but I realized then that the macho code was at work. Shank wasn’t going to be told what to do any more than Leonard was. He wasn’t going to be pushed around by some customer, even if he’d just as soon me and Leonard had stayed home. Leonard, especially.

“I don’t like the way things are going out here,” Philip said to Shank. “I don’t know I want to give you my business.”

“I don’t need your goddamn business,” Shank said.

“I don’t need this shit hole either,” Philip said.

“Yeah, but it’s my shit hole, and you can get your ass out and don’t come back.”

Philip stood up. He was wearing a loose, blue shirt with the tails hanging out, and his hand pushed his shirt up in the back.

“I can’t walk out of here and you let a nigger stay,” Philip said.

“You got a problem with me,” Leonard said, “come to me and we’ll sort it out.”

“I’ll sort it, all right,” Philip said, and that’s when he reached a little Saturday Night Special out from under the back of his shirt. “I’ll put a hole in you, nigger.”

Leonard lifted his hand quickly and then the knife was open in it. Philip lifted his gun to fire, and I don’t know what came over me. Maybe it’s the same thing that makes a soldier in combat leap on a grenade, but I stepped in front of Leonard and the bullet hit me in the chest at the same time Leonard’s arm flicked over my shoulder and he let the knife go.

Next thing I know I'm on the floor, my head up against the bar. I felt strange and winded, as if I had been kicked in the chest. I could see Philip, Leonard's knife sticking out of his shoulder. He didn't seem to notice it there, but there was blood spreading around it, turning his light blue shirt dark. He pointed the gun in the direction of where I had last seen Shank.

The men at Philip's table were already on the floor, trying to make themselves as flat as pancakes.

The world roared. There was a rattling as shotgun pellets clattered around the room and picked some wood out of the table by Philip. Philip had blood spots all over him. He didn't go down though. He had lost his aim for a moment, but now he regained it. The little pistol barked a couple of times, and I heard a bottle break, and then I heard Shank say "shit," and then the Saturday Night Special barked two more times. I heard another bottle break and something heavy hit the floor behind the bar.

Fearfully, I touched my chest. I expected to touch a wet spot, but I only touched a tender spot.

Philip walked toward Leonard with the gun pointed at him. He pulled the trigger and it made a little snapping sound, but it didn't fire. He tried again with the same results.

Leonard had his fists up, but there was still too much space between him and Philip for him to throw a blow.

And then Philip said something I couldn't understand. A bubble of blood came out of his mouth like a chewing gum bubble. It popped apart, and Philip turned and walked toward the door, making each step with precision. He opened the door slowly and carefully, as if uncertain how it worked, went out and closed it politely behind him.

Leonard squatted down beside me and grabbed my shirt and ripped it open.

“You don’t do that, Hap. You don’t take shit for me, god-damn man, what is wrong with you?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“You don’t take a bullet for me, you dumb bastard. You just don’t.”

“I’d do it different, if I could,” I said.

“Shit,” Leonard said, looking at my chest. “It was a bad load. It just punched you. Shit, how about that? You are one lucky son of a bitch.”

I looked down. A large bruise was forming, but the skin wasn’t even broke.

Leonard helped me up. I felt better knowing I didn’t have a hole in me. I went to the edge of the bar and looked behind it. Shank lay there with his eyes open. He was clutching a sawed-off double-barrel shotgun to his chest. A broken bottle of whiskey lay next to him, and it was mixing with the blood spreading across the floor from under his head. There was a perfect little hole in his face, just above the bridge of the nose.

I felt weak in the knees. Shank had caught the wrong bullet, and I had caught, at least from my viewpoint, the right one.

I started to tremble.

Leonard picked up the shotgun and cracked it open. It was empty. Shank had fired both shots at once.

“Damn,” Leonard said. “What am I thinking?” He snatched up a rag from the bar and wiped the shotgun clean of his prints.

By this point the bar was empty. The door at the back was wide open and swinging in the wind.

We went out that way, and we could see a couple of the men from inside disappearing into the woods. We eased around the edge of the place and moved toward the front of it, and the lot where my car was parked. When we got there, we could see Philip.

He was at a Studebaker, and his back was to us. His chin was caught on the side mirror where he had fallen, and he was dangling from it, his knees almost touching the ground. His hands were open and there was something dark dripping from his fingers. I could see the little cheap-ass Saturday Night Special on the ground.

Leonard walked over and kicked the gun under the car. We both walked around and looked at Philip. His eyes were open, and the moon shone against them as if they were stagnant pond water.

Leonard reached out and took hold of his knife and pulled it from Philip’s chest.

“Goddamn,” I said, “you killed him.”

“Don’t be silly,” Leonard said. “Shank’s shotgun killed him. It just took a while.”

Of course, the shotgun killed him, but the idea that during all that action Leonard had hit him with the knife amazed me. Philip’s shirt was dark and wet with blood, and it was running down his arms and over his hands and fingers and dripping on the ground.

Lurking around the edge of the Watering Shack, we could see the men who had ran out the back door and into the woods. They quit lurking and hustled toward their cars, and before we could get to ours, they were starting theirs up, turning on lights, and roaring away.

We got in my Impala and I drove us out of there. The trees grew close to the road and dipped over us, and the shadows danced across the hood. I rolled a window down. I needed fresh air, and lots of it. I could hear the crickets sawing away as we went.

It was a couple days later that the news about the deaths at the Watering Shed showed up in the local newspaper. Someone had found the bodies, probably whoever came out there the next night to drink beer.

The paper said the dead were Shank and Philip Atkins, and that was the first I knew of Philip’s last name. It was thought they had killed each other in some kind of argument, which was accurate. It was noted that the Watering Shed had been subject to violence in the past. The paper also said no one had come forward with any information.

A year later, in the daytime, I drove out to Shank’s by myself. In the harsh light of day, the place looked smaller and less mysterious than it had at night. It was funny how in that short bit of time the weather had worked the place over, ripped off a few sheets of the tin roof.

I walked to the front door and opened it and looked in. The back door was open and hung loosely by one hinge. Sunlight came through the gaps of missing tin from the roof. There were empty and broken bottles strewn about, and there was a pallet of some kind on the floor where some transient had made a nest. I went over to the bar and looked where Shank had lain. It was dark there. The blood and whiskey had turned black and had seeped into the wood floor. It looked like a varnish spill.

About a year later me and Leonard were in Marvel Creek, walking along the street, and a man passed us that I was certain was one of the men who had been playing cards with Philip. If he recognized us, he didn't let on, and we didn't make a thing of it either. We merely walked a little faster.

SPARRING PARTNER

> “Once that bell rings you’re on your own.
>
> It’s just you and the other guy.”
>
> —Joe Louis

THIS HAPPENED DURING SUMMER BREAK before I graduated high school.

Leonard found me at the end of the day when I had finished and stacked all the lumber and was putting up my tools. I was in a good mood because my employer owed me some nice money, and now I was done with a week’s work and it was time to collect.

I was happy too because I had met a girl I liked. I met her at an out-of-town dance. But that is another story, and that girl, later in time, when me and Leonard were older, nearly got us killed. But right then I was thinking about her and how warm she had felt to dance with and the way we had touched, and later in my car, down a pine-bordered trail, we had parked and made love. She was not shy or hesitant about it, and up to that point it was the greatest moment of my life. I still rate it highly. It made me weak in the knees, and in time

I realized it made me weak in the mind, but right then I was thinking good things about her, and sadly I knew I wouldn't see her next week, as she had gone out of town for a few days.

Leonard helped me put up my tools, which were an assortment of crowbars, hammers, and chisels.

It had been one hot, tough job, but the house wasn't too big, so all things considered, it had come down fast.

"What you up to?" he said.

I gave him a look.

"I'm putting up my fucking tools and you're helping me."

Leonard smiled at me. He had a very nice smile when he wanted to use it, and sometimes it could be fun and inviting and at other times it reminded you of a shark, right before its eyes rolled up in its head and its mouth opened wide and the teeth came together, with you between them.

"I got us a job," Leonard said.

"I just finished a job."

I closed up my box of tools.

"This is a good job."

"This was a good job. Not a career, but a good job."

"I got a better one doing something you and me are good at."

"What's that?"

"Knocking people down."

Me and Leonard had both been fighters, and in different ways. Leonard had been a fighter because he was black in a small town in deep East Texas during a time when Jim Crow was still alive and well, long after the time when slavery had been abolished, but the degradation of it had been kept alive: a soul-sucking day-to-day existence designed to remind a black person that they weren't on the same level as a white person, and that they were never going to be.

Leonard hadn't read that memo about how he should act, or maybe he had, but if so, he had torn it up and wiped his ass on it.

Me, I fought because a lot of people fought. It was damn near like a hobby in that little one-horse town, and the horse had a limp.

Later that day, after Leonard and I made plans to meet so he could tell me about the mysterious job, I got the money owed me, went home, ate a good dinner Mama had made. Sausage, spicy grits, and biscuits soft as clouds, tasty as ambrosia. Next morning, I drove out to meet Leonard on the black side of a town called LaBorde. It wasn't too far from where I lived in Marvel Creek. Years later, I would move there to live.

It was one of those days of summer when everywhere you went smelled like mowed grass and pine trees. The sun stayed bright for a long time, and the moon would come up in a thin wafer with the sun still in the sky. It was so beautiful it made me want to whistle and pull my dick.

As I drove into the black side of town, I saw young black men standing in ragged yards, or hunched on porches, as if those porches were their rafts in an awful churning ocean. They watched me drive by with cold eyes and stiff bodies. Nobody waved at me.

I stopped where Leonard was staying. The yard was nice and the house was well painted. It was a big house with a high porch and a kind of fenced-in crawl space. Leonard had parents, but he was staying with his Uncle Chester. They had their problems, he and his uncle, but there was no doubt in my mind that he was Leonard's true role model.

I parked at the curb, went up on the porch and knocked on the door. Next door there was a young black man with a bright red rag hanging out of his back pocket. He had a big-handled, black, wide-toothed comb buried in his bristling hairdo. He was about my age, strong-looking, with wide spaced front teeth, each of which seemed abnormally large.

He saw me and yelled out, "What you doing around here, white boy? You selling *Grit* door to door? Ain't nobody reads that shit. You ought to just pack on up and go before they don't find you no more."

Leonard came out of the house then, nearly knocking me over when he pushed the screen door back. He yelled to the kid on the porch.

"Come on over here, Lashawn."

"No, I'm all right."

"Come over here, goddamn it."

Lashawn's face lost its bright countenance. His mouth closed over his big teeth.

"Come on over here, I said."

Lashawn hesitated, came down off his porch and over to us, and up on the porch where we were. When Lashawn was close to Leonard, he touched the big comb in his hair. Up close I could see it was made of metal, and I could see Lashawn had got back some of his confidence, and he put it on display.

"You gonna get rough, Leonard, I'll cut your ass with this comb. It's a weapon."

Leonard hit Lashawn with a sharp jab that knocked him on his ass and made him do a somersault into the yard.

"What the fuck," Lashawn said, sitting up with a hand to his forehead where Leonard had popped him.

"Don't be talking to me like that. I done got a guest coming up in here, and you talking to him like he's a god-damn dog catcher."

Lashawn was still rubbing his head. "I didn't know he was a guest."

"He knocked on my door and is standing on my fucking porch. You don't know much of any kind of shit, do you, Lashawn? Can't have you bad-mouthing my visitors. Right, Hap?"

"Well, I don't know. That was pretty harsh."

"Naw it wasn't," Leonard said. "Was it harsh, Lashawn?"

"Damn right it was. Wasn't no cause to hit me like that."

"I just gave you the cause. You deaf or just stupid? Why don't you go back over to your house and put some ice on your forehead? That's going to leave a knot. And you need to rearrange your comb."

When Lashawn went into his house, Leonard said, “I can’t stand that country nigger. He’s a goddamn thief. Can’t abide a man that steals. Or wears a fucking comb in his hair.”

“Aren’t you from the country?”

“Yeah, but I’m sophisticated as poodle shit.”

This event would be reminiscent of many in our future relationship.

We left there in Leonard’s pickup, which rattled as it went, made a sound like a rod was loose and there needed to be a about two hundred dollars’ worth of piston work. Leonard had a box of vanilla cookies setting between us, and now and again he’d dip his hand into the box and have one. He didn’t offer me any.

I said, “Man, that was kind of unnecessary. He was just an asshole, not Attila the Hun.”

“Way I see it I’m keeping him from growing up to be Attila. If not, motherfucker won’t be Attila in my neighborhood.”

I knew it was time to let the Lashawn discussion lay still.

“You say we got a job, but you haven’t told me shit, except for that knocking people down part, and by the way, you like that better than I do, so do I really want to get in on this?”

“Thought I told you what it was, you might turn me down.”

“I don’t know I like a job that’s a secret until you show it to me.”

“Do you like four hundred dollars?”

“A piece?”

“No, split, but hell, two hundred dollars apiece, that’s more than ass-wiping money.”

Back then it sure was. Some people worked two, sometimes three or four weeks to make that much. Things were cheaper then, but cheap is relative.

“How much work?”

“A few partial days.”

“Sounds too easy.”

“Sometimes things are easy.”

Leonard drove us into town and parked in front of a local café. “Let’s get breakfast first.”

“I don’t know, Leonard.”

“Mean ’cause blacks don’t go in here? There ain’t no law against it, you know. Lincoln freed the slaves.”

“I don’t know, man.”

“I always wanted to try this place. I hear from some white folks it’s good, and the cook is a cousin of mine.”

“I don’t know, man.”

“You scared to go in there with a black man?”

“Yeah.”

"Damn, really."

"Yeah. I'm scared what they might do to you. And I'm more scared what they might do to me. May not be a law on the books, but there's a kind of unspoken law."

"You hungry, ain't you?"

"Yeah. But I haven't been eating vanilla cookies. Where the hell do you put it all? How could you eat breakfast after all that?"

"With my precious little mouth."

"What say I get us some breakfast to go, bring it out to the truck."

"Don't insult my ass."

"I'm trying to save your ass. And mine."

"Well, you sit in the truck, and I'll go in and have breakfast, and I got something left over, like maybe a biscuit, I'll bring it out to you."

"Ah, Leonard."

He got out of the truck and was going up the steps and onto the sidewalk. I got out and walked after him, went in behind him. I think he wanted that to happen. For him to go in first.

There was a kind of buzz in the café and it smelled of coffee and grease and toast, but when Leonard came in people quit talking and looked at us as if we had been made of tubercular spit and garbage.

Leonard said, "There's a booth, let's take that."

He said it loud.

We sat down at the booth, and both of us sat on the edge of our seats. Growing up where we grew up, we were wise enough not to end up trapped in a booth up against the wall. We weren't wise enough to stay outside.

People watched. Leonard waved at an old lady and her husband. A young man, a few years older than me, wearing a blue work cap, a khaki shirt and pants, work boots, got up and came over. He had a toothpick in his mouth, and he worked it from one side to the other. He stood at the booth, between me and Leonard, and looked down at Leonard.

Leonard isn't a moose, but he's a tall, solid guy and he was tough. We had trained in boxing together, and I had started taking martial arts at the Tyler YMCA twice a week most weeks, and I was teaching him what I knew, as a black person would get nothing but the runaround if he tried to sign up for class. The true nature of *budo* at the YMCA was you best be white.

"Ain't you in the wrong café?" the young man said, dropping his chin a little.

Leonard looked around, then up at the man. "I don't think so. How's the breakfast here?"

"If you're white, it tastes pretty good."

"Yeah, what if you're black?"

"You don't get to taste it."

"Who's going to stop me? You?"

"Me, maybe some others. Maybe all at once."

"You know what?"

"What?"

"I wouldn't count on it."

The white man smiled a little, then looked at me. “What you doing hanging around with him?”

“I work for him. He gives me a dollar at the end of the day, though I still got to shine his shoes.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Leonard answered for me. “I’m teaching him to be a nigger in ten easy lessons.”

“You’re a smart ass, aren’t you?”

“Better than a dumb ass.”

“You’re looking for trouble, colored boy.”

“You call an alligator a lizard? Don’t call me boy.”

The man opened his mouth to say it again, but Leonard said, “I wouldn’t.”

The man looked at me. “You backing his play?”

“All the way.”

Leonard glanced at me and smiled, and then he turned and stared at the man, and Leonard’s face changed. His eyes turned sharklike, like I was talking about, and his mouth made a smile that sent a chill up my back.

“You want to play, white boy?” Leonard said.

“You need to stay out of here,” the man said. “It ain’t right.”

“I got the message, considered it, discarded it.”

The man started walking away. “It ain’t right.”

No one else moved. Leonard stared at all of them. As for me, all I could do was sit there and feel my ankles vibrate a little in my work boots. I had crossed the color line and I had to decide. Walk and go my way and be safe, or protect my newfound friend. The thought of leaving was there, but it passed quickly.

I called to a middle-aged waitress, “Ma’am. We need some service, please.”

She hesitated, looked around and walked away, disappeared behind the counter and went into the back. When she came back, a big black man wearing a white, food-spotted apron and a white cap was with her. He came over and said, “Leonard, you crazy?”

Leonard said, “Yep. This here is my buddy, Hap. Hap, this is my cousin, Simon. He is a very safe kind of man.”

“Hey,” I said.

“Damn, man, you crazier than Leonard. You ain’t going to cruise the world like you did before, not after this. You know that?”

“Crossed my mind.”

“You our waitress?” Leonard said.

Simon studied Leonard, then sighed gently, like that was all the air he had left in him.

“Someday it’s all going to catch up with you, way you are around white folks. You got to know how the game is played, and you’re playing it wrong.”

“No. You’re playing it wrong.”

“What we’ll have is a menu,” I said, all of a sudden feeling my oats.

Simon stood there for a long moment. We could hear muttering in the crowd. Someone said nigger under their breath. It wasn't the same as when Leonard said it.

"I heard that," Leonard said. "I'm putting you on my list."

Things got quiet.

Simon went away, came back carrying two menus. "Okay, there ain't no law says you have to leave, but another law's going to catch up with you. White man's invisible law."

"And there's that whole God's law too about us queers."

"Oh, God, don't bring that up. That there is not a law to be broken by man or woman, white or black. God has his rules."

"Does he?" Leonard said.

Simon gave us the menus.

"What the hell do you want? Let's get this over with."

Leonard studied the menu, said, "They got corn muffins on here for breakfast."

"I think I'll try one," I said. "Make it two and a cup of coffee."

"Corn muffins for breakfast, Hap? What the hell?"

"They're new," Simon said.

"Say they are," Leonard said. "What they like?"

"Cornbread," Simon said.

"Cornbread. Hell, for breakfast? I don't want no cornbread for breakfast. I was having lunch, had some pinto beans to go with it, some collards, I'd be in, but corn muffins for breakfast? What the hell, man?"

"I don't make the menu."

“You can eat whatever you want for breakfast, Leonard,” I said.

“I know that, and I will, but it won’t be no corn muffin. Give me some scrambled eggs with some of that homemade hot sauce I know you got ’cause my friend Linson’s mother makes it for here, and give me an order of sausage and four pieces of toast, some jam or jelly of some sort, and while you’re back there, make sure no one spits in my food, and that means you too.”

“Goodness, Leonard,” Simon said, took the menus and went away fast.

We didn’t get glasses of water, but while we waited on the food, a man leaned out from the booth behind us.

He looked about forty, a rough forty, had on work clothes and a weathered gray cap. He looked as if he went to bed tired and woke up tired, and with that cap on.

“You’re right about them cornbread muffins. Who the hell eats those for breakfast?”

“What I was saying,” Leonard said.

“And they have the lunch, they don’t serve them then. And who the hell calls dinner lunch? Next thing they’ll call supper dinner.”

“They do that up North,” I said.

“Well, there you go. Up North they got a lot of funny ideas. But the thing I was saying is it’s bad enough they don’t know the name of the meals, but you order pintos, you get some light bread with it. I say you can make a corn muffin in the morning, you can damn sure make one at dinner, and not serve some damn tasteless light bread with pintos."

Leonard nodded. "It's the same ingredients. Right?"

"You know," said an elderly man sitting with an elderly blue-haired woman at a table near us, "you're right. I'm going to go talk to them."

The man got up and went to the back. He seemed quite determined. When he returned, he sat down, said, "They say they're going to put the muffins on the lunch menu, but they're going to leave them on the breakfast menu, 'cause some people like them. Can you believe that?"

"I'm going to try them," I said.

No one seemed interested in what I was going to try.

"That Simon," said the man at the table, "he sure can cook."

"He don't put enough bacon in the beans, though," said the blue-haired woman. "He skimps on that."

"Maybe that's the management," said the man in the booth next to us. "I mean, they got to be the ones came up with cornbread for breakfast, so maybe they skimp on the bacon."

He was still leaning out. Cornbread muffins seemed very important to him.

I had often had slices of cornbread with syrup for breakfast, and bet some of them had, but maybe because it was in muffin form, they felt it was all wrong. I decided not to bring that up.

"Well now, y'all enjoy your breakfast," Leonard said.

"You too," said the man in the booth. "What's that them frogs in

France say. Bone up a tit."

"I don't think that's exactly it," I said.

"Close enough," Leonard said. "Bone up a tit."

The cornbread muffins with butter and jam were good, and I ate them a little fast and slurped my coffee down, wanting to get out of there. When Simon came around with the check, which he had written out quickly, Leonard asked for more coffee, so I said I should have some too. I didn't want it, but Simon poured it. I drank it black, and it made me more nervous than I already was.

Leonard sopped up his well-peppered eggs with the toast and took his time about it all. When we finished, he pushed the check over to me.

"Why don't you take care of that, Hap, you done got all that big money."

I took the check, and Leonard paid the tip. I noticed he put a big tip on the table. I got up and went to the cash register. Leonard went over to the elderly couple and asked the lady how much bacon she put in her pintos and they shared a recipe or two, like maybe they were planning a picnic or some such.

The woman behind the register was the waitress who wouldn't wait on us. She took my money and said to me so she couldn't be heard.

“I couldn’t wait on you two, ’cause I did, it would be the end of my job.”

“I know,” I said.

“But I got to say, things didn’t go like I thought they would.”

“Me either,” I said, and I was happy about it.

She gave me some change and I gave her a dollar of it for no real reason at all, went over and got Leonard by the elbow and started us out of there.

The elderly woman said, “I always put a bit of lard and a touch of sugar in there with my bacon.”

“That’s because you know what you’re doing,” Leonard said, and she smiled her false teeth at him.

It was starting to turn rain-cloud dark as we drove out into the deep country, and tooled along the back roads where shacks seemed to be more thrown up than built. There were more black people on porches, mainly kids and old people, and they were watching us drive by, a salt-and-pepper job in a time when those human condiments didn’t much exist on the same table in the South.

Finally, we went down a narrow country road of red clay, snaked along between the trees as the rain clouds continued to gather and the shadows swelled and covered the road in darkness that was sliced only by bits of cloud-muted sunlight. That’s the thing about East

Texas. Sunny one moment, raining the next.

“How’s that girl you seeing?” Leonard said.

“Haven’t seen her that much, but it’s going good, I think. She’s out of town for a few days with her parents.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“I got a feeling you done whipped, Hap. I ain’t known you that long, but I know you like that stuff like a hound dog likes a pork chop.”

“It’s good stuff.”

“I wouldn’t know. Queer niggers ain’t popular around here, and other queers, white or black, they kind of stay silent. For me it’s whacking off to the men’s section of the Sears catalogue.”

A year back one of the kids in our school, younger than me, Sammy Lean, had paid some kids to let him suck their dicks. They took the money and let him do the deed, and then they beat him up. After, they told him he had more money, he could suck them again, but each time a beating would come with it. I heard they did that two or three times, and finally Sammy had been humiliated enough. During a dark night he hung himself with a jump rope from the Sabine Bridge in Marvel Creek.

He wasn’t found for three days. A fisherman in a boat looked up and saw him dangling. He had bitten through his tongue, almost severing it. He had died fully dressed but with his dick hanging out. He had painted it bright red with spray paint. Or so it was said. There were suspicions he might not actually have hung himself, or owned the paint that decorated his pecker. But after a few laughs from the kids he had been paying, and a brief investigation by the police, which amounted to a fifteen-minute query with his parents and a slap on the back for the kids that he had paid for sex, Sammy and his red dick were buried out of town with all the ceremony of a backyard cat funeral. His parents moved away, more shamed by his death than grieved.

How the hell Leonard survived in that time and climate, bold about his blackness and his sexuality, is beyond me, but it not only made him tough, I think it made him damaged. Darkness crawled around inside of him, and sometimes showed itself in his eyes. Later, he would add the Vietnam War to that.

When we arrived at our destination, it was raining fiercely. The place was a large barn out in the woods off a trail barely wide enough for a car, the trees tight on either side. There had been a house not far from the barn, but it had burned down and all that was left of it was a chimney and some burnt wood, and possibly the mineral rights.

“What the hell, Leonard?”

“It’s all right. Come on.”

Leonard parked near the barn, and we got out in the rain and pushed the barn doors open and went inside. There was a boxing ring put together on a platform in the middle of the barn. There was a young black man in the ring with an older black man, and he was knocking the kid around like he was a paddleball.

“Cover up,” a big black man at the edge of the ring was yelling. “Cover up, you stupid son of a bitch.”

There were a dozen other black men standing around, assorted in ages and sizes, but all of them had the same look now, one of surprise as we came in. But their focus wasn’t on Leonard, it was on me.

“Leonard,” the big black man who had been doing the yelling said. “What the fuck is this?”

“It’s a guy named Hap,” Leonard said.

“He’s white.”

“Oh. Shit. You’re right.”

Leonard kept walking and I kept walking with him, but I won’t josh you. I was starting to feel nervous. More so than in the café.

“You said you’d bring me a sparring partner,” the big black man said.

We were standing by the ring.

“Listen here, Bus. Said I’d bring someone with me to help you train your guy. This is that someone. Me and him, we can train your boy, but we can’t give him left tit. He has to have that already.”

“I don’t know what all he’s got. Just know he’s got a hell of a hook, no footwork, and he gets hit a lot. But when he makes contact, sounds like two cars running together, and I hear the angels’ harps playing.”

“Is that him?” I said, nodding at the kid in the ring.

“No, this is Will, and he’s someone I’m teaching to be a sparring partner. Right now, I think he’s starting to regret it.”

“Got that right,” said the young man in the ring. He grabbed a towel hanging over the ropes, wiped his face with it, slipped through the ropes, and dropped to the ground.

“I don’t think I want to be a sparring partner no more,” he said, and started walking away.

Bus yelled to the kid as he headed out of the barn. “You couldn’t be a boxer if they spread your ass with salad spoons and stuck Sugar Ray Robinson up there.”

“You got that right,” said the man at ringside who had been yelling for Will to cover up.

“This boy you got, me and Hap can show him some footwork, teach him to cover up.”

“What I need,” Bus said, “is sparring partners for him, someone won’t get knocked down or out first time they get in the ring. You calling him a boy, that’s your choice. How old are you, and this cracker? What’s he? Twelve.”

“Thirteen, sir,” I said.

“Oh, good, a wise-ass white boy,” said Bus. “You know how much I like that, ain’t that right, Dixie?”

He was speaking to the man who had told the young man to cover up. He had a big belly and wore a white T-shirt that might have fit him at birth but now was straining over his gut. For the record, it was more of a pinto-colored shirt. There were tobacco spit stains on it, and I think the stain on the loose neck of the shirt was maybe cheese, possibly mustard. I decided on mustard.

"Yeah, you love that shit," Dixie said. "Me and you both."

"Hap's all right," Leonard said. "Just got a mouth sometime."

"Choice," said Dixie. "I like that, coming from you."

"I need someone better than alright," Bus said.

Dixie said, "Joe, come over here."

About this time one of the men in the crowd, an acne-scarred black man who I judged to be in his late twenties, early thirties, came over. His shoulders rolled from side to side as he walked, and his chin was slightly down, as if he were about to rest it on his chest.

Bus said, "This here is one of my fighters, he's seven and one, and that one he lost was on a technicality. But the guy he lost to couldn't get a job sorting socks now, beating he took."

Joe looked me up and down. "Shit. Sparring partner. This honky looks more like a punching bag."

"Take it easy, Joe," Leonard said. "Or you might wake up with a crowd around you."

"Man, you got some faith in this cracker?" Joe said. "What are you doing here, peckerwood? On break from kindergarten?"

"I'd stop if I were you," Leonard said.

By now all the men, young and old, had gathered around us. Joe was looking me up and down. "Naw. He ain't much."

"Have it your way," Leonard said.

Joe grinned, said, "I think a strong wind would blow white boy down."

"It would have to be a really strong one," I said.

Joe reached out to push a hand against my chest, said, “Let’s see what it takes.”

I slapped his hand aside, stepped in, and hit him with an upper cut under the chin so solid it lifted him on his toes, and then he dropped on the dirt floor. All he needed then was a blankie and a teddy bear to snuggle with, possibly a surgeon to open his head and put a new brain in it.

Bus looked down at Joe. Blood was filling up in his open mouth. Bus bent down and turned his head so the blood would flow out on the ground and not down his throat.

All the other black men came over to look at Joe napping.

“Man,” said Dixie. “I believe that nigger is trying to row a boat over River Jordan.”

Leonard laughed a little. “That there is my boy, Hap. Got another one you want knocked down, set him up.”

Bus studied me. “I reckon you’ll do.”

Me and Leonard were still on the floor near the ring, and I was sitting on a stool, and he was pulling boxing gloves onto my wrapped hands. I was still wearing my jeans, but I’d taken my shirt and shoes and socks off.

“This tough guy they got,” Leonard said. “He’s just another tomato can, you see. All Bus’s guys are tomato cans. He keeps a steady shelf of them so he can pull down one when he needs it. He only wants this one to get a bit of learning so he can last longer, make Bus some money on bets."

"He said he had a good hook."

Leonard was lacing up my gloves, pulling the strings tight.

"I know what he said, but I know Bus. He only does so much work on a fighter, only gives Dixie so much time with them, then a new nigger's up. He had a peckerwood once, Jimmy Oasis they called him, on account of they couldn't pronounce the last name. He became Oasis. And that guy could fight, until he couldn't. Got so someone closed their fist, he was starting to faint. Bus pushed him too fast and too hard. He could have been good, but Bus ruined him."

"I haven't ever been a sparring partner."

"Now you will be."

"You seen or fought this guy Bus has?"

"Nope. But Bus thinks maybe this fucker might be his meal ticket. A real boxer who might even fight another real boxer and go big-time."

"Thought you said Bus is small potatoes, burns fighters out?"

"Well, from what I hear, it might take some real fire to burn this guy out. What he lacks in skill he makes up for it in having the brain of a dinosaur. Bus is hoping he'll get some local championships out of him, maybe get a well-paying fight. You can bet, whatever the purse is, it'll be Bus pulling the purse strings, and the guy wins, he'll end up with chewing gum money, and Bus will keep pushing him, not preparing him. He just wants his boxer to quit blocking with his face. You're ready."

"Where's the fighter?"

"I don't know. Let's ask."

We walked over to where Bus was leaning on the platform for the ring.

"Where's your boxer?" Leonard said.

"He's in the back," Bus said, "getting his muscles stretched, getting oiled down some. And they're trying to find some shorts big enough for him to put his balls in."

"I didn't get to stretch," I said. "I don't have a mouthpiece or a cup."

Bus said, "Ain't got no cups or mouthpieces, and shit, who wants to share. Should have brought your own. Do a couple knee bends, swing your arms a little. You'll be all right. And you look like you have plenty of room for your balls."

"I'm wearing jeans, shouldn't I at least get some shorts?"

"You don't want the ones they got back there," Leonard said. "No telling whose ass has been in them and when they were last washed. That shared junk is a chocolate party."

"Can't disagree with that," Bus said.

That's when the fellows on the floor near the ring stood up and looked to the rear of the barn. Out of a room on the side came a black man shiny from a fresh rubdown, about six-four, with shoulders wide enough and thick enough you could have laid a picnic table across them. His stomach was flat and his head was large, resembled a block of granite.

“Goddamn,” I said to Leonard.

“Yeah, well, he’s bigger than I expected. Keep your hands up.”

The guy came over to stand by Bus. He punched one gloved hand into the other, like he was kneading bread dough.

“Which one of these fools is going to show me some footwork?” the fighter said.

“The fool wearing the gloves,” Bus said.

“Yeah,” the fighter said, “thought it was him.”

“This here,” Bus said, “is my fighter. We call him the Man Slayer.”

“Wow,” Leonard said. “Cool nickname. Listen here, Bus, this fella is way bigger than Hap.”

“You noticed,” Bus said. “White boy’s big enough. They ain’t fighting for the fucking title. You worried about his height, Leonard, you can stand him on a stool.”

“That’s nice of you,” I said.

Leonard talked them into letting me go to the dressing room so he could help me stretch.

“Listen here,” Leonard said, “I didn’t know this guy was going to be the Jolly Black Fucking Giant. You want out, I can get you out. Shit, we can go through the window there, be gone by the time Man

Slayer figures out how to climb in the ring.”

“In for a penny, in for a pound.”

“Good news is you’re getting more than a penny.”

“Yeah, well, I hope I’m in the condition to spend it afterwards.”

“Out-footwork the motherfucker. Looks to me his ribs would be a good target with hooks.”

“You mean because I can’t reach his head.”

“Yeah, what I was thinking. You’re just supposed to give him a workout, but Bus, he has his boys wear their sparring partners pretty hard. He’s not worrying about your fucking health. He wants his boy to have a punching bag, so you play this like it’s a fucking title bout.”

“Seems to me you know a lot more about this than you told me.”

“I needed the money, but hey, so do you.”

“I got some money.”

“After a few days, you’ll have even more money. Maybe a nice funeral, with a wreath.”

We went out and I climbed in the ring with the big guy. He looked at me the way a snake looks at a mouse it’s decided on for dinner.

“Watch him, Man Slayer,” Bus said. “White boy here knocked Joe on his ass with one punch.”

Joe was awake now and was sitting in a chair in the front row rubbing his jaw. “He caught me by surprise.”

Leonard was up on the platform, outside the ropes by my corner. I sat down on the stool in the ring to think about what kind of plans my folks might have for my body.

Leonard said to Joe, “He caught you by surprise all right, but if he had sounded a siren and flashed some lights and called you by name, he’d still have knocked you on your fat ass. You was playing all bad and shit, pushing on Hap, and he knocked your little train off the tracks.”

“I’ll get you, Leonard,” Joe said.

“No, you won’t,” Leonard said. “They’ll find you in some weeds out back of this barn.”

“That’s enough tough talk,” Dixie said, climbing up on the platform. “That’s plenty, even if you got more to go around. And I know you do, Leonard.”

“I got enough everyone here can share a bit of it,” Leonard said.

Dixie climbed into the ring and came over to me. “Look here, this is Bus’s boy, but he fights dirty because that’s how Bus taught him. He’ll try to hook your balls or thumb your eye, rub his laces across your face. He’s big and looks dumb, but he’s not. But that don’t make him a boxer. He winds up and throws haymakers. He’s got a hook that could knock a fart out of a rhino’s ass, but if you got any footwork at all, you can probably stay out of range. But he gets your ass in a corner, he can do some damage, that hook, you know. Gets you cornered, you better cover up, ’cause that hook gets your head a time or two, you’ll be lucky you got enough brain left to get a job sacking groceries on crutches."

"Okay," I said.

"Okay my ass, white boy. You pay attention."

"I didn't exactly think you were on my side."

"You in my corner, ain't you? You move and stick with a jab. Bus, he don't have me teach no jabs much. He's all for getting in there and throwing hammers. You can't throw a hammer, you got to use a razor, hear me?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right, then. Listen here, you get carried out, wake up on the floor over there, like Joe did, there ain't no shame in it."

"Don't over-encourage me," I said.

Bus was over in the corner with Man Slayer, holding one of his wrists in each hand, shaking them. I heard him say, "Don't take it too easy. Don't go easy at all."

"I won't," Man Slayer said.

"Sitting right here," I said.

They looked at me and grinned as Leonard leaned over the ropes and Dixie climbed through them and stood out on the platform at the edge of the ring.

"Hey, brother," Leonard said. "I got your back. Look here. I think that motherfucker looks in better shape than he is. Make him work for it."

"You think he looks in better shape than he is? What kind of evaluation is that?"

Someone banged a bell. I stood up, and Leonard reached through the ropes and took my stool away. Man Slayer moved into the ring like a bull that was about to mount a cow. I got on my bicycle a little, started shuffle-stepping around, making Man Slayer chase me.

“Cut him off,” Bus was yelling. “Corner his ass.”

Man Slayer was too slow to corner my ass. I kept shuffling.

Bus said, “You get in there and punch some, you god-damn cracker. Ain’t paying you to cut a fucking rug.”

That’s when I skipped in and jabbed Man Slayer in the nose. It wasn’t a hard jab, but Man Slayer started bleeding right off.

“It’s all right,” Bus said to him. “You ain’t hurt.”

Man Slayer touched his bleeding nose with his glove, gave Bus a look that indicated he might think otherwise.

“You’re all right,” Bus said. “Shake it the fuck off. Knock him on his ass. Blow right through him.”

“All right?” Leonard called to Bus from across the ring, “That motherfucker’s bleeding like he’s on the rag. What you mean he’s all right?”

“Shake that shit off,” Bus said to his fighter.

“Everybody shut up,” Dixie said.

Man Slayer was mad now, and he came at me running. I sidestepped a little, hooked him with a left to the ribs, and that made him blow out his air. I turned then and hit him with an overhead right in the jaw. I had to go up on my toes to reach him.

His head moved slightly, and then he looked back at me. I thought, Oh hell.

But that look of fire and ice didn't stay long. Man Slayer's eyes glazed over and he stumbled a little, tried to hit me with his famous hook, but he might as well have been offering me his hand to dance. I ducked under that easily. I could have stopped and had a cup of coffee before that fist got to me. I caught him in the ribs again, and when I did, he bent over, and I caught him with my right again, this time in the temple. As he tried to pick his head up, pull his hands in front of him, I slipped an uppercut through his arms and caught him on the center of his chin. It was like someone turned out his lights. He fell over and lay on the floor of the ring in a fetal position and wiggled a little. Slowly his legs stretched out and he quit moving.

"Goddamn," Joe said, standing up from his chair. "Son of a bitch did it again."

I bent over Man Slayer, and shook his shoulders with my gloves. One of his eyes flickered, like someone was trying to raise a window shade, then the shade went back down and lay heavy over his eye.

Dixie and Bus came into the ring, went over to make sure Man Slayer was all right. I hoped he was. When I hit him, I could feel the electricity of that uppercut from my fist all the way down to my toes, and on point of impact, my balls tingled like the vibration from church bells.

I climbed through the ropes and Leonard started taking the gloves off of my hands.

"Shit, Hap. Hit that fucker any harder, they'd have to put a monkey and some Tang on board with him so he could circle the fucking moon."

Joe came over and looked up at me.

"All right. I'll say it. You damn sure know how to knock a brother out."

When Man Slayer got some ammonia under his nose and they brought him around, Bus and Dixie got him on his feet and helped him get through the ropes and down on the floor. Bus and Joe helped Man Slayer stagger back to the dressing room without falling over.

Dixie came down from the ring and walked over to us.

Leonard said, "Tomorrow, it's my turn."

"You ain't coming back tomorrow," Dixie said.

"What the hell you mean? You wanted sparring partners, so here we are."

"Yeah, well, he wanted some stiffs, and Hap here, he ain't no stiff."

"Nah, he ain't," Leonard said. "And I ain't neither. Was you thinking I was a stiff?"

"What I'm thinking," Dixie said, "is Man Slayer ought to change his name to the Marvel Creek Bleeder. I told Bus he wasn't no good against someone with some skills, a dancing master, a jabber. Bus thought his size would overwhelm whoever was out there."

“He is big,” I said, “and for the record, he scared me pretty good.”

“Scaring you didn’t do him no good,” Dixie said. “For him to win, he’s got to hit somebody. Only way he’d have hit you solid is if you were tied to a tree.”

Dixie took out his wallet and gave me and Leonard two hundred dollars apiece. That was a lot of money for one round and a knockout.

“Hey, man,” Leonard said. “I don’t want to look a gift horse in the mouth, but this is more than I agreed to for one day. I figured we’d have to go a week or two for this much.”

“Rest of that is so you don’t go around town saying how bad a boxer Bus has.”

“I was you,” Leonard said, “I wouldn’t put the gloves on that ox again. I’d maybe get him some kind of job hauling bricks or some such. Otherwise, you might ought to just go on and order him a tombstone and buy a burial plot and order the flowers.”

Dixie nodded, and me and Leonard went out of there with our money and no more job.

I was having an early breakfast one Saturday, munching on homemade cinnamon rolls, hot sauce grits and gravy, sipping coffee, watching my dad sitting across from me at the table, finishing up his breakfast. He had a saucer, and he put a tablespoon of Brer Rabbit Syrup and a tablespoon of butter in it, and was tipping hot coffee from his cup onto the saucer. It melted the butter and spread the syrup. He used a piece of toast to sop it up. The phone rang.

Daddy was closer to it, and all he had to do was reach out and pull it out of its rack on the wall. He answered briskly, put the phone down on the table, said, “For you. Sounds like a nigger.”

I got up and went around the table and picked up the phone. Dad took a last sip of coffee, got up and said, “Going to work,” and then he was out the door.

I put the phone to my ear and said, “It’s Hap.”

“Surprise, it is a nigger.”

“Shit, Leonard. Sorry you heard that.”

“Like I don’t know there’s people call me that. I don’t like it, but it’s not like it’s some kind of surprise. I say it’s all right, by the way.”

“What you keep telling me.”

“I got something for you. Remember that job as sparring partners we had?”

“Of course.”

“Well, they want us back.”

“Nope.”

“Look here, you’re not going to believe this. They’re offering us a hundred a day.”

“No one has money like that.”

“You mean no one black has money like that.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But you were thinking it.”

"Leonard, we don't have money like that. I don't know anybody that can pay us a hundred apiece to go in and dance around with some half-ass boxer."

"They got a new boy, and they think he's got something. He has all the moves."

"That so," I said.

"Yep. Lot of money, man."

I considered. I still had some of the money we had been given by Dixie, as well as some stash from the job I'd finished, but some of it had gone for jeans and union shirts I had tie-dyed, and I had a new pair of desert boots, as we were calling them then. I had bought a bunch of paperbacks off a drugstore rack. Replenishing of funds would be nice.

"We'll get hit a lot," I said.

"Didn't get hit so much last time."

"Yeah, but this is supposed to be their new badass."

"True," Leonard said. "But hey, we got some moves."

"We like to think we do," I said.

"Don't be modest and I won't."

"Are you ever?" I said.

It was a dry, hot day when we drove out to the boxing barn again. We got out of my car carrying boxing trunks and boxing shoes wrapped up in towels, had them tucked under our arms. Leonard had driven to Tyler the day before and had got us some jocks and cups and mouthpieces. He gave me mine.

“You were pretty confident I’d be back, buying this stuff,” I said.

“Just pretend you got something to put in that cup,” he said.

Inside the barn a big swamp cooler had been set in a window and it was beating the air without much success. Way it whined from time to time, I thought it might back out of the window and run off.

The crowd was smaller this time. Dixie, Bus, and Joe, who had the air of retirement about him, and a white guy we hadn’t seen before, along with this tall, lanky, good-looking, brown kid with close-cropped hair. He was wearing new, white boxing shorts and white boxing shoes. They were all standing inside the raised ring. The boxer was a little shiny, like he’d just gone a few rounds of shadow boxing. I didn’t see another fighter there, so I took that to be the case, like he had been showing his moves against the air. The air is a favored opponent.

Bus and the white guy were both wearing sports shirts and slacks and sports jackets, and the white guy had on sunglasses. There were bands of speckled lightbulbs hung across the ceiling, and light also came through in alternating blades of the swamp cooler. It wasn’t a place you needed sunglasses.

This white guy’s hair was cut close and it was graying and prickly looking. He had a belly pushing against a nylon pullover shirt with a collar that was blue and white and draped by a plaid sports jacket. His face had a banged around look. Dad always said a guy that has a tough face isn't any more than a guy that can't keep his hands up. Guy gave him that face, that's your boy, he said.

Still, he wasn't a guy I wanted any part of. There was an air about him of a guy that would steal a child's orthopedic shoes.

Bus had on a nice, dark sports jacket and slacks and a button-up white shirt, but he was the kind of guy that would always look like what he wore was supposed to fit someone else. Yet, him being dressed up meant something, I figured, like he was trying to impress the cracker in sunglasses.

Dixie's T-shirt had a different arrangement of stains this day.

The young man in boxing trunks and boxing shoes looked down at me in a slightly surprised way. Dixie saw him looking, said, "Ty, Hap looks like a hippie, but he can hit. I bet if he or Leonard wanted, I could turn them both into fighters."

Bus turned his attention to us.

"I've had Dixie working the kid here, Ty, but he might need some harder hitters, some quicker hands to deal with. Some guy like you rides the bicycle."

He was indicating me, of course, and it was meant to be something of an insult, something to explain his fighter Man Slayer getting knocked on his ass. Like I had ran from him until he knocked himself out.

Leonard said, "Ought to change your man's name from Man Slayer to Likes to Get Knocked the Fuck Out."

“Don’t pay him no mind,” Bus said. “He don’t know nothing.”

“He knows a little,” Dixie said, and grinned.

I was starting to like Dixie.

“Man Slayer has moved on,” Bus said.

“I bet,” Leonard said. “What about Joe here?”

“I’m on what they call hiatus,” Joe said. “See you fellows.”

Joe climbed through the ring, dropped to the floor, and moved back toward the dressing room, and we never saw him again. He either went out the back door or is still in the dressing room trying to decide which side of his shorts go in front.

Anyway, while Joe was walking to the dressing room, we all watched him go like we were observing the departure of the last of the dodos.

The white guy still hadn’t said a word.

Leonard studied the white man, said, “What the fuck is he, a deaf mute?”

“He finances,” Bus said.

“What’s he finance?”

“Fights,” Bus said.

The white man slowly smiled and spoke. His voice was surprisingly high, like a eunuch’s in the Venetian choir. “Had a black boy talked smart to me once. High school boy like you. Word is he got set on fire.”

“Try setting me on fire, motherfucker,” Leonard said.

I watched to see if Bus and Dixie were going to turn on this white guy, talking like that, but they didn't. They just looked uncomfortable, like they were in the midst of a rectal exam and the doctor had just announced he'd found a dick broken off in there.

The white man's face was as unmoving as one of the faces on Mount Rushmore, but his fingers clenched slightly where they rested against his legs. He looked at Leonard for a long time. "Me and the shine here got to go," said the white man.

Bus cleared his throat and the two of them climbed through the ropes on the other side of the ring and started walking across the barn in the direction Joe had taken.

"Bus fixing to give whitey a back rub, maybe a quick hand job?" Leonard said.

"Keep it down," Dixie said. "That's trouble you don't need. I sure don't need it. And Bus, he's a dick, but he don't need it from that honky neither. No offense, Hap."

"None taken."

"That peckerwood knows some fellas that know some fellas, if you know what I mean."

"No, I don't know what you mean," Leonard said. "That milky motherfucker looks like someone that doesn't know shit from wild honey to me. And this guy. What the name again? Ty? He's your fighter."

Ty dipped his head, like the most important thing for him to do was to examine the canvas and see if ants might be crossing it caravan style.

“What the fuck’s going on here?” Leonard said.

“It’s complicated,” Dixie said. “Thing is, ain’t neither of you need to worry your pretty little heads about it. Go back there and get dressed. And you, Hap, you put the gloves on.”

“Ain’t I going to get to hit nobody?” Leonard said.

“Somebody,” I said. “You can’t hit nobody.”

“I’m trying to bottom out with the atmosphere here, man. Getting in the common language groove.”

“Well pardon me all to hell,” I said.

“What the fuck are you guys chattering about?” Dixie said.

“They’re discussing diction,” Ty said, finally raising his head. He had a nice mellow voice, and he gave us a slight grin.

“Listen to the man,” Leonard said. “He knows of which he speaks.”

“The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain,” Ty said.

Leonard was wrapping my hands. He hadn’t bothered to put on his shorts and shoes, as I was the one Dixie had asked for.

“Asked you up first ’cause they want to see if he can corner you, case whoever he fights is a dancer too.”

“Anything but the polka,” I said.

“Thing is, Dixie, he ain’t quite the dick Bus is, but they probably want the kid to come on hard, so it’ll be more than a sparring match. I suggest you don’t knock him on his ass right away, earn some time and we'll make more money, we can stretch this out a few days."

"What if I can't knock him on his ass?"

"I guess it'll work out for me either way."

"That's sweet. What do you think about Mr. Sunglasses?"

"Some big ass trying to make money off black folks' hides and call it sport. My figure is Bus and Whitey are going someplace where Whitey can tell Bus how he better muzzle me, or me and Bus are going to end up in a ditch someplace."

"Maybe you ought to quiet it down some."

"Not my nature."

It was really a light time in the ring, and Ty didn't try to take any cheap shots against me. He looked pretty, was quick on his feet, had fast punches, but I knew something right off. He couldn't crack an egg with either hand even if he was hungry.

Because of that, I flicked him with a jab a lot, but didn't let it clobber him. I threw some light crosses and hooks and he dodged a few. He ought to have. I threw them slower than usual. Even a man blind in one eye with his back foot in a bucket of cement could have slipped or padded them off.

When we finished, I came down out of the ring, and Leonard handed me my towel. I wiped the sweat off me as best I could. It wasn't like they had a shower at the barn. They barely had a working toilet.

Ty climbed through the ropes and came down out of the ring and smiled at me. “Thanks, man. You move quick.”

“Thanks, Ty,” I said, and Ty went away whistling toward the back to change.

Dixie climbed down out of the ring.

“Only thing you didn’t do in there was give the kid a kiss and a dozen roses.”

“You hired me to work him, not knock him down,” I said.

“Ty’s got some moves,” Leonard said, “but they’re mostly for the dance studio.”

“Bus don’t think so,” Dixie said.

“Bus don’t give a shit,” Leonard said. “He’d put an infant in the ring if they could fit the gloves.”

“He’s not so bad,” Dixie said.

“Yeah he is,” Leonard said. “Looking pretty, having the moves, doesn’t make you fighter.”

“Yeah, well,” Dixie said. “Gonna help Ty get those gloves off. Can you come back in a couple hours, give him another round? Leonard this time.”

We agreed we could.

Dixie nodded and started toward the back.

“Give them a minute before you go back and change,” Leonard said.

“All right. Hey, it’s odd, but Ty, he can’t hit any harder than a paralyzed grandma. You see that one he caught me with. He punches to you, not through you."

"Thought that looked like the case. He's got the shoulder launch, the hip switch, but you can see it's a butterfly."

"Float like a butterfly and sting like a moth," I said.

When me and Leonard finally went to the back, Ty was still there. He was sitting alone in the dressing room on a wooden bench.

"You got some moves," he said to me.

"Thanks."

"I can't do the kind of footwork you do. I mean, I got footwork, but it's not helping that much."

"That's because you got footwork for footwork's sake," Leonard said. "You got to have a reason to shuffle, to step and lunge, to skip on back or to the side. You're just moving around, Ty."

"I know it."

"How did you get into this?" Leonard said.

"One of them things, you know. How old are you guys?"

We told him.

"You look my age."

"Which is?" Leonard said.

"Twenty-one."

"Yeah, well, you just got a few years on us," Leonard said.

“So, you’re sitting at home, and one day you jump up and decide to be a boxer,” I said.

“Nothing like that. Well, kind of like that. I went to a club in New Jersey when I was in high school, that was a couple years before we moved here to be near my mama’s sister. I learned to box in Jersey. I liked it okay, for exercise. Kept me in shape. Jumping rope, bag work. I won a lot of club fights.”

“Pillow fights?”

“Oh, hell, Leonard,” I said.

“No, it’s all right. He’s not wrong. I won on points a lot. I could keep from being hit by those guys, outpoint whoever I fought, though I don’t think I can outpoint you, Hap.”

“On a good day, maybe,” I said, “but you need to work on your striking power.”

“I have. It isn’t there.”

“Least you know that,” Leonard said. “Look, you got someone can move and hit, most of the time, they practice enough, they develop punching power, or more punching power, at least. But, Ty, I’m trying to save you some hurt here. You don’t have it, and you ain’t gonna have it. You’re throwing picture-perfect punches, doing everything right, and the only way you’re going to win a fight outside of points is wearing brass knuckles under your gloves, and they don’t allow that.”

Ty nodded. “Tell you another thing. My heart isn’t in it. I don’t want to be a boxer. I want the money to go to school.”

“Like a college school?” Leonard asked.

"Like that, yeah. I've been interested in history for as long as I can remember. I think I'd like to teach it, or write books, or some such."

"Then go to college," I said.

"Can't afford it. I got a mother needs takin' care of. It's just me and her. She needs me to make some money, so I have to put college on hold. Bus saw me at the tennis courts, out there boxing with some friends, and he liked what he saw."

"You do look good," Leonard said, "but Bus, he sees a cleaning lady that can kick a mop bucket over, he might sign her. He uses boxers up and spits them out. White guy here today. Know him?"

"Not really. Met him couple times."

"Well, my guess is he sells these fights in some out-of-the-way place, and it's always some black kid against a white kid," Leonard said. "The great white hope, or some such shit, like it matters. Bus, he'll tell you how you're going to go big-time, jump to fighting big-time, make that big money, but he pushes too hard and too fast. And frankly, not only does he not give a shit about you, I don't think he knows talent when he sees it. Don't know or care you couldn't beat your way out of a wet paper bag."

"Don't sugarcoat it for him, Leonard."

"It's all right," Ty said. "Got in there with you today, Hap, and I could tell you were the first real fighter I'd been up against, way you moved, way you hit, caught me at angles. And I knew too, you were taking it easy on me. Thing is, they got me signed up and I need this fight, because I need the money. It's a big enough purse I can get

Mama moved to a nicer place to live, and I can enroll for a semester."

"You got to win to spend it, Ty," Leonard said. "And say you did win, way Bus takes his cuts, well, it'll be less than promised. The towels are going to cost you, your space on that fucking bench, or wherever you sit before the fight that night, all goes on the tab. Fucking air you breathe, the sweat or blood you drop on the floor, the cleanup for it, that all goes on your tab. Even if you win it on points, then you got to go on to the next one, because that's the way it works. This white guy, the financier, he's just looking to see a black man get beaten by a white man. He probably made his mother pay him to suck her titty. You're in the water with sharks, Ty, and they are about to feast on your ass."

"They've promised me a certain amount, win or lose. So, I got to do it. All I can have you do is train me as best you can. I got a few days before the fight, and I have the athletic skills, just not the knockout skills. You say I can't get them, Leonard. But I have to believe I can."

"You can believe you can shit a sack of cat's-eye marbles, but it don't mean you can."

We drove to the tennis courts. We took some gloves with us. Wearing our regular clothes and shoes, we put the boxing gloves on him, and I put the other pair on Leonard.

“One thing Hap here showed me, out of Kenpo Karate, instead of always stepping and dragging the foot, leaving it in the bucket, he pushes off the back foot, which lunges him forward. That’s how he’s getting inside of you way he does. It has a lot of power too, because you got that train pushed from behind, not pulling the load forward. It ain’t a boxer thing, but it’s a real thing.”

“Okay,” Ty said. He was so earnest I wanted to hug him.

“I assume, Bus, bad a promoter and manager as he is, has told you a few things. I know Dixie has. Dixie knows his stuff, by the way, but he’s limited by the guy who pays him, that being Bus. He can only spend so much time, so he tries to give you the tools quick, same as us. They don’t usually work when you get them wholesale. Understand that?”

Ty nodded.

“All right then. I’m going to move around with you a little, and we’re going to do it slow, and Hap here, he’s going to tell you the things you ought to know. Basic shit, and you’re going to try and do them. Once we kind of got your warmed up, then me and you, we’re going to go for it. I’m going to knock the shit out of you unless you cover up, do what’s needed. I’ll do it so you won’t have brain damage, but I’m going to give you a taste of what you got coming.”

“All right,” Ty said.

“Hap,” Leonard said. “Talk to him.”

They started moving around, Leonard pawing light at him, the kid trying to outdance him. Leonard didn’t have the footwork I had, and it wasn’t as pretty as what the kid had, but Leonard didn’t just move to move.

“Cover up,” I said. “Flick his punches off by padding them, not just letting them hit the gloves solid, the arms solid. Punch catches you hard enough on the elbow, any part of your arms, if they guy is a thrower, you can get so you can’t pick your arms up. Hard enough keeping them up during a fight when they’re not hitting your arms, or you, so you can’t just cover up and let your arms take a beating.”

They moved around some more, and Leonard was cutting him off, slipping in closer. I kept talking.

“Thing I noticed when we were in the ring is you turn your head a lot, kind of narrow your eyes. Keep them open. Punches you see don’t hit you more than the ones you do see, and psychologically, you see it coming, you can deal with it better if it does hit you.”

“Really?” Ty said.

“He reads a lot of books,” Leonard said, as they moved in a circle, pawing at each other lightly.

“Stay balanced. Don’t stretch a punch too wide, because you do that, it won’t have power and it’ll get you off balance. You can get hit and knocked down just because you’re off balance, but for them that don’t know, it looks like a solid knockdown, and it sure as hell counts as one. Keep your feet under your shoulders, a little wider maybe, but not too wide.

“Here’s a biggie. You got to hit back more often, and not just touch the opponent. Best way to keep your head on your shoulders is make him worry about his own. He throws something, you step back, or better yet, go sideways and inside and hit. Don't move your head right, then back to where it was, because that's how a combination finds you. Move your head when you need to, but don't just move it. You go from A to B, and back to A, you're going to get your brains scrambled.

"Jab, then a combination is good. But you don't need to jab to combine. Pad a shot off with your left, hit with the right, follow with hooks, uppercuts, whatever your guy is in position for. Know how to put a series of punches together, but know you got to sometimes put them together in different ways. And again, got your eyes open, you can pick your shots better. You got all that?"

"No."

"Sadly, that's just basic information, Ty. Now, here's what Leonard was telling you. You use your back foot like a springboard. Best to do this when he's in the process of throwing a punch, or it's about to arrive at the station. You got to get off the tracks and push in at the same time. Push off that back foot, which launches the front foot forward. Got to bring the back foot into position right away, not let it get stretched out. You got to push in so close you're damn near wearing his trunks, and I repeat, as you come in, you punch through him, not to him. All right. You two can start to boxing."

Leonard started off a little easy. The kid looked good, because he had that kind of body, but Leonard slipped him once and gave him an uppercut to the gut, and then doubled it up with a same-hand hook to

Ty's jaw that sat him on his ass.

"You all right," Leonard said.

"Think so. That's the hardest I been hit."

"That's not good news," Leonard said. "That was my old-man-with-arthritis punch."

"Oh."

"Can you stand up?" I said.

"No."

"Sit there a moment, 'til you feel better."

We left him sitting there, and me and Leonard walked off to the side of the court and leaned against the high chain-link fence that bordered it.

Leonard said, "If he had six months to train, did it regularly, he'd still get knocked on his ass. He has one of those bodies, light as a feather when he moves, and heavy as a bag of cement when he hits the ground."

"Yeah. But on the positive side, you're getting that push-drag down."

"Yep. Look here, Hap. This guy, he wants to take care of his mother. I get that, but he'd better off working in the aluminum chair plant, saving up for about ten years."

"I don't think he'll go for that idea."

"Guy like that, ought to go to college, because he needs to stay away from things where he gets hit."

Ty was up by then, but he looked shaky.

He wandered our way.

"I can go again," Ty said.

"No, you can't," Leonard said. "I got a question for you."

Ty leaned against the fence next to me.

"So, this white guy, Mr. I Burned a Nigger Up," Leonard said. "He's seen you, all of us at the barn have, but the guy you're to box, his management, have they seen you?"

"First time I'll see them is the night of the bout."

"Yeah, well," Leonard said, "let me offer you an alternative to a cooling board in the funeral home."

Back at the barn, there was just us and Dixie. When we came in, Dixie was standing on the floor near the ring platform.

"Get dressed, Ty, we need to get cracking."

"We need to talk to you," Leonard said.

Ty wandered over to the far wall where there was a folding chair, and sat down in it. He looked at the floor.

"This guy," Leonard said. "We been working a little at the tennis courts. He could not get any older than he is now, be in the shape he's in, which is good, and train for six hundred years, and he couldn't knock a hole in a slice of Wonder Bread."

"And that might be an exaggeration of his punching power," I said.

“Yeah, well,” Dixie said. “Figured as much. But you know, I just help train. I don’t manage.”

“That’s a dodge, Dixie,” Leonard said.

“Don’t talk to me like that, you young pup.”

“You mean don’t tell you the truth,” Leonard said. “That’s what you mean.”

“Maybe it is, but I’m in for the penny, so in for the pound.”

“You’re in for the money man,” Leonard said. “You’re in for that peckerwood with the sunglasses.”

“All right. Guess I am.”

“Ain’t no guessing about it, Dixie. You’re working for the man. You’re the head field nigger, now, and you don’t care what happens to the others long as you got your three squares and a cot.”

“Goddamn you, Leonard. I ought to knock your block off.”

“You ought to try.”

For a moment, I thought Dixie might try.

“Guys,” I said. “Bottom line, we don’t need this to happen to Ty. Way me and Leonard see it, the guy he’s supposed to be fighting, his management, they don’t know Ty from a hole in the ground.”

“Different fighter shows up,” Leonard said, “they’re none the wiser.”

“Ah, but Bus knows,” Dixie said. “Money man, he knows.”

“Don’t matter,” Leonard said. “I show up ready to fight, they got to let me go in, or forfeit the match. Whatever way it turns out, Ty doesn’t end up with his brains scrambled, and if money is won, he gets it. Shit, Dixie, he’s professor material, not boxing material.”

“They won’t like I’m in on that,” Dixie said.

“No, they won’t. But you can be that head field nigger, or you can help Ty out.”

Dixie took a deep breath. He turned his head and watched the light come through the beating slats of the swamp cooler.

“All right,” he said.

Fight night was a rainy night, and the place where the fight was held was deep in the woods on a huge concrete slab inside a big aluminum building that had all the architectural class of a boxcar.

A man just inside, tall and white and bald, was taking money for seats. There were bleachers on three sides of the ring, and one side had fold-out aluminum chairs. There was a section of bleachers for black attendees and the rest were for the whites, except for the fold-out chairs that were for the fighters and their managers and trainers and the like.

The ring in the center of the place was lower than the ring in the barn, and there were lights set up everywhere, and it would have been hot in there except for the big fan in the ceiling that was beating the air around.

The white man who had been with Bus was with Bus again. When we came in, Leonard wearing a pink bathrobe got a big laugh from the crowd.

The white man came over with Bus, and they looked at us, then they turned their attention to Dixie.

“What’s he doing here?” the white man said.

“Why, he’s going to knock your boy out,” Dixie said.

“What the hell, Dixie?” Bus said.

“Ty has a replacement tonight,” Leonard said. “Me.”

“Where’s Ty?” Bus said.

“Home reading a book, I figure,” Leonard said.

“It’s supposed to be him, not you,” the white man said. “I didn’t make any agreement with you.”

“You got one now. I’m fighting for Ty, and no one but you folks know me here, so I’m as good as being Ty as not. I’m also a better fighter. That worry you?”

“Not in the least,” the white man said.

“You can cancel, you want,” Leonard said.

“Okay, smart guy. Have it your way. You’ll wish you stayed home in about thirty minutes or so.”

Bus said, “You in on this, Dixie?”

“Might as well be.”

“You and me are done.”

“No. I quit first, soon as this fight is over, no matter what the outcome.”

“I hope Hedge beats your brains out,” the white guy said, “but I don’t figure you have any to begin with.”

“Maybe,” Leonard said. “But I got a big dick.”

The white man walked away practically with a rain cloud hovering over his head. He crossed in front of the ring and went through a door on the far side. I got a glimpse of light from in the room there before he closed the door.

“He doesn’t like you,” I said to Leonard.

“I don’t like you or him,” Bus said. “And Dixie, I wouldn’t have thought this of you.”

“That’s what worries me,” Dixie said. “You had me all laid out in your mind. Ty could have been killed. He couldn’t hold his own with either of these boys, and you didn’t care long as he looked like he could fight, and you got paid.”

“It’s a business,” Bus said.

“Yeah,” Dixie said. “So was the slave trade. Thing is, though, Leonard here, he’s our fighter tonight, so accept it.”

“What’s with the fucking pink bathrobe?” Bus said.

“A tip,” Leonard said. “Don’t wash your whites with your reds.”

“Goddamn you fuckers,” Bus said, and walked over to one of the folding chairs near the ring and sat down.

“He’s pissed,” I said.

“Think so?” Leonard said. “I thought he seemed all right.”

“He don’t matter no more,” Dixie said.

“One thing,” Leonard said. “You’re going to be in my corner, Dixie, but I want Hap there too.”

“Doing what? Holding your hand?”

“If it comes to it.”

There was some commotion across the way, and the door on the far side opened wide and the white man came back in, and now he had two others with him. A chubby white guy wearing a T-shirt and loose pants and tennis shoes, and a beer truck of a man that had on a white sweatshirt with a white hood. Under the hood was a white face and eyes as blue and cold as glacial ice.

Their boxer was wide across the shoulders, thick in the chest, at least six-four, with legs like the trunks of trees, massive feet and hands. His chin was as solid-looking as a cement block, and the ridge of bone over his eyes was thick. His ears looked like cauliflowers and his nose was flat. He smiled at us. He had a missing upper front tooth.

“Man, that’s a face only his dog could love,” I said.

“Damn,” Dixie said. “Makes Man Slayer look like a yard gnome. It’s not too late for an early retirement, Leonard.”

“I’m all right,” Leonard said, but the words took time to arrive.

They pulled wooden steps from under the ring platform on both sides, as well as stools. The steps were pushed against the ring, and the stools were put inside the ring.

Leonard and the walking mountain went up their steps and stood in their corners, neither bothering with the stools. The white crowd called Leonard everything but a human. He just grinned at them.

The black crowd cheered for Leonard. The white crowd cheered for the mountain. A theme had developed.

I came up the steps after Dixie and stood next to Leonard in his corner.

Leonard said, “This does not look good.”

“No, sir,” I said. “It does not.”

“Before things get started,” Dixie said, “you could say you got to go pee, and just not come back.”

“I’m all right,” Leonard said.

“Well yeah,” I said. “For right now.”

A stocky white man with a crew cut, wearing a white shirt and black pants, climbed into the ring carrying a megaphone. He looked out over the rambunctious, loud crowd.

“Cut it out!” he called into the megaphone. He had to repeat that a couple of times, but the crowd finally settled down.

“Tonight, I’m the referee, Tom Ray. We got ten rounds of boxing. And boxing it will be, and the crowd will maintain itself. White folks will watch and enjoy. Colored folks will watch and enjoy. I don’t want trouble. In this corner,” he pointed to the big man, “is James Hedge.” He then pointed to Leonard, and called out Ty’s name. He ended with, “Now, let’s get on with this event.”

Leonard and the mountain moved to the center of the ring and got instructions from the referee. While the ref talked, they were glaring at one another. If someone had crossed their line of vision, I wouldn’t have been surprised if they had burst into fire.

They went to their corners, and neither he nor Leonard sat on their stools. They stood and rubbed their shoes in some resin that had been put there for just that.

Leonard said, “I got this guy.”

“Of course, you do,” I said.

“What is he, thirty years old?”

“He’s twenty-four,” Dixie said. “Twenty-four hard fucking years. Five in prison. Before that, a bit of reform school. Trust me, don’t put your guard down.”

“I’ll have my hands up plenty, and they’ll be hitting him.”

“That’s right,” I said.

“Don’t get cocky,” Dixie said.

“You know of any weak spots he’s got?” Leonard asked.

“He gets tired around round nine.”

“That’s a weak spot? That’s damn near the whole fight.”

“Sorry, Leonard,” Dixie said.

The mountain’s cornerman was standing behind him, rubbing his shoulders. After a moment, he stopped and pulled the stool and himself through the ropes, stood on the edge of the platform. Me and Dixie did the same.

A guy on the side of the ring hit a piece of angle iron with a short piece of pipe, and that served as the bell. We were into round one.

Leonard was strong for his age, and pretty damn quick, but when Leonard hit Hedge it was like hitting a six-foot-four fireplug. The guy’s defense was his face, which seemed hard to hurt.

I tell you true as the night is dark, Leonard was hitting Hedge so hard a bull would have gone to its knees and begged for mercy. But this guy, he just kept coming, didn't move his head at all.

Leonard hit Hedge over the eyes with a series of jabs, kind of shots that normally bring blood, but this guy, the ridge over his eyes was hard and scarred and didn't seem to have any blood in it.

First round was mostly Hedge inching forward and Leonard hitting him with jabs and a couple of crosses that were picture-perfect. When he hit Hedge, the sweat came off Hedge's face and sprayed up into the light and made a kind of golden mist. Toward the end of the round Hedge caught Leonard in the ribs with a couple of hooks that probably gave Leonard's childhood teddy bear consternation.

When the bell rang, Leonard came back to the corner and sat on his stool this time. The muscles in his back were jumping a little, and Dixie went into rubbing him down.

"You think I hurt him any?" Leonard said to me.

"Nope."

"Aren't you supposed to encourage me?"

"Well, he hasn't really hit you good yet."

"He hit my ribs pretty good, my left elbow. He's slow, but when he lands one it's like a sledgehammer."

"I think you got to stay away from his head a little more, work his body. Frankly, you get a chance to rabbit punch him or slip one into his balls, you might want to do it. Something needs to make him tire a little. Look at him."

He was sitting on a stool, looking like he felt good enough to take time to read a magazine—if he could read.

"I got this," Leonard said.

"So you say."

"Yeah, I might ought to catch him one in the balls."

Bell clanged and Leonard went back out there, coming to the center of the ring first. He gave Hedge a series of jabs to the head, and then started slamming hooks to the body. They didn't seem to be doing any more harm than the jabs.

They clenched a couple of times, and once or twice Leonard hit him in the back of the head, and got separated by the referee and got a warning.

Leonard didn't take the warning to heart. Next time in he swung an uppercut to Hedge's stomach, then another to his balls.

It was solid, and the referee stepped in, and Hedge said, "Nah, it's all right."

Leonard said it was an accident, which it wasn't, and they went at it again.

Hedge took a series of jabs, and then he swung a hard hook. Leonard put his arm up, but this one was a really good one, and hit Leonard's arm and slipped off the sweat and caught Leonard over the left ear and knocked him down.

I was wishing he'd stay down, but I knew better than that. Not while there was life in him. Leonard got up on the count of four.

"I slipped," he said.

"Yeah, after he knocked your black ass down," said the referee.

Leonard rode the bicycle for the rest of the round, the white crowd booing, and even some of the black crowd.

When the bell rang and Leonard came back to his stool, he said, "He's going to kill me."

"What I was thinking."

Dixie gave Leonard a sip of water and Leonard spat it into a bucket.

"You can box him all day long, and you might even get some points," Dixie said, "but these motherfuckers don't count points. They count knockouts and dead."

"Your suggestion for me is what?" Leonard said.

"Don't get hit."

"That's it?"

"Listen, you got to tie him up a couple of rounds, let him wear down."

"I'm the one wearing down."

"Dance with him, then grab him and get in close. Step on his foot, and soon as you do, uppercut him to the chin, hard as you can. Not on the point, like you hear, but just behind that, so you don't break your goddamn hand. It'll do the same thing as a tip-of–the-chin shot. Side of the jaw is even better than that."

"All right."

"But mostly, don't get hit."

"You finish up here tonight, Dixie, you ought to maybe be like a motivational speaker," Leonard said.

The bell rang, and Leonard went back out.

Well, there was dancing for a while, and then damn if Leonard didn't hit Hedge so hard with a hook to the face, the force of it knocked Leonard off balance and he fell down.

The white crowd went wild for a moment.

The referee did call that one a slip.

The white crowd booed. The black crowd cheered.

I studied Hedge. He looked calm and dumb, like he was thinking about something less than profound. Like why do dogs like bones? If he was any calmer, they could let him fight from an easy chair in front of the TV.

Leonard was shuffling a lot, dancing still. Getting in close hadn't worked as well for him as he had hoped, so he was back on his bicycle. He was really starting to sweat.

The bell rang.

Back on the stool, Dixie worked on Leonard's legs. The muscles and nerves in them were jumping like frogs.

"You okay?" I said.

"He hasn't really nailed me but a couple of times, but those times worry me some. There might be more of them."

"That one you hit him with when you were in close," Dixie said.

"That hurt him."

"Think so?" Leonard said. "I didn't notice."

"He actually blinked once or twice," Dixie said.

"Probably had something in his eye," Leonard said.

"His legs bent a little," Dixie said. "Not much, but a little. A little ain't much, but it's something."

"You notice that, Hap? Me making him sag a little?"

"No," I said.

"Telling you, you hurt him," Dixie said. "You need to do it again."

The bell rang, and Leonard went back out. He gave Hedge a series of blows, and I mean they were good ones. Anyone else had taken shots like that, they'd be in a padded room trying to figure out how to sort white socks by colors.

But Hedge, he didn't seem to notice. It went on like this for a couple more rounds.

Back in the corner, Dixie said, "You want me to stop it?"

"Hell no . . . Well, not yet," Leonard said. "Hap, you got a blow gun, maybe you could shoot that motherfucker with a poison dart."

"Get back inside of him," Dixie said. "Listen to me, and you might get to go home and not in a box. You might survive, anyway. But you got to get in there and do what I'm telling you. Close in, and work those uppercuts."

"All right, Dixie. Bury me in blue, please. Hap, put my cowboy hat on my chest. The one with the chin string."

Bell rang. Leonard went out again.

It was as before for about half the round, and then I noticed when Leonard tied Hedge up, got those uppercuts in, as Dixie said, Hedge was buckling a little. Very little, but his knees bent and even wobbled slightly. Weren't watching for it, it didn't seem like much, but I was watching hard. Hedge was blinking too, like he was trying to find focus.

Dixie knew his stuff.

When the bell rang, Hedge went back to his corner more slowly than before. Leonard sat on his stool like a sack of potatoes.

"You got him," Dixie said.

"I'm what you might call uncertain."

"You don't get hit solid in the next round, he'll go," Dixie said.

"You base this on what?"

"I saw it too, Leonard. It's those uppercuts under the chin that he doesn't wear too well."

"That's right," Dixie said. "You got to tie him up more."

"He's stronger than me," Leonard said.

"Yeah, but he isn't hitting you much."

"Funny, I feel like he is."

"He's not," I said. "Not like you're hitting him."

The bell rang and out Leonard went. As he neared Hedge, Hedge threw a lazy left hook that Leonard ducked under, but then a right hook caught him and knocked Leonard on his ass. Leonard lay back on the canvas, looked at the ceiling lights.

Leonard slowly rolled on his side and got his hands under him and got up at an eight count. He tried to dance a little after that, but he didn't have much dancing left in him. Now it was toe-to-toe, and Leonard got in some damn good hooks to the ribs. Those hooks were having serious effect now. Hedge started dropping his elbows to cover his ribs, and then Leonard started jabbing him, and I could tell those jabs were beginning to work too, due to plain old attrition.

Leonard got inside of him, tied him up. Hedge slung him around a bit, but Leonard got an uppercut in, and it was solid. You could hear it all over the place, like someone had dropped a bag of dry concrete.

Leonard had begun to chip off Hedge's armor. He got inside again and tied Hedge up, slipped a double uppercut with the right in. Hedge sort of bounced back on his heels, stumbled, righted himself, then fell back again, against the ropes.

Leonard skipped in and started hooking Hedge to the head, one shot after another. Then he zipped an uppercut in, caught Hedge just under the chin, and Hedge did that little hop again, hit the ropes, bounced forward, and Leonard threw a right cross at him that was loaded with everything but the kitchen sink and a blacksmith's anvil.

Hedge fell backwards, stiff as a board, hit the ropes, rolled off them, landed facedown on the floor with a smack, spit his mouthpiece out, and passed a little fluttering fart that sounded like a weak blast on a kazoo.

"Knocked him right into the shit house," Dixie said.

Leonard returned to his corner. The referee started counting, and when he got to nine, I knew there wasn't any way Hedge was going to get up short of a winch and a pully.

“And the winner,” the referee said, and called Ty’s name, which, of course, was Leonard.

Leonard lumbered to the center of the ring and the referee lifted his hand and held it up.

There were yells from the white crowd, and cheers from the black crowd, and Leonard said, “I need me a steak and a jug of ice tea, and a goddamn big-ass bowl of banana pudding with vanilla wafers in it.”

“Come on, let’s get a move on,” Dixie said.

When we climbed out of the ring, Bus came over. “You did it, Leonard.”

“My name is Ty,” Leonard said. “It’s better for all of us you don’t forget that.”

“So it is,” Bus said.

“What about the prize money?” I said.

“Come by and get it tomorrow, at the barn. Three o’clock.”

“Don’t try and play me none now,” Leonard said. “I can do to you what I did to him.”

“Don’t get too proud of yourself,” Bus said. “You had some luck.”

“No,” Dixie said. “Luck had nothing to do with it.”

Leonard didn't have a steak or banana pudding. When we came out, it was raining and the white crowd was aggressive and the black crowd was pushing back at them.

I thought it might all go to hell, but the referee came out and pulled a pistol from under his rain slicker and fired a shot in the air.

"Now back off," the ref said. "Nigger won fair and square."

"He's just the sweetest," Leonard said.

We got in the car and Dixie drove us out of there.

Leonard ended up staying at Dixie's. I stayed there too. Leonard hurt too much to eat. His jaws couldn't have worked over a spoonful of tapioca pudding. He was asleep on Dixie's couch in an instant. I unbuttoned his boxing shoes and slipped them off; Dixie covered him with a blanket.

At the kitchen table, Dixie said, "I'm going to be moving. What about you and Leonard?"

"We'll play it out."

"Good luck on that. Want coffee?"

I didn't know what I wanted, but I said, "Yes."

Dixie made coffee and we sat at the table and sipped it.

"Leonard would make a hell of a boxer," Dixie said. "Could go all the way. And you too, except you got a streak of kindness in you."

"Just a streak," I said. "Look, you really think you got to run from all this?"

"I'm thinking that. Yeah."

"Me and Leonard, we'll get the money for Ty tomorrow. You don't need to be there."

Dixie was silent for a time. He sipped his coffee.

"Yeah. I need to be there. You might want to call Ty, tell him he won."

Ty didn't go with us the next day, partly because he was embarrassed, and mostly because we asked him not to.

"There's no point to it," Leonard said. "You're there, they're going to be mad at you more than us. And by the way, you been in that ring other night, you'd be dead, or close enough to it they'd have the food tube down your throat."

So we left him home, bought Leonard a Dairy Queen vanilla cone, and drove out to the barn. When we walked in, it was sticky hot and the fan wasn't on, and there was no wind moving through the open windows or the gaps in the swamp cooler. Just dead air, heavy as disappointment.

Dixie, Bus, Hedge, and that asshole white-guy promoter were all standing at the bottom of the platform that held the boxing ring.

Hedge had taken Leonard's shots without much blood, but on this day, he looked a lot worse than Leonard, who was wearing Band-Aids like a fashion statement, and had a bit of a hitch in his get-along.

In contrast, Hedge's face was swollen and could have been mistaken for a volleyball with bits of hair on it. I got the impression he had been too sore to shave. His eyes were narrow due to that swelling, and his shoulders were slumped. He gave the impression he was ready for a trip to the garbage dump and willing to be shot dead before he got the ride.

When we got close to them, the white promoter stepped out, said, “I guess you’ve come for the other nigger’s money. You ain’t getting it.”

I said, “Why not?”

“You cheated. You put in a ringer.”

“You cheated, your guy is a ringer and Bus here knew Ty would wind up in the cabbage bin at the Piggly Wiggly, and he didn’t care.”

“I didn’t know any such thing,” Bus said.

“Yeah, you did,” Dixie said.

“I thought I told you, you were through.”

“You did, but I’m here today, gone tomorrow.”

“You could end up gone for a long time,” said the white promoter. “Look here. I got the money your monkey won, but it was the wrong monkey.”

“You let the fight go on,” I said. “Had Leonard lost, you’d be expecting some dough. Way I have it figured, you and Bus are like Siamese twins. You had your bets on one guy, Hedge here.”

“You broke the rules,” the promoter said.

“So did you, planning on throwing some showboat who couldn’t fight into the path of this semitruck,” I said. “Leonard here just happened to be better. Hedge, they don’t care about you. They put you out there until you can't be out anymore, then they get a new semitruck."

Hedge didn't say anything.

"Well," the promoter said, "however you see it, you aren't getting the money. Hedge here gets his cut, and me and Bus take ours, but your monkey has to buy his own bananas with his own money."

"Call me a monkey one more time," Leonard said. "Please do."

"I think he's talking about Ty," Bus said.

"Ah," Leonard said. "That makes it all right, don't it? So, let me rephrase it. Call anyone a monkey, I'll fix your little red wagon good."

The promoter might have considered saying something, but he didn't. He just took a deep breath.

"Give 'em the money," Hedge said.

"What?" the promoter said.

"You heard me. Man here beat me fair and square."

"You ain't listening here," the promoter said. "They didn't play fair."

"Didn't you tell me to try and kill this fella?" Hedge said.

"Symbolically," the promoter said.

"Give him the money."

"I'm not—"

He didn't get another word out. Hedge swiveled and hit him square in the face with a nasty left hook, and the promoter fell back against the ring and then onto the floor.

"Damn," Leonard said. "I remember those hooks. One more round of those and I'd have lost."

"You know that's right," Hedge said, bent down and looked through the promoter's coat pockets, came out with a stash of cash. When he stood up, he had a folded wad of money with a rubber band around it.

Hedge said, "I got some coming for being in the fight. The rest of it, you can do with what you want. You earned it."

Hedge removed the rubber band and slowly peeled off what he was owed, wetting his thumb and finger between bills until he had his share.

He handed Leonard the rest of the money.

"I'm going to go home, have some coffee, fuck the wife, then go see if I can get on at the foundry in Tyler. Boxing is tiring and the pay sucks."

"Good luck," I said.

"Same to you, kid." Hedge reached out and gently touched Leonard on the shoulder. "I never fought nobody harder and never been fought as hard. Couple years on you, and you'll be hard to beat even with a pipe wrench."

"I know that," Leonard said.

"He knows it," I said.

Hedge laughed and walked away and was quickly out of the barn and gone.

Leonard said, "What's your share, Dixie?"

"Keep my share. Ty will need it."

“All right,” Leonard said.

“I got a cut coming,” Bus said.

“No,” I said. “No, you don’t.”

“This won’t go over well with me and some other folks,” Bus said.

“Woo, the spooky I-got-assholes-in-high-places card,” Leonard said.

“Gonna be what it’s gonna be, Bus,” Dixie said. “And part of what it’s going to be is you ain’t getting paid.”

“You were a part of it,” Bus said.

“Yeah, I lied to myself a lot. But I’m done quit with that. I fucking resign big-time, and you can kiss my black ass bye-bye on my way out the door.”

We went to Ty’s house and gave him the money and met his mother, who was a nice lady with faded clothes that smelled faintly of laundry soap and starch. She gave us each a slice of buttermilk pie and a glass of milk.

We sat at the table and ate. After we talked about how Ty was going to college, how he would do great things, his mother cried a little.

Later, me and Leonard and Ty went out in the yard and stood by my car. It was a bleak spot where Ty was living. We could see the smoke from burning garbage at the city dump.

“I can’t believe you did this for me,” Ty said.

“Me either,” Leonard said, touching one of the Band-Aids on his head.

“I feel like a fraud.”

“You are,” I said, “but it’s good that you are, or you’d be busted up something awful.”

“I know that’s right,” Ty said.

“Damn straight,” Leonard said. “Listen here. Bus was the fraud. He fed you some shit about your skills. He knew you looked pretty but hit soft. Or he didn’t care enough one way or the other, however you want to look at it. But here’s the thing. I was made for battle and you were made for the books. You go on and do good with yourself.”

“Will the promoter and Bus be coming after you fellows?”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “I think the promoter was a blowhard and wanted people to think he was tough. I think Bus might pack up a grip and move on.”

“Thinking the same,” Leonard said.

“I guess we’ll be leaving soon,” Ty said.

“Just in case I’m wrong about how the losers feel and what they can do, I’d suggest it, and right away,” Leonard said.

We shook hands with Ty, and got in the car.

I said, “You really think the losers are done with us?”

“I think so. We might want to be cautious for a while, but I think so.”

We drove away, and by the time we did that it was close to noon.

I drove us to the café and parked in front of it.

Leonard said, “What are you doing?”

“I don’t know about you, but that pie was like an appetizer. I’m still tired from watching you take a beating and give one, and I’m thinking I need a good meal to boost back my energy.”

“You ought to be on this end. But I thought you didn’t want to have me go in a café like this with you. A white café.”

“Like you said, there’s a law now. Besides, we’ve done been in there and you gave your opinions on breakfast items, and I’m thinking about the lunch special. Saw it on the menu. Beans and greens, or you can go for chicken and dumplings and greens. That’s the way I’ll go. Shit, man. I might even get another piece of pie of some kind. They might have chocolate meringue. Some coffee would be nice too.”

“I ain’t having none of that pie they use whip cream on the top and not meringue, I’ll tell you that.”

“You’re saying about something you don’t even know is a fact.”

“I like to be prepared for disappointment. Fact is, screw chocolate pie, meringue, whip cream, or dog sput. I’d like some banana pudding—they got that and they put actual vanilla wafers in it, I’ll be all over it like a duck on a fucking June bug.”

“What’s with you and vanilla wafers, vanilla ice cream, cookies and such?”

“I like vanilla.”

“Fair enough. Shall we go in?”

“With bells on. Just let me shift five or ten pounds of my balls to the left, where I feel the most comfortable, and I'm ready."

We got out of the car, and Leonard, splotched with Band-Aids, went up the walk with a skipping motion, and moved ahead of me through the door into the café.

THE SABINE WAS HIGH

“Home from the war, home from the seas,
out of the skies, and weak in the knees.”
—Jersey Fitzgerald

I HAD GOTTEN A PHONE CALL from Leonard a few days before he was to be mustered out, and he told me where he would be coming in, told me he wanted me to pick him up at the bus station in Tyler. From there, he wanted to go camping and fishing.

It was raining that day, and the water ran across the highway in silver sheets and filled the ditches on either side of it. The Sabine River actually touched the sides of the high bridge’s upper railing, and the water sloshed onto the highway.

I tooled on into Tyler, over to the bus station. The old colored section was still there, and most of the black people were sitting there, even though legally they didn’t have to.

I looked at the clock on the wall. I was early. I went to the coffee machine, dropped a few coins in. The cup came out upside down and the coffee hit the bottom of the cup and sprayed out onto me. The coffee was the color of diarrhea.

I tried again, and the cup was right this time, but the coffee tasted like what it looked like. I threw it in the trash and bought a package of peanut butter crackers, but the crackers were stale, and the peanut butter had a nasty taste somewhere between river mud and brick mortar. I tossed the crackers too.

I went outside. The rain had stopped. I walked out to my car and sat in it, read from a book I had in the glove box. I always had a book. It was science fiction. But I wasn't in a mood to read. I walked back to the station. I looked at my watch, but I wasn't wearing it. Inside the station I glanced at the clock again. It was five minutes until arrival time.

At the ticket desk I asked if the bus was on time.

The fat man behind the counter, who looked as if he had been built by stacking snowballs in three piles like Frosty the Snowman, and may have bought his clothes from a clown store, said, "We'll know if they show up on time, won't we?"

This was impossible to argue with. I thanked him and went back outside. I leaned on the wall. I saw there were flies on the wall next to me, high up close to the roof. I guess they were having a picnic, or maybe just a family reunion. I watched them for a while, and then I watched the road in front of the bus station.

The Greyhound came rolling in, shiny from the rain. The hound design on the side of the bus looked happy and in a hurry. The bus brakes hissed and the bus bumped a little as it stopped.

The bus door whispered open, and people started out. The first one out was a tall, well-constructed woman in her thirties wearing a blue miniskirt and blue top with the confidence of a nun who thinks being a bride to Christ means she'll someday get epic action from Jesus. She had on white boots, and her brown hair was piled at the top but long in back. Watching her walk into the station, I almost forgot I was there for Leonard.

Looking back at the bus, I saw Leonard get off. The sunlight made his black skin shine. I guess I was expecting him to be in uniform for some reason, but he wasn't. He was wearing blue jeans and cowboy boots and a blue western shirt with a blue jean jacket. He had a brown cowboy hat in his hand and a duffel bag slung across his back on a strap. He looked at me and smiled.

There are some people you don't talk to for a couple years, maybe more, and soon as you see them, it's like they have only left the room for a moment, and that's how it was with me and Leonard.

In the car, we chatted about this and that, nothing special. We hadn't gone far before we stopped at a Brookshire's store, bought some food and drinks for the fishing trip.

We bought some lard and hot dogs, a carton of eggs that we well-padded with paper bags, and put them in a Styrofoam cooler, along with some Dr Peppers and some Budweiser, bought some chips and buns, a few assorted items, along with a couple boxes of vanilla wafers. We packed them and the cooler in the back seat of the car. I had rods and reels and fishing tackle in the trunk, along with a folded tent and some other camping goods.

“So, how was it over there?” I said.

“Wet like this, but a lot more of the time, and maybe wetter. Definitely wetter. You walked through the jungle after a rain, the foliage steamed when the sun came out and there were more snakes and insects there than here, and there were these folks in black pajamas who wanted to kill you with guns. They made booby traps too. Pits with spikes coated in dung down at the bottom. Fell on one of those, spike didn’t kill you, the infection would. The Cong were tough. It was dark in the jungle, sometimes even when the sun was high, and at other times you went along trails where the moon was so full and bright, you could see in front of you better than if you had a flashlight. The enemy killed friends of mine, and I killed the enemy when I could. I did my duty, Hap, and I’d do it again, I was asked to. That’s how it was in a nutshell.”

“I did my duty too, Leonard.”

“Yeah. I know. How was prison?”

“Not as damp as the jungle, but it’s a jungle of its own, concrete and bars and people who got nothing to gain or lose by sticking a knife in your gut, saying they just wanted to rid the world of cowards who wouldn’t fight a war. I had to adjust their thinking a little from time to time. I only got stabbed twice. Minor stuff.”

“So, like me, you had it pretty easy?”

"I wouldn't have traded with you."

"You know, I wouldn't have traded with you. I don't know I could handle prison, even a short term. Hey, you know what's good?"

"What?"

"You get a big glass mug, and you put it in the freezer section of the refrigerator until it frosts over, and then you pour it three-quarters full of Dr Pepper, and top it off with vanilla ice cream. Don't let it set long, just drink it right away, and it's like a gift from the gods."

"Which gods?"

"Whichever ones I want to make up in the moment."

"We didn't buy any ice cream."

"I'm just saying it's good. We don't have any frosted mugs either, but I'm telling you, try it, it's so damn tasty, while you're drinking it, you could jack off with a hand full of briars and feel nothing but that cool drink and that ice cream sliding down your throat."

We nearly drove all the way back to Marvel Creek, but just before, took a road into the Sabine River bottoms. It was a gravel road, and it went by a place where the woods had been cleared and there was a big building and some concrete slabs. They used to hold illegal fights there. Once, Leonard had boxed against a behemoth named Hedge, and Leonard beat him, but it was close.

I drove us to a place near the river where the woods had been beat back and there was a concrete picnic table under some trees. A square of fire-stained bricks with a metal grate over it had been put near it for cooking. Table and cooker had been there for years. No one knew who built either. There were beer cans scattered about. Over the river you could see an old rickety metal bridge supported by cables and rust. Soon the bridge, like a lot of my plans, would fall into the Sabine and be carried away.

I parked, and the first thing we did was pick up all the beer cans. We put them in a tow sack I kept in the trunk of the car for this and that, and then we tied the bag off and set it in the back seat of the car.

We decided to pitch our tent over the picnic table, so we'd have it inside. It was the perfect campsite.

When the tent was pitched, we were covered with sweat. Now that the rain had passed, the air had become humid, and it stuck to us like Brer Rabbit Syrup.

Going through the fishing tackle, we found what we wanted and got our hooks set, pulled a couple of folded lawn chairs out of the trunk and took them and the rods down to the edge of the water.

We unfolded the chairs and sat and cast into the muddy Sabine, which was rolling along high and furious, rushing its water toward the Gulf of Mexico.

We weren't using live bait, just the stuff from the fishing tackle box, the false flies and so on. Neither of us were particularly good fishermen, but we had discovered long ago that we liked to sit and anticipate. We had rods, but we often used the old standby, cane poles. Fishing gave us something to do that didn't really matter. If we caught fish, I had the fry pan and the stuff to cook them; if we didn't, there were the hot dogs.

A big water moccasin swam by in the center of the river, either caught up by the churning water or on his way down deep south for a snake fiesta.

“Big motherfucker,” Leonard said.

“You should see his brother.”

“You don’t know he’s got a brother.”

“You don’t know he doesn’t. He might have a sister.”

That was our way, stupid jokes and companionship. There were moments when we didn’t need anything other than that.

Leonard said, “When’s the last time we did this?”

“I don’t know. Been a while.”

Leonard breathed deep, let out a sigh.

“One time, over there, long before I was back in the world, I saw a Vietnamese, little guy, riding a bicycle. He wasn’t a soldier, or at least he didn’t seem to be, but he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. We were on a hill and we could see him in the distance, riding along next to a huge stretch of jungle. Our jets were flying overhead, coming down close to the tops of the trees because it was thought the Cong were in that piece of forest, hiding, and that’s where our squad was going. The lieutenant, to make it safer for us, called in a napalm strike. Nasty stuff, dropped out of the jets in a thick, fiery goo.

“I’m watching this guy, and he’s pedaling fast. Hears the planes, looks up, pedals faster, thinking maybe he could outrun them or some such stupid thought, and out comes that dark burning mess from a couple of jets, and it falls fast and hits him the way it hits the jungle, and zap, the jungle disappears in a roar of flame and this crackle like dry leaves underfoot, but way louder, and the bicycle guy, he disappears too. Just plain ceased to be. He wasn't boiled. Wasn't set on fire. He was gone, Hap. And you know what? I thought it was funny as hell. We all laughed. Just some poor guy riding along on his bicycle, and the next thing you know his village is looking for him. You know, hey, anybody seen Bob? Wasn't he supposed to bring some rice home for supper? They not only weren't going to find him, they weren't going to find his bicycle either. I mean that shit disintegrated him and his bike, like pouring salt on a slug, but a faster process. I laughed, Hap. Funniest thing I had seen in months, just hysterical. I didn't think about his family, probably never knowing what happened to him, or why. I just thought it was funny, so funny, I cried. I still think about it, and now, when I wake up thinking about it, I don't find it so funny."

"Release valve, Leonard. Fireman, policeman, the military, they all do it. Probably emergency room folks as well. Sometimes, you got to laugh to keep from crying. Prison could be like that."

"I don't know I felt that way, though, Hap. I got so if their eyes were slanted, I hated them all. I don't have any regrets fighting for our country, but I sometimes got to wonder where the line really was, you know, and I got to think too how it changed me for a time, maybe forever, and I'm not sure I got enough excuses to make me comfortable about it."

"Why I didn't go, Leonard. No war is good or pretty, but that stuff with Hitler, I'm pretty sure had I been around then, I would have got into that. Vietnam. Different thing. Political war over unclear politics. The line was firmer between us and them in World War Two. Guarantee you, no matter what flag they fly under, won't be long when they'll be as capitalistic as us, and we'll be visiting them for vacations, and because of the money, they'll be glad to see us."

"I suppose. But I did what I thought was right."

"But it may not have been right."

"Could be, Hap. Could be."

We cranked in our false bait and cast again, but with the water the way it was, it just carried our lines, and it was all we could do not to tangle them together or mix them into the debris of limbs and leaves that were washing by.

"One time, in prison, I'm in one of the many lines we had to make to do this or that, and we were so close you damn near got your dick in the guy's ass in front of you—"

"Maybe I did make the wrong choice."

"I think you might have found the company less than romantic, Leonard."

"Didn't say anything about feeling romantic."

"So, I'm in a line, and this guy, he breaks the line, and he's got this little sticker, shank, whatever you want to call it, though I never hear anyone say shank when I was in prison. He comes up to this one guy in line and reaches out quick with his free hand and wraps his arm around the guy and pushes the knife into him, uses his body like he's fucking, you know, pushing it against the knife, back and forth, did that fast as a bunny gets pussy. This other guy in line was in on it, you know. He grabs the poor guy from behind and helps hold him so he won't fall, and this other con keeps knife-fucking him until there's blood all over the floor. Usually, something like that, they stab quick and they're gone. But these guys, they were in for life and didn't give a shit. They didn't stop until the guy was dead. It happened fast, but there was a part of me that thought I should help. But the guy they killed, he was no peach either, but still, I felt helpless and guilty for not at least trying to stop them. The guy getting stabbed, he turned his head toward me once, like he was asking for help, and I didn't do anything. No one did. It was over pretty damn fast.

"Found out later the beef was over one of them feeling he had been insulted by that guy, but no one remembered the insult. Think about that, Leonard. They killed him in a horrible way over one of them thinking he was insulted, yet he couldn't remember the insult. And here's the corker, guy did the stabbing. Guards figured out what was what pretty quick. They took him away, put him in the hole, and then for whatever reason, they let him out a few months later. He and his buddy, one who had held that guy while the stabbing was done, they got into some altercation over a chocolate bar. The stabber wanted to eat it, and the erstwhile assistant to the murder, he was saving it to melt so he could grease up a convict's asshole for fucking. Guy who had helped the stabber kill that guy over an insult, was stabbed by his friend who just got out of the hole. Where the fuck did he get a tool that quick? Why did they let him out of solitary confinement after what he did, just drop him back into the prison population, this guy from hell? Right then, I understood the death penalty, at least for a select few, and I've never had a moral question about it since for creatures like that.

"Anyway, the stabber got taken away this time, put in the hole again, and a few days in, he decided to beat his brains out on the wall rather than be there. He succeeded. Can you imagine that type of determination?"

"I think he was a good judge of character," Leonard said.

"Let me tell you something. Soon as I heard he beat his brains out on a concrete wall, I laughed. Funniest goddamn thing I could imagine. It wasn't just me, the guards and the prisoners heard about it, they thought it was hysterical. One of the guards said, 'So he beat his head on the wall and all that came out was oatmeal, no brains,' and at the time that seemed damn funny, and it's just silly."

"Makes me laugh a little," Leonard said.

We quit talking. It was quiet for a while, except for the sound of the river rushing along. We kept reeling in our line and recasting. After an hour of this, Leonard said, "I think we need some different bait."

"Maybe," I said.

We didn't get up to dig for worms, and we were too far away from a good spot for grasshoppers. The sun started going down, and darkness slipped in over the pink light of the evening sun, slid through the trees with carbon-stained fingers, fell over the water and made inky splotches. In short time, through the limbs and leaves, you could see the sun swelling red like a big rubber ball, falling behind the world in slow motion. Finally, it was dead dark and the mosquitoes came out, big guys that could straddle a turkey flat-footed. They buzzed around our ears until we gave it up and got inside the tent and pulled the mosquito netting over the open front flaps. I took some bug spray from my camping bag, and we took turns spraying it on each other.

When we felt the tent was secure from mosquitoes, I slipped back out, got some camping gear out of the car, including a camping light, which I hung from a loop in the top of the tent. I got some cooking goods too. A frying pan, a couple pots, a Dutch oven and a coffeepot and a bag of Maxwell House coffee. I had a box with a bag of flour and a can of lard in it, sourdough starter my mom had prepared for me, pepper, salt, some odds and ends for frying up fish, which we didn't have. I had a container of water with a spout, and I brought that in too. I was only missing a TV set and a tall antenna to bring in programs from Shreveport.

Under the lantern light, Leonard started cleaning out the square of bricks with a little camp shovel. I took a hatchet and went looking for firewood.

The wood around the tent was damp, so I had to go into the woods a bit. I was able to find some thin pieces of fairly dried wood, and a couple of larger limbs I could bust open with an axe to get at the pith and use for fire starter. I also managed to acquire a few ticks on my balls, which I stealthily picked off outside the tent.

After I got the fire going, it was hot inside the tent, but the flap being opened helped. The wind made the mosquito net in the doorway tremble.

I used a bit of flour and the starter and stuck it together with lard, and used a bit of water to make it smooth. I decided not to use any eggs. I rolled the dough with my hands on a paper bag placed on the picnic table until I had a small, thin blanket of dough. I coated the dough with a filmy layer of lard, dropped the hot dogs onto it, and wrapped the dough around them. I coated the inside of the Dutch oven with lard and put the dough and hot dogs inside of it, set the lid down over it. I used the little camp shovel to make room in the firewood and ash and sat the oven in that, shoveled some of the burning coals on top of the lid. Leonard found a spot where he could set the coffeepot, and he got the water inside boiling and he put the grounds directly into the water, cowboy style.

When I thought it was done, I worked the lid off again, and set it aside. It smelled really good.

We cut some slices out of the dough, like it was a deep-dish pie, and put them on the sacks the supplies had been in. We sat at the picnic table and ate with our hands. Food eaten outdoors like that, cooked on a fire, seems to taste better to me. Maybe it’s psychological, but it sure was fine.

The smoke inside the tent was annoying, and we fanned out the smoke and spread the coals inside the brick square, then rolled out our sleeping bags. We put one on each side of the table, on the concrete benches. It was a little narrow, but it worked well enough and made us less worried about snakes. We stretched out and lay in the dark, except for a little red glow that came from the brick fire pit. The air smelled of burnt wood and the remains of our supper.

“Trudy, you’re officially divorced from her?”

“Yep. Got my papers when I was in the can.”

“I don’t want to shit on sacred memories, Hap, but she’s a neurotic do-gooder that’s mainly doing herself good. She’s an idealist without a real agenda. She’s bad for you, buddy.”

“I know. But I miss her. I tell you, right now, knowing all that, I’d take her back in a heartbeat. I love her, man.”

“You want to fuck her. Not the same thing.”

“That isn’t it.”

“I don’t know. You’re pretty pussy-trained. I work on the other side of the fence, and that can train you too, the old wiener craving, but I got to think that pussy for you must be powerful stuff.”

“It’s pretty powerful, but that isn’t it. I really love her.”

“Don’t matter how you feel, she’s got to feel the same, and she don’t.”

“Thanks for the reminder.”

“Just trying to talk straight to you.”

“I know. I don’t have to like it, though.”

“Thing is, what’s true is going to be true no matter what. When you were out of sight, you were pretty much out of mind, except for her having an address for the divorce papers."

"Don't keep boosting my confidence. I might get the big head. Shit. You know a lot about me, for being in Nam."

"I got your letters. You wrote a lot of them. It was like you were my mother."

"Prison gives you a lot of free time."

"Let's change the subject. We used to box, and you showed me some of the other stuff you learned, the martial arts stuff. I got some more of that in the army, though the hand-to-hand stuff they teach you is mostly shit. I think we should start practicing, doing some sparring and stuff."

"We can do that. I want to do that."

"I need a job too."

"We can go see if there's a job at the aluminum chair plant. Go together."

"Yeah. That's good. Been my life's ambition, to make fucking aluminum chairs."

We talked awhile longer, and then grew silent. The night sounds from outside grew, a chorus of insects and frogs, and we could hear the water running fast and gurgling below the high bank. The glow from the fire pit was gone and the cool air blew through the mosquito netting and we were comfortable in there.

In the morning I awoke early, before the crack of dawn, went outside and sat in one of the lawn chairs near the bank. The air smelled sweet and fresh from yesterday's rain. I had brought my rod and reel out with me, and I put an artificial bait on it by feel.

When first light showed yellow behind me and fell warm on my shoulders, I cast my line out into the water, which, though still moving fast, was not rushing as before.

I sat there and, bathed in the daylight, saw that the trees on the other side of the river were filled with black birds, almost more birds than leaves it seemed, and as the sun continued to rise behind me, and the sky strained out the purple and let in the blue, the birds suddenly took to the sky with a burst of wings and a squawking of voice.

A fish hit my line. I reeled it in. It was a small bass. I took it off the hook and ran a string through its gills, dropped the fish in the water and tied the end of the string to my chair.

I cast again, and almost immediately another bass hit, and in short time I had four of them. None of them were big, but they were all eating size.

I pulled them out of the water and off the string, used my pocketknife to gut them. I rinsed them in the river, took them up to the tent. When I pushed through the mosquito net, Leonard sat up.

"That's the first real night's sleep I've had. Didn't dream guts and blood and all that shit. Didn't see that fucker on the bicycle. It was like I was innocent and had never borrowed money."

"I slept good too," I said. "I woke up, thought for a brief moment I was still in Leavenworth, then felt overwhelmingly happy when I knew I wasn't."

Leonard pulled back the sleeping bag, got out of it, and began to slip on his pants. "I see you got a few fish. Go to the store?"

"Without you out there they been biting. We're having fried eggs and fish for breakfast."

"Sounds good."

Leonard went out and gathered wood, using the hatchet. When we got the fire going well, I made some flat bread, fried the eggs and fish. I made the coffee this time, strained the grounds through a cloth. It wasn't great coffee, but at least there weren't any grounds to chew on.

When we finished eating, without really talking about it, operating with that one mind we seemed to share, we packed up everything and drove away. We rolled our windows down and felt the cool morning air come in. We could smell the green of the woods and the wet of the river, and then we were on the little road out. "You know, I'd be lying there in the jungle," Leonard said, "and I could hear people praying, but I didn't pray, because, like you, I'm not a believer. I felt to even think about it was silly, as I didn't believe in God. But I damn sure believed in hope then, because that's all I had to believe in, except being ready. So, I always tried to be ready. I had to be ready every minute, every second out there. Last night, I wasn't ready. I wasn't cautious. It felt good to not be ready, to just sleep. I find you irritating, but soothing at the same time."

"I guess I'm supposed to believe there's a compliment in that.

Thing was, in prison, in my cell, I was all right, I felt fine there. It's when we went outside on the yard, or when we went to eat, all of us near one another, that's when I felt worried. That's when I was cranked up and ready, every fucking minute, especially after seeing that stabbing right in front of me. When I was in the cell, I was fine. I didn't have a bunk mate. It was just me. I had some books there, and I read a lot. I exercised in my cell, slept there, dreamed there, and confining as it was, I felt better and safer behind those bars than out on the concrete. When I left prison, got home, I didn't sleep well. I could be in my bed in my parents' house, and I'd feel like someone was behind me. But last night. It was fantastic."

"That's because I was there, big boy."

"Maybe."

We drove on, heading toward where Leonard would stay with his uncle, provided his uncle would let him, and then I would go home. I would cross the Sabine Bridge with its high water, sinking down now, finding its place between the shores, and I would go to bed tonight after a warm glass of milk. Leonard wouldn't be near. We wouldn't be able to talk and joke or fish. That concerned me a little.

Leonard made me promise that before bed we would go out and look at the North Star, and we'd know we were both doing it, even if not at that same moment. That was our connection. We were both home from the war and from prison, and we told ourselves we'd be fine, and we should look at that North Star every night as a way of feeling connected.

“Don’t forget,” Leonard said.

I didn’t forget. I did just that for a lot of nights that followed, looking up at that North Star, knowing my brother was looking too, and that we were star companions.

Sometime later, when I finally saw Leonard again. I told him how I had done what he suggested, and how fine it made me feel, and what a good idea it was.

“Oh, yeah,” Leonard said. “I remember now. I forgot about it.”

GOOD EATS:
THE RECIPES OF HAP AND LEONARD

KASEY LANSDALE

HAP'S DISCLAIMER: These are the recipes as I remember them from my youth. Some of them handed down, some of them original, and some I can't remember. Feel free to experiment, and don't take every direction to heart. (Except when I specifically tell you to take something to heart. Ice water means ice water, by golly.) Also, since you're rich enough to buy this book, I'm going to assume you're rich enough to have an electric stove too. So everything will be presented to you as though that were true.

As seen in “The Kitchen”

HC’s Iced Tea

I decided it might be best to ease you in slow. Like training wheels on a bicycle, see if you can get yourself a batch of iced tea together without putting an eye out before we move on to something more lavish.

Water
3–4 **tea bags** (black tea is my preference)
Lemon
Ice
Sugar (optional)

Boil some water on the stove then turn off the heat. Toss the tea bags in the water. Remember, the number of bags can be subjective depending on how much water you boiled, which is based on how much tea you want. Let the tea bags steep for about 4 minutes. Don’t let it sit too much longer than that or your tea will turn more bitter than Uncle Chester about having a gay nephew. Pour it in a jug full of ice. Add some lemon or sugar if you feel so inclined. Pour it into a big glass and enjoy.

Mama’s Pecan Bread

There was one major rule in the house when pecan bread was on the menu. Absolutely no running or slamming doors inside, lest you cause the bread to fall. I never did know if this really made a difference, but I wasn’t trying to find out. I could see it now, the headline would read something like “Local boy accused of ruining pecan bread found snatched up, hide tanned. Mother questions where things went so wrong.” My folks weren’t big on whippings, and I wanted to keep it that way.

1 cup **sugar**

1 cup **brown sugar**

4 **eggs**

1 cup **vegetable oil**

1½ cups **self-rising flour**

1 tsp **vanilla**

2 cups chopped-up **pecans** (better when they’re from the trees out back)

Turn on your oven and get it warmed up to 350 degrees. Spray a 9x13 casserole dish with some Pam, or get a stick of butter and rub it inside the pan. Get a glass bowl and mix together the sugar, brown sugar, eggs, and oil. Stir with a fork or whisk. Next, add the flour and the vanilla. Now stir that up until everything is smooth, with a nice golden color. Once your bowl looks like a wheat field, add your pecans.

Pay attention now, do not add all of them.

You want to save some, about a half a cup, to put on the top. So help me if you add all the pecans at once, you’re on your own. Stir it around until the pecans are mixed in, then spoon it into the greased dish. Spread it out evenly, *then* add the remaining pecans. It should look pretty covered, like ants on a picnic.

Bake that sucker for about a half hour, then let it cool. Cut it up into squares and marvel at the wonder that is Mama’s Pecan Bread. And remember, no running in the house.

Mimi’s Pie Crust

My honest opinion: it’s wrong to buy your pie crust already made. It’s like cheating at cards. You might get away with it, but that don’t make it right. And besides, there’s nothing like your own flaky disc of deliciousness that you put your own blood, sweat, and tears into. Metaphorically of course. Just ask yourself, what could possibly go wrong? I ask Leonard that all the time. Though come to think of it, he usually answers with “Do you know us?” Ignore him; he ain’t always right.

1½ cups **Crisco** (vegetable shortening)

3 cups **all purpose flour**

1 **egg**

Salt

1 tbsp **white vinegar**

1 **egg**

5 tbsp **ice cold water** (that doesn't mean run the tap to cold)

Salt

First things first, and let's just get this out of the way. You can't use butter. You sure as hell can't use olive oil or some other fancy pants butter alternative. You *must* use Crisco. Lord forgive me for what I am doing to my arteries, but if you want a flaky and delicious pie crust, that's just what you have to do. Now, put the flour in a bowl and add the Crisco. I grew up with a girl who used to work the mules in the fields, plowing all day in the hot sun. She'd come home starving, would take a big old spoonful of Crisco and then dip it in sugar, and eat it straight. She died very young. I am not saying those two things are connected, but I'm not saying they ain't.

Anyway, find your pastry cutter (or two knives if you're able) and work that Crisco through the flour. Do this until there's no chunky bits in it. This part takes a little practice, but eventually you can see the texture and know it's ready. Take your egg and crack it into a different clean bowl. Grab you a fork and whip that egg like it stole something. Now pour it onto the flour mixture and add the cold water and vinegar. Add the salt. Mix it together lightly. Don’t beat the tar out of it: the mixture is not your enemy. Take that ball of dough and wrap it in plastic. Put it in the ice box for about four hours (you can leave it until the next day even). If you are ready to make the pie now, separate the dough into manageable sections, and freeze it slightly flattened for 20–30 minutes.

*Side note: When you are ready to spread the dough out for baking, get a rolling pin and flour whatever hard surface you have. Sheet metal or butcher block is always perfect for this. You don’t need an extravagant kitchen, just a hard surface you can spread some flour on. Roll out the dough from the center until it’s flat. This is not your cousin’s Play-Doh, so don’t treat it as such. If you find the dough sticking to the pin as you roll, add a little more flour. You don’t want it to be watery as you spread it out. I hope you don’t have any prior engagements, ’cause getting the crust rolled out to the right size can take some time. Flour and flip as needed, and don’t be afraid to get your mitts in there and firm up the edges when things start to crack. It ain’t rocket science, just make it look like every other pie crust you’ve seen in your life. Roll the finished, flat dough up on your rolling pin like a scroll, then transfer it to your pie pan rather than trying to scrape it up off the countertop. You want the dough to fall over the edges of the pie pan when you finally put it in. Metal pie pans are the way to go, but you do what you have to do. Tuck the edges of the crust under and then get a fork and crimp around the perimeter. If you just can't imagine placing a pie down in front of your family that isn't one hundred percent aesthetically pleasing, you can always use your fingers to pinch the border in for that clover look. (If you're a bit on the ostentatious side, a spoon or tongs can work too.)

O'Reta's Chocolate Pie Filling

I don't know what people have against writing down recipes, but this is how I remember it from when I was a kid. I had to make a few tweaks here and there until the memory and the taste aligned, but this is as old-fashioned and Southern-style as a chocolate pie can be. Now when I make this pie, which is usually only around holiday time 'cause let's be honest, nobody's getting younger and, for certain, nobody's getting thinner, least not 'round here, I always think of Mama. There she'd be, in the kitchen making all kinds of goodies. When we finally got a television, I'd come home from wherever I'd been that day and she'd have her stories on in the background. You weren't to disturb her then. You could be on fire and it wouldn't matter, not until the end of the program. That woman, though, could make anything out of anything. She was the MacGyver of ingredients.

1 cup **evaporated milk**
3 tbsp **flour**
3 tbsp **unsweetened cocoa powder** (One day I'll tell you 'bout the brownies Mama used to make using this same powder)
1 cup **sugar**
3 **eggs**, separated
2 tsp **vanilla extract**

Go ahead and turn on your oven to 350 degrees. Whether you bought it at the store, or you made it yourself, get your pie crust ready. Put a saucepan on the stove, but don't turn it on yet. Don't want you burning the filling before we even get started. Combine the milk, flour, cocoa powder, sugar, egg yolks, and vanilla. Now you can turn it on to medium. This next part is super-important: whisk that mix like Zeus trying to start a hurricane. You got to keep that liquid moving. It has been said that if you stop stirring, not only will you end up with a too-thick pie filling, there will also be a voodoo curse that descends upon your family from now to eternity. Nobody wants a voodoo curse, trust me. Once that filling starts bubbling up, you can reduce the heat to a simmer, and let it cook until it thickens. It'll sneak up on you and be too thick if you don't pay attention. What you want is a pudding consistency. Some people use pudding as their filling in general, but those people are wrong. You should have your pie crust at the ready, and with the filling still hot and the right consistency, pour that liquid gold into the crust.

*Don't ignore me now. It's very important that the meringue goes on the pie while the chocolate filling is still super-hot. You need to seal this puppy like your life depends on it. If you have questions, refer over to the meringue recipe. If you still have questions, call your mom. You should call her anyway without me having to say as much. Act like an adult. That woman gave birth to you. Show a little respect. If Mama ain't around no more, bless her soul, call someone who you know would love to hear from you. Don't wait on me to tell you who it is. Take some responsibility. Anyway, after you seal the pie, let it cool at room temperature.

Uncle Chester's Meringue

4 **egg whites**
¼ cup **sugar**, ground extra fine
¼ teaspoon **cream of tartar** (Uncle Chester would say this is a white man's addition, but

I like it.)

Leonard here . . . Wasn't no way I was gonna let Hap here tell y'all about my Uncle Chester's meringue recipe. Uncle Chester always told me the secret to good meringue was this: cold eggs. You gotta separate the eggs from the egg whites straight out of the icebox. Then you leave them alone and let them reach room temperature. Go read a book, do a puzzle, put on some Ernest Tubb. Whatever you have to do to give them enough alone time so that your meringue turns out "Chester-Ready."

Uncle Chester used to always say, "Let them sit if you wanna whip."

I never had the heart to tell him it wasn't a great rhyme.

While you're waiting, put your sugar in a blender and let it get real fine. It holds a lot better when the sugar is almost powdery. I don't recommend using powdered sugar though. There's a difference, is what I'm saying.

Once you're sure it's been long enough, pour the egg whites into a clean bowl that has been sitting in the icebox a few minutes. Listen to me when I say clean, 'cause I mean clean like baby Jesus is coming over for dinner kind of clean, and whip them until they are as glossy white as Hap's ass. Unlike Hap's ass, do not over-whip. Add the cream of tartar so the eggs will hold their shape. I don't remember seeing Chester use cream of tartar, but I know I haven't been able to make a chocolate meringue pie myself without it. Slowly add the sugar to the egg whites, about a tablespoon at a time.

Now, if you'll notice, Hap said before that it's very important that the meringue goes on the pie while the chocolate filling is still super-hot! This is still true. Also as Hap said before, you need to seal the pie correctly. You can do so by taking your meringue all the way to the outer edges of the pie so that when it does shrink, it still covers all the filling. Trust me, nobody wants shrinkage. Uncle Chester taught me that early on about several things. This meringue can also be used on top of my namesake banana pudding.

**Now you have the crust, the filling, and the meringue recipes all at your disposal. Go forth, good luck, and Godspeed.

As seen in “Of Mice and Minestrone”

Kill Ya Dead Jalapeño Cornbread

I know some people like sweet yellow cornbread, and it’s true that I’ve been known to indulge myself on some occasions. But real cornbread, the old style like Mama used to make, wasn’t even called cornbread. It was known as “corn pone,” and it sure didn’t have no sugar.

Full disclosure though, I can’t really tell you what the true difference is. Mind’s been busy with other things, solving the world’s problems and whatnot, but I know my mama was adamant that they were in fact, different.

Mark Twain even went so far as to suggest, “You tell me whar a man gits his corn pone, en I’ll tell you what his ’pinions is.” So as you can see, cornbread, or corn pone as it’s known, has highly permeated Southern culture. It was Twain who also said, “The North thinks it knows how to make cornbread, but this is gross superstition.”

1 tbsp **shortening**
1 cup **cornmeal**
1 slight tsp **salt**
1 cup **boiling water**
Jalapeños to taste

Ample **bacon grease** (Just use what’s in the Folgers coffee can on the back of the stove.) *Ample can be defined as how much grease your body can handle today

It should be said that if you plan on using jalapeños straight off the vine, you should conduct a taste test on your batch to see what you’re dealing with on the spice scale. Remember, without any sugar in the recipe, there’s nothing to cut the heat from within. I suggest having a big glass of buttermilk nearby to keep those seeds from sneaking up on you, lest you find yourself yelling s’wanee and passing out right at the kitchen table.

Start off by melting the shortening in a heavy iron skillet, then put the cornmeal and the salt in a different bowl. Use another pot on the back burner to get some water boiling. Take a cup of boiling water and pour it over the cornmeal and the salt. Believe me when I say it needs to be hotter than a billygoat with a blowtorch. Go ahead and add the melted shortening (and chopped jalapeños if you’re using them) and stir it up with a long wooden spoon. Once things cool off, portion it out evenly into little cakes. Keep it sort of thick, don’t flatten it out. We aren’t making pancakes over here. Next, put you some bacon grease in the skillet, about ¼ of an inch, and turn the heat to medium. Let it get hot, then place the cakes in the skillet until they fry up brown. Should take five minutes or so, and for Pete's sake, don't forget to do both sides.

*Recommended with Death by Chili and Minnie's Minestrone.

Minnie's Minestrone Soup

To this day I still think of Minnie, especially when I hear the word "Minestrone." I think of how ashamed I was that I didn't stand up to Dash that first time. I also think that maybe I'd be laying next to Minnie if I had. I think too of my father, how in his own way, the best way he knew how, told me some things just ain't never going to be right in this world. That sometimes bad things happen to good, and bad, people, and life ain't always fair. How that feeling, that discovery, don't make you special, but part of a sad little club nobody wants to be a member of.

Making this soup, though, makes me smile. I smile knowing that Minnie was a fighter right up until the end. A cruel end that came too soon. That maybe, just maybe, meeting me, getting away once, even if only for a short time, made her stronger somehow. In the end, didn't help enough, but it's the only way I can make any sort of peace with what happened. I never did see Dash again, but I heard that he got liver cancer, and suffered right up until he died alone, penniless. I hoped it was true. So Minnie, here's for you.

1 tbsp **olive oil**

1 tbsp **butter**

2 large **carrots**, diced

1 medium **onion**, chopped

2 **celery ribs**, chopped

3 **garlic cloves**, minced

2 cans (14½ ounces) **chicken broth**

2 cans (8 ounces) no-salt-added **tomato sauce** (I'm trying to watch my girlish figure.)

1 can (16 ounces) **kidney beans**, rinsed and drained

1 can (14½ ounces) diced **tomatoes**, undrained

1½ cups shredded **spinach**

1 tbsp dried **basil**

1½ tsp dried **parsley** flakes

1 tsp dried **oregano**

½ tsp **pepper**

1 whole shredded or sliced **zucchini**

1 cup uncooked **elbow**

macaroni (or whatever you have left in the cabinet)

*Poisoned rats optional.

Find you a big saucepan (like the state of Texas big,) and put the butter and oil in it. Then, sauté your carrots, onion, and your celery. Next, add the garlic. Let that cook for about another minute, then add everything but your noodles. Cook that until it boils up, stir it, then reduce the heat. Put a lid on it, and let it simmer for about 15 minutes. If you're ready to eat it, add the macaroni and cook without the lid on another 7 or so minutes. Basically, just keep your eyes on things, and if the pasta looks done, and the veggies look done, it's safe to assume that they are. You can be sure by poking around in there with a fork, or some other pointy object, to make sure things are tender.

There's a lot of stuff that goes into this soup, but there's not really that much to it as far as the cooking process. Also, it's sort of a kitchen sink recipe. In other words, if you've got it, go ahead and toss it in there. If you prefer fresh tomatoes, for example, or low-sodium options, that's all you. I know some people add more vegetables, or chickpeas, or they sub the macaroni with another type of pasta. If you're a vegetarian, you can use vegetable broth instead of chicken. There's lots you can do with this recipe to make it your own. Spice it up or tone it down as you see fit. You can also add grated parmesan cheese when you're ready to serve, but I wouldn't do it if you plan to freeze it (see below).

*This makes a huge helping of soup. If you plan to freeze some for later, cook the pasta another time and add it in when you're ready to eat it so that it won't get gooey. Also, let the soup cool down before you freeze it.

Mom's Mexican Mess

Mom started making what became known as "Mexican Mess" when one day at dinnertime, she realized she didn't have enough ingredients for one of the meals in her regular rotation. She had some ground beef leftover from our cow, Spare Ribs. (We named him that to keep reminding us he wasn't our pet, he was lunch.) She had some canned goods and a bag of chips, and with that, Mexican Mess was born. She started tossing everything together on the stove and created her signature "Mess." Because it was always a mishmash of things, there weren't really consistent measurements. This recipe continues to evolve over time, but my favorite iteration is as follows:

1 pound **hamburger meat** (easier when you don't know

the cow personally)

Taco seasoning (Buy a pouch of it at the market. This is my splurge and I won't feel guilty about it.)

1 can **whole kernel corn** (This we usually got from the neighbors in exchange for work Daddy did on the man's car. It typically arrived in a wooden basket, was usually still on the cob and in the husk. Nowadays, I like to buy it in a can or even a freezer bag, ready to go. If you use it from the can, drain it first.)

1 can **pinto beans** (You can buy them dry and soak them, but sometimes the Piggly Wiggly runs a special, and it's easier to just stock up at that time.)

1 can **Black beans** (This addition came about later,

when black beans suddenly became a part of every American’s consciousness. You can always substitute kidney beans, and no need to drain either if you’re using from the can.)

Fritos (If you don’t have Fritos, which makes me question you and is a whole ’nother conversation, get some old tortillas and fry them until they’re crispy, then rip them into strips.)

Jalapeños(From the pepper plant on the front porch. Hard to believe we got those little seeds to not only sprout up, but live
through a number of scorching Texas summers.)

Shredded cheese, added on top to taste

*A great addition on the top of this mess pile is some Hit Ya So

Hard Homemade Hot Sauce.

Toss what’s left of poor Spare Ribs on the stove in a greased pan and cook the meat until it browns. Drain off the fat as best you can, then add the taco seasoning. After the seasoning cooks through, dump the corn and beans into the mix. Stir it up nice, and when the smell starts to permeate the kitchen, turn off the heat and scoop it into a bowl. You can even put the Fritos on the bottom of the bowl, or put a tortilla on a plate, scoop the mess into the tortilla and roll it up. Don’t forget to add the jalapeños and cheese as desired. If you’re watching your figure like Leonard and me have been lately, skip the chips and tortillas and just eat the mess as is with a fork. Comfort food at its finest.

Pop’s Chocolate Shake

¾ cup **milk** (the fatty kind, none of that new age crap)
¼ cup **chocolate syrup** (have an affection for Hershey's)
1 tbsp **malted milk powder**
1½ cups **ice cream** (vanilla was Pop’s favorite, chocolate

is mine. You can use any kind you want ’cause you’re grown.)

Whipped cream (a dollop’ll do you.)

Cherries (1–3 per shake)

Over at the café they used to make the shakes pretty simple-like. They would pour the milk, chocolate syrup, malted milk powder, and ice cream all together in a blender and let it run until it was the right consistency: smooth like mashed potatoes. Then, they would pour it into a tall glass that had been stored in the freezer. Pop always got his topped off with whipped cream and one cherry. Pop wasn’t a glutton. I, on the other, hand prefer mine with three cherries. Tastes better with three, if you ask me. If you happen to be making a birthday shake of some sort, you can always add sprinkles.

Bud’s Warm Milk

This one should be pretty self-explanatory, but there’s a few little tweaks you can do to make a nighttime glass of warm milk go from good to downright delicious. Now, Dad wasn’t much into froufrou stuff, but every once in a while, he would warm up a glass of milk on the stove and add in some vanilla extract, nutmeg or cinnamon (cinnamon sticks if you’re feeling fancy), and if the neighbors had dropped some off from their hives, fresh honey. You want to be sure you don’t let the milk sit too long on the stove lest you end up with a scalded batch. And don’t forget to stir the milk as it gets warm, ’cause nothing tastes worse than burnt milk. Okay that’s not true, there’s actually plenty things worse than burnt milk, but that doesn’t make it taste any better.

As seen in “The Watering Shed”

Watering Shed Moonshine

After the Watering Shed got slapped with a few citations for distributing moonshine without a license, they quit making it in the bathtub, letting it ferment for weeks at a time, and started using the stove. Seemed like a novel idea, you ask me. Not being much of a drinker myself, I couldn’t really taste the difference of that made in the tub and that on the stove. Either way, it all has a flavor about as subtle as rocket fuel.

Enough **cinnamon sticks** that is starts to smell like Christmas (about 10)
1 gallon **apple cider** (see below *)
4 cups **apple juice** (You can buy it at any Piggly Wiggly.)
3 cups **brown sugar**
1 cup **white sugar**
Everclear, 190 proof (only illegal in some states)
(If you happen to be a Yankee —anywhere outside of Texas

—you may need to find a high-proof alcohol alternative. You’ll need a little over 3 cups.)

1 cup **rum**, 70 proof (Rumor has it that Shank uses Captain Morgan, and has even used up to 2 cups per batch instead of 1.)

And gather up 12-ish **Mason jars** and their lids from whatever jams you and your cousins have finished off.

***Easy way to make apple cider:**

1/3 bushel fresh Delicious **apples**

Clean the apples and cut out any rough spots. Leave the skins, no need to make extra work for yourself. Quarter them and toss them in the blender until they look like applesauce. Get you a cheesecloth, and place that mush on top of it. With the cloth over a bowl, start squeezing like you’re milking a goat. There. Fresh apple cider.

Making the shine:

Take the sticks (cinnamon, that is), apple cider, and apple juice, and put them together in a big pot on a stove or over a campfire and bring it to a mild simmer. When it looks like Leonard's bathwater, add in the sugars and stir 5 to 10 minutes, until the sugar is gone. Turn off the heat and go find you a book. Read that book, then come back and check on the shine. Now that the mixture is at room temperature or slightly below, stir in the Everclear and the rum. (If you skip reading the book and go straight to adding the booze, it'll burn off some of the alcohol.) Now you can pour that soul-scorching nectar into a Mason jar, and if you're feeling fancy, you can add a cinnamon stick inside there too. Pinkies up.

Shank's Cherry Bombs

The Watering Shed doesn't exactly scream variety, but Shank always has something in the back just in case someone ventures out to his establishment with a hankering for something a little more exotic. Disclaimer: Cherry Bombs have been known to cause vomiting, dehydration, pregnancy, and death.

"Leftover" **Everclear** from the moonshine Jar of **Maraschino cherries** (Piggly

Wiggly is still your best best.)

Drain the jar of cherries, and once the juice is out, replace said juice with the Everclear and let them soak a few days in the icebox. Can be served with soda or eaten alone. Be careful though: eat too many, you might be visiting Philip sooner than later.

As seen in “Sparring Partner”

Leonard’s Banana Pudding

Ain’t a soul alive don’t know that vanilla cookies is Leonard’s favorite. I’ve seen him throw hands over someone just looking at his cookies. I can’t say as I blame him; they are pretty great. No matter how broke we may be, he’s always got to get the brand-name vanilla wafers. Leonard’s funny about that. They taste the same to me, but he swears up and down there’s a difference, and who am I to come between a man and his cookies? So with all this in mind, it’s no wonder Leonard’s favorite dessert is banana pudding. If we poured Dr Pepper on top we might just be uncovering his holy grail. Though I don’t recommend you pour anything on top of the banana pudding other than caramel sauce. That’s a little decadent if you ask me, but so long as it ain’t a soft drink I guess that’s okay. One great thing about banana pudding is it doesn’t take long to make. So, if it turns out you got kin dropping by in an hour, no need to panic, and you likely already have everything you need.

4 tbsp **all purpose flour**

1½ cups **sugar**

Pinch of **salt**

3 **egg yolks** (You can save these egg whites to put

towards the Meringue.)

3 cups **milk**

1 tsp **vanilla extract**

Box of **Nilla Wafers** (from anywhere but Leonard's pantry)

6 **bananas**

Fire up the stove to 325 degrees and let it heat up. Grab you a saucepan with some weight behind it, and put in the flour, sugar, and salt. In a different bowl, beat three egg yolks like they owe you money, and add the milk to the same bowl with the eggs. Pour that mixture into the saucepan and then cook over medium heat, stirring constantly, like it's your full-time job, until everything is smooth as a baby's bottom. Take the pan off the heat and stir in the vanilla. Once that pudding mixture has cooled, arrange some of the vanilla wafers on the bottom of a glass dish. Slice up your bananas, and place some of them on top of the wafers. Then pour about 1/3 of the pudding over the layers and repeat, ending with the cookies on top. If you want to add meringue, then by all means. Who am I to stop you?

Hit Ya So Hard Homemade Hot Sauce

Pound of fresh **chiles** (Serrano, poblano, chiltepin, jalapeño, habanero . . . you get the point. You can stick to one or experiment with a mix. I usually just use whatever I managed to grow this season that the bugs ain't gotten into.)

1½ tbsp minced **garlic**

½ cup diced **onion**

2 tbsp **salt**

1½ cups **white vinegar**

I have also used smoked salt, and a dash of paprika a time or two, but neither of those things are necessary, and it's been reported that some people don't like the cross-up of that many tastes for their hot sauce. To each his own, as they say.

Toss the chiles, garlic, and the diced onion, along with the salt, into the blender until it's the consistency of a chunky tomato sauce. Pour the puree into a Mason jar, cover loosely, and leave it out on the countertop overnight. The next day, add your vinegar, then stir. Don't go to town on it, just make sure it permeates the sauce. Now, this is where you just have to wait. You let it sit on that same counter (okay, it doesn't have to be the same counter) and leave it there for up to a week. The longer it sits, the more concentrated it'll be. Once enough time has passed, pour that mixture back into the blender and let it run until smooth. Pour it back into that Mason jar and store it in the icebox. Technically, it will last you four months, but I think we both know it'll never make it that long. If you pull it out and it looks weird, don't worry, it's supposed to separate. Make sure that lid's on there tighter than a hair in a biscuit, and shake it up until it smooths back out. Can be enjoyed with everything. Seriously, you can add hot sauce to anything. Can and should are not the same, but nonetheless.

As seen in “The Sabine Was High”

Hap’s Hard Eggs and Cheese

2–3 **eggs** (depending on how hungry you are; that’s sort of up to you)
Shredded cheese (same thing)
Salt and **pepper** to taste
Cayenne pepper (optional)

There’s no great magic happening here, and this recipe came about one day by mistake. I was just getting breakfast ready on the stove when Leonard came knocking on the door, distracting me from what I was doing. I went to answer, we got to talking, and damned if I hadn’t forgotten about my breakfast. By the time he went on and I made it back to what I was doing, there they were. Hard eggs. All you got to do is put some Pam cooking spray or some kind of oil in your pan and let it get hot. Now crack your eggs into the pan. I know most people would recommend doing it in a bowl first, stirring everything together, but I like to cut out the extra dirty dishes. It’ll be fine. Besides, an old trick I learned to get eggshells out of anything is the get a spoon, run it under the water faucet, and eggshells will stick to that wet spoon. You're welcome.

So, as I was saying, crack your eggs into the pan and let them sit. That's about all there is to it. If your best friend comes knocking at the door with news, don't be shy about it. Go on, answer the door. When you come back, those eggs should be getting nice and hard. You can let them keep cooking, and then add cheese and seasoning as desired. If you're tired of waiting, you can scramble up what remains and then add the cheese and seasoning. Either way, the eggs will be delicious and not much labor involved on this one. When they look right to you, scrape those suckers onto a plate and enjoy. Don't forget you can add some homemade hot sauce too.

Brer Rabbit Cookies

Mama started baking these cookies during the sugar rationing of World War Two, and never stopped. To me, brother rabbit was just that. A rabbit. I'd seen him fight a baby made of tar as a kid, which at the time I accepted as plausible and factual. As I got older, it became clear to me that old Brer Rabbit was the cause of most of his own troubles. He was cunning, all right, but only after he put himself in a piss-poor situation to begin with.

Don't get me started on Walt Disney. Wasn't until I was older and heard about Uncle Remus, I realized that Disney had pulled another fast one on me. Another, you might ask? That's right, I found out the hard way that Mickey was a guy in a suit. I don't want to talk about it. Anyhow, I digress. If you're rationing sugar for one reason or another, or you just like the taste of molasses, these cookies are for you. This is the recipe exactly as I remember it on the back of the bottle.

¾ cup **shortening**
1 cup **sugar**
1 large **egg** (I'm serious about it being large, not giant.)
¼ cup **unsulphured molasses**
2 cups **flour**
2 tsp **baking soda**
½ tsp **clove**
½ tsp **ginger**
1 tsp **cinnamon**
½ tsp **salt**

Start by melting your shortening, then let it cool. Seems counterproductive I suppose, but stay with me here. Once things have cooled off, add your sugar, your egg, and then the star of the cookie show, your molasses. Remind me at another time to tell you about the first time I was offered a mole-ass cookie at Christmastime. Neither here nor there . . . Sift the rest of the ingredients together in a different bowl, and once combined, add them all together with the shortening mixture. Beat this mixture well. I mean really get in there. Now that it's all mixed up, let it chill a few hours, or leave it until tomorrow. When you're ready, take out the mix and form it into small balls. I'm gonna just keep plowing forward here . . . Roll this mixture in some extra sugar you have set aside (probably should have mentioned that up top) and place them on a greased cookie sheet a few inches apart. I probably should have also told you to preheat the oven to 375 degrees. The small ball thing threw me for a loop. Bake the cookies about 7 minutes. You're looking for light-as-a-cloud-like on the texture scale.

Doing all this cooking brings back many memories of my childhood. My parents always made sure I didn't do without, even if they did. So sometimes, when I make these cookies, I put a little spoonful of Brer Rabbit Molasses on a saucer and do something I remember seeing Dad do. He'd pour hot coffee on top of a glob of Brer Rabbit Syrup, (or "surp" as he would call it). Then he would wipe it up with a biscuit, piece of plain cornbread, or a slice of toast. Sometimes he'd add bacon. When you're broke, you get inventive, as you can tell from some of these recipes.

Death by Chili

Even though I didn't get a chance to tell y'all about some of my chili adventures in this collection, I thought it important to include this recipe, as it's the quintessential Hap Collins dish. How do you think I got Trudy, or Brett, or Florida? Wasn't just my boyish charm. This chili recipe is foolproof. I'm the living, breathing example of that. And so, I wanted to share this with you because if there's one thing Hap Collins knows a thing or two about, it's chili. Especially Bad Chili, which this is not. On that note, there will be zero debate about where the best chili is made. It's Texas. End of discussion. To make your own bowl of red, you'll need everything listed below, as well as some wet wipes and a roll of TUMS handy. You will thank me later. And don't go adding beans in there. That's just wrong. This is best served with Kill Ya Dead Jalapeño Cornbread.

Hamburger meat (a lot)

Steak strips (also a lot)

1–2 cups **water**

10 oz **tomato paste**

2 tsp **sugar**

4 tsp **chili powder**

10 **jalapeño peppers**, sliced

Dash of **cayenne**

Dash of **Tabasco sauce**

2 cloves **garlic**, minced

1 tbsp **olive oil**

3 ripe **tomatoes**

1 small **onion**

½ tsp **oregano**

1 tbsp **black pepper**

Pinch of **salt**

Ghost chili pepper (optional)

First, cook the hamburger meat and brown it, and then drain the grease. I'm not sure how much is a lot, but a lot. Take that cooked meat and put it in a big pot on the stove. Now get the steak and cut it into strips. Add the steak strips to the empty pan until they start to brown. Once the meat is the right temperature, put it on a cutting board and cut it into chunks. Then, add it to the pot.

Now here's where you have to pay attention, 'cause you don't want to make it too watery, this ain't the Sabine. Turn the heat to medium, add a cup of water, and about 10 ounces of tomato paste. Stir it up with a long wooden spoon. Keep stirring and put in the sugar, chili powder, and jalapeño peppers. If it seems too thick, add some more water. If it seems runny, add some more tomato paste (assuming you had some left in the can).

Full disclosure, I've seen some people use ketchup in a pinch. Now toss in the cayenne, Tabasco, and garlic. You are your own master, so if this don't seem right, adjust according to your own taste. Also, don't forget the oil. Lard is always an option, but I like olive oil. Add a tablespoon to grease the proverbial wheels. Again, you'll thank me later.

Take the fresh tomatoes, cut them up, and toss them into the mix. Dice up a small onion and do the same. Add oregano, some pepper, and a pinch of salt. Let simmer a long damn time. When you think it's been long enough, let it simmer just a little bit more. You can add water as needed, but do so sparingly. When it comes time to eat, it should be just right. If it isn't, you may have followed the recipe too closely. You have only yourself to blame.

These recipes may change over time, but the comfort they provide, sometimes only in familiarity, remains the same.

There is one thing that will never change. As Leonard says, "I ain't having none of that pie they use whip cream on the top and not meringue, I'll tell you that."

From mine and Leonard's family to yours.

—Hap Collins

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Joe R. Lansdale is the author of fifty novels and more than thirty short story collections. He has won multiple awards in crime, western, fantasy, and horror fiction. His work has appeared in films and in TV shows, such as *Hap and Leonard*, as well as scripted episodes of *Batman: The Animated Series*, *Son of Batman*, and many others. He lives in Nacogdoches, Texas, with his wife, Karen, and his pit bull, Nicky.

Musician, personality, writer, and editor **Kasey Lansdale** is the author of several short stories and novellas including the collection *Terror is Our Business*, co-authored with her father Joe R. Lansdale. She has appeared on The Sun-dance Channel, Animal Planet, IFC Channel, and others. Lansdale will be starring in a new reality TV show in early 2020 on USA Network.

New York Times bestselling author **Kathleen Kent**'s fourth book, titled *The Dime*, is a contemporary crime novel set in Dallas, nominated by both the Edgar Awards and the Nero Awards for Best Novel. The sequel to *The Dime*, titled *The Burn*, will be published in February 2020. Ms. Kent is also the author of three bestselling and award-winning historical novels, *The Heretic's Daughter*, *The Traitor's Wife*, and *The Outcasts*.